



A. WENDEBERG

1/2986

BOOK 1

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1/2986

*by*

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## Books by this author:

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*fog*

*ice*

Anna Kronberg Series:

*The Devil's Grin*

*The Fall*

*The Journey*

*Moriarty*

*The Lion's Courtship*

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*To my children, Béla & Lina*

**Part One — Woods**

*At night, I open the window  
and ask the moon to come  
and press its face against mine  
Breathe into me*

Jalal ad-Din Mohammad Rumi

# ZERO



The clock on the wall shows 12:01. Twelve hours left to live, minus one minute. No drama. We all are going to die, and I'm overdue anyway. An exhale of relief will rumble through my village when they find me tomorrow morning. Maybe Zula will miss me a little. I hope he does. A few tears shed would be nice, just so I know I wasn't a total waste of space. But then, I'll never know.

Actually, I'm surprised I'm still here. One could say I'm a coward who doesn't dare press the blade deep enough. But that's not the entire truth. If hope didn't bug me, life would be simpler. And shorter. In my case, shorter is better. But I'm naïve enough to hope the last day of school might magically turn my dismal grades into excellent ones, so that the city council forgets my wrong gender and wrong past, and allows me to be the new turbinehouse keeper. I would have a future. But even the best grades won't convince them to allow another generation of Capras to soil this honourable occupation, excellent skills or not.

I'm thinking of my knife's tip wedged in the hollow between bone and tendon of my wrist. I'm thinking of opening an artery, of life draining from me, and I'm growing calmer. People around me fade. I've already cut off most of myself. But I forget when.

I catch myself hoping to meet my brother and my grandfather tonight. My heart flutters. Of course it's all nonsense. When you're dead, you're dead. Depending on how your body is processed, you either end up as ash, or as worm poop.

If Grandfather were still alive, he'd call what happened to my life after my brother died "hell," earning him a public whipping for using a banned word. He was a rebellious guy, always talking about the Great Pandemic and how he kicked ass, then, how he stopped kicking ass when Grandmother died and he raised Mother all by himself.

When I was little and sat on his lap and no one else was listening, he dared talk about God — an old guy who made the first two humans from clay. Since then, the word "God" tastes of clay, although the sound of it is more round and fruity, like an overripe tomato, maybe. Grandfather also talked about his parents a lot, my great-grandparents, who believed our souls are all going to this place called "hell," where we are eternally burned, or put on a stake, or gutted, or



whatever.

I have no idea why people back then thought this stuff would make any sense. Maybe that's why religions are illegal now? But there's still tons of stuff around today that doesn't make sense to me at all, and yet everyone thinks it's cool.

Grandfather believed in God. He didn't really care much about rules, and that's why I loved him. Neither of us fit in.

For me, the fitting-in begins with the stupidest things; for example, the ability to stand with a group of giggly girls who talk about boys. It's considered the coolest activity since we turned twelve or thirteen and the game always has the same outcome: the more men you can attract, the better. No one seems to notice how embarrassing it is to climb the social ladder simply by being the most fuckable female. Maybe I'm thinking this because I'm at the very bottom rung, but I can't imagine that the whole circus looks any more logical from a higher vantage point.

I know I'm not good with people. But I'm not sure if it's *because* I don't like them or *why* I don't like them.

The one thing I'm good at is fixing machines, especially turbines. The word "turbine" has the taste of hot pancakes with melting butter and treacle. Turbines always do what I want them to do. Maybe they like my hands. Being up at the reservoir or inside a turbine duct makes me insanely happy. The smell of grease makes me happy, too. I tasted it once, but it wasn't good. Its sting didn't leave my mouth for days.

Maybe turbines are my main reason to pull the plug: once I finish school, I won't be allowed to *play* with machines anymore. I'd be assigned a *real job*. Every time people call what I'm doing "playing," I could scream. The word "play" tastes of burned oak; ash. Although it sounds almost liquid in my ears. Like a sudden splash on a still surface.

Everyone believes I'm stupid. I tried to be better. I really did. Every first morning of a new school year, I told myself that this year, I'll do it. This year, I'll work my arse off (although I don't really have one to begin with), I'll do my homework on time (or at all), will daydream less (or not at all), and will be thinking so hard that my brain bleeds out through my nose (if that's even possible).

Every second morning of a school year, I knew I would only be myself.

Today, my grades won't improve either. I haven't learned a thing. I tried but... I'm a scatterbrain.

Hope dies last, they say. I hate hope; the bitch keeps screwing me. If I were alive tomorrow, the council would assign me a job at the composting facility —

the stupidest activity there is — even more brainless than street sweeping and picking weeds from the cracks in the pavement. I'd shovel the shit of every inhabitant, every cow, cat, sheep, and goat, from one container to the next, aerating and judging its ripeness before it goes out on the fields. It takes three years for fresh poop to turn into good compost. Piss is collected, stored, and sprayed on the fields every spring, but shit needs treatment. And that's all I'd need to know to excel at this job. One gets what one deserves. I wouldn't mind as long as people let me be. My parents do mind, though. I'm like the ugly mole on Father's nose, making him cross-eyed and sick, and Mother's fingers itching to slap at it.

The word "mole" feels furry on my tongue.

I squeeze my eyes shut and imagine my hand holding out my quivering school certificate to Mother and Father — a few moments before dinner is on the table — and I wonder how they'll respond this time. The word "certificate" runs bitterly down my throat. My ass cheeks burn with knowledge. Will my parents feel sorry when they find me in the morning? The thing is I do care, although there's no reason for it.

Right now, I'm at a place I'd rather not be. I'm standing in a line of naked girls in the blistering hot town hall. My bare feet happily leak heat into the stone floor. Beads of sweat form along my spine. I'm itching. All windows and doors are closed. Someone must be worried we could oxidise if fresh air were allowed to blow in.

The room is divided by a long curtain, so we girls don't get to see the naked boys and the boys don't get to see us naked girls. As if we've never seen a prick.

Two women — a physician and a nurse — prod, ask questions, and take notes. I have no clue why old Zula doesn't do this. He's good at all kinds of things, from delivering babies to curing whooping cough. He can even do cesareans on Lampit's milk goats. Strangely, no one feels the need to enlighten us as to why our physician has been replaced by two strangers from the city. No one even asks. Not the other girls, anyway. I did, but all I got as a response were two sets of raised eyebrows.

I hate to be naked. I want to hide my skin, press my back against the wall, at least, or magically let my hair grow to waist-length to cover the worst.

The doctor walks up to me and palpates my abdomen, her eyes raking over the scars on my arms, chest, and legs. Then she asks me to turn around. I set my chin and shake my head no.

She places her hands on my shoulders and tries to force me to turn. I lock my knees and knock her hands off me. No one gets to see my back. 'Pull yourself together, Mickaela,' she hisses.

‘Piss off,’ I mouth.

She gives me a cold stare and then nods to the nurse. My chin trembles when both whip me around.

They freeze, cough, and pat my shoulder without a word or further examination. My stomach slowly settles back to its usual position. The cramp in my throat loosens.

The two move on to the next girl, who doesn’t seem to have noticed anything out of the normal. My classmates aren’t completely blind or ignorant. It’s just me being...invisible.

I cast a shy glance to my right where the other girls stand — waiting, smiling, looking pretty. I’m all bones with a scrubby mop of orange hair and freckles that look like fly shit all over my face.

Anyway, here’s the deal: I see boobs. Seven beautiful pairs. Large ones, perky ones, apple-sized ones. I don’t need to look down at my own chest to know there’s nothing. Both the doctor and the nurse point it out for me, perhaps believing I’ve not noticed. When they ask everyone how regular our menses is, all I can say is, ‘Every fifteen years. Maybe.’

The doctor doesn’t seem to approve of my humour. She eyes me over her brown-rimmed glasses as though she wants to strangle me with the stethoscope. But nothing happens. She turns to one of the other girls who holds her chin high, chest pushed out, stomach sucked in.

Apparently, queuing up is the thing here; it shows some kind of order or hierarchy that, so far, hasn’t revealed its deeper meaning to me. I’ve lined up so often in my life I’m unable to count it. Line up for food rations, for examinations, for roll call, for community work. That I’m the last in line is normal, expected, just like snow in winter. I have no idea who decided this.

We get dressed and, still in line, march to school to take the last two exams. It’s only a hundred metres or so, but I’m already soaked with sweat. My scalp itches from fear when we reach the classroom. Four teachers stand guard, one in every corner of the room, making sure we don’t cheat.

Again we form a line, file in, sit down, and a number of sheets are placed face-down in front of us. A shrill whistle and everyone turns the first page. I can’t help looking up, wondering what’s going on in people’s heads.

Constance’s head is right in front of me, her black braids parting her hair, a white line zigzagging along the middle of her skull, red ribbons resting on her shoulders. She’s so pretty, most boys are in love with her.

Marreesh’s head is to my left, also black-haired. His curly bangs are hanging low over his forehead, almost touching his desk as he rubs his eyes and digs in his brain, desperate to find answers to the test questions. In all these years, I’ve

rarely heard him speak. The sound of his name tastes of pear, slightly acidic, but sugary sweet with a soft grit on my tongue.

A few months ago, I almost asked him to marry me because Marreesh seemed like a good compromise. I'm sure he'd be fine with never having sex.

Everyone happily gets married when they are fifteen; most girls start popping out kids when they are sixteen. If there's no unmarried man available for a girl, then she'll be a second wife. No womb is left unfertilised — survival of the species crap.

I'd be a second wife to one of Father's old buddies, a guy with a hard face and hard hands. Out of the rain and into the gutters. It doesn't concern me anymore.

I wipe the sweat off my forehead and look up at the blackboard. "History Finals" is written there, in case it slipped our memory. The sun shines through the high windows, beams sharp and white, glittering with dust motes — beauty no one notices.

Going to school is like switching off everything that makes me a person as soon as I enter the building. I've never been able to handle it. Everyone else seems to enjoy being part of the herd and repeating what the teachers say word by word. *Baaah baaah*. And I — even with my brain on full throttle and ready to race around the trickiest corners — rarely understand what precisely the teachers want from me.

But my brain on full throttle is still only a Micka brain. I wish I could get out of my head. But on it goes, my funny little brain, never focussing on one task only, always playing with lots of things simultaneously, drifting in and out of past, present, and potential future. Sending me flavours where there are none. What a useless organ. I wonder if a large bird stole me from somewhere far away and dropped me here, wrinkled and screaming at the top of my newborn lungs.

A soft squeaking pulls my attention to my right. The history teacher paces the aisle and looks down at our desks. My pencil hovers over an empty page. He stumbles when he passes me, his sandals singing a quiet and sour *squee sque* when rubbing across the floor. I hope I'll never see him again. The homework he made us do was so bland, I never did it until a minute before class began. He always asked us to underline the most important phrases in specific chapters of our history books. I don't think I ever read any of it. I took my ruler and went *rrrrish rrrish rrrish* with my pencil, quickly, randomly, until some kind of meaningful mark-up pattern adorned the pages. And he never read it either, he always walked past, nodding. The same man teaches art.

To me, history is pointless. It's all about learning phrases and numbers by heart and then being able to recall them whenever someone shakes you awake in

the middle of the night screaming, ‘HOW MANY PEOPLE DIED IN THE GREAT PANDEMIC?’

My index finger softly brushes the scar on the inside of my left arm, just below the elbow bend where the skin is really sensitive. I guess one could say I’m cheating, because the number there equates what’s left of humanity:  $1/2986$ . It’s a small scar, not much bigger than my pinkie. The two thousand nine hundred eighty-sixth has no flavour. I’m wondering about this lack of sensation since I etched the numbers into my skin a few years back. Blinking the memory away, I try to pull myself together and focus on the test.

Humanity is now a little short of 3.5 million, so if this is  $1/2986^{\text{th}}$  of what was before, an original population size of ten billion is more or less correct. I write down the number, noticing that it took me too long to answer only one of the many questions.

Once, a few days after we buried my brother, I asked the teacher what had been done with eighty million tonnes of contaminated flesh — assuming that every corpse weighed eighty kilograms on average — and since, a bit more than sixty years later, we see no traces of any of them. Where are they buried? Why are there no graves?

My teacher had sent me to the dean, who sent me to the doctor, who sent me to my parents.

Now I know that so many corpses can only be burned, left to rot, or dumped in the oceans. Do the mighty seas stink of our ancestors? The air doesn’t. At least not up here in the mountains. I wonder if — once we return to the vast lowlands in ten or fifteen years, and the soil is fertile from all the dead — we can eat our harvest without the taste of corpses on our tongues?

When the bell rings a few minutes later, a shockingly naked page stares up at me.

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My throat is so dry, I can barely swallow. We are in the same stuffy room, the same teachers circling our desks. Math finals.

I’m almost overjoyed to see that a large portion of the exam is dedicated to functions. It’s hard to admit, but my parents effectively taught me how to calculate them two years ago, precisely one year before our teacher did.

Whenever I see the slanted  $f$ , I think of the one night my father said, ‘What did you learn at school?’ He’s always saying this. It’s his only way of saying *hello*. But that night took a different turn and now my left arm is decorated with

thirteen parallel lines, pale red and a bit thick at the centre. I made no plan to snap tendons or open blood vessels. Back then, I was convinced there must be more to life than this.

My pencil drops from my slick hand, pulling me from past to present. The paper in front of me sways and tilts. The room is hot. My abdomen cramps.

I'll be lucky to scrape by with a C.

But I'm not.

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I arrive at home and quietly place my certificate on the kitchen table. Vomit burns in my mouth. Mother looks at the blood seeping through my pants and hands me a wad of sheep's wool. 'Now you are a woman,' she says.

I wonder where boys have to bleed from to be considered men.

Once I return from the bathroom, I see my parents looking down at the certificate as if it soils the house. They say nothing. My mother is breathing heavily. Father produces a grunt. This is the shittiest certificate of the year, yet, they don't say a peep. Full wrath would have been a normal reaction.

Before they boil over, I sneak away to celebrate the end of hell and the beginning of my first and only menses. Maybe *celebrating* doesn't quite describe what I'm doing, but two life-changing events and one life-ending event in a single day have to be acknowledged somehow, and as turbines and solitude are my favourite companions, one might even call this a party.

Rays of sunlight caress the reservoir. Lazy ripples throw dark-golden sparks in all directions. I open my mouth wide and stick my tongue out to catch all scents, aromas, colours, and flavours. Pollen, sunlight on water, wet grass, earth. I press the soles of my feet deep into the soil until mud squeezes through the gaps between my toes. I feel so alive now I could explode. Here, with no one else to be compared to, I'm enough.

Half of the sun is hovering above the mountains — one big fat orange slice, its bottom sawed off by a line of firs and rock. I think of an overripe peach and juice dripping down my elbows when I take a bite. It's almost harvest time.

Loud rattling behind me tickles my eardrums. Chain links are pulled in, the reverse-vents open while the forward-vents close — a process set in motion by the waning solar energy. Air hisses through small leaks in the piping, forming a pocket of bubbling noise. I love sitting up here on this massive, energy-generating system, watching the lights flicker on down in the village.

When the first wave of water from the reservoir hits the turbine blades, it sounds like an avalanche of rocks banging against metal. A moment later, it's

only a soft rushing noise that mingles with the low hum of the generator. The earth beneath me vibrates — subtly and easy to miss, but it's there. I can feel it in my feet and in the small of my back.

And then the vibration lessens. Something's wrong. I prick my ears. The noise of water pressing against blades grows limp. The swoosh is less than a trickle.

Puzzled, I stand and gaze along the wall into the reservoir. Kind of stupid, because I can't see down to where the water enters the ducts anyway.

The quickly approaching night dictates my moves. I hurry to the control cabinet and open it. A small red warning light is blinking, indicating a resistance somewhere between the upper and the lower reservoir. The security gate that blocks all water from surging downhill is now automatically lowered and the safety brakes are engaged. As soon as the gate and the brakes are in place, I flip the main switch to keep all moving parts locked. Only a few minutes, and people in the village will sit in the dark.

I press the button for the emergency underwater lights, yank off my shirt and pants, and...damn, the wool pad. The bloody thing has to stay here. I take it off together with my panties, and run to the dam, stark naked. Sucking in as much air as will fit in my lungs, I jump. Cold compresses my chest. I clench my teeth and strain my eyes. My surroundings grow darker with each additional metre of water I leave above me. I make a semi-yawn at the back of my throat, letting my ears pop. It's now pitch-dark except for the four pale-green dots in the deep. I keep kicking until I see the stainless steel bars to the turbine's mouth, illuminated by a pair of dim lights on either side. The entrance is clear.

I turn and push hard with my arms and legs. Down here, I'm heavy. A few metres farther up, when buoyancy grabs me and lifts me higher, my lungs are ready to pop and my vision begins to flicker. And finally, my head breaks the surface. The air and the blackbird's song taste sweet in my mouth.

I push out on a bank, shake the water off me, and walk back to my clothes. While shimmying my wet legs into my underwear and pants, I think of chucking the gross wool pad far away. But that would only worsen the mess. I put on my shirt and climb the stairs to the top of the low-pressure turbine housing, unlock the hatch and peek into the power duct. The sun stands too low. All I see is black, with the occasional metallic reflection.

When I gaze down towards the valley, darkness already conceals the high-pressure turbine at the very end of the narrower piping. The steel artery is a massive six feet in diameter up here and four feet wide where it spits water into the lower reservoir, but only white-and-red stakes are visible, marking the water's path down the hill. The pipe itself is buried at two metres depth, so it

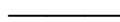
won't freeze up in winter.

During the summer months, excess energy produced by the black solar paint covering all roofs in the village, drives the pumps that gradually fill the upper reservoir to the brim. Every night a tiny fraction of that water flows back down, pushing through the turbines and making them turn so the generators can supply energy for people to switch on lights, for the baker to run his mill, for the wire heaters in the greenhouses' raised beds to keep the crop growing in winter, and for the butcher's storage to keep the meat below freezing in summer. Among many other things.

Come winter, when all excess solar energy from the summer months is stored as hydro energy up on the hill, and no more water is pumped up because the reservoir is full and the sun stands too low, the village relies almost solely on wood and what's in the reservoir. Then, piping and turbines will run at full capacity and the vibrations up here will be epic.

Long and hard winters hit every three to four years, and they are a problem. When the sun is still hiding behind a thick blanket of clouds in April, or even May, and snow keeps falling, covering the roofs and the solar paint; when the reservoir, root cellars, and grain barrels have been emptied, people freeze, starve, and get ill. Then the ones too old and too young die.

Any drop of water less in that reservoir and a hard winter will become even harder. The turbine has to be fixed before sunrise. I need a torch and tools — although I don't know which ones yet — and I have to make sure the high-pressure turbine in the valley is clear before I fiddle with the low-pressure turbine up here.



With a bang I enter my father's workshop, but he's not in. Weird. I grab a torch, a bunch of tools, and an extra pack of batteries — valuables only few families have in their possession, but an absolute necessity for the turbinehouse keeper.

When I knock the dirt off my shoes and step into the house to tell my parents where I'm going and why the power will be off for a while, Mother greets me with a tense, 'Hello, Mickaela.'

I stumble to a halt. 'Is everything all right?'

'Yes, yes. Only...Father is running a high fever.'

He's never had a fever in his life. Maybe my certificate made him ill. I drop my gaze to the doormat, wondering if she might unleash her fury any minute now. 'Something's wrong with the upper turbine. I'll fix it quickly.'



‘Be careful,’ she calls after me, and I’m shocked. The last time she told me to be careful was when I was ten.

They are still fretting about my poor grades, but what makes them so unnaturally quiet? Will they boil over once I return? Or are they already packing my stuff so they can quietly leave it at the doorstep?

No, they would never do that. Whatever is up with my parents, I’ll deal with it later. First, I have to fix the power supply.

I take the few steps to the high-pressure turbine, unlock the hatch to the coupling chamber, then the one to the power duct, and shine my torch into each cavity. While pushing the blades in one direction and then the other, I watch the movements of rotor and shaft and listen to the oil-slick whisper of the bearings. The turbine is clean. The generator and the control cabinet look fine, too. I lock the hatch and make my way up the hill again.

The sky shines in a hot purple slashed with pink. Dark blue creeps in from the east and the scents of earth and grass are changing to the heavier early-night aroma. Come midnight, this will change again to a crisper scent, and again early in the morning when fog begins to rise.

I unlock both hatches and shine my torch into the belly of the low-pressure turbine. A huge yellowish-grey mess is wrapped around the rotor shaft, eating into one of the bearings. Squinting, I bend lower. I’ll need at least an hour to pick that out.

The tiny hairs on my neck prickle. What’s wrapped around the blade shaft is hemp, not plant matter from the reservoir. Someone must have put it here. But how the heck could anyone have stuffed it into a running turbine?

I sit on my haunches and think. I had my back turned to the turbine when it stood still for the two minutes the gears need to fully switch from forward to reverse. Only my father is quick enough to unlock the hatch, jam that much hemp into the turbine, make sure it blocks the whole thing, and lock it again before I notice. But he would never threaten the functionality of his beloved machines. Besides, it might be interpreted as humour, and having a good laugh is surely not his style.

I have no clue who could’ve done this.

‘Okay, douche canoe. You can show yourself now!’ I shout at the tree line.

Nothing moves. The *yck yuck yyyyyyck* of a woodpecker sounds from afar. When I was little — maybe three or four years old — I ran my tongue over resins from all kinds of trees, but the word “woodpecker” always tastes of pine resin only.

I inhale sharply to whisk away the pine flavour from my nostrils and focus on the problem. The small hairs on both my arms stand straight up. The sight of

the control cabinet reminds me that anyone can flick the switch when I'm inside the duct. What a fine mess that would be! It would take days to scrape my intestines out of the bearings.

I march to the cabinet, remove two relays, and slip them into my pocket.

'Try to fix that in an hour, asshole!' I shout, sticking both my middle fingers high up in the air. Then I squeeze myself into the gap between metal blades, support arms, and duct structure.

My knife is sharp enough to quickly slice through the wet hemp. I stick two handfuls in my back pockets, soaking my pants. Maybe I can find out to whom it belongs. The stuff looks smooth and well-retted, not like the cheap sealing hemp. I throw armfuls of it out through the hatch. The fibres that sneaked into the bearing have to be picked one by one. The air is growing hot and stuffy in here, and sweat itches on my eyebrows. My heart bangs against my ribs when I hear footsteps above me.

'Hey Micka. You down there?'

Ralph, the idiot: son of the dean and sitting right behind me in school (I correct myself: *used* to sit right behind me). A perfect position to pull my braids, until I cut them off. Since then, I look like a boy and I'm treated like one. He was the first to give me a black eye. I returned it two seconds later.

'I'm busy.'

'What's the matter?'

He sounds genuinely clueless, but I don't trust him.

'Hey! I asked you *what's the matter?*'

'And I said *I'm busy!*' I'm upgrading my fine-picking from forceps-fiddling to needle-poking now. The torch flickers. I whack it against my thigh until it provides a steady light. One last thorough examination of the bearing and the shaft, a good dollop of grease on all moving parts, and I can pack up my tools and climb up through the hatch. But not before checking where Ralph is and whether he's wielding a stick to slap me over the head.

He looks oddly harmless, though. Not that I would trust that, either.

I lock the hatch, replace the relays, and flick the main switch. *BLAM!*

*WHRRRRR.*

Perfect.

Wiping my greasy hands on my shirt, I turn to Ralph. 'So, why did you do that?'

'What? Do what?'

'Wrap hemp around the turbine shaft.'

'The...what?' He blinks, then spreads his hands in front of him. 'I did no such thing!'

Something tells me he's innocent. Or *might* be innocent. But something else tells me that he's behaving really weirdly today. Maybe he's nervous. But why?

Anyway. I have no time for smalltalk. Even if I had the time, I wouldn't waste my energy on an attempt at a conversation with Ralph — a boy who solves all conflicts with muscles instead of his central nervous system (although I'm not sure he has one).

'Good. Go home, then.' I switch the torch back on and point its light at the ground. Whoever did this must have left footprints.

'Um...Micka?'

'What?'

'I was wondering... Now that school's over, I was wondering if...you would go with me?'

'All you need to do is follow the markings of the pipe,' I mutter while searching for traces of suspicious human activity.

'That's not what I meant.'

I stare at the circle of light when realisation hits me like a well-aimed kick to the stomach. The boy has smiled at me today. And yesterday. And the day before. I believed he was sick, but now I know he's love-sick. Or something.

The thought that someone might actually like me feels...unreal. In a good way though, even if it's brutal Ralph liking me.

'Why?' I ask.

He taps his foot. 'Don't know. Um...you're...nice. I guess.'

*I guess?* What's that supposed to mean?

'I'm busy,' I repeat and get back to my search thing.

Behind me, he mutters, 'I'm not good with words.'

'No, you are good with your fists.' The soil is a bit muddier close to the reservoir and I clearly see my own footprints from earlier today.

'I'm sorry!' cries Ralph. 'Can I kiss you?'

I'm thunderstruck. Is that how adults get together? Scream "*CAN I KISS YOU*" at each other? I hope not. I've never been kissed by anyone. I wonder how it might feel. The taste...

'Okay, Ralph. One kiss. No tongue. Then you go home.'

'Okay,' says Ralph, wilting a little.

I walk up to him so he's not stepping into my footprint search area. He has his hands in his pockets; I have the fingers of my right hand tightly wrapped around the torch handle, the other around my bundle of tools.

He bends forward and places a kiss on my cheek. Fuzz tickles my skin and I think of fly legs.

Ralph quickly extracts his hands from his pockets, grabs my waist, and pulls

me into him. His big wet mouth sucks on mine. He tastes of... Blah! I don't even want to think about it!

I struggle to break free, but his grip is too strong. I calculate my chances of success when applying various approaches of self defence, then decide for the most straightforward one.

My knee hits his balls. He lets go at once.

'Fuck, Micka!' he squeaks, as soon as he has his voice back. 'It just started to feel nice.'

'Fuck yourself!' Scraping Ralph's spittle off my mouth and tongue, I stomp away and let him stand in the dark. I don't give a shit whether he finds his way back home or not. That boy hasn't brushed his teeth in years, if ever. What a foul-tasting rag of a tongue!

I come to a halt. The sooner he's gone, the better. 'Pipe, Ralph.'

'I'm not an idiot! But *you* are.'

'Yeah, yeah. Blah blah blah.' I press my tools tighter to my chest, trying not to retch. How did humanity reach an astonishing number of ten billion?

Ralph's stomping and muttering grows fainter while he walks in one direction, and I the other.

I've almost reached the turbine when I spot a partial footprint in the lamplight; half a heel, merely, and no other prints in a radius of two metres. Someone has been careful.

Someone clears his throat. Someone male. Adult. I jump in shock.

'Micka,' a stranger says, sounding as if he's announcing the time.

I press my mouth shut. The fingers of my left hand slowly probe for the large wrench inside my tool bundle. It's there, right where the tip of my thumb is. I squeeze it harder.

He takes two steps towards the edge of the turbine housing and jumps down, not twenty centimetres from where I stand. I can feel the air pulsating. His fast and fluid move scares me shitless. My heart chokes and my arms decide before I can form the trace of a thought.

My right hand swings forward, burying the torch handle in his stomach. His right shoulder twitches — he wants to bring up his arm to block the attack — a familiar reaction. If I had the time, I'd be grateful for the many fistfights I had with Ralph. My left hand is already flying and *crack!* the bundle of tools makes contact with the man's skull. He freezes, his upper body tipping forward a fraction. He grunts and his knees buckle.

I don't wait for him to hit the ground. I bolt. Hissing and grunting, I run past Ralph, who looks at me as if he's encountered a ghost.

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I'm barely able to breathe when I reach our house. Mother stands in the corridor as though she's waiting for me. She looks at my sweat-covered face, then over my shoulder and into the dark outside.

'Where is he?'

'What? Who? Ralph?'

'No, Mickaela! The new Sequencer!'

'The...'

The word gets stuck in my throat. On his last visit in spring, the old Sequencer told us that he'd be retiring and another would take over some time during summer.

She grabs me by my shoulders and shakes me until my jaws rattle. 'What happened, Mickaela? *What happened?*'

I can see where this is going.

'Someone sabotaged the upper turbine. I found the man and hit him on the head because I thought he was about to attack me. He's unconscious.' I press my fist against my stomach. 'Or worse. If he's the new Sequencer, I'm fucked.'

'We are not...' she slaps me across my cheek. '...speaking such language in our house...' and a slap for the other cheek. Her eyes are dark green and watery, her face pale. She hates me.

I want to disappear. Like a magician, maybe, and leave a white bunny in my stead. She could have a less irritating and more loveable daughter. Saltwater presses against my eyes; I don't want her to see it. I push past her towards the bathroom.

With my face stinging and my eyes blurry, I yank off my clothes and hop under the shower.

The Sequencer. The title alone opens doors. These men and women have the power to move entire cities with a single word: Cholera. Strangely, the word doesn't taste of decomposition. It's more like...the raspy, cold, dry, and almost salty taste of a piece of jagged rock.

When the Great Pandemic hit, it was the water that killed almost ten billion people; the water in rivers, in the ground, in lakes. It was everywhere. The few handfuls of people who survived moved away from the poisoned lowlands, high up in the mountains, if they didn't already live there.

Sequencers have been around since...well, since long before I was born. They are safeguarding the remnants of humanity. When a Sequencer visits your village, you treat him or her with the greatest respect. And never, under no circumstances, do you hit a Sequencer over the head.

My stomach rolls at the thought of the crack I felt when the wrench made

contact with his skull. There's even a little blood on the tools' linen wrapper; I saw it when I dropped the bundle in the corridor.

I slide down the cold wet wall, grab two handfuls of hair, and pull hard. I want to turn back time so badly, so very badly.

Understanding snaps me upright. If he's dead, I'll be lynched. Problem is, the village might turn against my parents when they realise I'm not available for lynching tomorrow morning. The soap jumps from my hands when Father enters the bathroom. There are no locks and no privacy in this house.

'Shame on you!' A bellow that penetrates the window and travels along the streets into every neighbours' home. 'You! *You!*' He pokes an angry index finger at me. Silently, I turn around, showing him my bare back, daring him to finish what he began. He doesn't speak another word. The door slams shut. I know what he wanted to shout at me. *I wish you were dead and your brother alive.* As if I didn't know that already.

I scrub my skin until it burns. Then I scrub some more, making sure it'll feel raw for hours. I rinse the bloody wad of wool and squeeze out the water. Where does Mother keep a supply of dry ones? She never talks about "women's issues." Maybe I'll just pinch my legs together for now; I'll make a bloody mess soon anyway. But leaking from my privates is so gross, I decide to rip my worn-out shirt in four, fold one of the quarters, and stuff it into my panties.

It doesn't matter. Nothing matters. The day is almost over; my life will be over with soon. Yet, I gaze at the bathroom door, unable to step out into the corridor. My knees are clacking against each other. My control is slipping. I dig my nails into my thighs until the pain stops the rising panic. *What have you done, Micka?* My only comforting thought is that of my knife on my skin.

By now, Father will be up at the reservoir, seeing to the Sequencer. Soon, I'll know if the man's dead or only injured.

Shivering, I pull a nightshirt over my head and leave for my room. A stranger's voice brings me to a stop; it mingles with my mother's anxious voice and my father's usual grumbling.

*It's not the worst, it's not the worst,* my mind cries when I step into the kitchen.

His shoulder-length black hair contrasts with the white bandage Mother is wrapping around his forehead. A hint of blood shines through the gauze. Underneath is a pair of black eyes, farther down, a compressed mouth. His skin is different from anyone's I've ever seen. Darker; almost like barley roasted halfway, or the coffee we make of it mixed with lots of cream from Lampit's goats.

He sets his eyes on me and his look of annoyance changes to...I don't know

what. A dangerous flicker, some getting-ready-for-a-fight kind of expression, maybe.

‘I’d like to talk to your daughter in private.’

My legs already have the consistency of jelly, but his request makes them all watery-wobbly and I need to sit or I’ll fall over. I walk to the kitchen table and plop down, unbidden. My face feels hot. My hands are quivering fists, each crowned by a row of white knuckles.

Mother asks if she can do anything else for him, but he shakes his head. His eyebrows are drawn together. He’s blinking often, slightly turning his face away from the kitchen lamp. He must be in pain and his eyes overly sensitive to light. I take Mother’s yellow summer shawl from the chair and drape it over the lamp.

My parents leave the room and the air acquires a flavour of quiet terror — taut and astringent.

When the door falls into its frame, my heart hollers for help.

‘Excellent reflexes. You did well.’

At first, my brain doesn’t register this information. I repeat the words in my mind. Roll them over, sort them back to front and front to back. It must be a joke; although the man’s stern expression doesn’t change.

‘Does your head hurt?’ I whisper, because nothing else would voluntarily form in my brain.

He ignores my question. ‘This was a test.’

My mind *clicks* and begins to race. The blocked turbine, the carefully placed footprint. My mother asking for the Sequencer when I arrived, my father having a mysterious fever — they’ve known about this. A test, once complete, almost always has a result and a conclusion. Although I can guess what it is, I feel like I ought to ask for the sake of politeness. ‘What’s the outcome?’

‘You decide that. I hear you want to go into composting. A useful occupation.’

I stare at him, wondering why he drags it out, why he doesn’t give me the verdict at once. Something like, “You are a disgrace to our species; dig yourself a hole and rot.” Maybe he likes to play with his prey before he eats it.

Unmoved by my silence, he continues. ‘Would you consider an apprenticeship as a Sequencer?’

Is it possible to get a puke-reflex from too massive a bewilderment? Because that’s precisely how I feel right now. My hand claps over my mouth. Who knows what could slip out?

A muffled squeal sounds from behind the kitchen door. I’m mortified, but he doesn’t even look in that direction.

‘You are of age. It’s your decision, not your parents’.’

Impossible. Impossible! ‘I have a lot of questions,’ I croak, while my useless brain echoes nothing but *impossible*.

‘Good. I do, too.’

This man is a liar. I know it. No one in his right mind would offer me an apprenticeship in anything. ‘Did you send the physician and the nurse?’

‘I asked them to come, yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Dr. Volkov is a friend and I trust her judgement.’

‘What judgement?’

‘That you are healthy enough to go on extended hikes.’

I nod, mostly to stretch my tense neck muscles and to give myself time to think. So he wants me to go with him to some place far away. My parents trust him. Or do they?

He lowers his voice to a whisper. ‘And you cut yourself, and have a sense of humour even when humiliated in front of others.’

I feel warm blood leaking on my makeshift shirt-pad. ‘You asked her to humiliate me,’ I manage to say.

‘Yes.’

His honesty is unexpected. I open my mouth and snap it shut.

‘I wished to know how you’d react. You remained calm. You seem to be used to humiliation.’

I feel trapped, manipulated, and ready to run away. I want to slap his face, or better, hit him over his head again, this time, with more force. But I all I do is hold on to my hands, place them in my lap, and stare at the wall.

‘There will be more tests,’ he continues. ‘Not like the ones at school, more like the one I did today. But no more humiliations.’

When my gaze slips up to his bandage, he says, ‘There might be more of that, though.’

‘What did she say?’ I ask, not sure if I should be surprised that no one questioned the doctor’s identity. Zula might have said something, but still, he allowed her to do the final physical exams. Why?

‘Dr. Volkov?’

‘Yes. I want to know every word she said about me.’ My molars are grinding against each other, and I give the man the coldest stare I have in my repertoire. Having my secret exposed to a stranger is tough enough. But two strangers in the same day — one of which I might meet again — is too much for me to stomach.

‘What I said already. Why is it important?’ He seems irritated.

‘It is important to me. What precisely did she say?’

‘She said, “Micka is a quiet girl, she’s very healthy, she has a number of



scars of which several are evidently self-inflicted, and she's a late developer.”

‘Why is it important that I’m a late developer?’

‘It’s not important.’

‘Why did she say it then?’

‘It might be relevant later. If you pass and become an apprentice, you’ll need a contraceptive implant. You want to avoid pregnancy, because you cannot be a Sequencer and a mother.’

Like I ever want to have sex with anyone. ‘Is that all she said?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have one?’

‘An implant? Of course I do. Why is that important?’

I wave his question away, lean back, and feel the heat drain from my face. She didn’t tell him what she saw on my back. ‘What happens if I say yes?’ *I drag you into the forest and have you for breakfast.*

‘You’ll live with your parents for another six months. During that time, we’ll meet regularly. Once in a while, we’ll travel. This will be your probation period, and whatever I teach you during this time mustn’t be shared with anyone.’

‘And after that?’

‘Should you or I decide — at any point during your probation — that this is not a future for you, then that’s what it is. You can work at the local composting facility if you choose to do so. However, should I approve of a full apprenticeship, you’ll leave home and you’ll never return. Any contact with your parents and your friends will be strictly forbidden.’

Okay, so the man knows I’m desperate, wherever he got that information from. But people tend to provide everything and anything if you tell them you’re a Sequencer. My parents will practically throw me into his arms without asking a single question. ‘Where will I go?’

‘I’ll only ever talk about what happens after the probation, when you’ve met my expectations and those of others.’

Of course. How stupid of me to ask. ‘Why me? Have you seen my final grades? Or any of my grades?’ *Have you seen how bony I am? Aren’t the other girls prettier?*

‘No, I have not seen them. Grades are irrelevant.’

I can’t bite back the snort. It comes spurting out together with an avalanche of acidic words. ‘I don’t believe you! You can be anyone. Some guy who steals girls from her parents and does things to them. I’ve never seen anyone with a skin that colour. Where do you come from? What’s the name of our Sequencer? The one who usually visits?’

‘Cacho,’ he says without hesitation. ‘He suggested you.’

‘Impossible.’ He must have found Cacho, pressed information from him, and killed him. There’s no other explanation.

The man leans back and crosses his arms over his chest. ‘Well, we can’t ask him now, can we? I suggest you make up your mind in the next ten seconds, because I need to sleep off my headache.’

I tap my fingers against the tabletop. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. ‘I have nothing to lose,’ I say. ‘You seem to know this. So I guess you win.’

‘Is that a yes?’

‘Sure.’ Yeah, sure. Whatever. You have no idea what my plans are for tonight, idiot.

He flicks an eyebrow up; it goes hiding under the bandage. ‘You believe I abduct girls because my skin is darker than what you think is normal. Funny. I doubt you’ve ever seen anyone with skin as pale and as dotted as yours. Not to speak of your hair — orange, of all colours. Do you abduct boys?’ He pushes from the table and says loud enough for my parents to hear, ‘I assume you heard what your daughter said.’

‘How is it called? The colour of your skin,’ I ask, pointing at his face.

‘Olive.’

I knew it! Flavours of coffee and cream spread between my sinuses and my palate.

The kitchen door opens. Mother and Father look shocked and puzzled. They probably can’t explain why a Sequencer picked me over a whole village of non-idiots. Yet, they seem to believe this is really happening.

‘Tomorrow morning, six o’clock, at the upper turbine,’ he says when he walks through the corridor.

Weird. I’d expected he’d take me away at once.

‘Should we accompany her?’ my father asks, his voice unnaturally high.

‘She comes alone.’ He steps out, looks up at the night sky, and says, ‘It smells like rain.’ Then he turns away and the darkness swallows him whole.

Of course I’m to come alone. The door closes and I turn to my parents. ‘Did he show you proof of his identity?’

‘You didn’t show the man *any* respect!’ barks my father. ‘If you screw this up...’ He brings his face close to mine. ‘...you’ll be disinherited.’

There’s nothing I want from my father. I turn away from him and see Mother opening her mouth. I’m not in the mood for her good advice. Before she can say a peep, I mutter, ‘Need to sleep. Have to get up early.’

Or never.

Desperate for solitude, I push past the two, knees weak, arms shivering.

I roll up in my blanket, cocooning myself in, compressing myself as much as possible, trying to squeeze out the confusion and leave only clarity behind. It doesn't work, of course. Hope sneaks in uninvited.

# DAY ONE



I sit on my windowsill, my nightgown wrapped around my knees, gaze unfocussed. Outside it looks as if the black bowl of the night is tipping aside, slowly making space for the milky morning. Might as well be a bowl and not the universe.

Most of the night I've been arguing with myself about what could be real and what couldn't. My ceiling, which I stared at throughout, didn't respond to my questions. Neither did the walls, window, or the black bowl with its silver pinpricks. For lack of answers, I chewed my cheeks until the blood made me gag. Around midnight, I noticed that I'd forgotten both knife and suicide. For about an hour or two, I sat with the blade tapping against my wrists, because there it was again — this painful, useless fizz of hope that forbade me to put an end to everything. Now, I feel so stupid and naïve, I'm too ashamed to get up. But waiting doesn't get me anywhere. My mouth hurts and tastes of metal.

Bleary-eyed, I make it to the bathroom just in time. How do women get used to this bloody menstruation business? So far, it feels like some form of massacre-related incontinence. Clamping my legs together doesn't seem to help in the least.

In the kitchen, I drink a cup of water, slip my small knife into my back pocket, and the remaining two quarters of my shirt into the pockets of my rain jacket. I wonder if I should take a woollen pullover with me, but decide against it. It's summer. The little rain that falls is warm enough. Besides, I might be thrown into a hastily dug hole before I can grow too cold. Ha! The play of words. I chew them and swallow the wash of contradicting aromas.

Rustling behind me and a 'Mickaela,' spoken softly. My mother, who looks like she didn't sleep either, reaches out to me— a rare gesture. I take a step back.

'We are proud of you,' she whispers and engulfs me in her arms. I don't know what to say. My throat clenches. Everyone enjoys hugging, but I don't. All I feel is being trapped in a cage of rigid arms, with Mother's need for a moment of harmony suffocating me like a wet blanket. I've been held previously, three or four times maybe, and I always wanted to bolt. A simple handshake would be enough if it wouldn't feel so ridiculous. Why can't people just look into each other's eyes? Doesn't that speak loud enough?

‘I need...wool,’ I stutter.

‘I keep it in the bedroom. I’ll get it for you.’ She lets go of me, and I get the feeling she’s relieved to have a task other than saying goodbye to me. But I don’t have a particularly good sense for Mother’s feelings if they’re not related to anger or disappointment. She has a way of breathing hard that tells me I’ve screwed up before she lashes out. She has a way of walking that tells me to stay out of her way — it looks and sounds as if her knees are locked and her heels are made of expensive china.

She returns with the wads and holds them out to me and then gets busy cleaning the kitchen, although she just polished it last night.

‘See you later,’ I lie and slip out the door.

Father stands in his workshop — his expression close enough to friendly — and waves through the open window. My chest does a funny contraction thing when so many of my childhood memories seem like a bad fantasy. My mind envisions two scenarios. One: The apprenticeship is real, and some of the respect paid to the Sequencer miraculously rubs off on me. Everyone will say “We always liked her.” I might even hear my parents say it after they forget how my brother died. Two: Everyone is in on the man’s plan. Everyone is eager to get rid of me.

But neither of these two theories makes much sense.

I shake my head and lift my arm, waving back at my father, before I pass through the garden gate and make my way uphill.

My brain feels oddly empty and full at the same time. Stuff races through my head, banging against my skull bones. Nothing is in order, nothing is clear. My feet are heavy, knowing full well that once I’m up there, reality will show one of its ugly faces.

The man is waiting atop the turbine housing. His stance is casual. Dark clouds are gathering behind his back. ‘We cannot stay long,’ I call. ‘A storm is brewing.’ He probably didn’t hear me, because he doesn’t even turn his head to see who’s stomping up the hill.

‘Hi,’ I say once I reach him. The bandage around his head is gone. A massive welt shows above his right eyebrow. Beneath, his irises are of such a dark brown, they are very close to black. I consider apologising for the assault, but decide against it. I’m not sorry.

‘I came because of the storm,’ he says. ‘How’s the wrench, Micka?’

I open my mouth and shut it, my eyes searching for something to say, something to change the topic. They find a silvery box in his hand. I read the label on the top right corner. *MIT FireScope GenomeID*. It’s the same the old Sequencer had.

He sees my gaze resting on the thing, and says, ‘The weather is growing worse. We need to reach the other side of the reservoir in fifteen minutes.’

I get the feeling that he thinks faster than he talks. And off he strides, covering more ground with his long legs than I with my shorter ones. I have to run a little to keep up.

We reach the other side quickly, and he sets his machine on the ground. A capillary is extracted from a hatch on the back, extended to the reservoir’s edge, buttons are pushed, and water is sucked through the opaque tube into the machine.

‘It identifies microorganisms,’ he begins. ‘It’s impossible to analyse the hundreds of substances potentially contaminating soil and water. Not without a whole park of HPLCs, FPLCs, GCs, MALDI-TOF-MSs, spectrometers, fluorometers, and a wet-lab.’

I don’t have the faintest what he’s talking about.

‘Hence, we are using a single, but not much less complicated device,’ he continues. ‘It allows us to identify all microbes in a sample. Microbes can adapt to their environment within minutes, and they show us what their environment is made of. Some of them are indicators of harmful substances, some are harmful themselves. Do you know where your drinking water comes from?’

I nod. Of course I know. Everyone does. It comes from a well that takes groundwater from a few metres below. ‘But why do you test the reservoir?’ I ask.

‘Because rainwater flows through the topsoil into deeper soil layers. When it reaches geological formations that make it flow horizontally, then it’s called groundwater and the geological formations are called aquifers. Your reservoir constantly exchanges water with surrounding aquifers. Rainwater and meltwater also flow along the surface into the reservoir. Rivers, streams, and the like. The hills surrounding the reservoir, feeding water into it, are called the catchment area. If the soil or any waterbody in the catchment area has a problem, the reservoir water will acquire the same problem, and soon this problem will show in the aquifer below and, hence, in the water you pump from the valley’s wells to drink, wash, and cook.’

My head spins. ‘Did you test the well water already?’ But all I really want to ask is, ‘You *are* a real Sequencer, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, last night.’

‘Is it okay?’

‘Patience, Micka. My analysis is not complete.’

The machine is dead quiet and I begin to wonder if it’s broken.

‘We can leave,’ he says and rolls the tube back into the hatch. The machine

produces small grating sounds. ‘What you hear is the self-cleansing mechanism. It wouldn’t help if I identified microbes growing in the capillary or the machine. Therefore, capillary and machine need to be DNA-free.’

My mind is overloaded. It feels good, exhilarating. I notice that he didn’t lecture me once and didn’t call me slow or stupid.

Yet.

‘What you don’t want in your drinking water is anything that can harm you. There are several pathogens — microbes that make humans, animals, or plants ill. *Vibrio cholerae*, for example, is a human pathogen.’

Every child knows what *Vibrio cholerae* is. The first words we learn are mama, papa, cholera. In that order. “Pandemic” is a bit too complicated for toddlers, so that word comes later.

‘How could this thing kill most of us?’ I interrupt.

‘We need to find shelter.’ He points up at the sky. It hangs heavy and low and dark above our heads. Wind pushes against my back as though to urge us forward. ‘I believe you know the area better than I.’

‘Is that a test?’ I ask.

‘Of course. Everything is.’ His hair stands on end. The air is charged.

So this is it, then. I’ll have to turn my back to him and lead him into the woods. He can slam that machine on my head and my lights will go out and I’ll know nothing of what comes after. Or nothing of all this will happen and...my life will change. I could be a Sequencer.

I nod. ‘This way.’ Rushing ahead and into the forest, I seek a low stand of trees. My neck doesn’t even tingle. I’m quite ready for change, whatever it might be.

When we climb through a dry wash, the first drops hit my shoulders. We reach a small elevation covered with spruce trees. Farther from us are pines, spruces, and the occasional oak. I point at a pine that is short enough as not to attract lightning, yet broad enough to protect us from rain and flying branches.

We crouch underneath it, our backs against the trunk, our butts poked by spruce needles. Or at least mine is. I have problems focussing on anything. Hope is growing stronger, inhabiting my stomach like a sharp-toothed beast, making it ache, pucker, and lurch.

‘What do you know about the Great Pandemic?’ he asks and *BLAM!* I feel like I’m back at school.

‘The Great Pandemic was caused by *Vibrio cholerae* and ended sixty-eight years ago, leaving only 1/2986<sup>th</sup> of humanity alive.’ That sentence comes easily because I’ve written it only yesterday, in my history finals.

‘How can it be that one small microbe killed most of us?’

‘The water...’

He tilts an eyebrow. My answer doesn’t seem to please him. I look at my shoes. ‘I...don’t know.’

‘Question everything, Micka. The Earth is one very large piece of rock that once harboured ten billion humans. Disease is as common as birth and death, and life adapted to it hundreds of millions of years ago. Cholera has been around for thousands of years. That’s a long time for humans to adjust to it, don’t you think? So how can it be possible that close to ten billion people died of this one disease?’

His stare is intense. I feel myself growing smaller with every silent second that ticks by, while hope is screaming, “This is it, Micka, the real thing! Don’t screw up!” I see myself failing this very first test, not even an hour into my so-called probation period. It pisses me off, big time.

‘I don’t have enough information,’ I say. ‘All I’ve ever heard and read about the Great Pandemic was that so-and-so many people died because cholera suddenly and inexplicably swept over us, and that it will never happen again. All we’ve ever learned at school are a few names of cities that were hit first, when they were hit, which way the pandemic spread, and how many died in which year and place — never an answer as to *why*. Whenever I asked ‘why,’ people told me ‘because I said so.’”

He smiles. How come he smiled?

‘And what does that tell you?’ he asks.

‘How would I know? Maybe they don’t know, either.’

He tips his chin. ‘Historic reports of the Great Pandemic are impossible to count, and it’s impossible to read them all. Interpretations vary. Accounts vary. Whatever knowledge we can extract and whatever conclusions we draw from the breadth of information is openly shared among all Sequencers. However, what the council of each settlement chooses to believe and hence, communicate to its citizens, is often an oversimplification of what we really know.’

The first *CRACK!* splits the dark, hitting some poor tree deep in the woods. ‘You picked a good spot,’ he says calmly, probably noticing the tremble that ran through my back.

But it’s not fear that shakes me. It’s excitement. ‘Why are you called a “Sequencer?”’

‘We let people believe that it’s because we sequence genomes of microbes and map their occurrences and capabilities wherever we go. Our...profession... originates from a group of scientists, engineers, and historians who investigated the sequence of events that led to the demise of most of humanity. But if we were only investigating what caused what, we’d still be only a bunch of



scientists, engineer, and historians. We call ourselves Sequencers because we create sequences of events.'

I swallow. 'What events?'

'We move settlements from one place to another, for example.'

'And...that leads to what?'

'A mixing of beneficial genetic traits. Thinning of unfavourable genetic traits.'

'Are you saying that you guys are lying when you wipe clean a whole village? It's never really cholera but some... some *breeding* program?'

'A dangerously simplistic view.' He squints up at the black clouds. 'Cholera is a serious threat, as are the small and isolated human subpopulations.'

'I want proof of your identity. I don't even know your name.'

'I haven't introduced myself yet,' he shouts over encroaching squall.

I wait, but he remains silent. The world around us blares with thunder, storm, and rain as if the weather wants to uproot all trees and move the whole forest to some other place.

The dry wash begins to fill — little at first, not more than a trickling of needles, soil, and water. Then, all of a sudden, a wave gushes down the hill, lapping at the small elevation we sit on, splashing us with muck. I can't help but think of disease and poison being washed down, spreading into my village, into the lowlands and into the oceans. I'll never again view water in the simplistic "Oh look, it comes out of the ground!" way. It's more like... like a networking organism, maybe?

'I'm Runner,' he says between two thunderclaps. He bends closer and speaks with an urgency that drives goosebumps up my arms. 'Whatever I ask of you during your probation time — two things are more important than anything else and justify breaking every assignment or order I may give you. One: Your survival. Two: Your own values. That's it. Never risk your life, never betray yourself. Is that understood?'

'Yes,' I answer, although I'm not sure what he means by the value thing. 'But your name isn't proof of your identity.'

'Do you know how Sequencers are identified?'

'No.'

'So how would you know if my identification is valid, should I show it to you?' He leans back against the tree. 'Your first assignment is to survive, Micka. One week in the woods. You do not ask anyone for help. You do not contact your parents. If a search party combs the hills, you hide.'

'My parents don't know I'll be here for a week?'

He shakes his head.

‘They’ll think I’m dead. They’ll be horrified.’ Why does this suddenly bother me?

‘Yes. You can abort your probation at any time.’

How helpful. Thank you very much. When he wipes rain off his face, a thought hits me. ‘You asked Ralph to kiss me.’

‘I asked him to distract you. He chose to ask you for a kiss.’

‘It was disgusting.’

‘That’s your responsibility. You said, “Okay, one kiss, no tongue. Then you go home.” Your choice, Micka. You are of age.’

I want to kick his balls. Instead, I lower my head and bite down hard on my cheeks.

He taps on the hood of my rain jacket. ‘Do you have any other questions?’

Yes, a million, but I want him gone. ‘Where and when do we meet the next time?’

‘Here. In precisely one week.’ He’s disappeared before I look up. Next to me on the soaked forest floor lies a book wrapped in clear plastic. A note is stuck on top of it. *Find answers while I’m gone.*

I push the note aside and read the title. *The Great Pandemic.*

Ugh, I *am* back in school.

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With my hood pulled low over my face and the rain jacket wrapped tightly around my shivering frame, I press the volume to my stomach and wait for the storm to pass. The binding of Runner’s book appears weatherproof, but I don’t want to risk soaking it.

While my body is growing colder by the minute, my mind is racing. Chances are, this isn’t a bad joke after all and my life is about to take a drastic turn. Drastic is an understatement. Once news spreads, people will wonder what I’ve done to deserve such an honour. I’ll be the talk of the village, not because of something I’ve screwed up, but because of something great. Has that ever happened before? I wrack my brain and can come up with only one occasion — I managed to fix the high-pressure turbine at minus twenty-five degrees Celsius outside temperature and ten-centimetre ice buildup on the blades. It took a lot of well-measured whacks and a few new parts on the defroster unit, plus ten bloody fingertips, while my father was busy de-icing the low-pressure turbine up on the hill.

I was twelve, then, and Mother told me I might make a good turbinehouse keeper if I could improve my grades. I doubt she believed her own words. After

all, I'm a girl. Sometimes I think Father only wanted to torture me with all this. Allowing me to fix his precious machines, knowing I enjoyed it, knowing I hoped for more when there was no reason for hope at all.

Ah, hope. Can one have hope without doubting? I guess not, because if there are no doubts, one would have to say "I know" instead of "I hope." The stupidity of ungrounded expectations — that's what optimism is. I'd rather stick to facts. Being noticed by a Sequencer, let alone being considered for an apprenticeship, is absurd. It simply doesn't happen, and certainly not to the village idiot. Sequencer apprenticeships are so rare that hoping to receive one is like jumping out of a window expecting to fly. Sequencer apprentice... A prickling runs across my palate. I love this term.

I'm struck by Runner's weirdness. He rarely answered any of my questions directly, only talked about something totally unrelated and gave an answer much later. He picks a potential apprentice at his very first visit. He'd said the old one suggested me, but why the blind trust? Why not look first and decide later? It would spare him a lot of trouble. Why would he do this?

I'm still not one hundred percent convinced of his identity. But he must have shown proof of it to the dean, to our physician, and maybe to someone from the council, too. Not to Ralph, though. That boy is such a dork, if anyone waves the authority flag at him (and in Ralph's case, adulthood is authority enough), he lolls his tongue and wags his tail. He'd been so nervous because he was afraid to disappoint. He didn't want to kiss me at all, and only used this as an emergency strategy for Runner's request to distract me. I feel a strange mix of relief and offence. I'm glad Ralph isn't in love, or whatever one can call it, but I also feel betrayed. Weird.

My biggest problem with Runner is that he neither looks nor behaves like a Sequencer. But there's only one comparison: Cacho, the old Sequencer, a quiet man who hummed and smiled a lot. With a pang, I notice that I miss the old guy. I even liked his name. It makes no sense that he'd suggest me for an apprenticeship. I haven't done anything brilliant, especially not the few times I accompanied him up to the reservoir. I held his box and he called me "sweetie." It made me suspicious. No one ever calls me sweetie without demanding niceties in return. Only when he left that day did I realise that he'd said it because he wanted to be friendly. He never said it again.

Runner is different, more...grating. I don't mind, really.

My chest produces an involuntary sigh. I want this apprenticeship deal to be real. But I'll probably pull an epic fail in the next few hours.

Should I wait for the rain to stop or should I... There, I don't even have a clue what to do. He didn't ask for anything heroic or cool or difficult. *Stay alive,*

*Micka.* Can't be that hard, can it?

I check the contents of my pockets, although I know what I packed. A knife for whatever purpose, pieces of an old shirt, wool. How ridiculous! Menstruation hygiene items, of all things. I could use a pullover and food instead. Maybe a sleeping bag, too. Not that I know anyone who possesses such a thing. Okay, what are the first things I need to find? Water, food, a dry place to spend my nights.

The nearest food supply would be the orchard in the valley with its peach, apple, and pear trees. It might be a bit early for harvest. I could eat rabbits, too. I've often hunted them during school holidays using father's air rifle. I wonder if I should break into our house tonight and get the gun, my woollen pullover, some food, and a blanket. But if anyone sees me, I'm screwed.

My aching butt reminds me of the clumps of hemp in my pockets. I take them out and I'm about to throw them into the stream when an idea hits me: Traps!

I comb the fibres with my fingers, twist them into two long threads, then ply them tightly and secure them with knots on either end. My hemp yarn is barely the length of my arm, but it'll have to do.

Once the rain lessens and the rumbling is far on the other side of the valley, I set off to find a rabbit trail. I install my snare between two sticks and hope that my human-stink will be washed off soon enough and that the rain doesn't make the hemp so soft the rabbit can rip it apart. Or chew it apart.

That could be a problem. I decide to observe the snare. A nearby oak provides shelter and an elevated position. I scramble up the trunk along thick branches and pick a spot not too uncomfortable to sit. My legs are drenched and I'm shivering when I remember it's not even midday. The rabbits won't come until nightfall. I'm damn nervous. I have to get my brains together.

I plop off the branch and go for a walk, slowly drifting towards the valley — always careful to remain invisible — before making my way back into the forest. People will be working in the community orchard now. I'll have to wait until nightfall, but then I can't keep an eye on the snare *and* go down to pick fruits.

Hands in my trouser pockets, I stare at my boots and try to think. This absurd situation makes my brain frizzly.

What is the most important thing I need?

Yes! A shelter for the night. Something that keeps the rain outside and my body heat inside, but it must be built so that I can disassemble it fast enough — Runner doesn't want a search party to find me, so they shouldn't find my shelter either. The food issue will be tackled later. All is cool.

With my priorities set, I collect material for my temporary home. The spruce

trees provide branches for a roof and twigs for bedding. The construction is finished around noon, or around what I suspect to be noon, because my stomach roars. When was the last time I ate something? I had an apple yesterday morning before my finals, and that's it — an apple in twenty-four hours because I was too nervous to eat anything. And now I'm trembling with hunger and cold.

Okay, no problem, I think.

I trod to the reservoir — no one seems to be looking for me just yet — and get my fill of water. My belly makes sloshing noises when I walk back to my makeshift spruce home. The thing suddenly looks very unprofessional. I was proud of it just after I finished it. Now it seems the pathetic pile will collapse the moment I move in. Carefully, I inch my limbs in, trying not to bump against a weight-bearing branch. It's too small for me to stretch my legs. From outside, it looks much bigger.

With hours to kill, I'm sorting through my potential food sources, and the prospects aren't good. There're no edible mushrooms — the season is just about to approach. The blueberries are all gone. Everyone between age five and fifteen, me included, took a bucket, a blueberry comb, and a backpack with provisions into the woods. After two weeks of this, we had stripped naked all blueberry bushes in a radius of ten kilometres around the village. Now the root cellars are filled with jam, sauce, and dried berries — unreachable for me.

The blackberries are just getting ripe, and I might be able to find a few handfuls of sweet fruits. No need to even think about nuts, they're due in two months. If push comes to shove, I'll eat dandelions. But...yuck.

My best bets are the rabbit trap and the community orchard. I decide that food really isn't a problem and open Runner's book, certain it will bring boredom galore.

The first chapter shows a picture with piles of corpses.

*The Great Pandemic was caused by two bacteria, Mycobacterium tuberculosis and Vibrio cholerae, and spread across our planet in several waves, starting in the 1960s.*

*Factors leading to the Great Pandemic are considered to have been:*

*(A) Elevated atmospheric temperatures and sea surface water temperatures, and thus better growth conditions for pathogenic bacteria.*

*(B) Raised seawater levels and heavy rainfalls, causing an elevation of groundwater levels, which resulted in*

*(C) flooding of at least 63% of all sewer lines worldwide and substantial fluxes of faecal matter into aquifers, rivers, and lakes, contaminating all major drinking water resources.*

*(D) Frequent long-distance travelling of Western and Central Europeans, North Americans, Australians, and Asians by air, sea, and land, facilitating the spreading of virulence factors and antibiotic resistance genes, and later, significantly accelerating the spreading of disease.*

*(E) Use of large amounts of antibiotics (in the range of hundreds of thousands of tonnes per year), both for the treatment of disease and for industrial meat production, leading to antibiotics contamination of soils, aquifers, rivers, and lakes, and thus triggering bacterial multidrug-resistance in a great variety of ecosystems.*

*(F) Spontaneous acquisition of an extremely potent virulence factor in a multidrug-resistant strain of V. cholerae, and*

*(G) prevalence of various multidrug-resistant strains of M. tuberculosis since the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

*While we cannot ascertain whether the infection with both, tuberculosis and cholera, was the norm, we found evidence for dual bacterial infection in 879 out of the investigated 2176 bone samples. Based on these data and further analyses of bone injuries of various severity (for detailed information, refer to standard works by E.R. McCullough and A.G. Karkarov), a morbidity rate of greater than 40%, with a mortality rate of greater than 80% in the infected population, can be assumed.*

And on it goes. I've never heard any of these explanations and — despite reading the chapter twice — I merely understand half of them. What the heck is a morbidity rate? Mortality rate is easy — that's the number of people who died of disease. But if only 80% of the infected people died, why are more than 99.9% of humans gone? I flip to the index, but can't find anything by Karkarov or McCullough.

The part about the antibiotics reads as absurd. I've heard about them and once I even saw one — a few spoonfuls of red powder in a sealed glass flask. It's one of the most valuable substances to be found in our village. Zula has it locked up in his bedroom, as far as rumour goes. I can't even imagine hundreds of thousands of tonnes of it. How could people manufacture all this? And what's industrial meat production? Meat coming out of machines?

I snap the book shut and rub my eyes. The part with the bone injury data nags at me, but I can't figure out why.

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The sun sinks into the forest, painting trees with fire. I sit in my oak without

paying much attention to the spectacle. My eyes are stuck to the snare. My stomach yowls with emptiness and anticipation. The bunch of dandelion leaves didn't really help against the hunger. Their taste is still stuck to my tongue and all my words constrict around the white and bitter dandelion milk. I can't think properly.

A marten sneaks across the clearing, its slender body bow-like and quick. *Go away*, I urge silently.

Darkness falls. The branch beneath me digs into my butt. I pull my legs up and balance on the balls of my feet. The moon is a thin sliver, providing only a little light.

The crickets begin their song and firebugs dance to the tune. I love the woods. If not for the winter, I wouldn't understand why people moved away from the forest to live in small rectangular boxes.

A scream cuts through the night. Judging from its direction and pitch, it sounds very much like a rabbit trapped in my snare. I fall from the tree as I scramble down. My legs have fallen asleep.

Half limping, half running, I approach the trap. The rabbit's white tail is flashing. It's fighting, kicking and squealing in pain or in panic. I jump, my knife unclasped, and then...

The rabbit shoots across the clearing, gone in an instant.

My vibrating fingers search the spot where the sticks and my snare should be, but can't find them. The poor animal must still have the string around its neck, probably choking to death slowly. There's no chance I can find it in the dark. I kneel in the soft grass and groan into my hands.

When I make my way back to my spruce hut, my knees wet and muddy and my hands empty, I decide to never again hunt without proper equipment.

Then I realise I have nothing to start a fire with, not even dry wood. I couldn't have cooked the meat and I can't eat it raw; the risk of catching rabbit fever is too high. The animal would have died in vain.

Tired and defeated, I slip into my hut and hug Runner's book to my chest. With hunger rumbling through my stomach and only a shirt, a pair of pants, and a rain jacket covering my skin, I drift into a fitful sleep.

## DAY TWO



The burning in the pit of my stomach wakes me at sunrise. I pick dandelion greens and eat three handfuls at once, but I'm still hungry. After a trip to the reservoir for a drink and a visit to the blackberry bushes for a few sour, reddish fruits, I return to my makeshift hut and open Runner's book. It distracts me from the empty feeling that spreads all through my abdomen, chest, and brain.

The mentioning of bone injuries kept me thinking until I fell asleep. Then came the dreams of piles of bones, all dented, thick blood leaking from them.

I reread the first chapter and can make a little more sense of all the information. If mortality means dead people, morbidity could mean infected people. There's no alternative explanation that would make more sense. So if 40% were infected and of these, 80% died, then only a third of humanity died because of the pandemic. No other disease is mentioned in the book, at least, none that seems important. Typhus was discussed, as were syphilis and a few others that had caused a number of deaths, but nothing close to ten billion.

I lie back down and gaze up at the ceiling, tracing the injuries my knife has inflicted on each twig and branch. Bone injuries. What else but hard impact can make bone yield?

A shudder runs up my arms. Is it possible we killed each other?

The idea doesn't make much sense. One person hitting the other, sure. One person murdering another is possible, too. I've read about this. Some sickos have their own chapter in our history books because they butchered an entire family, kids included. But murder on a global scale and then...everyone taking part?

Runner's words niggle at the back of my neck. The council decides how much the citizens are allowed to know; but what about memories? If there were so many people killing other people, Grandfather must have seen it. Why did he never talk about it?

I shake my head and rub my eyes. What crazy thoughts. The book must be wrong.

I creep out of my hut and brush pine needles off my pants. Warm thick liquid leaks from between my legs. Yuck. I hurry my pants off and squat next to a tree. My stomach grumbles unhappily. I need more breakfast. And I need this menstruation crap to be over already.



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The bush doesn't provide much cover, but it's all there is. The lawns are shaved; the tree line is far behind me. Nothing but a few small hazels block the view from orchard to forest. I'm crouched down behind the largest of them, twigs and leaves tickling my face. In the dusk, the orchard looks ghostly with the linen fabric draped over each tree for storm protection. I'm surprised they are keeping the trees covered. The last heavy wind and rainfall was yesterday. They must be expecting more of it. Runner's words are ringing in my ears, 'I came because of the storm.' How can he know the weather days in advance?

A rumble issues from my stomach. I thought of stealing eggs from birds' nests, but all the chicks have hatched already. And I don't think I'll ever try raw eggs. I'm probably not hungry enough. My brain feels furry, though, and my knees and fingers are weak.

I've been sitting behind that flimsy bush for more than two hours now, waiting for dusk to grow darker and the last workers to leave. I have to make sure I don't miss anyone. Like couples smooching behind the tool shed, or something.

Bending low, I quickly make my way to the picket fence, push a loose stake aside, and squeeze through the gap. The thought of almost-ripe peaches makes my mouth all watery.

I swallow the flood of saliva, fumble at the knot that keeps the protective linen bound to the tree, unfold it, and stick my upper body beneath the cover. The first peach goes directly into my mouth, as does the second, third, and fourth. They are a bit tough and sour; I need to be careful so as not to mess up my digestion.

I tie the cover closed and visit another tree, and then another, picking only a few fruits each time so my nightly visit won't raise suspicion in the morning.

With a grin on my face and my rain jacket bulging with fruits, I make my way up the hill.

---

Ugh, half-ripe peaches and unripe pears. Even thinking of them makes my stomach churn. The thought of dandelion is even worse. How did this happen? I've been careful with the fruits. After stuffing a handful of them into my mouth, I ate only another five or six, slowly, one at a time. Did the dandelion do something funny to my innards? I've never eaten it, let alone in such amounts. Groaning, I roll onto my side, curling up like a baby. My belly hurts. My legs

tremble.

A gurgling spasm shoots through my intestines and unbearable pain follows. I jump out of my hut, yank down my pants, and double over, not knowing which way the food wants to leave first. Front or back? There's no time to dig a pit.

With clammy hands, I wipe vomit off my mouth. Spruce twigs don't make for good ass wipes, but they're all there is.

# DAY THREE



When the morning sun peeks through the trees, flies have already found me and my stink. A bunch of the fat insects are buzzing around my face, drawing malformed ovals of brainless activity. One of them lands on my rain jacket, crawls around, then flies away to find its buddies. I watch them and drift into complete and blissful indifference. Flies do that to me. I've always stared at them crawling over the walls of my room, once Father was done punishing me, or when I woke up screaming my brother's name, screaming for help. But no one ever came, and my brother never answered. In my dreams, Karlsson's hair is still plastered to his head, his hand still outstretched in an oddly stiff and balled-up way. My own hands grasp and grasp. Splashes of water. A wide-open mouth, flooding. Eyes staring, submerged, gone. And all I do is struggle. All I do is save myself.

It's my fault my brother is dead. It might sound somewhat melodramatic to say that I have killed him, but it's true. I did. I'd bugged him for days to take me up to the reservoir and teach me how to swim. And boy did I learn to swim that day. I barely made it to the water's edge, fled from there to our home, hoping someone could haul him out of the depths and back into pulsating, breathing, warm life.

When my parents stood at the shore, staring out at the cold water, they looked like two old tree trunks with their roots chopped off. They gazed at the still surface and grew smaller with each second ticking by, while the others — Zula, Lampit, Klemens, Alexandre — moved about frantically, sopping wet, exhausted, and then, giving up. Shrugs, sobs, hugs — for grown-ups only.

I should have seen it in the eyes of my parents. But I didn't. With my five years, I was too stupid.

I sobbed myself to sleep and woke to Father kicking the door down, stinking of alcohol, fire, and smoke. Stinking of despair and metal.

*Metal?* I was wondering, when he hollered a drunkard's song of accusation. 'Why did you go up to the reservoir? You knew you weren't allowed! Why did you go in the water? You knew he had epilepsy! My son! My son!'

With every *why* and every *you*, his fist fell on my face. He sobbed while he did it, and I knew I made him do it. I passed out when he sat on my head, his knife drilling into my back.

When I came to, Zula sat next to me, dark and swollen half-moons under his eyes. My back was bandaged, evidence hidden, mouths sealed. From that day on, all went downhill.

Sometimes I wonder why I feel so old.

I blink into the morning light that falls onto the forest floor in sharp, stabbing angles. If I remain here, unmoving for another half hour, the sun will caress my face. I watch it coming closer, touching the tips of grass blades, ants that carry pupae and dead caterpillars, then my outstretched hand, my arm, and finally, my eyes, cheeks, and lips.

I hum.

The patch of sunlight leaves my face and travels farther. I wonder why I'm here. Maybe I should go home, take up composting, get married to whomever, have five or six babies. Maybe two or three will stay alive and grow up while I turn grey and bent. Like everyone else. Are the others really happy, or are they just pretending to be? I've never stopped to ask. How does the compassion thing work, anyway? Am I to show compassion to get some in return? Maybe that's what I did wrong all these years. I was mostly focussed on saving my own skin. Don't get punched in the face at school; don't get your arse whipped at home.

I don't give a shit about other people's feelings, so why should anyone care about me?

Anyway.

Time to move.

I disassemble my spruce house and spread the twigs and branches on the soiled ground before I leave. The place reeks. I reek. Hunger isn't my main problem at the moment.

The reservoir lies quiet and peaceful in the morning glow. I scan the surroundings and, seeing no one, I shed my clothes and jump into the cold water. My calves cramp at once.

I gulp air, sink beneath the surface, take both my feet into my hands and stretch the rock-hard muscles, massage them, stretch them again. Swimming is hard, almost impossible, but eventually I make it back to my clothes. Panting and coughing up water, I flop on the grass.

Cackling, I hold my stomach. Tears well up and roll down my cheeks. In my throat is a clump and I choke on it. I'm ready to commit suicide, but panic when I'm about to drown? What bullshit. What's wrong with me? No guts?

I rub my snotty face, stand, and start washing my shirt and pants. No jumping into cold water while starving — I'll keep that in mind. The rain jacket is easy to clean — just a few dunks and it smells like new.

I wring the water from my clothes and wash my body, glad that at least the

menstruation thing seems to be coming to an end. With nothing to rub myself dry, I catch as much of the warming sunlight as possible while keeping my ears and eyes pricked for anyone walking up the hill.

In my mind, I turn over my options. My clothes need to dry, but if I leave them here, they could attract unwanted attention, or worse, even — someone might take them. I need to find food, but carrying my clothes under my arm won't help them get dry. Running around naked in the woods isn't too cool, either — I'm more visible, I'm colder, and I'm certainly not planning to show my bare skin to anyone.

I decide for a compromise and put my wet shirt on. It can dry in the sun without me having to leave it behind. Besides, my body heat will speed up the drying process. I might catch a cold, but I don't care much. My pants and the rain jacket can be hung somewhere else, maybe in a clearing. But first I need to eat. My body feels like an empty husk of bones and skin.

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I ate twelve blackberries today. Just looking at dandelions makes me woozy; no way I can eat them again. Hunger felt sharp and painful around midday. It's a dull throbbing now. The cold night is a bigger problem. My pants aren't dry yet. I'm covered with my rain jacket and atop of that lies a bunch of awkwardly piled-up spruce twigs. The hailstorm keeps blowing through, digging icy fingers into my skin. What a screwed-up summer.

I nod to myself. I'll solve the food problem tomorrow. I only wish I were a bit fatter. Skin and bones don't help you stay warm. Fat does.

I've never been a good eater. During the winter three years ago, the eating-little habit helped my family survive though. All we had left were wrinkly potatoes that believed spring should have arrived long ago (the potatoes were correct — it was May). The small brown tubers sprouted pale arms in a last attempt to reach sun and warmth where there was none. The beans had grown mould and we had to toss them out in the snow, hoping to attract birds, or even rats we could kill and fry. But nothing came. All preserves had been eaten two weeks prior, as had the hams, beets, nuts, and dried berries. People began hacking open the frozen ground in their search for edible roots, but the starving wild boar had eaten them already and moved on. Hunting parties were sent out and didn't return. So that's what we were left with: three potatoes per person per day. We counted the days we had left with something to chew on. It was barely a week.

When all was used up, Alexandre found a dead stag in the woods. It must

have starved to death; its ribs were poking through scraggy fur. But there was still enough meat on it to feed the village and delay death a few days more. And that was enough for spring to arrive. Snow began to melt, the first birdsong was heard, and we knew that the soil would sprout new life. Twenty-eight people died that winter. Babies not counted.

# DAY FOUR



I'm warm when I wake up. Shit! Wasn't there something about hypothermia? One feels warm when one is actually freezing to death? My heart beats a panicky rumble, my eyes snap open, and a dreadful future presents itself: Runner sits before me. He sports a black eye.

'Breakfast?' he asks.

I notice the sleeping bag. He must have spread it over me quite a while ago because I feel really hot now. Might also be from the shock of seeing him.

I sit up and rub my eyes. 'No need to be polite.'

'Hmm. I'm certainly having some. I thought you might be hungry.' He doesn't even look up from the delicacies he's spreading on his sandwich.

'You know, I'm too tired for pleasantries. Just get it over with. Say your thing and go back home.'

'You believe you've failed,' he says.

There might be something resembling a smile. At least his mouth twitches and there is a funny glint to his eyes. It could also be a sneer.

'It's obvious,' I point out.

'Is it?' He spreads butter on a second slice of bread. My mouth waters. I might actually be drooling soon.

'You said one week. It's now day three.' Why do I sound as if I want to protest?

'No.'

'No what?'

'It's day four.'

'Oh.' Right. I stare at the sandwich he holds in his outstretched hand. My stomach somersaults in anticipation. 'Thanks,' I say and more or less inhale the offered food.

'This is not about reaching a randomly set goal, Micka. It's about showing the spirit. You did your best using the resources you had available. With the weather conditions and the lack of provisions, equipment, and warm clothing, you never had a chance to get through a whole week. I'm quite surprised you're still here.'

What's that supposed to mean? 'So why...'

'I wanted to see how easily you give up, and it seems you didn't even

consider it. I'm not here to torture you, and I'm not here to play the smart ass, if I may be so blunt. Humans don't live all by themselves. We are social animals. We help one another, and that is how we survive. You and I will be in the woods for a week. You haven't been alone these four days, and you won't be alone the next three days. Here, have more bread and cheese.'

So, he saw me pooping and vomiting all over the forest floor. Brilliant. To say I'm mortified would be an understatement. 'I don't understand your test,' I mumble and snatch a slice of bread and a hefty chunk of cheese.

'I need to know what kind of person you are. That means I'll occasionally push you over your limits. At the same time, I want you to question everything. Total obedience doesn't show me who you are, it only shows that you can pretend to be a machine.'

His words remind me of my ten-year-old self. I had no clue what I could do once I came of age. I settled on nomadic prostitute, because I discovered my second talent next to turbine fixing: being able to pretend I'm all right, no matter how deep the shit is I'm wading through.

'In the following six months — or less, depending on the outcome — I want you to question everything I say or do. I don't want to create a copy of myself. Forget what you've learned at school. Perhaps most of what you've learned in life, as well.' That last sentence is a bare whisper.

I squint at him, nonplussed. 'What do you know about me?'

'I know very little. My predecessor gave me his impression of you, but I'll not repeat what he said. I might tell you when you are an apprentice. I also know that your grades are dismal, because you rarely do what the teachers tell you, and if you do it, you do it your way.' He sees me gape and adds, 'The dean told me.'

'Adults,' I mutter. They always stick their heads together and exclude anyone too young and, hence, insignificant.

'You are an adult now,' he points out.

'Maybe I should have said "old people,"' I grumble, although he doesn't look old in the greying sense. He's probably thirty or forty.

'So, you don't want any of this?' he asks and begins packing away the breakfast.

Did I say something that pissed him off? I grab another piece of bread, hurry the butter on it, and stuff it in my mouth before it disappears into his rucksack. 'What's next?' I manage to say through the food in my mouth.

'We'll see,' he answers and leans back, arms crossed behind his head.

His casual behaviour rubs me the wrong way, and he seems to have noticed. 'If you believe I have a secret book with a list of things you have to accomplish, I must disappoint you,' he says.



I bite down on my cheeks and he catches the nervous gesture. ‘If it makes you feel better.’ He points to the book. ‘What did you learn, Micka?’

My neck tingles, because his words remind me of my father’s “What did you learn, Micka?” and the humiliations that always follows. But Runner doesn’t look aggressive. He looks relaxed.

‘I don’t know,’ I whisper, ashamed.

‘Why?’

‘Because... Because all this...’ I wave at the book. ‘...gives me more questions than answers.’

‘What questions?’ Still relaxed, still no sneer.

‘What I’ve been told at school and what everyone else knows about the Great Pandemic is very different to what’s in your book. And I wonder why that is. There are only two possible explanations. Either the book is wrong, or everybody else is.’

‘The book is a summary of what we Sequencers know about the causes of the pandemics. Some of it might be wrong, but I doubt it,’ he says.

‘That would mean everyone else is misinformed, or deliberately misinforming others. But I have no guarantee that what is written in your book has anything to do with reality.’

‘Make a guess,’ he says and looks up at the foliage, chewing on a blade of grass.

I don’t want to guess; it feels like gambling with ten billion corpses.

After a long moment of silence, he says, ‘Imagine there is a threat so big no one can do anything about it. What lie would I have to tell you to stop you from panicking?’

‘One that says, “Shut up, I do the thinking?”’

He laughs at that. ‘More or less. I would tell you a lie that you’ll find easy to believe. One you’d *want* to believe.’

‘Which is?’

‘First, I would let you believe what you believed for years: that the Great Pandemic was caused by an unhappy coincidence, bad karma, or a deity with a strange sense of humour. To give you something to look forward to, something that keeps you calm, I would tell you the lowlands will be safe in a few years, that you can soon go where the grass is green and the winters aren’t so harsh, where we can live together and not in settlements so small and so far apart from one another that it’s barely possible for people to survive with the little they have. And everyone would believe these lies easily, because sixty-eight years ago, humanity was wiped out almost completely and this collective trauma is hard to digest. Most people want to forget about it. No one wants to be terrified,

no one wants to know it can happen again. No one wants to know that, next time, no one will be left alive.'

I try to swallow, my throat hurts, and I'm left with a croaky voice. 'Why were bone samples examined for injuries?'

'What do you think?'

Rarely does anyone ask me what I think, and Runner does it so often, my head is spinning. I think of Grandfather and what he told me about the Great Pandemic. Then I comprehend how little information he'd shared. Not once did he mention how Grandmother died. I've always believed it was cholera that killed her. I believed a lot and didn't dare ask, because I knew it hurt him. Whenever we touched the topic of death, he spoke of God and Grandmother being in heaven.

I look at Runner. The grass blade scoots from the left corner of his mouth to the right. A bird calls in a tree above me. And there it is, the one word that makes more sense than all others dropping from my mouth. 'Violence.'

'Yes.'

'How many people died of disease?'

'Three billion, maybe less.'

I stick that information in a corner of my brain that knows little emotion. 'Seven billion people killed one another,' I whisper. 'The ones who survived are murderers.' I'm nodding at myself. My father's behaviour seems to make sense now.

Runner's face darkens. 'It's more complicated than that.'

I bend a little closer, ears and eyes wide with attention.

'I'll tell you once you're an apprentice,' he says.

My shoulders sag and I inspect the dirt under my fingernails. 'What are Sequencers really doing?'

'Trying to keep humanity alive, but it gets harder every year.'

'Why does it get harder?' I ask.

'You'll know once you are an apprentice.'

'The time...the ten or fifteen years for the lowlands to be safe again, is that...'

'The time we have left, yes.'

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Runner is lying at the base of a beech tree, half rolled up in his sleeping bag. I sit close by, reading and picking the soft innards out of the loaf of bread he's brought, but I'm barely able to contain my hunger for knowledge. I can't believe

that I actually want to read more books. He told me to be patient, but I've never been more impatient than today.

Before he dozed off, he asked me how I can sleep on the forest floor all by myself while that lynx is in the area. I've never heard of a lynx here, but Runner is certain he's seen footprints.

He had little sleep in the past four days while keeping an eye on me. I felt ashamed when he told me this, but what choice did I have? I don't own a fancy tent like the one he has, one that can be hung between trees, far enough from anything that wants to take a bite off me. He calls the thing a hammock and it has room for two. He also says we'll share it whenever we're travelling together.

Since then, goosebumps scuttle up and down my back. I'm thinking of the Old Geezer who died a few months ago, but not because people lynched him. He simply fell down dead. Probably drank too much. Everybody knew what he did to little boys. Or maybe they suspected it and it was too horrible to ask questions or point fingers. Instead, it was better to say nothing. In third grade, Marreesh often had problems sitting on his bum. No one talked about it. I didn't either. I had no clue what I could say. "Are you okay?" would be stupid. "Did someone stick something in your arse?" would be outright...impossible. So I settled on "Hey." Later, because Marreesh flinched every time I approached him, I stopped trying. Everybody stopped talking to him. A wall of silence. There are a lot of people on this side of the wall. On the other side, you are alone.

I watch Runner snore softly. I know nothing about this stranger and I'm supposed to travel with him, sleep in a small tent with him, share food with him, and even my thoughts. I need a weapon, something more useful than this pathetic pocket knife of mine. And I need to be better prepared for our next trip, should there ever be one.

I've never thought about a Sequencer's life. Cacho appeared and disappeared, leaving behind a whiff of magic. Some people gaped when he marched along the main street into our village. Everyone believes Sequencers are wealthy, but Runner claims that all he owns is in his backpack. The silvery machine, the clothes he wears — plus four more sets packed — his ground pad and his sleeping bag, a pot, a water canteen, two knives, a rifle, the hammock tent, and three books. I haven't seen it all yet, but there can't be that much more. He has to have a place where he lives, where his family lives, and where he stores stuff like winter clothes. Cacho didn't show up in summer clothes at minus twenty degrees Celsius, either.

When the sun begins to set, Runner cracks open an eye. 'What time is it?'  
'Dinner time.'

His “short nap” was several hours long, and he doesn’t look particularly fresh. Yet he jumps up, compresses the sleeping bag into a small roll, and quickly stuffs it into his backpack. ‘Come,’ he says and walks ahead.

We hike to the reservoir, and on the way he points out traces of wild animals and explains their meaning. Feathers of a bird — plucked, not moulted — droppings and pellets of an owl that show where the nest is, scratches on the bark of trees, brushed-off rain droplets.

When we reach the reservoir, he says that he needs to wash.

That reminds me — my damp clothes must smell like Alfons Lampit’s goat cheese. I pull off one shoe and hold my socked foot close to my nose. Yuck!

Sitting on the turbine housing, I hug my knees. My back is turned to Runner and my front faces the sunset. About twenty minutes later, he walks up to me, his hair still dripping. ‘Your turn. Wash your clothes. They reek. I have a dry set you can use.’

I wonder how he does his command thing without ever raising his voice. He rummages in his backpack, extracts a pair of brown cotton pants and a white shirt, all too big for me.

No underwear, though.

Now, I’m glad my body hasn’t changed yet and there’s nothing that makes me look very female. Well, nothing prominent at least. Feeling awkward washing with a stranger not ten metres away, I keep my eyes on his back. Should he move a fraction, I’ll dive. I’m a good swimmer and there’s no way he can drag me to shore. I’ll drown myself before he can even put a finger on me.

But nothing happens. The man sits as still as a statue, his slender silhouette black against an orange backdrop.

While my clothes soak on a bank, I take my time rolling around in the chilly water and swimming to the middle of the reservoir. The exertion helps to clear my mind. I watch the small bump in the distance — Runner still sitting motionless on the turbine housing. I wonder about his motives, because, for an adult, a fifteen-year-old as the only company must be nothing but irritating.

The sun is almost gone when I spread my washed and wrung-out clothes next to the turbine. ‘How old were you when you started your apprenticeship?’ I ask.

‘Fifteen. One of the most basic skills every Sequencer has to learn is survival,’ he says. ‘You have to be able to travel between settlements in harsh weather. In the next three days, I’ll show you how to hunt and fish, how to make a fire without burning down the forest, how to scale trees and put the tent up, and how to find water if you don’t know where the nearest river or lake is, et cetera. I want you to practice these skills when I’m gone. You’ll soon need your own

sleeping bag, rifle, and hunting knife.’

That’ll be expensive. My parents won’t be happy. ‘I know how to shoot rabbits,’ I offer. The same goes for fishing and making a fire without burning down the forest. That’s stuff seven-year olds learn. Besides, I seriously doubt he can teach me anything about climbing trees. But I keep my mouth shut. I’m still embarrassed by the recent non-demonstration of my survival skills.

‘Show me.’ He stands and pulls a black rifle from a sheath. It looks much sleeker than the one Father has in his bedroom.

‘An air rifle,’ he explains. ‘Very quiet — a great advantage when hunting in the woods.’

I know air rifles. The ones that need bullets are only for the hunting parties and the council. The propellant is hard to come by. If anyone wants to shoot small game, pellets and air rifles are used.

He breaks the barrel down and takes a small silvery pellet from his pocket. ‘Push the pellet all the way into the breech — like this — then close the barrel. If you need more than two shots to kill your food, you shouldn’t be hunting.’

The barrel latches. He aims at the ground and pulls the trigger. There’s only a soft click. ‘This is an old weapon, but a very robust one. It has excellent aim, no recoil, and it needs little maintenance. But you can’t kill anything bigger than rabbits and fowl. If you need to defend yourself against something large, you can use it as a club, but not much else.’

He holds out the rifle to me. ‘Give it a try.’

Finally, something I know well. I take the weapon from his hand. He fumbles in his pockets, extracts two pellets, and hands them to me.

The rifle is surprisingly light. I load it the way he’s shown me — it’s different from my father’s, which has a lever to compress air. I aim at a tree about seventy or eighty metres away, and shoot. We have to walk up to it to see that bark has chipped off where the pellet hit.

‘Hmm.’ I try to not sound too appreciative about the weapon’s aim and reach. Runner doesn’t comment. Looking down at his shirt I’m wearing, I say, ‘Too white to hunt.’ I fetch my dark rain jacket, pull it over me, and ask him for more pellets.

With a grin, he places only one into my palm. If I need more than two, I shouldn’t be hunting.

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I sit in a beech at the edge of the forest. Several narrow trails criss-cross through the grass, entering the woods where a mighty tree lies on the ground,

covered by moss and a few marten droppings. I can smell them all the way up to my branch.

My feet are bare, pressing against the smooth bark. My back is nestled against the trunk. The rifle is pinned underneath my right arm, my eyes trained into the distance, focussing on nothing in particular. My ears, though, are wide open, mapping locations of the occupants of the woods behind me and in the meadow before me. A pair of tawny owls must be nesting half a kilometre to my right. I see them swooping in and out of the trees, calling their high-pitched song as soon as they settle on a branch.

The meadow ahead is buzzing with crickets. No rabbits so far, but they're small and will be hard to spot. Three deer tiptoe through the vegetation. I watch the animals bend their slender necks, their snouts kiss the grass.

Two dark-tipped ears peek over the vegetation, wiggle, and hide again. A hare, maybe?

A nightingale begins to blare in a shrub beneath me. Its song seems to work like a calming call to everyone. *All is good. No danger.* The hare takes a hop and I take aim just beneath its shoulder blade. *Click.*

The animal somersaults, kicks and kicks, until it finally falls still. The deer prick their slender ears, stick their noses higher up in the wind, but find nothing suspicious. The nightingale begins its crescendo.

I strap the rifle on my back, wrap my arms around the branch I sat on, and swing down. The soft noise silences the nightingale. The deer dart into the woods.

I walk up to the hare and pick it up. Just when I turn to walk back to the reservoir, I spot a set of gleaming eyes fixed on me.

On the fallen tree, soft paws on soft moss, stands a lynx.

I feel how my cursing blood warms my skin, but it's not caused by fear. It's caused by a wild desire to watch the cat move silently, the wish that it would stay a minute and allow me to take in all its features, the pointy ears with the narrow black brushes of hair sticking up. The eyes, sometimes yellow, sometimes green, but never clearly defined. The markings in its face, like those of a warrior.

When the cat begins to move, it's not retreating. It's approaching. And that is when fear finally creeps in.

Ears folded flat, hackles rising, and throat hissing, the lynx creeps forward. I don't think it could kill me — it's not large enough — but it can certainly injure me. Those incisors look rather long and pointy when I imagine them cutting through my neck.

The cat jumps off the tree trunk and I take a step back. It stares at me and then at the hare. And finally, I understand. I've stolen its dinner.

I don't know precisely what gets into me when I hold the hare out instead of throwing it the two metres to the lynx. Curiosity, maybe. I have a bit too much of that, I guess.

Light-grey paws are set in motion and I can see a slight limp in its right hind leg. When the cat steps out into the pale moonlight, it shows ragged fur, and underneath, ribs grinding against skin.

I wonder if I should go down on my knees to appear less threatening, but decide against it, as this will also make me look more edible. Instead, I stretch out my arm as far as it can go, the hare suspended on its ears, feet touching the ground.

Without taking its eyes off me, the lynx lunges, closes its jaws around my kill, and disappears between the trees.

I touch my hand to my chest and feel an oddly calm heartbeat.

Later, when I return from my hunt with a rabbit that has only one hole in its pelt, Runner asks where the second pellet is.

'You'll know once I'm an apprentice,' I reply, and gut our quarry.

# DAY SEVEN



When I step through the door, it feels like being swept up and brashly thrown back into reality. The same corridor — overly clean and impersonal, the same scrubbing sounds from the kitchen, the same grumbling from the living room.

In the woods, Runner has unceremoniously touched his fingers to his hat and marched off. I don't even know if, or when, he'll return.

As soon as my mother notices I'm back, reality seems to vanish once more. My parents — who rarely express any other feelings but regret — now behave like two hens who've just laid abnormally large eggs. I let myself be wrapped up by their happiness while my doubts keep niggling in the back of my mind. Even after a week in the woods, I still cannot believe what has happened, and what might be happening to the rest of my life. Or how short this rest might be.

But I don't run around chicken-like, making noise and repeating the same information over and over again. Micka (the loser) has done well! Micka (the loser) starts her probation time as a Sequencer's apprentice without screwing up! Micka (the loser) returns home dirty, stinky, and unable to utter a peep.

Once the day comes to an end and my parents retreat to their bedroom, my mind uses the silence to produce its own noise. The uncertainty is unbearable. The change from hope and adventure, from feeling alive and respected to... being back home, tears me apart. My chest is aching. Hope — the hungry beast — is prowling inside. I'm prowling, too. From door to window, window to door, door to window, and back and forth. It doesn't help. I unclasp my knife and my hands grow calm. The pain inside my chest lessens with every line I carve into it.



## ***Part Two — Winter***

*Before the times of change, still is it so:  
By a divine instinct men's minds mistrust  
Ensuing dangers; as by proof, we see  
The waters swell before a boisterous storm.*

William Shakespeare (Richard III)

# PROBATION



I stare into my soup. Bits of greyish potatoes and woody string beans drift among flecks of what must be herbs. Winter soup recipes are simple: throw leftovers into water, add salt and whatever grows beneath the snow cover looking like it might add taste. Boil until all ingredients appear very dead. Serve.

As a kid, I played “save the veggies.” My spoon was the rescue boat that scooped drowning vegetables from the soup and poured them on top of one another. The ones at the bottom would have to sacrifice themselves for the survival of the ones at the top. Funny how much my soup reflected life.

The game always ended with Mother yelling. Not anymore, though. I could play it until Christmas next year and no one would complain.

These days, when Father talks about me, he refers to me as “his daughter.” I used to be “that girl.” My mother hugs me almost daily and asks how I’m doing. I can’t stand it; the hugs give me a headache and I don’t want to talk about how I feel.

The presents that arrived today are shockingly luxurious: an air rifle, a backpack, a ground pad, and a sleeping bag — ordered by my parents eight weeks ago. The whole village pitched in. Everyone seems proud to have me.

The things are strewn across my room now. I’ve touched everything, smelled and tasted everything, and even wept into the sleeping bag. Tomorrow morning I’ll go for a hike and test my new equipment. I have to get out of this chicken run.

I know I should be grateful, humble, and nice. But I’m not. I’m still me. I didn’t change from despicable to loveable, not that I know of, anyway. Whatever changed is superficial. It’s all in what others suddenly see in me. It’s all because a stranger showed interest in me four months ago, and still does, despite me being me.

That’s why I hate the sudden attention, because it’s not for me. It’s for a man who’s deeply respected, even feared maybe, throughout the entire village.

I eat my bread and stop shovelling beans on my save-the-veggies pile. I’m too old for this stuff. As if to prove my adulthood, my chest sprouted walnut-sized boobs. All other girls my age are rather...well-developed, to put it mildly. At fifteen, one isn’t playing around anymore. One is to work a job, get married, have children, and be normal.

A mischievous grin spreads across my face. There are no job, kid, and husband duties waiting for me. Only adventures.

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I pull the scarf higher up on my nose. The snow is deep, but the felted goat hair gaiters protect my legs from wetness and cold. I'm wrapped in wool and hair, my muscles ache and produce heat, and the backpack is heavy. I have no specific plans other than to not return this week. I know I'll sleep little because the tarp I carry won't be enough to keep the wind and snow out at night. But it's wonderful to be outside and far away.

I talk to myself just to taste the words. I shout them to feel their aroma spread to the back of my head. I stick snow into my mouth and rub it over my face to savour scents and flavours. If anyone were to see or hear me, they'd think I was insane.

Who knows? Maybe I am slowly getting there. I've learned so much in the past four months, I have problems wrapping my head around it all — the complexity of events, the ignorance of my species. For decades before the Great Pandemic, scientists knew what factors triggered cholera outbreaks. Elevated sea surface temperatures caused yearly cholera pandemics along almost all coastlines, and every August and September, people fled the coasts when the water turned thick with algae, copepods, and *Vibrio cholerae*. Each wave of death could be predicted, watched, and quantified. Yet nobody seemed interested in moving away from the coasts for good. Thousands of people died each year. They had homes, families, and fishing jobs there.

The seas had long risen to more than eighteen metres above pre-climate disaster levels, and all it took was one particularly hot year with exceptional heavy rains to flood sewer systems more than ever. Then disease ran rampant, not only along the coasts but through crowded inland cities as well. Two bouts of cholera — one coming from the sea and one coming from the cities — poured over all continents, except Australia and Antarctica, which were either too arid or too cold.

It didn't take long for people to realise that tuberculosis had spread silently for years, weakening the immune system of more than 80% of humanity before the more aggressive cholera struck. The resulting death rate was staggering. No cure was available, because bacteria had long ago learned to neutralise antibiotics. So many dead people, and who was to blame? The *others*. In this one year of great suffering, we began murdering each other and didn't stop until close to ten billion of us were gone. I don't get the logic in this. Runner keeps

telling me that there is little logic, that we are not a very logical species.

He told me about the *Brothers and Sisters of the Apocalypse*, short, BSA. The mentioning of the BSA alone raises a lot of hackles, and I'm not to talk about them when we are with strangers. It might end badly.

Runner said the BSA formed during the Dark Ages — when people were shitting their bowels out or coughing up their lungs and they needed someone to blame for their misery. A lot of people believed in a god and a devil, and that this devil spread evil in the world and this god wanted to fix it. So god planned to wipe us all out with disease, but somehow he didn't get it quite right because only three billion died and seven billion were still alive, and so the BSA rushed to help. Millions of people believed this crap and many still do, because when you help the cause of a god, your afterlife will be better than the shit life you're living.

People who looked wrong died first, and people who believed wrong died next. Apparently, a lot of men and women believed there was only evil on this planet. I keep wondering if they learned to hate because their lives had been so hard. Maybe they often starved because the world was so crowded. I don't know. Runner doesn't want to tell me the details. Not yet, he said, but soon.

And it's not just the BSA to blame, he argued. There were countless groups, separatists, people who acted alone and enjoyed a killing spree, helped by billions who simply turned a blind eye and didn't care about their neighbours dying. When I asked him if it's better now that they are all dead, he fell silent. I watched the tapping of his fingertips against his shins, and I knew I'd said something wrong.

After a long moment, he asked, 'You don't care about *your* neighbours much, do you? Do you think it would be better if I killed you now?'

Maybe it would be better, I thought, but I didn't say it. The future scares me.

When I look at the snow now and the empty landscape, I'm left to wonder how it would be if the land were filled with people. Would I hate it? Maybe. I like it the way it is now — quiet, vast, and peaceful.

# SNOW



Runner showed up three days ago, little clumps of ice stuck to a three centimetre long beard, his eyebrows white with frost beneath a snow-covered hat, his hair shaggy and wet, sticking to his fur collar. Father didn't recognise him at first. Mother hurried his backpack off and ushered him into the bathroom, where he took a hot shower for a wasteful five minutes, sucking our boiler empty. I knew the man needed to eat and sleep, but all I could think was *Let's go!* Although sharing a tent with him feels awkward, our hikes totally rock.

Now he's walking only three steps ahead of me, yet he's barely visible. The wind blows snow down from the clouds, up from the snowdrifts, horizontally off the firs. Tiny icicles needle my cheeks. My snow goggles are caked with snow, my gaiters are leaking snow into my boots, and my neck has a snow collar.

This winter grew harsh and that's why Runner insists on crossing the mountains to the lowlands. Snow is good there, the more the better because it helps you survive in a contaminated place, he told me. Snow can be thawed and used as drinking water, while lakes, rivers, and groundwater are unfit for human consumption. We are trading the risk of dying of disease with the risk of dying of severe cold. But I'm not complaining. I'm happy out here, and I've never seen the lowlands with my own eyes.

There's just this one problem with my feet. I can't feel them, and although I'm trying really hard not to, I'm about to topple over.

Runner turns around and shouts something I don't understand. The wind is picking up and howls into my face.

'We'll dig a hole over here and get out of the snowstorm,' he says louder, pointing to a bolder with a snowdrift piling up on its side. 'Can you use your hands?'

I yell, 'Yes!' but I have my doubts.

We drop our backpacks, unstrap the snowshoes, and use them to dig a tunnel. The snow is compact — slowing the digging but making sure our bivouac won't collapse. I hope.

Runner is shaping a cave that will barely fit the two of us. The smaller the better — less dead volume to heat and less snow to dig out.

'Fix sleeping bags and pads. I'll cook tea,' he says once he drilled an air hole into the side of the cave, and that's all we speak until each pair of ice-cold hands

holds a steaming mug of peppermint tea. We are chewing strips of dried meat, handfuls of nuts, and dried cherries.

‘In the morning,’ Runner says, ‘we’ll have to eat a hundred grams of butter each. Otherwise it will be hard to take in all the calories we use up hiking through the deep snow.’

The word “calories” alone makes my mouth water.

‘How are your feet?’

‘What feet?’ I joke, but he doesn’t think it’s funny.

‘Sleeping bag,’ he says and points. ‘Take your shoes and socks off first. Anything that’s wet or full of snow, too.’

I strip down to my woollen long-johns and sweatshirt, moving about carefully so as not to brush snow off the ceiling or walls. He extracts a set of dry clothes from my backpack and stuffs them into my sleeping bag. I wiggle in and get dressed in the confined space while Runner changes his clothes, too.

‘Okay, Micka, scoot over.’

‘You want to come in *here*?’ Does he even fit?

‘Yes. Move.’

Now I *am* worried. My hunting knife is in the pile of damp clothes and just out of reach. But the chances of him doing anything funny at minus twenty-five degrees Celsius might be low. I unzip the sleeping bag and move aside as far as possible. Runner opens his sleeping bag all the way, throws it over mine, and inches himself into our cocoon, but from the other end.

‘Feet under my armpits, Micka. That’s the warmest place.’

I burst out laughing when he pulls up his shirt and pullover, but I immediately do what he says. We are both on our backs, his legs sticking up above my ears, while my icy feet find the two warm pockets under his arms. Not that I feel the warmth, but I assume it’s there, judging by his wince.

‘What about yours?’ I ask.

‘They are okay.’

Sure. I send my hands up there anyway, slipping my fingers into his socks. Ice-cold. As I thought.

‘Feet under my armpits, Runner.’

I don’t need to invite him twice. He inches his large feet under my arms and I try not to squeal from the sudden drop in temperature.

‘Once you feel a little warmer, you can stuff all your wet clothes into the foot-end of your sleeping bag. They’ll dry overnight.’

Right now, I don’t feel like moving at all. Runner’s icy toes slowly grow lukewarm. My feet are regaining a little feeling, especially my toes, which now hurt as if someone chopped them off. I bite my cheeks and close my eyes.

‘Show me your toes, Micka.’

Reluctantly, I pull one foot from the hairy, but wonderfully warm Runner-  
armpit. He probes and presses, then sticks my foot back into the toasty place.

‘Superficial frostbite, nothing to worry about. Have more of the hot tea.’

‘Give me a moment,’ I hum, limbs aching, eyelids heavy with exhaustion.  
‘How do you stick your feet under your own armpits?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I was just wondering what you do when you hike through the snow all by  
yourself.’

‘I would have walked another five hours to the next settlement, stuck my feet  
into warm water, sipped hot tea with something stronger in it, and sat as close to  
the fireplace as possible.’

‘Is it annoying to have a fifteen-year-old as company?’

‘Sometimes.’

I sneak my hand into the snow, grab a piece, and throw it into Runner’s face.  
‘Old people are quite annoying, but what can one do about it?’

‘Micka, you really don’t give a shit about authority.’ A sharp grumble.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say quietly.

A handful of snow hits me. ‘Question everything,’ he says without taking his  
eyes off the bumpy snow bivouac ceiling.

‘The next village is only five hours from here?’ I’m tired, but wiggle myself  
towards the teapot and pour a cup. ‘Tea?’

He hands me his mug and I hand it back, filled and steaming.

‘Five hours for me. With you, depending on how much snow falls tonight, it  
could be another day, or even two.’

‘I had no clue I was such a weakling.’ I try to put some acid in my voice, but  
all I sound is tired.

‘Micka, I’ve been doing this for years. It would be a shame if I hadn’t  
improved my hiking skills in all this time.’

He’s right, but it still rubs me the wrong way. I push his large feet from my  
bony armpits, pull on my socks and boots, and announce that I need to pee.

Once I’m back inside and our backpacks secure the entrance, I stuff a  
handful of nuts into my mouth, slip into my now-empty sleeping bag, and drift  
off within minutes.

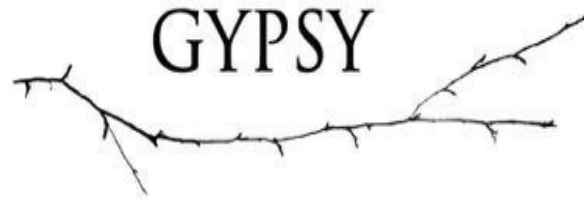
I don’t know for how long I’ve slept, but my clattering teeth wake me. It’s no  
use to try to compact myself into a ball. I’m freezing cold.

Rustling tells me that my noise woke up Runner. I hear a zipper being  
unzipped and feel an arm and a layer of his sleeping bag being draped over me.  
He scoots as close as he can and I’m left to confusing thoughts about me hating

hugs and all. But I'm so cold that it might be time for a compromise. I unzip my sleeping bag, nudge the one half of my cover underneath his, press my back against his stomach, and doze off quite comfortably.



# GYPSY



We're stuck in a tiny village high up in the mountains, with only three houses and two barns, surrounded by large meadows that will be dotted with cows and sheep as soon as spring arrives. The snowstorm was heavy, and it might take a month or two until Runner and I can pass over the mountains again. But for now, after we've rested and replenished our provisions, our path lies in the opposite direction — down and farther down.

This place is very different from my own home. People seem busier and closer to one another. They laugh and chat more, and it's odd to see them embrace Runner and even kiss him on the mouth. I'd believed him to be more of the distant kind. But here, everyone kisses anyone on the mouth to say hello. They hug a lot, too. I did the hugging thing, but turned my head away when the kissing was about to happen. They didn't seem to mind because I'm a stranger.

Now I'm sitting pinched between two sets of shoulders. An entire cow plus a vegetable field is spread on the table. Or so it seems. I've never seen such enormous amounts of food, wine, beer, and people in such a small room. I flick a finger across the kinked tabletop, imagining that the scents and noises can be moved like a cloth.

Outside, snow flutters against the windowpanes, settles, and scoots down with a slug-trail, forming white mounds on the sills. The black night sky has little opportunity to peek through the white onslaught.

And just when I think the room is impossibly overloaded, even more people enter. Two men with beads and coins in their braided beards, a woman with tinkling earrings and strands of silver woven through her raven-black hair, and two girls with colourful dresses and scarves around their heads call a cheerful, 'Hello!' The men shake snow off their long hair. One of them toes the door shut.

Runner turns his head as the word "Gypsies" sounds over the chatter. The woman nods at him, then talks to the two girls. For a moment, it looks as if Runner knows them, but there's no hugging and kissing, so I turn my attention back to my plate. The man next to me eats a hunk of fried udder as if it's the best thing he's ever tasted. Fat dribbles down his chin and hits the potatoes on his plate. I'd rather stick to my ribs. The beer makes me lightheaded and I find myself laughing at jokes I don't even understand.

Rubbing my tongue against my palate, I try to describe the flavour of the

room and the people. The hum of conversation tastes of candied apples, and the surroundings are spicy, but I can't tell what spices. Nothing green, that's for sure. Rugs decorate walls and floor. A large fire heats the room, and it's not even used to cook the meat. Where I grew up, this would be considered wasteful. A slight unease trickles down my neck, caused by the loud chatter, the laughing, the large amount of food, the jokes, and colourful clothing. I've never seen anything like it, and I'm almost expecting someone to enter, point at me, and drag me out by my ears to whip me for quietly taking part in this luxury.

I shrug and grab another piece of fried ribs. When I look up from my plate, I see Runner approaching the Gypsies. The woman is introducing the two girls who must be her daughters. One looks like she's my age, the other is probably three years younger and is now taking Runner's hands into hers. They stick their heads together and chat.

There's still space in my stomach for a few string beans, I think. They glisten with butter and slide down easily. Maybe a third serving will fit in, too. When I reach out to the string bean pot again, my hand freezes mid-way.

The girl sits on Runner's lap. Both talk and laugh and hug. I've never seen him so engrossed by anyone. She's whispering in his ear, pressing her face to his neck. His cheeks are shiny, his eyes glistening, and he seems nervous and excited at once.

I make an effort to blink really hard, but there she is, still only a small girl. Her arms are skinny, her chest flat, and her face that of a child. She's barely twelve. My skin crawls. All that hugging and mouth-pecking suddenly makes me sick. I try not to stare, but I keep my eyes on Runner for the rest of the night. All the while, my brain is ringing with what my mother repeated throughout my childhood: "Men always only want one thing, Micka."

When everyone is fed and tired and the room gradually empties, the Gypsies bid their farewell. The girl gives Runner a kiss on his mouth and he holds her to him, mussing her hair, kissing her in return.

The beef ribs and string beans want to get back out of my stomach. My mother's "Certain girls get what they ask for" echoes in my head.

The Gypsy woman walks up to Runner, leans close to him, and speaks into his ear. He's positively blushing, smiling, beaming even, and then he's coughing into his hand.

Did she just...

Runner catches my gaze. 'Micka, you look ill. Are you all right?'

'Yes,' I croak through clenched teeth. 'Tired.' If I open my mouth too far, I'll puke.

He waves at a broad-chested woman with short grey hair. 'Martha, I think

Micka is getting sick. Look at her.'

She looks down at me, her eyes widen. 'Good Lordy!' She lays her palm on my forehead, hums, and says. 'Exhaustion, I'd say. Into bed with you, little one.'

I'm almost grateful Martha calls me "little one," as it provokes me enough to move my stunned muscles.

She shushes me into the tiny room where Runner and I are sleeping, squeezes my shoulder, and offers to help me undress. Shocked, I shake my head. As soon as she's out of the door, I fetch my hunting knife and position myself at the window. Do adults believe that kids deserve this when they behave in a... whatever kids-like way? Was that the reason for everybody back home to ignore what the Old Geezer did to little boys? I don't even know what his name was. *The Old Geezer* was like a keyword for really bad shit.

Only a few moments later, my worst suspicions are confirmed. Runner stomps through the deep snow, shovels some of the cold stuff into his hands, and rubs his face with it. Clouds of white condensation exit his mouth when he makes his way around the house toward three yurts that hadn't been standing there when we arrived.

Breathing heavily, I press my fists against my eyes until lights flicker in my vision. Thinking of my dead brother helps against the panic. 'Karlsson?' I whisper. 'I'm scared.'

What am I going to do now? Does this woman sell her daughter often? The whole procedure appeared so...so normal to everyone. If I help the girl tonight, she'll still have to endure this pig of a mother for another three years until she's of age. She might get punished if I try to help her. Maybe I'll get punished. I'll lose the apprenticeship. But who wants to spend another second in Runner's company, knowing what he's doing? How could I have been so blind? His *helpfulness* when I was cold. *Here, Micka, sleep in my sleeping bag. Here, Micka, let me hold you. Here, Micka, let me warm your feet.*

How can I be so naïve? Shit, I don't want to feel helpless and much too small. But the girl...much smaller. I don't even want to think of it. But the image of him lying atop of her makes me retch, holds my feet in place and, at the same time, drives me forward. The latter urge wins. I blink the shock aside and coax my brain into working mode. I never moved a muscle to help Marreesh, but tonight I'll chop off balls, I swear. A job at the composting facility would be very welcome after this crap.

What do I need? I turn away from the window and scan the room.

My coat is draped over a chair. My boots are drying in the corridor. My skin itches so badly I want to pull it off. My hands are so sweaty it's hard to maintain my grip on the knife. I wipe my palms on my pants, pull on my coat, slip into

my boots, and follow Runner's deep footprints to one of the yurts. When I hear a deep moan — which I identify as male, and hence, his — bile fills my mouth. I spit in the snow and, before my little courage fails me, I kick at the entrance and shout, 'Get off her! Get the fuck off of her!'

Snot and tears are already pouring down my face, but I don't care. My feet are firmly planted in the deep snow. With my heart aching and my fists balled, I'm ready for anything.

'Micka?' Runner's voice. Asshole.

'I said, get the fuck off of her!'

Soft footfalls approach, then the rug — or whatever it is that serves as a door — flaps open, showing a flustered Runner with a colourful shawl wrapped around his hips. His chest is furry and a line of black hair points from there to where his privates are. The rest is naked. 'What the hell is going on?'

'Probation is over,' I spit.

'What are you talking about? What the hell are you doing here, anyway?'

'I'm not an idiot. You flirted with that tiny girl the entire evening. How old is she? Twelve?' I'm only slightly aware that he used a banned word. Hell. Does he believe he can get away with everything?

'Thirteen.'

'Thirteen! You fucking pervert!' My voice fails, I shrieked too loudly.

Runner's expression is cold. He opens the door wider and I can see inside. A candle is lit on a small table. A woman is lying on a mattress on the floor, her upper body naked, her heavy breasts tattooed. The silvery streaks in her raven-black hair sparkle in the candlelight.

Runner inhales and says with a voice that fights for control, 'The girl you are talking about is my daughter, Ezra. And this...' He indicates the bed. '...is her mother. She was so friendly to invite me tonight.'

It feels as if the world falls deaf. Even the snot under my nose is frozen. I take a step back. I've forgotten about the deep snow. My view tilts and before I can say 'Oh!' I'm buried in the cold stuff. I can probably melt a big hole into it now, I'm so hot with shame. My fury is evaporating.

An outstretched hand is offered. I don't take it. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'll... go.' And off I run. I'm such an idiot. I'm such a fucking idiot!

I lie awake until dawn. Runner doesn't return. I would have been surprised if he had.

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Hunger and the scents of frying pancakes and fresh barley coffee pull me out

of bed, although I'd prefer to hide until much later.

Martha stands at the stove, scraping at sizzling yummy things in her black cast-iron pan. My mouth is flooding. 'Hey,' I mumble when I see Runner. I'm so ashamed I don't dare look at him.

'Sit, please.' He indicates the chair next to him as he rises and gets plate, fork, knife, and cup, which he sets down in front of me. I don't know why he's doing this, but I guess he's being nice now so he can deliver the heavy blow without a bad conscience.

He turns on the tap, boils water, and mixes something in a large bowl. When he sets the bowl on the floor in front of me, I scoot away from him.

'Allow me, please.' His face looks...I don't know...sad, maybe?

Feeling awkward and ridiculous, I move my chair back to where it stood, but not one millimetre closer.

He holds out his hands. An offering, but I'm too puzzled to react. He moves closer, pulls my socks down, takes my feet, and splashes them with water. I'm very ticklish there, but not today. I guess one needs a trace of humour left for that.

'Why are you washing my feet?' I croak.

'It's a custom...' he explains without looking up, '...I learned at a place where people don't use words to ask for forgiveness. They believe that words have little weight.'

He takes the soap and lathers the soles of my feet. 'I was angry at you last night,' he continues. 'To be honest, I almost burned a fuse, because I couldn't fathom how anyone could think I would abuse a child. My own daughter!' He freezes for a moment and stares at his hands. 'I should have known better, considering...' He clears his throat. 'Kaissa set me straight, helped me understand your reaction. I'm an idiot, because it was evident.'

Seeing my nonplussed stare, he adds, 'Kaissa is the woman I slept with.'

My feet twitch in his hands. Too much information for my taste.

'I thought that was obvious.' He cocks his head. 'I'm apologising for my ignorance.'

'I have no idea what you are talking about,' I croak. My feet feel like they are wilting off my ankles.

'You've been abused, probably even raped.'

'No, it wasn't... I wasn't...' I exhale a growl of embarrassment. 'I'm a virgin. No one raped me. I want my feet back.'

Puzzled, he looks up at me. Then he rinses the soap off my feet, dries them with a towel, and puts my socks back on a second before I bolt from the kitchen.

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I haven't been myself since Runner washed my feet. I'm not even sure if I've ever been myself, and have only now come to notice. How can a friendly and humble gesture hurt more than violence?

I've seen Kaissa and apologised. It wasn't easy, because I can't remember the last time I said "I'm sorry" to anyone but my dead brother. I've met Ezra, and her resemblance to Runner, her boldness and honesty, hurt even more. It took me a while to realise what it is that I find so disturbing about her. She's not bent. And she's beautiful.

When I look at myself now, I realise that the ugliness I've seen all these years is probably not ugly at all, and what I thought is making me special is only making me crooked. I'm like a gnarled old tree that wants to stretch to the light and doesn't quite know how to do it. Meanwhile, I feel sorry for myself, and always only for myself.

I haven't talked to Runner since. When I see him at mealtimes, we barely acknowledge one another. I don't know what to say. I'm growing smaller by the hour.

Now, with everyone assembling for dinner, I stand with my back to the wall, watching. This small group of people is so different in many ways. The touching that I find hard to accept. The kissing and hugging. It gives me goosebumps.

And then there's all the stuff that makes my heart heavy. Never does a child weep alone, there's always an adult kneeling next to her or him, hugging, or another child walking up and offering a dried pear or a wet kiss. The small gestures of respect are everywhere, gestures one can only notice if one takes the time to look.

I feel myself sinking into self-pity, wondering why I grew up with so little love and respect. Then I realise that I don't have much respect for people, either. I don't love anybody. The others aren't the problem. It's only me being judgmental.

And then I know what I need to do.

Runner's face looks like it's carved in stone when I approach him with a bowl, a towel, and a piece of soap. The room falls silent. People wait for me to speak. But I don't. I don't know the right words to say.

I kneel and look up at Runner, who blinks when I pull off his thick woollen socks.



Today is our last day here, and in a way, I'm relieved. The kitchen always seems crammed and Runner's gaze too inspecting or grave. I'm longing to walk through the silent and snowy countryside with only his back facing me and neither of us speaking more than necessary.

Presently, I'm sitting on a pillow in Kaissa's yurt. She insists on cutting my hair; she thinks orange is pretty.

Kaissa wants to be nice. But why, I don't know.

'Ready?' she asks, and I nod.

She brushes my hair, then takes strand by strand as if the scrubby stuff needs testing before it can come off. I avoid her gaze in the mirror while goosebumps rake over my skin. Gentle touch makes me weepy. I grit my teeth and clench my butt cheeks.

'How do you want it?' Kaissa asks.

I shrug.

'Let's see what I can come up with.' The scissors go *snip snip snip*, but each time only a tiny bit of hair falls to the floor, on my shoulders, or on my nose until I blow them off. At this rate, it will take ages.

'Are you a real Gypsy?' I ask. I heard about them a few years ago and it sounded like something out of a fairy tale.

'No, I'm not. I doubt there are any Gypsies left. A lot of people blamed them for the Great Pandemic. They were dirty, they said. Decorating a stake with a Gypsy's head was considered heroic then. My grandparents and my parents were among those who believed all Gypsies must die.'

'How come you look like one?'

Her green eyes twinkle and she tugs a strand of silver-streaked hair behind her ear. 'When I came of age, I expressed my disgust with my family by dressing up as a Gypsy and leaving for good. What began as a childish rebellion and a love for colourful clothes and wild adventures turned into a passion. I saw a whole culture disappearing forever, so I learned as much as I could about the Romani. Which isn't much, sadly...' She trails off and gets back to cutting my hair.

'Are both your daughters from Runner?'

She laughs. 'No. The oldest, Katharina, is from my husband.'

I begin to wonder which of the two men might be her husband when she says, 'He left many years ago. The loneliness was unbearable. One day, I met Runner and his mentor. They were guests in my yurt for a few days. It was easy to seduce such a young man.' She gives me a sharp gaze through the mirror. 'He was on probation then. Your age.'

'That is fucked up.'

'Why? Because I'm twenty years older?' She bends closer. The corners of her mouth are twitching. 'Or because his daughter has three fathers?'

*Both* men are her new husbands? Back at home, some men had two wives, but never the other way around. Men are too territorial to share a woman. But the two guys looked happy enough last time I saw them. They even helped each other braid their beards like they were best friends. But still...

'Don't they freak out when you have sex with Runner?'

She laughs again, a deep and throaty sound. 'No. They are a couple. I love them, they love my daughters, we never fight over silly relationship things, and I can invite whomever I want into my bed.'

Men can be a couple? I'm stunned. My weird brain tries to fit two pricks together and fails. Then I think of the Old Geezer and shudder. But then...these two seemed happy, and were perfectly capable of sitting down without flinching. What are they doing? Hugging and kissing? Does no one ever force them into the survival-of-the-species business? But maybe they're already done producing offspring.

Behind me, Kaissa chuckles, and I'm torn from my virtual anatomical studies.

'You've never seen a gay couple,' she states.

I burst out laughing. What a weird choice of words! 'Of course I've seen happy couples before. Are you done with the haircut?'

'Just the front left,' she says, grins, and moves around.

I can see part of the tattoo on her chest. A dragon and a snake, silver and red and yellow, like flame and moonshine twirling through her cleavage. If Runner was fifteen then and has a thirteen-year-old daughter, he must be twenty-eight or twenty-nine now. I could be his daughter. Did he offer me a probation because he's missing Ezra so badly?

Kaissa brushes clipped-off hair from my shoulders and neck, announcing that I have a decent haircut now. I don't really see the difference, but I thank her anyway.

I find Runner in the kitchen, packing provisions for us both.

'Hey,' I say.

'There isn't much else you are saying these days but "hey." Did I shut you



up?’

‘No. It’s just...’ I close the kitchen door so Martha doesn’t hear, ‘...too many people for my taste.’

He nods and stuffs more ham into my backpack. There are several new things in there, additional to all the food. I step closer and examine the contents, noticing a woollen sweater and two pairs of woollen socks. They look very nice, soft and warm. ‘Why did you pack these? They aren’t mine.’

‘Did you ever wonder why people invite us into their homes and feed us their best food?’

‘No. Well...you are here, so of course everyone wants to provide for you.’

‘Precisely.’

‘The clothes, too?’

‘Micka, Sequencers own almost nothing. All we have is either borrowed or a present.’

‘What? How can you not own anything? I mean, you have a home, so there must be a bed, rooms, clothes—’

‘You’ve slept in my home.’

It takes me a moment before the penny drops. ‘Your tent is your *only* home?’

‘What else would it be? I’m travelling. Carrying a house with me would be kind of stupid.’

‘But...don’t you need...stuff?’

He stops rummaging in the backpack and looks at me. ‘Tell me what precisely you missed on our hike.’

My mouth opens and clicks shut. ‘Um... A warmer pullover and a pair of warmer socks,’ I mutter after a moment.

‘Isn’t it a nice gesture of Martha and Kaissa to provide you with both?’

He must have told them that I almost froze my toes off. ‘Will we see them again when we return from the lowlands?’

‘No, we’ll take a different route.’

I nod, suddenly missing all those people who seemed to crowd my space. ‘I’ll check where our snowshoes are,’ I say and rush out the door.

I search in the small room that used to be the place where we slept, on the second floor where Martha lives with her large family, then in the bathroom, and finally I find her in the basement. ‘Martha?’

‘Yes, my dear?’ She wipes her hands on her apron. Sand and bits of straw fall on the dirt floor. The potato clamp she’s just dug through spreads scents of fresh earth.

‘Thank you.’ And then I do it. I walk up to her and give her a hug and a peck on her cheek.

‘Why thank you!’ she cries and presses me to her soft bosom. For the first time in my life, I don’t mind the proximity.

‘We are leaving soon.’

‘I know, I know. But you have to have lunch before you go. I’ll make you really fat and happy.’ She grins and piles potatoes in her apron. ‘Take these.’ She points at jars with cooked pork and I pick up two. ‘Two more, Micka. You can’t leave with an empty stomach.’

I wonder who’s going to eat all this, but if I can make a guess, more than half of it will be inhaled by Runner. His system seems to know when it’s time to stuff itself with goodies. I’m more of the constant-nibbler kind. Large amounts of food usually make me nauseous and sleepy.

I help Martha peel potatoes and cut onions. When it’s time to cook, she ushers me from her kitchen. It’s her queendom and bony people put too much pressure on her when she’s in food-production mode, she’s told me.

I try to find Runner, but all I come across is our two backpacks standing in the corridor. His boots are gone. He’ll be at Kaissa’s. I search the shelf for grease and a rag, then begin waterproofing my boots. There are a few cracks in the leather that need special attention and when Martha calls, ‘Lunch!’ I’m done.

‘Where’s Runner?’ she asks.

‘He’ll come in a minute.’ I pick up his plate that’s already loaded with food and put it in the warm stove.

Martha takes a tiny blob of mashed potato and sits down next to me. I point at the comically small amount of food. ‘Why don’t you eat more? Is it poisoned?’

She laughs. ‘I’ll eat with the others when it’s lunch time. Can’t have you sitting here all by yourself.’

I check the clock on the wall. It’s quarter to ten in the morning. Runner said we have to leave by ten.

A moment later, he’s rumbling through the entrance door and kicking the snow off his boots. I don’t look at him when he enters the kitchen. It feels like intruding on his privacy.

‘Thanks, Martha,’ I mumble through meat and potato mush in my mouth, stand, and put my plate in the sink. ‘Have to fix something before we leave.’

‘What’s up with her?’ I hear Runner ask when I’m out through the door. His boots are wet with melted snow. I rub them dry and take care to get all the slush off. Then I waterproof them. Can’t have him wearing leaky boots and then sticking his icy feet under my armpits.

‘Thanks, Micka,’ he says and I jump. I didn’t hear him approach.

‘No problem. Are we ready to leave?’

‘Yes.’

And suddenly, it’s hard for me to go. I pull on my boots, coat, and mittens, strap the backpack on, and we are back in the snow in minutes.

‘Do you miss them?’ he asks, and I answer, ‘No.’

I’m sure he knows it’s a lie.

# TRAIN



‘What’s this?’ I ask, pointing at two shiny metal things that stretch through the valley. ‘And who would brush off the snow...*all* the way?’

‘Train tracks. We wait here.’

‘What? What are trainracks? And why—’

‘Train *tracks*. Trains have been around since the nineteenth century; they transport people. Some train tracks reach more than two thousand kilometres.’ He takes a thin rectangle from a side pocket of his backpack and flicks his index finger across it.

‘User login,’ a female voice says.

I jump. Runner arches an eyebrow at me. ‘Runner,’ he says to the small machine and she answers, ‘Runner. Logged in.’

He runs his fingers across the smooth surface again and I hear a bleeping. ‘We are in position. Sending coordinates. Please acknowledge,’ he says.

*Tat tat tat.*

‘Acknowledged,’ a male voice says. ‘The toy you requested is on board.’

‘Thank you.’ Runner swipes three fingers across the thing when I step closer. The screen goes blank. I’m not sure, but I think there was the face of a bearded man on it. ‘What is this?’

‘A SatPad. I use it to communicate with others, to receive the weather forecast, and to see where we are, among other things. Tonight, I’ll show you how to work it.’ He steps forward and puts his ear on the train tracks. ‘They are close.’

Soon, I hear a buzz coming from the tracks. Runner nods south, towards a long silver bullet that’s approaching fast. The thing has so much speed my legs take several wobbly steps back. He remains rooted to the spot, right between the two metal ribs. The man must be insane. In a few moments, he’ll be mush.

‘Runner?!’ I cry, unsure if my voice can drown the hollering of my heart.

A screeching sounds when the bullet slows down. The thing is very fast and he’s still not moving. ‘Runner!’

He grins at me while the massive train screams to a halt a mere two metres from him. A hatch bangs open at its front.

‘Fuck, dude! Every single time! Get off my track!’ A man with a grey ponytail and a gap in his front teeth spits in the snow.

‘Hey, Aristotle, how’s the wife?’

‘Don’t you *Aristotle* me, dude! Who’s that?’ He points at me.

‘This is Micka. She’s an outsider,’ Runner answers.

The man eyes me, spits again, then slams the hatch shut.

Runner stomps through the snow to the door closest to us. He presses his palm against it. It beeps and hisses before it permits us.

‘We don’t have much time,’ he says once we climb in. He strips himself of his backpack, his coat, and mittens. ‘Drop your stuff right here and follow me.’ Then he shoulders his air rifle and I wonder what the heck he’s planning to shoot.

The train begins to move and we walk in the opposite direction, along a corridor, through doors and small compartments that connect wagons — as Runner calls them. Everything is made of metal, shiny and polished with diamond patterns hammered into it. No dirt anywhere. I’m inside a huge machine and I’m loving it, the scent of metal, the quiet grinding noises, and the hum of power. Only the smell of grease is missing.

He holds his palm against a small red screen until a heavy steel door groans open. Lights flicker on, and we enter a room filled with weapons. Large rifles hang on the walls. Below them are boxes and drawers labelled with “ammunition” and a number-letter combination indicating specifics of whatever nature. Runner places his air rifle on a counter and begins searching the drawers.

‘What’s this?’ I ask, pointing at things that look like bullets the length of my arm and twice its width.

‘Explosive warheads. They are fired with a rocket launcher.’ He bends down and opens a hatch in the floor. ‘This is a rocket launcher. Our trains are equipped with one in each wagon. This one here is the spare.’

The thing is enormous. I step closer, stretching out my hand, but he snaps the case shut before my fingers can touch it.

‘The BSA,’ I say. It’s not meant as a question.

Runner nods. He picks a rifle from a table at the centre of the room, hands me two boxes of ammunition, and takes two himself. ‘And why do we need this one?’ I ask.

‘Dogs.’

‘I heard about them. Are there many wild dogs in the lowlands?’

‘Yes.’

I hate it when he’s in his one-word-sentence mood. ‘And they like to eat humans?’ I try.

‘Sometimes.’

The room echoes my impatience with a loud *smack*, when my palm hits the

top of the counter.

Runner raises an eyebrow. 'They have little incentive,' he explains. 'Enough deer, wild boar, foxes, rabbits and the like, are available to hunt in the lowlands, except when the winter is hard. When they are starved, they get desperate, and have less fear of humans. The dogs are replicating fast and might soon go higher up into the mountains. We believe their population to be close to fifty thousand now.'

'This winter is a hard one,' I remind him. 'Shouldn't we have two rifles?'

He hands me the one he just picked. 'Hold it up and aim for a minute. If you can do it without trembling, it's yours.'

I take the weapon from his hand, press its butt against my shoulder, and lift the barrel. It's heavier than I thought. My right arm quivers after a few seconds. Runner extracts the gun from my grip and leaves the room. Topic closed.

If push comes to shove, I'll have to use my air rifle as a club, or defend myself with my hunting knife. A shiver crawls up my neck when I think of dogs so close that they can rip my head off.

We keep walking through the corridor, entering and exiting a series of wagons, and I notice that the train is more a storage area than a means of transportation. We sift through dried food items, clothes, and other useful things such as torches, knife sharpeners, can openers, snow goggles, and first aid kits. 'We'll leave our rain jackets here. They aren't needed to cross the lowlands,' Runner says.

When I ask him why I can't have a small and light weapon to defend myself against dogs, he nods to the new rifle and answers, 'This is the smallest weapon they've got, and it's on board only because I requested it for us. All others are heavy-duty assault rifles. Should you ever see anyone with such a weapon, you hide and run. Do you understand?'

I tip my chin. 'No one in my village ever mentioned the BSA or attacks by whatever groups. I've always believed that war is stuff from the times before the Great Pandemic. So...' I swallow. '...if the BSA is only in the lowlands...or even farther away, why's the train heavily armed?'

'Heavily armed looks very different.' A bitter grin flickers across his face. 'The BSA hasn't been in this area for years, but the train occasionally enters their territory.'

We pack our food. Runner straps the new snow goggles on our backpacks for later.

'Does the BSA have trains?' I ask.

He nods. 'At the moment, they respect our big guns and we respect theirs.'

'But the dogs won't. Unarmed, I'm left unprotected. You could have asked

for two rifles.’

‘One rifle is more than enough for the two of us. I’ll protect you.’

Thank you very much, I’d rather be able to shoot than to wait for someone to do it for me. I guess I’ll have to eat more and work harder. Maybe my body will grow out of its bony phase. In the meantime, I’ll find out what problem Runner has with handing me a decent weapon.

‘We have another three hours before the train drops us off. We should eat and rest. Come.’

We walk through another wagon and enter an open area that smells quite delicious. And it’s populated. People chat, eat, and smoke.

‘Hi,’ is all he says when we enter. I wave a hand in greeting. People step aside, a few brows are crinkled, smiles fade, and conversations stop.

We reach a bar with a man behind it. He wipes his hands on his apron and stares at Runner. ‘You’re in a hurry, I’ve heard,’ he grunts.

‘We are,’ says Runner. ‘Give Micka something with lots of fat and meat.’ He tips his head at me.

The man in the apron gifts me a stubbly grin. ‘You look like a toothpick. Here, eat my stew and maybe you’ll grow a few muscles.’ He plops a bowl on the counter and bellows with laughter. His belly hops, and sprinkles of soup land on the smooth wooden surface. He wipes the mess off with his apron.

Anger boils up in my stomach. Without thinking, I pull my hunting knife and jab the tip into the counter. It’s wood, so the knife stays. Cool effect.

The man stares at his fingers, spread left and right of the blade, his flowery apron now decorated with a hole.

‘Is this supposed to be meat? Looks like lint to me,’ I say, sticking a finger into the soup and fishing out a white fibre. ‘Hmm. Could be rat, though.’

A short moment later, two fat chicken legs are chucked into my stew without a word.

‘Thanks.’ I pull out my knife and push past Runner to find a table. I don’t want to look at anyone in the room. If they think I’m a toothpick, it’s their problem, not mine. I suck the meat off the bones and shovel stew into my mouth. It tastes edible.

Runner eats at the bar, talking with a group of men. I get the impression that some of the other people purposefully step in my line of view, as if I’m not supposed to hear what’s been said. Then, Runner disappears.

‘Hey,’ says the stew cook. I show him the darkest stare I can manage. ‘Does it taste good?’

‘Why? Are you testing it on toothpicks before serving it to people?’

He throws his hands up. ‘I’m sorry, m’boy. This old man here just tried to be

funny.’

I’m totally loaded. How can he think I’m a boy? I’ve had breasts for two months! ‘Funny,’ I grumble.

Irritated, he bends his neck, looking for Runner, but doesn’t seem to find him. I place my hunting knife next to my bowl to make cook’s departure easier. He takes the hint and disappears. I’m relieved. There are too many, far too-quiet people in this room, and I’m looking forward to leaving. Huge machine or not, if I have to share it with a bunch of weirdos, I’d rather not be here.

When Runner doesn’t return, I make my way back to our backpacks, sit down, and close my eyes. The rattling and swaying makes me sleepy and soon I doze off.

I’m woken up by voices, hushed and aggressive. I keep my eyes shut and strain my ears. ‘...no time for this crap! We need you there with the next—’ A stranger’s voice

‘No.’ Runner cuts off the man. ‘My decision is made and I’ll not discuss it.’

‘It is a bad decision you are making!’

‘If you want to take my position, feel free to apply for it.’ An icy warning from Runner’s mouth. Whoever the other guy is, I’d shut up if I were him. When he doesn’t say another word, I’m almost disappointed. I’d like to see Runner freak out. I think he has explosive potential.

‘Micka.’ A hand shakes my shoulder. ‘I know you are awake. Here, drink this, then get your stuff ready. The train is coming to a stop.’

I take the bottle from his hand and drink the...whatever it is. The taste is fruity and sweet and I’m wide awake all of a sudden.

Once we’re back in the snow, I ask, ‘What was that about?’

‘My business.’

‘Thanks. How come I never heard about trains if they have been around for ages?’

‘You haven’t heard about a lot of things, Micka. I told you that the council of each settlement decides what knowledge they communicate to their citizens. They can choose to penalise the spreading of information. In your village, it was generally not seen as respectable to ask too many questions. I’ve seen this in other places, too. Most people are content with it.’ He throws me a glance and walks on.

‘And tonight you show me how to use the SatPad?’ I ask, just to make sure he remembers.

‘As I said.’

‘Why, precisely, are we going to the lowlands anyway?’

‘Hmm.’



‘Runner!’

‘I’ll tell you another time.’

# DOGS



Since we've reached the lowlands, my senses are pricked. Runner trudges on as if all is normal, but that doesn't make me any less nervous. I've never seen land as flat as this. When the sun is hiding behind a thick blanket of clouds — which it does most of the day — I have no clue where I am and where we are heading. I've always known where's north and where's south. The mountains told me. Here, the featureless surface melts into a featureless sky. I can't even tell where the horizon is in all this white. But the worst is that there's no place to hide.

Suddenly, Runner's stride stiffens and I lift my eyes. Dark shapes trail through the white — a line of dots that are growing larger. We stop simultaneously. He curses and breaks into run, his breath, sharp clouds of fear. I follow with a feeling of rising panic.

'We'll separate,' he huffs.

'Dogs.'

'Yes.'

I don't know where to turn. We're on a perfectly flat and white platter. The next tree line is several kilometres away, stuck to the horizon. We are trapped by vastness and a bunch of hungry beasts. I feel my heart hopping in my chest. It wants to flee and so do I.

I almost bump into Runner when he stops. He flings his rucksack from his back, takes ammunition from a front pocket, yanks his snow goggles off, and the next thing he does makes me want to retch.

He pushes buttons on his SatPad, logs in, and speaks into the machine. 'I give operating rights to...' Then he holds it in my face.

'Fuck you!'

'Operating rights to *fuck you*, please acknowledge,' the machine squeaks.

'Acknowledged,' he says and turns to me. 'You know how to operate both.' He holds out the SatPad and the FireScope.

I grip the straps of my backpack harder.

'No time for discussions, Micka,' he warns.

'We have a rifle. We can shoot the dogs.'

'You probably haven't counted them.'

I focus at the approaching animals and count — more than sixty. They are

fast. No time to think. He throws both machines into the snow, yanks the rifle around, and points the barrel at my stomach.

‘I will not hesitate to shoot you. An abdominal wound bleeds and makes you writhe in pain, enough to let the dogs go crazy about you. It’s either you or me serving as bait. Choose.’

I grind my teeth. ‘I’ll need my air rifle if you don’t want me to starve to death.’

Without blinking, he takes the weapon from his backpack and hands it to me. I sling it over my shoulder, pick up the SatPad, the FireScope, a box of pellets, and march off without a word.

I keep my head slightly cocked to listen to him shuffling his rucksack around, the clinking of the bullets in the box — ready to reload his rifle quickly.

What a fuckuppery. There’s no elevation, not even a shrub I could pretend to climb. I run a wide arch until I come to a halt perpendicular to an imaginary line between Runner and the pack.

I throw my ruck into the snow, put the machines and the box with the pellets on top of it, take off my snow goggles, then stretch my tense shoulders. Runner aims his weapon in my direction. ‘No, Micka!’

‘I can shoot your right eye out!’ I yell at him. When I take aim, he drops his arm and swings around. We both point at the approaching dogs.

Within seconds, they enter his shooting range and Runner goes wild. He shoots twice, reloads, shoots twice, reloads. His hands are a blur of action. I’ve never seen anyone kill that fast.

Three dogs are down, one is injured. The others fan out, slowing their attack. They lower their heads and creep closer. I can see their shoulder blades and hipbones poking through thick fur. Aiming at their eyes doesn’t make much sense — although the most easily injured parts, it’s too hard to hit them when the animals are moving. I’d waste precious time and most likely end up plopping half the pellets into their skull bones. I aim at their sides instead, at the tender area where belly meets hind leg.

*Click.* An instant later, the first dog yelps and jumps, rolls on his back, and hides its tail under its belly. No time to think. I reload and shoot. Reload and shoot. The pellet can’t kill, but it seems painful enough to scare the shit out of them.

I’m almost hopeful when a third of them is down or bolting. Then I see how close they are to Runner. I scream and their heads turn my way.

Runner whips his head around. He looks at me, furious. Then he begins to holler, too. And shoots and reloads.

I try to find the largest of the dogs, aim at it and take it down, and then the

next largest one, trying to get their leader, if dogs even have such a thing.

Runner's hollering is cut off with a yelp. Time slows to a crawl. Three dogs jump at his chest and throw him into the snow. He pulls out his hunting knife, slashing with one hand, grabbing a furry throat with the other.

I run. And I scream. The snow flies up and in my face while I plough through it. I wave my arms, the rifle, and whatever I have in my other hand to distract the dogs from Runner.

There's blood in the snow, one dog with its intestines pouring out, one twitching, blood gushing from its throat. Another dog is on top of Runner, mauling and growling. Runner's legs are kicking, boots finding no target. I bring the FireScope down on the dog's head. Again. Again. A yelp and the animal lands in the snow, leaking red into the white.

I'm bloodthirsty. Screaming, I grab Runner's knife and pull it through the dog's throat, then I attack what's left of the pack, swinging the air rifle and landing its butt wherever it can find a target — soft fur, teeth, eyes, ears, ribs. It takes a while until I realise that there's nothing left to hurt or kill. The dogs are running.

No time for triumph.

I turn around and race back. Runner is moving. A hand is pressed to his neck, blood leaking through his fingers.

I kneel in the snow next to him, my gaze raking over his injuries. He looks straight up at the sky; his eyes are glassy, the once-black irises a pale brown and his olive skin greyish. His legs twitch. I stumble to his backpack, rip it open, and dig with trembling hands until I find the small package of bandages, disinfectant, and whatever else he has in there.

I zip open the first aid kit and find a bottle labelled "morphine." Doubtful, I look at Runner's face. He's breathing hard.

There are two curved needles, thread, and a thing that looks like a bent mix between a pair of pliers and scissors. I don't even know if I can stitch up a wound. I pry his fingers off his neck and gasp. Thick red is pulsing through a gash. The large artery cannot be torn; that would certainly squirt like a fountain. It's something smaller, but dangerous enough. I don't know what to stitch up considering that mess, and I'll certainly not pour disinfectant in such a large wound as long as it's wide open. That would be like injecting him with the stuff.

He's grunting. His hand wanders up to his neck again. Quickly, I pick a thick white pad and a bandage, and press the pad on his wound. Soothing words pour from my mouth. I don't even know what I'm babbling. How can I possibly wrap a bandage around his neck when he's twitching like this?

'Hold still!' I bark. His eyes flicker, trying to find focus.

I scoot around and bring my knees close to both his shoulders, then I carefully lift up his head and rest it on my lap. His hands are stiff like claws and blood leaks through the pad. I press harder until he grunts again. Then I wrap the bandage around his neck, unsure how much pressure is too much and will cut off his air, and how little is too little and he'll bleed to death. Snow! Cold can stem the flow. I lower his head and pile up snow against his wound, his shoulder, and the side of his face. Runner looks white now, just like the snow he's half-buried in.

'ey,' he manages to squeeze out.

'Hey,' I answer. 'How far to the next settlement?'

'Three days.'

Shit.

'Won't make it. S's okay.'

'Fuck you!' Like I could use his depressive shit now. I stand and throw the tent on the ground and unroll it. The bottom of it is pretty sturdy. I take his sleeping bag, spread it on top of the tent, and move everything close to Runner. 'Okay, help me get you in there.'

He huffs and grunts, then passes out when he's half on top of the sleeping bag. I nudge his upper body farther to the middle, then his legs and his butt. I take off his snow-caked gaiters, knock the snow off his boots, stuff him in the sleeping bag, and zip the thing closed. Then I wrap the tent around him, strapping it tight until he looks like a fat noodle with only his head sticking out.

My gaze falls on his backpack. The thing is a problem. I cannot carry both packs; he'll have to help. I place it on his lap and secure it with one of the tent straps. He doesn't protest. How could he? He's only half there.

I run to my rucksack, stuff the damaged FireScope in it, and switch on the SatPad. 'User login,' the machine demands. 'Micka...'

'User unknown.'

Yeah, I know. 'Fuck you.' That totally fits my mood.

'Fuck you. Logged in.' The thing goes through its little booting and location-finding *tiddly-tuts* and then shows me a map. Several black blotches on green background indicate the next settlements. The white cross is where we are. The forest is between the village and here, and there's even a small river. Or a big one, I can't tell. Okay, I'll follow the compass northwards, cross the river that will probably be frozen over now, and then we'll hit the woods in a day or two.

I shoulder the air rifle and march back to Runner, pull his rifle through the loops of the tent's straps and imagine I'm a horse pulling a cart. And off we go. He's heavy, but once we are moving, the tent's smooth bottom makes dragging him easier.

Now I'm glad the ground is flat. I'll have to get a few kilometres between us and the dog carcasses before the sun sets.

After only a few hundred metres, I'm sweating. Every half hour, I check the bandage around Runner's throat. It's soaked. There's only one other roll of gauze in the first aid kit. All he does is look up at me through half-closed eyes, not saying a peep.

The sun is now as high as it gets these days. A milky round thing, hovering behind my back, stretching my shadow. When I turn around, I can still see the dead dogs — small dark blotches in the snow. Not far enough for us to be safe. But I need a break, every single bone in my body is aching, and Runner has to drink. He's lost too much blood.

Gently, I lower his head to the ground, take the backpack off his lap, and place it next to him. My backpack follows. I eat a handful of snow to quench the burning in my throat, then I take a closer look at Runner. His face is pale and unmoving, his mouth slightly ajar. If it weren't for the faint huffs of condensation, one would think he'd stopped breathing long ago.

I fetch the second roll of bandages, the disinfectant, and small strips of tape. 'Runner?' I say, and he starts. 'Do you know how much of the morphine I can use on you?'

'Syringe...half-full.'

'Okay.' I pick up the syringe, poke it in the bottle, and pull the plunger up halfway.

'Air bubble,' he grunts.

Air bubble? I look at him, then at the syringe. Okay, air bubble, got it. I push it out and a small drop of clear liquid runs down the needle.

'Inject here.' He holds out his trembling hand. His voice sounds a tad clearer, but his face doesn't look one bit better. 'There.' He points to a vein that stands out at the side of his wrist. 'Like this.' His finger shows me where to insert and at which angle. And I just do it. The needle goes in, the plunger goes down, and Runner relaxes at once. 'Be quick,' is the last thing he says before his eyes flutter shut.

Yeah, like I know what I'm doing.

The bandage is stiff with blood, it sticks to itself and to his skin and I'm worried I'll tear the wound open even more. I press snow to the layers of gauze, let the meltwater soften the caked blood, and then carefully peel off the bandage. There's a long gash from the side of his jawbone down to the collar of his torn jacket. I undo the straps of the tent around him, and open his sleeping bag and the jacket. There's blood on his chest, his sweater is torn, and I can see his shirt and the cuts across his chest.

I turn away from the sight and press my face into the snow. I've never stitched up anyone. I suck at sewing up holes in my own clothes, and I'll surely suck even more at doing a suture on a wound.

But there is no one else.

I place the first aid kit next to me and get to work. The largest injury needs to be closed first, so I push Runner on his side and pull the sleeping bag close around his chest.

Blood oozes from the gash. The only good thing is that the big artery isn't cut. Or maybe it's not good. Maybe a quick death would be better than this slow one from a botched surgery.

I spray a little of the disinfectant around the wound and he doesn't even twitch. The morphine is doing its job. I use the clean parts of the bandage he'd worn and dab off blood, spray more disinfectant, dab off more, until I can see where I can stick the needle in. I don't know if this is where one *should* sew, but I can't think of anywhere else. Put flaps of skin and flesh together, make sure there are no crinkles. Maybe.

The first stitch is the worst. The sound of the skin breaking and the thread pulling through. It's as if the snow muffles all other noises and amplifies the *snaaaarf* of thread through flesh. Runner doesn't complain, but his mouth is a thin line and his jaw muscles bulge. I ignore it and keep working.

It's an ugly suture. I disinfect the area and bandage the wound with the last fresh pad and the one unused roll of gauze. Then I push him flat on his back and cut his sweater and shirt open along the middle. The dog has left teeth marks down to Runner's collarbone, and scratch marks down to where his ribcage ends. The wound on the collarbone needs stitches, the rest can be taped. The hair is a problem, though. No tape will stick to that fur. At least the collarbone isn't hairy, so this is where I start.

After stitching up this wound and cleaning the chest wounds, I fetch one of my clean shirts and cut it in two, fold the one half and lay it over the injuries. Luckily, his body isn't hairy all over, just the top of his ribcage and not the sides, so this is where I tape my fresh shirt to his skin. I cut away the entire front of his bloody shirt, because it's too wet to keep him warm. Then I sew up the front of his sweater, and zip the sleeping bag closed.

His breath comes in shallow bursts now that he's surfacing.

'I'll make us tea.'

'Too close to the dogs,' he whispers.

'I know. We both need hot tea and food. Then we'll leave. I'll not discuss it.'

I prep the burner, connect it to the gas tank, and turn snow into boiling water. Sad-looking peppermint goes into it and by then, Runner is sleeping.

While sipping the hot tea, I wrack my brain as to whether I should wake him up or let him rest. He's lost too much blood and needs liquids. I empty my cup, wash it with snow, and then put a little snow in the tea so he can drink it without burning his tongue. I pour the rest of the tea in our thermos. 'Runner? Runner, come on, you need to drink something.'

No reaction.

I form a small snowball and hold it to his lips. Meltwater drips in his mouth, but he isn't swallowing. I touch his head but find no injuries there, not even a bump. 'Runner!' I shout, and before thinking twice, I slap a handful of snow in his face.

'Orrhhhh!' One hand goes up and he flicks at the cold stuff. I wipe his face clean. His eyes are half-open.

'Here, drink this.'

Holding up his head, I press the cup to his mouth. He drinks and I'm so happy my whole face cracks open in a big smile.

'Sweet.'

'What?'

'Blood loss,' he whispers. 'Need something sweet.'

I fetch him a few of the dried berries and he chews them slowly. I sneak in a few slices of dried meat, a bit of frozen butter, and more tea.

'How far...' His hoarse voice is faltering.

'Far enough,' I lie. He tries to push himself up and his face looks all green. 'I'll shoot you if you don't lie back down,' I say quickly. I think I can hear a quiet snort, but it could also be the sound of Runner passing out again.

I strap him into the tent, put his backpack on his thighs, pack the burner, thermos, cup, and food, and begin pulling him north.

---

He's been shaking since I pitched the tent. I'm really worried now. Truth be told, I'm close to panic. The sun is setting faster than my frozen fingers can set up the ground pads and my sleeping bag. I feel like lying down for a very long time. But Runner and I both need to eat and drink.

I make tea, cook instant pasta, add powdered ketchup and freeze-dried cheese. Our dinner looks like what comes shooting out of a skull together with a bullet.

I shovel food into my mouth. Oh, delicious calories! I add a large chunk of butter, stir, and put some into Runner's mouth. After two spoonfuls, he turns his head away.



‘You leaked quite a bit. You must eat to fill yourself up again,’ I say.

‘Not hungry.’

‘Eat or I’ll leave you in the snow tomorrow morning.’ That doesn’t seem to increase his appetite.

‘Are you cold?’ I ask, although I know he is.

‘Yes.’

‘Good. We make a deal. I warm you after you’ve eaten half of this.’

He exhales a large cloud, and turns his face to me.

‘Thank you,’ I say, although not very friendly, and shove two noodles into his mouth. He takes his time chewing, but it seems that the noodles in his stomach are asking for company. I feed him another two, and again, and again. Every tiny spoonful that goes in lifts a bit of the weight off my shoulders.

‘Micka,’ he says after he’s had a cup of tea (which again made me very happy). ‘I’m sorry, but...’

‘What?’ Is he going to announce his last will?

‘Need to pee.’

I burst out laughing. Then I realise what it means. He can’t get up. Or can he?

‘Help me sit up.’

That voice doesn’t sound like there’s enough air left for anyone to sit up.

‘Okay,’ I say, and my hands hover undecidedly over his chest. There’s nowhere I can grab to lift him without tearing his wounds open, so I slip my hands under his back and start pushing. We reach some kind of upright position before he slumps back down with a groan.

‘We’ll solve this,’ I say, although I have no idea how.

‘The pot,’ he mutters and I think *NO WAY that’s where I cook my food!* And that’s actually where our noodles are right this moment.

‘Can’t you...aim?’

‘Umm. Not today.’

I’m thinking hard but can’t come up with anything but the pot. ‘Finish the food first.’ I’m almost proud of myself to have such a brilliant blackmailing technique. He takes a few more spoonfuls of pasta and I scrape out the rest. Okay. That’s the moment of truth, I guess.

‘Should I...I mean, do you need...help?’

‘I hope not,’ he grunts and takes the pot from my hand. I busy myself with cleaning the fork and packing up the burner.

‘Spread this around the tent,’ he says, once he’s done.

‘Are we marking our territory?’

‘Yes.’

# COLD



Runner is trembling like a poplar leaf. I don't know what else I can do to help him. He wears my woollen hat on top of his own, and on top of all that is his sleeping bag's hood. Underneath his down sleeping bag, he wears his sweater and mine, his pants, long-johns, and two pairs of socks. He looks like a fat black caterpillar about to explode.

I clean the pot, stash away the burner, and rub my face with snow. The tips of my fingers are white with frostbite and I can't feel much when I try to unzip Runner's sleeping bag. Careful not to hurt him, I slip into his down cocoon, my back snug against his stomach, my sleeping bag spread over the two of us. He wraps an arm around me, tugs his feet in between my ankles, and tries to suck heat from my body. 'Runner?' I whisper.

'Yes?'

'How do you feel?'

'C...cold.'

I take his hand and slip it under my sweater. It feels like a limp fish against my stomach. 'Th...thanks,' he says and presses his wiry frame closer to mine. When hot breath blows through my hair, I know he's running a dangerously high fever.

Desperate, I blink saltwater from my eyes. The village must be close. I'll make it...maybe another day or two.

I know I should sleep to have enough energy to drag him across the snow tomorrow, but I don't dare. I'm afraid to wake up next to a corpse and there's nothing I can do to pump life back into him. The tent gives me a headache. For the lack of trees, I can't pitch it out of reach of the dogs. Not that I'd be able to throw Runner three metres high up in the air...

Exhausted, injured, and lying on the flat ground with only a thin sheet of fabric separating us from thirty hungry beasts, we are as vulnerable as it gets. I reach out and pull Runner's rifle close, flick on the torch, and check the chamber the hundredth time to make sure it's loaded. Then I move the box with the ammo next to me. I click off the light and prick my ears.

There's nothing but silence.

Slowly, Runner's shivering ceases.

---

I wake up to scraping noises. I must have twitched so hard from the shock that Runner wakes up, too. ‘Shhh,’ he whispers.

A *tap tap tap* through soft snow — small paws...a brushing against the skin of our tent.

Probably a stupid fox. I exhale and close my eyes.

---

An earthquake wakes me up. My stomach is hot. I’m sweating. After a moment I realise it’s not the tent shaking, but Runner’s trembling. His feverish hand is pressed against my belly.

‘Runner?’ I say and wriggle out of his grip. He cracks his eyes open. They are glassy. His cheeks are red, his jaws clenched. My first thought is rabies; Zula talked about it once and it sounded like a fairy tale gone bad.

I unwrap the bandage around Runner’s neck and reveal a swollen, scarlet wound. Pus oozes from the suture. Hastily, I pull off the two pullovers he’s wearing, undo the bandage covering his collar bone and the shirt-bandage on his chest. All injuries look awful and infected, but the bite-wound on his throat is the worst. I open the tent, scoop up a handful of snow, and place it on the neck wound. His body snaps to attention. He looks up at me for a moment, and slowly shakes his head no.

I slap more snow on him and snarl, ‘One day. One day is all I’m asking!’

‘kay...’ he whispers and I can see he doesn’t mean it.

‘Fine! I’ll drag your dead body then.’

‘kay.’ His breath rattles.

‘Fuck you.’ I’m scared shitless.

---

I don’t know how long I’ve been walking, but it feels like we’ll never arrive, never find help. I hate being fifteen. Why can’t I be twenty or thirty already, like Runner? I want to know how to use my muscles — *have* muscles to begin with! — and be able to run us out of this white shithole.

When I was little, I often dreamed a monster was chasing me. No matter how hard I tried, I was unnaturally slow, slug-like. Time dragged, pulled itself along like rubber. At the end, the beast always caught me, scooped me up with its beak-like mouth, drenched me in reservoir water, and gulped me down.

This is how I feel now. Too slow. About to be eaten. Only this time, it's not a dream.

The dogs are keeping their distance, but I'm sure they know I'm tired. They'll attack as soon as the sun begins to set. I have a few hours left and all I can do is keep pumping these pathetic sticks for legs, and hope the woods that appear so far away are really very much closer. Which they aren't, but I don't allow myself to think about it much. It doesn't help.

The SatPad shows me that the river is close. The fact that ancient high-tech stuff shoots across the sky and watches us die makes me feel even more powerless. I can't call up to the satellites and ask for help. And even if I could, all they'd do is keep recording images, sending signals of locations, of the weather, and of who's where and when.

But where is the damn river? I can't see or hear it. Maybe it's frozen over and we can pass—

I don't get to finish the thought. With a deafening *CRACK* I break through the ice and all air shoots out of my lungs. My scream echoes across the empty landscape. The pack answers with excited yapping from afar.

I'm up to my chest in cold water. My body hurts so badly, I can't breathe. The rucksack is heavy and wet. I hurry it off my back and onto the snow next to me. It lies there pretending all is good and solid. Behind me, Runner is as still as a log, stretched out on the ice that carries him as if he weighs nothing. It's just me who's trapped in a fucking river.

The water pulls at my legs. I don't dare hold on to Runner or the edge of the ice, for fear the ice will break and we'll both drown. But I have to make a choice now, because standing here will kill me in no time.

I grab the hood of Runner's sleeping bag with one hand, my backpack with the other, and jam my elbows into the snow-covered ice. Kicking and grunting, I eventually make it out of the water, but I'm not much warmer here. I'm an oversized icicle.

My brain doesn't work well. Repetitive, monotonous, it blares at me to get moving, to cross the river or we'll never reach a settlement. The ice carries the outstretched Runner, so I try the same and lie down flat. Pushing my backpack ahead of me, I wiggle across the ice on my stomach. Then I pull Runner. Push, wiggle, pull. Push, wiggle, pull. I can hear the river quietly gurgling beneath us and although I've never prayed in my life, I send silent commands to whomever is listening (The ice, maybe? Or the river?) — *Don't break! Don't. Break.*

I keep turning my head, assessing the distance to the dogs. It seems to be getting smaller each time I look. The pack knows I've screwed up. I swallow a sob.

Snow inches its way down my scarf and my collar, leaking cold down my chest. I don't know how much farther I have to crawl, but by now, I wouldn't mind breaking through the ice again. Drowning can't be much worse than this. I can't feel my legs, my hands are smarting from the snow, the tugging and pushing. I can't bend my fingers, so I've wrapped the tent-straps around my wrist.

...I'm so slow.

...so slow.

Runner begins babbling. Most of his feverish words are incomprehensible, but every time I hear him say, 'dogs...dogs,' I want to smack him. I keep looking back and this slows me down even more. The pack is close and just out of shooting range. Not that it would matter much. Both rifles are wet.

The trickling of water under the ice is gone and I dare push up on my knees, then to my feet. My boots are frozen over with a mix of snow-mush and ice. No idea if what's inside will carry me anywhere. I try to put one foot in front of the other and somehow, it works. Strapping the backpack on is almost impossible without my fingers listening to anything my brain tells them. *Bend, you stupid white sausages!* But they won't. All they do is tell my brain that they are about to fall off.

The river swallowed my mittens and the dogs don't know I can't aim, let alone pull the trigger, much less use a rifle filled with frozen river water. There's only one thing I can do — run.

The tree line is still so far away, it seems impossible to reach, impossible to outrun the dogs and the sunset. But I try. I'm not yet ready to sit down and let myself be eaten. And Runner.

The longer I walk, the warmer I feel. Tired, but in an odd sense, comfortable. The pack crosses the river and is getting closer now. My rifle feels warm in my hands. My fingers look like claws. Funny. The Runner package feels so much lighter now.

Snow falls from above. Oh, look at this! Flakes as big as apples. Or pumpkins. Some of them look like fluffy white dogs.

Where's the pack? Can't see it anymore.

Oh, I can see the dogs. Did they change direction? Did *I* change direction?

The wind goes *oooooeeeeehhhhh* in my ears.

Did I lose my hat?

The flat snow in front of me turns to ice, turns to a mirror. Little Micka stands there. My feet stumble to a halt. Can't step on her.

'Hi Micka,' I hear myself say. It's the day I had to see Zula for...what was it? Pulling threads from a suture, I think. How old was I? Eight, maybe? I see

myself awkwardly examining my own back in Zula's large mirror, reading what my father has written there. Until I could decipher numbers and letters, the scars were just that — scars and memories from the forgotten side of reality.

'Zula?' little Micka squeaks, her eyes large and glistening. 'Why would a father write "DIE" on his child's back?'

I know she doesn't dare say 'cut' or 'carve.' It sounds violent. Parents cannot be violent.

Zula's tired reflection shows in the mirror. 'You are not his daughter,' he says quietly. 'Your mother ran away when your brother was only four. She returned a few months later. She never talked about it. You shouldn't either, it's better for everyone.' His lips compress to a thin line as he looks away from her.

I blink hard. I know she'll ask her parents about it soon. They will not speak to her for days, and she'll begin to carve lines into her skin. Lines of silence. Like Zula's compressed lips. I know she believes her parents will love her once they see what she's doing. *Look, you don't have to hurt me anymore. I do it. I do it already!*

I want to take her hand, lie down with her, and hold her in my arms. Instead, all I do is stare and sob.

Something's moving in the corner of my vision. I look up. Why is the pack approaching from the north now? I turn around and the world zooms past so quickly, I don't know what's up and what's down. Another pack. Two packs. Funny.

One pack is waiting. Don't know for what. The other pack is coming on so fast, I wonder whether they'd eat the bony girl first, or the bony corpse.

I look down at my legs — hard to make out shapes — white. Everything's white. Two large clumps of caked snow, I lift one clump, then the other. Large snowman feet. Snow woman. Snow girl.

The pack is flying towards me. Two queues of dogs, tongues lolling. If it weren't for the fangs, I'd think they were laughing at me.

I plop to my knees. Something tugs at my wrist. What's this? Runner? He's still here?

With my last tiny bit of energy, I bring the rifle around and aim at the first dog, but it's too close already. A muzzle in my face, my throat. I swing the weapon. Another rifle swings back. *Crack!* and all is black.

# WAKING



I open my eyes. More white, more pain. My head is pounding and lights are popping in my vision. Every single bone in my body is aching, my left foot feels like it's about to rot off.

I blink. It's not snow I'm looking at. It's a ceiling. I'm covered with white blankets, and next to me is a warm, white, furry—

Shit!

I try to inch away, but my body doesn't do what I want it to do. Ears prick. A black nose leaves a wet trail on my cheek. A tongue goes *slop*. With a squeal, I push the dog off my bed. It does a *whoomp* on the floor and then puts its snout on the mattress looking insulted, as if I tried to kill it and not the other way around.

'What the...' I say.

'Oof!' it replies.

I've never had a conversation with a dog, and until a pack tried to eat Runner and me, I hadn't even seen one. That reminds me...

Something in the room moves, and it's not the beast. My eyeballs seem to be stuck in glue, because it's hard to change focus.

I find a boy sitting in a corner of the room. No, not a boy, a young man. He holds a rifle. His eyebrows are pulled low, and his expression is dark. 'Hey,' I try. 'Where's R...the man I came with?' The stranger only stares at me. My question must have been unclear. 'I dragged a guy wrapped up in a tent. Do you know where he is?' My voice gains in pitch and panic, but all I get in return is hateful staring.

He doesn't want to break the news. I know it. Runner is dead. Or dying? With a cry, I force my legs to move out of the bed. 'Where is he?' I bark, but I get no answer. When I notice I'm naked, I tug at the thick blanket in an attempt to wrap it around me. It's heavy, or stuck somewhere. 'Okay, mute guy,' I grunt, still struggling with the stupid thing, but at least half-covered now. 'I'll find my friend, then I'll pack our things and we'll leave.'

I take a step towards the door and lose my grip on the blanket as I notice that something's wrong with my left foot. Pain shoots up my leg and the floor begins to tip. The white furball plus the rug it occupies are approaching fast.

A yelp, a nip in my arm, and I bonk my head on something sturdy.

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‘Micka.’

My eyelids are sticky.

‘Micka!’

Something pokes my ribcage. ‘Ow!’

‘Micka, you need to eat and drink, except, of course, if you’d rather die. I’ll have your food then. Fine with me.’ Runner’s voice. He sounds like he’s having fun. ‘This wild boar ham is delicious. And the bread! Fresh from the oven. Can I eat it?’

I’m so happy he’s alive, my chest is about to burst. I clench my jaws, swallow the excitement, and say, ‘Man, you are toying with your life. I’m not a morning person.’

‘Excellent. It’s noon.’

I rub my eyes and crack them open ‘To me it feels like the morning after someone scrunched me through a turbine. You look better than last time I saw you. How’s the throat?’

He pushes a plate on my lap. I see a large black stain on the side of his neck; the suture is awfully red and black but not swollen anymore.

‘You don’t look like you should be walking around,’ I tell him.

‘I’m okay. You are not, though. You suffered from severe hypothermia and exhaustion. You have a bad concussion. And you...lost two toes of your left foot.’

What an inventory. The information doesn’t really lodge in my brain just yet. ‘Did the dogs chew them off?’

‘No, frostbite. They’ve been amputated.’

‘Um. You warned me when we first met. So...’ Two toes. Shit. I’m the eight-toed Micka. I test-wiggle whatever remains on my left foot, but it hurts too much, so I stop.

He sees my gaze stuck to the bandaged limb. ‘The two smallest toes. The big toe is important for balance, the small ones not as much. You’ll be fine.’

‘Ah,’ is all I can say. Just one more scar.

The scents wafting off the food on my lap make my mouth water. I reach out and grab a slice of warm bread, spread butter on it, and put ham on top. Chewing hurts my head, though. ‘Why do I have a concussion?’

‘Your skull had an argument with a rifle’s butt.’

I dimly remember the dark thing that came flying before I blacked out.

‘You tried to shoot the dogs, so Katvar hit you on the head.’



‘Why would anyone befriend dogs? And who’s Katvar?’

‘He’s kept an eye on you in the past three days. Both eyes, actually. I told him to take a nap. The people here keep dogs to protect the village against wild dogs, and to pull sleds or carts.’

‘Crazy. Oh, but...’ The food in my mouth suddenly tastes stale. ‘How can they survive in the lowlands?’

‘They are nomads, sort of. They live here in winter and move up in the mountains when the snow melts.’

‘Hmm.’ I finish my sandwich. ‘By the way, that guy, *what’s his name*, creeps me out. Never seen anyone so...sulky.’ I laugh. What an understatement.

‘He protected his dogs.’ Runner’s voice sounds wobbly. I look up at him. He looks tired and pale, as if he’s about to pass out. I offer him my food, but he declines. ‘I thought you were hungry?’

‘No. No, I...I’ll lie down for a moment.’

He shuffles from the room. He can barely walk upright. That was a close shave, closer than I’d thought. For him, at least. I stare at my food. My appetite is gone.

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I wake up to the man, Katvar, sitting on his stool again. He pushes his cap farther up when he sees that I’m awake. The white dog lies panting by his feet. I wish I had my hunting knife.

‘Hey,’ I say. He pulls his silent staring thing. ‘Thanks for hitting me on the head.’ Wow, I had no idea his expression could turn even fiercer. ‘So, you’re too noble to speak with lowlifes. Why don’t you just piss off?’

He stands and shows me his middle finger when he leaves the room. I send a loud, ‘And don’t come back!’ along. The dog rises with a grunt and follows him, tail going left and right in synchrony with his butt, claws clacking on the wooden floor.

A pile of clean clothes sits on a small drawer next to my bed. I put them on, gingerly inserting my bandaged foot into the left leg of my pants, or whoever’s pants. I decide to ignore my chopped-off toes as long as possible. At the moment, I can’t stomach yet another wound. There’s a crutch next to the door; someone must have had fun imagining me hobbling over to get it and probably falling and bonking my head again.

I stand and give it a try. When I put my weight on my heel only, I’m okay, as long as I ignore the pain. I reach the crutch, grab it, pin it under my left arm, and explore the house. It’s oddly quiet. My *pad* (wool sock), *plop* (bandaged foot),

*pad plop* sound through the hallway. Quiet clinking pulls me to the right and I spot the kitchen with Runner sitting at a table that looks like someone carved it from a single piece of mighty trunk. He's staring into a mug filled with what smells like coffee. A half-eaten slice of bread lies on the plate in front of him.

'Good morning,' he says when I step in.

'Hey.'

'You look better.'

'You, too. What's that black stuff on your neck?' I ask, and sit down across from him.

'Shale oil. The people here use it for medical purposes. They treat infected wounds with it. I analysed it and found it contains a lot of sulphonates.'

*Sulphothings*. I wonder if I ever heard that word in chemistry class, but I come up blank.

'Sulphonates kill bacteria,' he provides.

'Where did you get this from?' I point at his plate. 'And where is everybody?'

'Behind you on the counter, in the cupboard, on that shelf.' He waves. 'To answer your last question: outside, sled-dog training. And before you ask: no, I didn't father any children in this village.'

That pulls me up short. 'I wasn't...what's wrong?'

'You nearly died,' he says quietly.

Way too serious a topic. I get up and search for edible things. 'Two toes, Runner. That's all.'

'Yeah.'

I put a loaf of bread, a knife, butter, and jam on the table. 'Where are the cups?' I ask, and he points. I spot a thermos, open it, and sniff. Barley coffee. Wonderful!

'It will not get easier, Micka,' he says when I sit down. 'I made a grave mistake. I planned for us to run into a pack of wild dogs, planned to send you away, make it look as if I sacrificed myself. I wanted to see how you would react, how you assess danger, and what decisions you make. I wanted you to question my stupid decision. But...I didn't anticipate *this*. More than sixty dogs! I've never seen a pack that large. Ten to fifteen dogs are the norm; easy enough to scare off with a rifle. I have no idea how a pack of this size feeds itself. The people here believe that several packs merged temporarily.' He shakes his head and rubs his face, as if to wipe a thought away.

'When I saw them, I knew our chances were slim. So I sent you away in earnest. And you did question my decision then and I could have...I could have killed you for it.' He balls his hands to fists. 'I meant business when I pointed the

gun at you.'

'Okay.' I don't look up. I pretend to be busy spreading butter on my sandwich.

A hand stops mine on the way to the jam. 'Thank you, for saving my life and risking your own.'

I gulp. 'Yeah...umm...welcome.'

'It has been five months,' he says.

My stomach makes a lurch. I quickly take a large bite of my breakfast, so I don't say anything stupid.

'Your probation is over. You're ready for an apprenticeship, should you still want it. Considering...' He points at my left foot.

'Two toes.' I mumble. Then, I'm just chewing, wide-eyed and stupid-looking, most likely.

'You are a good shot, Micka.' He looks up and I see something working behind his eyes. As if the fact that I can aim decent enough is significant to whatever plan he's brewing up.

'You ordered only one rifle so your sacrificing yourself would look better?'

He nods.

'Will you keep playing these games during my apprenticeship?'

'No.' He draws his eyebrows down. 'Remember that you cannot contact your friends and family from the moment you enter apprenticeship.'

'I know.' And I couldn't care less. Although... 'I should send a message to my parents, so they don't think I died.'

He lowers his head. 'Write a letter, and the new Sequencer in your area will take it to your parents for you.'

The penny drops. He came just for me. 'Why...how do you choose apprentices?'

'Lock the door, please.'

I get up and lock it. Once I'm back on my chair, he begins. 'The old Sequencer made the suggestion to test you two years before he was to be replaced.'

'Why was he replaced?'

'He asked to be retired.'

'Ah. Yeah. He must be something like seventy or eighty years old now.'

Runner laughs and says, 'He fell in love with a woman. They wanted to stop traveling and have children. So he asked for relief. He is not *that* old. Only sixty-two.'

'But why did he suggest me?'

'What do you think?'

I shrug. 'First, I thought you were having a good laugh.' I don't tell him that I believed he was a pervert who dragged girls away from their parents and buried them in the woods. 'But now it feels...real. I have no idea what to make of it. Everyone else was good at school. Why did you not choose any of them? Why the...' I was about to say 'village idiot,' but somehow I don't feel like this anymore. The special treatment by Runner has already changed me.

He looks at me with those intense black eyes and I'm about to wilt. 'We choose highly creative, intelligent, independent, and sensitive people.'

No idea who he's talking about. I snort, but he continues calmly. 'We are not interested in the authority-obeying, adapted mass. We are not interested in people who strive for a goal that aids only them. We want the dreamers, the people who think differently, who doubt themselves and others constantly. We want the ones who fail, fall, stand up, and try again. The ones who put puzzle pieces together in a way others can't. The ones who see the large picture, who see the world and the humanity within, and not just their own small bubble of reality. We need the ones who can put anger, fear, and hate aside and analyse data independently of their own wants and needs. We want the excellent observers, the ones who are so sensitive to their surroundings, to the mass of normal people with all the ignorance they spread, that it destroys them. And of these few, we choose only the ones who never externalise their frustration; never the ones who torture others — the weaker, the smaller, or animals in their care. We almost always choose the ones who take it out on themselves.'

He bends over the table and tips his fingers to my chest. My scars begin to hum.

'I want to see yours,' I whisper.

'I didn't cut myself, I tried to drown myself, three and a half times, without success. I was a coward, I guess.' He offers a tilted smile.

'I'm glad you were.'

'May I see yours?' he asks and I begin to tremble. My gaze flicks here and there. 'Micka, all I said is I wish I could see them, not that you have to show me.'

I pull up my sleeve. Of the ones I inflicted, this is the scar that counts the most. He looks at the small 1/2986, puts a fingertip there, and asks, 'What happened?'

'I...' My throat shuts down. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to show it to him. I cough to get my words out. 'One day, Father whipped my brother so hard he soiled himself. For years afterwards, I dreamed of it every night. When I learned about the Great Pandemic in school, I cut the 1/2986 into my arm, because I found it unfair that ten billion people had to die, but my father was

alive to terrorise us. I was little. I didn't understand a thing.'

'Your brother?' he asks and I shake my head. I'm not ready to talk about him.

'Did the dreams stop?'

I nod, thinking of Father and his idiotic passion for the military. He loved great-grandfather's antique army belt. He loved talking about a soldier's discipline, although there have been neither armies nor soldiers since the day he stopped pooping his diapers. I can't remember what my brother had done or how often the leather hit his bare behind. But I clearly remember the yellow diarrhoea that leaked from there. I remember that clearer than the screaming and the slap of leather on skin.

Runner withdraws his hand. 'Think about this apprenticeship, Micka. Think hard. Think of the day you cut this into your skin. Much harder days will be coming, should you choose to be my apprentice. Think of the day you dragged me across the snow and you wished I was dead and you could go on.'

How can he know I thought that?

'Think of your darkest memory,' he continues. 'And know that what is coming will be unimaginably worse. All your days. Every night. You'll hate me for it. You'll hate me as much as you can hate. I promise you that.'

He doesn't know my darkest memory. It can't get any darker than that.

# KATVAR



I find Katvar outside, playing with the dogs. When he sees me, he jumps to a chopping block, fetches a knife and something else — a thing so small I can't see what it is.

'What is it with you and weapons? First you hit me on the head and now you want to stab me?'

He shakes his head. His face reddens.

'Don't you have a voice?'

His jaw sets. Both feet firmly planted in the snow, he mouths the word *no*.

'Oh,' is all I can say, freezing in shock and embarrassment. He rolls his eyes, whistles, and all dogs swarm around him, yapping and lolling their tongues, spittle rolling off their incisors. I see the white one that was rolled up against me when I woke up. It's focussed on Katvar. They all are, as if he's the most delicious food the beasts have ever tasted. He directs the dogs with his whistling and body language, and they totally adore him. He is all smiles. Maybe he loves dogs because they don't care whether he can speak human-tongue or not.

He sees me smiling at the jumble of furry bodies and waves at me invitingly. Hoping the dogs won't tip me over, I approach. My crutch moves dog butts and curious noses out of the way, but the animals are pushing too much. I'm about to drop face-first into the snow. Katvar makes an *ooof*-ing sound and they all plop down. I'm amazed.

Their scent is a mix of tart rhubarb, mushy and brown apple about to ferment, and fallen leaves. Wondering how their fur or their noses would taste, I bend down and tip my finger at the white dog's neck. Its head whips around and I stumble back. Katvar steps forward, sits down next to the dog, and beckons me closer.

I kneel, ready to bolt should the dog try to bite me. Then, I tentatively put my hand on its neck. *No*, gestures Katvar, takes my hand and places it on the animal's side. Together we stroke the thick fur. I nod at the dog's face and Katvar signals, *yes*. I touch the animal's cheek and soft lips. It closes its eyes and pants. I think I like dogs. My fingers comb through its fur until it turns its head and flicks his tongue over my hand. Immediately, I stick my finger into my mouth. The flavour is different than expected. Fresher. I lean close, watching the dog for any signs of disapproval, and then I lick its ear. Hairy and quite undelicious.

Katvar cackles and I sit up. He places two fingertips against my forehead, and frowns.

‘What’s there?’ I ask. ‘Oh...that.’

He draws a circle around my one eye.

‘Is it black?’ I haven’t looked in a mirror since... I can’t even remember.

He nods, the corners of his mouth pull down.

‘Don’t worry. It’s not my first black eye.’ The bruise from the head injury must have sagged down to my eye, because the eye itself doesn’t hurt. It’s the bone and skin above it that are tender.

Katvar stands, points to his chest, then to a shed a couple of hundred metres away. He makes a swinging gesture with his hand, palm flat against the snow. *Sled*. Then he slaps his thigh and all dogs jump up and follow him.

I rise and walk a few steps to a clean patch of snow, sit down, pull off my left boot and sock, unwrap the bandage, and stick my foot in the snow. The cold bites, but slowly, the throbbing dulls. When the wound feels numb enough, I begin rubbing snow around the sutures, carefully cleaning my foot. What I see is absurd and disgusting. Swollen and reddened scars and empty air where two toes should be. Impossible to blink away.

When I look up, Katvar and his dogs are taking off with a sled. The tinkling of the sled bell and the yapping of excited animals spread flavours of fresh snow and cranberry jam on my tongue. I’m left to wonder how he managed to tame these fierce predators.

The image of Katvar with his rifle and his fierce expression flickers past my vision and I burst out laughing. Maybe the dogs have tamed *him*.

---

Runner appears rested today. There’s even a little colour in his face when he kicks the slush off his boots and enters the house.

‘I have another question,’ I say as he takes his sweater off.

‘Go on.’

‘Why did we come here?’

He stops, puts his sweater back on, and tells me to follow him outside. We walk a semicircle around the village until he finds a tree stump to sit on. He brushes the snow off and sits down. His breath comes hard; he’s in no shape to go on extended hikes. ‘You know that tuberculosis and cholera killed a lot of people.’

I nod.

‘The problem with tuberculosis was, and still is, that the disease spreads

silently. Most people didn't know they were infected until another serious disease hit.'

'Cholera.'

'Not in every single case, but in principle, correct. Tuberculosis weakens the immune defence and any other infection comes quicker, more severe, deadly, even.' He looks at me. 'We are still in the middle of the tuberculosis pandemic.'

I feel like he's just poured a bucket of boiling hot water down my neck.

'What?'

'About eighty percent of humanity is infected. The majority has latent TB and will never notice it, nor die of it. But all have a risk to develop active TB, and about twenty percent does. Many of those who do are people with a compromised immune system, for example, from malnutrition. Some are too old or too young to fight off TB bacteria. Most of those who develop active TB, die.'

I remember the long and hard winters. The coughing that never stopped. The bloody mucous that told of death if you were too young or too old. I nod at my boots. 'Are you infected? Am I?'

'No.'

'Are you not afraid to get the disease?'

'I take precautions. We all do. Cacho tested you before suggesting you for an apprenticeship, and I tested you again in the woods.'

'How?'

'I took a saliva sample when you slept.'

'That's pretty—' I start to protest.

'Reasonable,' he cuts across. 'You let an infected man kiss you.'

I raise my eyebrows.

'Ralph,' he explains. 'Do you believe I'd risk infection? The constant exchange of saliva with someone who has tuberculosis is too high a risk.'

'I'm *not* planning to exchange saliva with you! *Especially* not on a constant basis!' I protest and get a nonplussed stare in return.

'You did already,' he says with a shrug. 'You drank from the cup I drank from, you drank from a canteen I drank from, you were breathing close to my face when I was injured, you used my fork and spoon several times. And vice versa. I'm asking you to not get too close to anyone you haven't tested with a FireScope. Specifically, don't let anyone cough in your face or kiss you, and don't eat from a dirty spoon or similar. All Sequencers get tested at regular intervals. Everyone else doesn't.'

Ralph. The thought of his stinky tongue makes me shudder. 'You should have warned me earlier.'

'The village we've been to is tuberculosis-free, as is Kaissa and her family.'



They know how to protect themselves from infection. I wanted to warn you before we reached this settlement here, but that didn't work out as planned.'

'How are your injuries?' I ask.

'The cholera pandemic burned itself out,' he says, ignoring my question and staring into the distance.

'What does that mean?'

'Too few people left. There are local outbreaks that don't justify the label pandemic. When cholera breaks out, it's limited to a small number of people and they know how to contain it.'

'But then all is good, isn't it? Why did you say we only have ten years left?'

He shakes his head no. 'This is a very complex topic. I have to show you data of what happened and is still happening, additional to predictive models to help you understand. For now, let us discuss your first question. You wished to know why we are here. We came to monitor the TB pandemic. A few years back, a Sequencer discovered these people...' He points his chin towards the village. '...living with dogs. They regularly take puppies from wild dogs for their breeding program — mostly for good hunting, guarding, and sledding dogs. The Sequencer was surprised to see that the tuberculosis bacteria of the dog people are very different — they are bare of antibiotic resistance genes.'

I scramble through the mass of information I found in the books he gave me to read. The main problem with the Great Pandemic was that the miracle cure for bacterial infections — antibiotics — didn't work anymore, because bacteria had learned to neutralise them, jotted that capability down in their genetic code, and then happily exchanged these genes with other bacteria, even across species that weren't even distantly related. As if fish had sex with birds so they could learn to fly.

'It wasn't until we studied the dogs, that we found out why,' he continues. 'Wild dogs have TB, too. But somehow, the bacteria behave differently in dogs than they do in humans. During the initial phase of infection, tuberculosis bacteria grow much faster in dogs, but they also have a harder time settling in a dog's lungs and lymph nodes. It's as if they have to be quicker to not be killed by the immune system, and that's how they must have lost their antibiotic resistance genes.'

'I don't understand. How's this possible?'

He scratches his chin. 'I have to shave this damned beard off. Picture a set of antibiotic resistance genes as a backpack filled with lots of useful things that give you an advantage for a long hike in the wild. Everyone else has no backpack, and soon, you'll be the only one alive and well. But what happens when it comes to a race, for example, when a predator hunts you? Your once-

useful equipment is a burden now. You have to get rid of it, or you'll be eaten. The same is true for antibiotics resistance— it comes with a cost, because it needs to be synthesised and maintained.'

'I didn't know bacteria could rid themselves of genes.'

'Oh, they can. Just as they can acquire genes from other bacteria or invent entirely new ones. They are actually quite...awesome.' He grins like he's in love with the little buggers.

'So we came here because you monitor the spreading of the special TB bacteria?'

'Yes and no. I mainly wanted us to encounter a pack, see how you are holding up, and then visit this place to analyse samples because we are in the area. The elders here know that Sequencers come each winter to analyse samples of the wild dogs people have shot during the cold season. They always keep a small piece of lung. The snow preserves it.'

I think of the dented FireScope that rattles every time I pick it up. The thing is only good for decoration. There's no way Runner can analyse samples now.

'I'm sorry I killed your FireScope.'

'Don't worry. It can be replaced.'

I cock my head. 'But...you gave it to me to keep it safe. I thought it was extremely valuable.'

He picks up a handful of snow and forms a tight ball. 'I gave it to you to keep *you* safe. The SatPad can show you where you need to go, but together with the knowledge of satellites and the FireScope in your possession, it shows that you've already been accepted as an apprentice. One of the other Sequencers would have taken you. ...can take you.'

I watch him smoothing the surface of the snowball. My brain is rattling. 'Why the test with the pack if you'd already decided to take me as an apprentice? You told me about satellites the night after we took the train.'

'I already knew you'd make a good apprentice. I just wasn't sure to whom I should transfer you.' He throws the snowball. It hits a woodshed and explodes.

'You never wanted me as your apprentice?'

'I haven't decided yet.'

I shuffle my feet in the snow and chew my cheeks, feeling as if I've failed.

He pokes his elbow to my ribs. 'What I do is dangerous. What many of the others do isn't. If I take an apprentice, I risk her life, or worse.'

'What are you doing?'

'I can tell you what I'm not doing. I'm not monitoring the spreading of tuberculosis or the loss of antibiotic resistance genes.'

'But...'

‘Change of topic, Micka. Ask about something else, if you have to ask at all.’

I stand and walk around the stump, undecided if I should go back inside and let him sit here and rot. Trying to not look as if I agree with his game, I remain standing, arms crossed over my chest. ‘Our physician, Zula, had antibiotics in a small vial. I’ve never seen him use it. So what does it help if the dogs and this one village have special tuberculosis that can be cured with antibiotics, if we only have a tiny amount of the stuff?’

He shakes his head. ‘We have thousands of tonnes of antibiotics available, but they are the old-fashioned ones. The few grams your village physician has are of a special and very rare kind — one that bacteria haven’t yet learned to neutralise. But...’ He lifts his hand to stop my next question. ‘The wild dogs help us spread this ancient, this curable form of TB. That’s one of the things the other Sequencers do: spread disease. They spread the one they can cure to outcompete the one they cannot cure. Only then can they use antibiotics to fight it. But it only sounds good. The whole process takes much longer in humans than in dogs, and the effort might be in vain.’

I’m hit by a memory. Groaning, I bury my face in my hands. ‘I kissed a dog.’  
‘You did what?’

I’d rather not explain the whole business, so I say the first thing that comes to my mind. ‘The white dog licked my face on our first day here.’

‘Dammit,’ Runner grumbles. ‘I’ll test you as soon as possible.’

‘What happens if I get infected?’

‘You’ll be quarantined and receive antibiotics for six months. Success rate is over ninety percent.’

Relieved, I decide to push the infection issue aside until Runner tests me. ‘How long is an apprenticeship?’ I ask, trying a stealth approach to the question that bugs me the most.

‘Five to seven years, depending on the type of...job you’ll do. With me, it would be seven.’

‘What will we be doing, Runner?’

He squints up at me and shakes his head no. ‘I cannot give you this information, Micka. You are not my apprentice, not yet, if ever. You have to accept the possibility, or rather, likelihood, of being transferred to another Sequencer. We will talk only after you’ve written your letter to your parents and cut off all contact to your home. I can understand if you decide against an apprenticeship under these circumstances. It’s okay to say no. You’ll be taken back to your village then.’

He places a hand on the stump, pushes himself up, and walks back to the house.

I watch the glittering snow, wondering why Runner behaves as if I'm the lamb led to the butcher's block. That man certainly has a melodramatic streak.

# FAREWELL



I'm sitting on my bed, bent over a small notebook, pen in my cramping hand, and I have no clue what I should write. "Thank you for having me" doesn't nail it.

I touch the scars on my left forearm, then the ones on my right. I don't blame my parents for this anymore. My own hand did it, holding my own knife. Even blaming my father for cutting a word into my back would be pointless. I would never get anything in return, no apology, nothing. In my family, we never apologise. Saying "I'm sorry" means admitting a mistake.

So what is one supposed to write to parents who don't seem to care whether one exists or not, as long as one exists quietly? I remember the surprise I felt when they wept at my brother's funeral. I had no idea they could feel the loss as deeply as I felt it. They pulled themselves together soon enough, though. We are not a family of weaklings.

I kept telling myself that it's love that forbids me from asking why they treated their kids the way they did. Now I'm old enough to admit it isn't love. It's fear of being all wrong about it, of being unable to remember correctly. I know that Mother would say I made it all up, that they never raised a hand against their children, that it was my fault Karlsson died, that Father never whipped the shit out of us, that he never beat me unconscious, and I never woke up with **DIE** screaming from my back. Mother would convince me they'd poured out buckets of sweet love on us. Then, I would lose my memories, my pain, myself. I'd cease to exist.

My legs tremble. My body wants to curl up protectively around my heart, make it feel like an embryo in a loving mother's womb.

My vision floods with saltwater. I hear myself crying when I run the sharp point of the pen into my forearm. Once, twice, three times. Beads of blood mix with ink. I take a deep breath. My heartbeat grows calmer.

The paper before me is perfectly white. A very capitalised "YOU HURT ME!" wants to be there, right next to a "I think I'm stupid enough to love you, but maybe not, because I don't even fucking know what love is!"

There's a ton of shit I want to throw at them, but I doubt the three sheets of paper will ever be enough to take all that ink.

I decide for one word.

## *Farewell*

Something tells me Mother will appreciate that there's absolutely nothing between the lines.



Katvar is fidgeting in the snow, kicking at it with his fur-lined boots while the dogs dance around him. I walk up to him, hoping he isn't going to run away like he did every time I went outside to learn more about dog handling. Once, I'd asked him if he could tame adult wild dogs. He tipped his head and frowned, shrugged and laughed his odd throaty, huffing laugh. Then he disappeared, always with that knife gripped tightly and a tiny thing he hid the moment I approached.

Today, though, it seems as if he wants to tell me something. Both his hands are dug deep in his trouser pockets. His lower lip is pushed out a little. I wonder if he's mad at me. Last night, he put on his darkest expression when everyone was crammed into the council's meeting room, and we thanked them for saving our lives and announced that we'd be leaving in the morning.

The dog people — men and women with long hair that seems to melt into their fur coats — already knew. Rumour spreads faster than a dog fart, the saying here goes. When suspicions were confirmed, food and drink were carried in and cooked in two large fireplaces. Snowflakes melted on shoulders and hair, and the room began to fill with wet-dog smell, only to be replaced by rich scents of fried deer, smoked sausage, melted butter, warm bread, and baked potatoes. When I finished eating and tipped the dregs of my beer into my mouth, I noticed that Katvar was gone.

Now, the morning sun shines in his face and softens his unyielding features. 'Hey, Katvar.'

He points his chin to the west, as if he needs to go somewhere. What is it about me that makes him want to run away as soon as he sees me? I've been unfriendly, yes. But he ran a rifle into my face; what does he expect? 'I just want to say goodbye, didn't want to disturb you,' I mutter.

He shakes his head until the bobble on his cap is wiggling. His finger points at me, then at himself, then to the west. 'We walk?' I ask.

Yes! he nods.

'Okay. But Runner wants us to leave in an hour...'

Katvar looks at his boots, shrugs as if to shake off my comment, then walks ahead to find the exact same tree stump Runner and I were sitting on several days earlier to discuss disease in dogs and humans. He plops down and pats the

small space next to him. This is the closest I've been to the man since he ran the butt of his rifle against my skull.

We sit together and say nothing because he can't, and I hate to be the only one talking. I don't have much to say anyway. The sun glitters in the snow, and the dogs are playing, yapping, and running circles around us. Katvar doesn't move, so they eventually give up and lie down, eating snow to cool their bodies.

Exhaling a large white cloud, he clears his throat and extracts both hands from his pockets. One is balled up; the other rests on his leg. He holds out his fist to me.

I open my hand and something white and small drops on my palm. A leather string is attached to it. I pick it up.

A shiny and intricately carved white dog smiles up at me. 'Beautiful,' is all I can say as my chest clenches. I gaze at him, and he taps at his teeth.

'It's a tooth?'

He nods.

'A dog? No, too large.' I squint at Katvar. He curves both index fingers and holds them to the corners of his mouth, fingertips pointing upwards.

'Wild boar,' I say, and he smiles happily, then nervously before he looks away.

'Thank you, Katvar,' I whisper. 'But if you think I'm angry at you because of the—'

He cuts me off with a slashing movement of his hand. He gestures at my forehead, the fading bruise, and shakes his head. Then he touches his heart. Oh shit. And he touches mine.

I gulp.

He looks away.

'I'm leaving,' I remind him.

He slips his hand into mine.

'I'm leaving,' I say again, softly.

He looks at me, tips his head in his usual slightly amused Katvar-way, and dips his finger to my lips. Then he lets go, stands, and walks away.

---

Runner doesn't ask why I keep turning my head and looking back. The village is growing smaller. Our packs are heavy, loaded with lots of dried meat, nuts, and fruits. The dog people rarely experience food shortage. They are excellent hunters and have a lot to share, they told us when they placed two large bags of supplies next to our rucks.



I touch the small dog at my neck, remembering how cold it was when I put it there. Cold like the snow, where Katvar and his dogs play. My skin warms it now.

‘Should you decide on an apprenticeship, you’ll have to say goodbye a lot,’ Runner says without turning to me.

‘I’ve long decided.’

He stops, looks down at me, and holds out his hand. ‘The letter.’

I take it out of my inner coat pocket and he slips it into his, marching on as if nothing had happened.

‘Runner!’ I call to him. ‘What will we be doing in the next seven years?’

‘I’ll tell you once we’ve arrived in the city and I’ve dropped off your letter.’

‘Dammit, Runner! You try very hard to piss me off.’

‘Yes.’ And on he trudges, as if we’d just conversed about the weather.

---

The skyline — a jagged shape, dotted with hundreds of lights, a sharp contrast to the dark evening sky. I’ve never seen anything like it.

‘Where does all this energy come from?’ I ask.

‘There’s solar paint on all roofs and outer walls, and a large river driving several turbines to supply power for the industry.’

‘Industry?’

‘They make steel, a variety of metal alloys, magnets, and they manufacture parts and machines. Anything from the blade of your knife to parts for a train, for example.’

I walk faster. ‘Can we look at it? The industry? And...um.’ I scratch my head where the woollen cap itches my scalp. ‘Who grows food for all these people?’

‘No time for sightseeing, Micka. The food is produced mostly by farms along the south bank of the river. They make good wine there.’ He shows me a grin.

‘I had a sip of plum wine once and it tasted like vinegar,’ I say. The memory makes an acrid appearance at the back of my throat.

‘Then it was most likely just that. Wine making is an art. Very few who drink it know how to make it.’ He’s walking faster now, as if he can already taste it.

‘What about the water? We must be at sea level. Why are they not sick?’ I stop walking. ‘Or are they?’

‘No, they aren’t. The hydropower plant provides energy for the waterworks where groundwater is filtered through a multitude of membranes. Each household has ultraviolet lights installed at their taps to fry the DNA of all

bacteria and viruses.'

My mind cannot comprehend the luxuries: safe drinking water, the lowlands' fertile soil, energy to light up the night sky. Do these people even know what hunger means?

'Why don't we all live like this?'

'Are you envious, Micka?'

'Umm...maybe.'

'I'm pretty sure that you don't want to live like this.' He claps my shoulder and urges me forward. 'There's a reason they keep that gate locked. The city is a stronghold. It even has artillery to keep the outskirts safe.'

'They have a what?'

'You'll see.'

He pulls out the SatPad, logs in, and sends out our IDs long before we arrive. The city appears like a massive block. The closer we get, the more details I can make out. A black wall, about ten metres tall, looks as if it holds the many buildings inside captive. A shiny steel gate is hugged by two stone towers. I feel ant-sized.

Beams of light blind us and I stop automatically. 'Keep walking,' Runner warns.

'Your names,' someone barks from above.

'Runner McCullough and Mickaela Capra. We sent our IDs an hour ago.'

That's the first time I hear his family name. McCullough...it sounds oddly familiar. 'Runner?' I whisper.

'Later. Walk through the gate. Don't speak.'

A bang and the gate creaks open. Two men stand on either side, pointing large rifles at us. The same kind Runner warned me about. If I truly listened to him, I would have to run and hide now. What a circus.

I avoid eye contact and silently walk past the guards. 'Mr. McCullough.' One of them nods at Runner. 'The rooms are prepared.'

'Thank you.'

Runner indicates the row of weapons sitting idle atop the wall. They look like large versions of the rocket launcher I saw in the train. 'Wall-mounted defensive artillery,' he says.

We're passing through streets and alleys, and with each step, terror seeps in and makes my knees wobbly. Faces of demons have been hewn in stone pillars, walls, and pavements. Death can be seen at every corner — a cloaked statue, sometimes holding a scythe, sometimes an enormous axe. I thought that stuff was banned.

Every single person we come across carries a weapon. No one talks to us, but

I think I spot occasional flickers of recognition when they see Runner's face.

'This way,' he says, pushing me through a door and into a building. We walk up several flights of stairs. Then he knocks at a door. A woman opens.

'Runner, finally! And who's this?'

'Regina, this is Micka,' he says and enters without waiting for an invitation. 'I have to leave, but I'll be back soon. Your letter will be dispatched in a few minutes. Are you certain about this, Micka?'

'Obviously. Send the damn thing.'

He leaves without a word. He must be enjoying this superhero show. What a letdown it will be once he can't do his "Oh, it's so dangerous, I can't tell you" shit anymore.

I look at the woman and wonder if she's one of Runner's flings. My eyes can't help but search for kids' toys. But the apartment seems free of knee-biters of all ages. Then, I remember he said he has a contraceptive implant. He must have received it after he met Kaissa. Otherwise, Ezra wouldn't exist. I guess I'll get one soon; maybe here in this city?

'Are you his apprentice?' she asks.

I turn around. Am I? Theoretically, yes. But practically, not yet. I nod anyway, because that's simplest.

'I'm Regina.'

'Yes. Hey. I'm Micka.' I hold out my hand, but seeing how dirty it is I quickly withdraw it.

'Would you like to take a bath?'

I gape. 'Can you afford it?'

She pulls up her eyebrows. 'Of course, everyone can,' she says, turning on her heels and disappearing into what must be the bathroom. Soon, I hear the opening of a tap and the splashing of water.

I drop my backpack, my coat, boots, shawl, mittens, and hat. Everything appears so dirty in this clean place, I'm ashamed. Regina returns with a large basket. 'Give me all your clothes and I'll get them to the cleaners. You can wear the nightgown and the bathrobe. It's all in the bathroom. Fresh towels, too.'

I pull all my dirty shirts, pants, underwear, and socks from the backpack and place them in the basket. 'There's a lot of blood on Runner's sleeping bag,' I tell her.

'I'll get his things cleaned when he's back. The tub should be full now. Go ahead. I'll fix dinner soon.'

'Thank you,' I mumble and enter the bathroom, undress, push my dirty clothes through the door, and lock it.

A large mirror startles me. I look like a savage. Every inch of my body is

dirty. The dog people weren't much for washing. They smelled like their dogs, and so do I. Or of fox den, I'm not sure.

The bathroom is warm, full of steam and soapy scents. I close the tap and stick my feet in the water. Oh...wonderful! I slide under water, close my eyes, and pinch my nose. My stomach gurgles, my heart thumps. I hear Regina's heels clacking down the stairs. And I hear muffled conversations, maybe in a room below me. Runner's voice is nowhere to be heard. I surface and begin scrubbing my skin. The layer of dirt is hiding my scars, but the brush peels it off and reveals pink lines cutting through freckles. I've never seen anyone with such a fly-shit pattern and sometimes I wonder if it's a disease I contracted. The fly-shit disease.

Anyway, I can't scrub them off, so there's no use in discussing the issue with myself or anyone else. Besides, if the freckles were to magically disappear overnight, I'd still have scars all over my arms, chest, and thighs. Dots and lines. Dots and lines. Like a code.

---

Runner returns when the table is set and spicy odours are wafting off our dinner. The man reeks. I only notice it now that I'm all washed and polished. So that's how much I've stunk. Impressive.

Regina and he are absorbed in small talk while I rest my brain and eat all I can. The stew is delicious. I have no clue what it is, but I could totally eat the whole pot.

'What's the white stuff?' I ask, suppressing a belch.

'River mussel.' There's pride in her voice, her cheeks are glowing. 'From our new aquaculture plant. We grow fish, mussel, crayfish, and algae in purified river water. The animals are eaten, the algae used to make fuel.'

Trying to not drop my spoon, I inspect the white blobs that, until a second ago, tasted like the most tender chicken I've ever had. I probe my mouth with my tongue to make sure nothing's left stuck to my teeth, else I might retch. I've seen drawings of mussels in biology class and they looked like grandma pussies to me. Not that I've ever seen one. I mean old...vulvas.

I gulp down the wine and instantly feel better. And nope, the stuff doesn't taste like vinegar. But its flavour still doesn't justify Runner's dreamy expression when he moved it around in his mouth and said, 'Excellent!'

He puts his spoon down, stands, and looks at me. 'I'll wash. Then we talk.'

*Hurray!* I think, but I have problems believing it's finally going to happen. He might fall asleep in the bathtub or something.

---

Regina has set up a room for Runner and me. I'm surprised he isn't sleeping in her bed. She's wiped down our ground pads and sent both sleeping bags out to the cleaners. All our stuff, including ourselves, will smell like daisies by tomorrow morning.

Alone in the room, I lie down and roll up in one of the blankets, happy to rest my full stomach. The façade of another building shows through the window — black with yellow rectangles, a few are divided by curtains. Quiet muttering seeps through the walls, rumbling feet on stairwells, shouts down on the streets. Not one moment of silence. How can anyone live like this? I'll happily leave the luxury of a bathtub and a warm bedroom to sleep in a tent somewhere in the snowy woods.

My mouth can't stop yawning and my eyes burn. It must be close to midnight. To stay awake, I sit up and lean against the chilly wall.

The guard's words ring in my memory. *Mr. McCullough, the rooms are prepared.* The rooms — plural. I doubt he meant Regina's apartment. Rooms prepared for what? The sound of *Mr. McCullough* tasted of...fear? I roll my tongue around in my mouth, press it against my palate, but fail to identify what it was the man might have felt, seeing us. Harshness is what this city tastes of. Even the woman, Regina, has a harsh aroma. She's on edge. Her hands are hardened, but not from work in the fields. The cracks in the calluses of her fingers aren't darkened from soil and plant juices, but from something else. Her hands are... I hold my own hand close to my nose and suck in air to define what is missing. Machines! That's what she works with. She smelled of grease, machine oil, and metal shavings. Why did I not identify them at once? My favourite odours. I guess I didn't expect them on a woman.

The thought of my turbines makes me smile. I miss them. *My turbines.* Bullshit. They were never mine and would never be—

Runner rumbles through the door. He holds a candle, places it next to his ground pad, and sits down. 'Do you want to hear it or do you want to sleep?'

'Hear it.'

'Okay.' He crosses his legs, folds his hands in his lap, and says softly, 'I'm known as *The Executor.*'

'The what?'

'As a member of the Sequencer council, my responsibility is to provide an expert opinion on anything related to warfare. I'm a strategist who sets the goals and determines actions to cripple the BSA. And I'm a sniper; I kill BSA leaders

and soldiers. I execute decisions and people.'

The Executor. With every word he speaks, my skin is growing colder. I don't know what to say. All the questions I have evaporate. Strangely, he doesn't appear any different. The same gentle, but firm face, stubbly cheeks, olive skin, black hair dripping water on lean shoulders. I can't imagine him running around killing people.

'Cacho told me you were a boy,' he continues. 'I don't know why he lied. Taking a female apprentice is probably the stupidest thing I've ever done.'

So he is taking me? But... I clear my throat. 'I don't understand.' My chest hurts. I wonder if my heart has stopped beating. I put my hand there and I'm surprised to feel the familiar *thump thump*. 'You saw I'm a girl. But you... you...'

'You whacked me on the head pretty good, and that impressed me. I didn't expect it. Quite a revelation for a man trained in combat. You taught me to never again underestimate bony young women.' He smiles.

'I got curious and decided to take the next step,' he continues. 'I went to your home, and then I saw it. I knew that expression. You looked like I felt when I tried to drown myself. I knew if I left without offering a probation, you'd be dead in hours. You're a cutter. You're not afraid to run a knife through your flesh. I decided to give you a few weeks. I told myself you could be someone else's apprentice, that I'd get rid of you and then find a suitable young man. I almost congratulated myself at such a brilliant idea.' He rubs his face. 'I'm an idiot.'

'So you have a problem with me not being male. Thanks very much. You probably forgot that it was a *bony young woman* who dragged you through the snow.' I yank my blanket up to my chin and glare him with a cold stare. He probably doesn't even see it, what with the little light the candle provides.

'So you want to kill people,' he says coldly.

'You're killing people. There must be something good about it,' I retort.

He groans. 'I know of only a handful of female snipers. Two of them are still alive. The other four have been captured, tortured, and killed. Cacho knows what I do. He knows the risks. I have no idea why he would want this for you.'

'What's the mortality rate among men?' I snarl, almost proud of recalling the term.

'A little lower. Micka, you are a good shot and you have a lot of grit. But you have no clue what it's like to pull the trigger and watch a man or a woman die. That part is hard. I can teach you most of what you need to be an excellent sharp shooter, but no one can teach you to brush off repeated gang rapes, amputations, and whipping. If the BSA captured you, they'd make you watch all of this before

they did it to you. You'd cry with relief when they finally showed you a beheading or stoning, because then you'd know your torture would soon come to an end. Men are shot. Bullet to the head at close range and that's it. Women are seen as harbingers of all that is evil. They are made to suffer for weeks, sometimes months.'

I nod, but understand little. Images of corpses, piles of them, of dented bones and of torsos leaking innards, burn themselves into my eyes. I can't even imagine gang rapes. My breath is heavy. Runner is silent.

'I thought it's called *The Brothers and Sisters of the Apocalypse*?'

'Very few women work for the BSA. As long they are heterosexual virgins who believe in the BSA's cause, they are comparatively safe. But only as long as they are of use and no one takes interest in them, sexually. Because it proves that she wants to lure decent men into evil.'

'That makes absolutely no sense. How can anyone be so...stupid?'

Runner huffs a laugh. 'Who knows?'

We are silent for a long moment. Then he lies down and pulls the blanket up to his shoulders. The candlelight reflects in his black eyes. 'Don't decide now.'

'No. I mean, yes. I won't.'

'Is there anything else you'd like to know?'

Uh, yeah. Distraction would be great now. 'Your last name, McCullough. I read that name in the first book you gave me. It was mentioned in connection with a study on bone injuries.'

'Yes, I wrote it during my apprenticeship.'

'You wrote and published a standard work during your apprenticeship?'

'What's wrong with that?' he asks.

'Nothing. Tell me about that study.' I have to hold back a yawn.

'I studied the casualties of acts of war, and the reasons why humans turned on each other during a time of great suffering — the Great Pandemic. The results were...sobering.'

'Why? Because you found that one cannot trust people?' I try to not sound too sarcastic.

'No. Because I found that, as a species, we have no swarm intelligence whatsoever.'

'A what?'

'Bees... You've heard about honey bees, haven't you?'

'I've seen a hive once, in a tree. I've never told anyone about it.'

I was eight or ten then and watched the bees whenever I could sneak away from work in the fields, from homework or household chores, and if the turbines didn't need attendance. I knew people would try to steal the honey and the bees

would die or move away. I loved the scents the insects spread and the taste their buzzing produced in my mouth.

‘Honey bees,’ he continues, ‘are intelligent in a swarm. They are highly organised and every individual has a task. In emergencies, they act as one, despite their miniature brains. Humans, on the other hand, have a large and highly developed brain. We fancy ourselves the most intelligent species on Earth. We compose music, we build spacecraft...used to build spacecraft,’ he adds when he hears my shocked cough. ‘Long ago, Micka. But as a mass, we often act much dumber than if we’d acted alone. It gets worse with panic and distress. During the Great Pandemic — when every family had someone dying of disease, and medicine that once worked wonders didn’t do its job anymore — theories began to spread: The Jews caused the pandemic. The Gypsies caused the pandemic. The government took away our effective antibiotics and replaced them with powdered sugar. The Russians poisoned our air. The US Americans poisoned our water. God is eradicating all that is evil. The Christians are guilty. The Muslims are guilty. And so on. The results were endless variations of witch-hunts that spiralled out of control. What began as a fistfight ended in bombings on a large scale.’

I press the heels of my palms against my eyes until I see lights popping. ‘The people in the train seemed to be afraid of you.’

‘Because they know what I do, and what it means to take a girl as an apprentice. They disapprove.’

‘The cook believed I was a boy.’

Runner snorts. ‘Yeah, that guy’s half blind. You might have been correct about the rat in his stew.’

Ugh, great. My stomach gurgles to remind me of the mussels I ate. ‘What’s wrong with this city? Why all this *death*?’ I ask.

‘It was occupied by the BSA for decades. They erected statues, carved and painted death everywhere. A few years ago, rebels took back the city. The people who live here are warriors who keep to themselves, who have their own tricks and secrets. And so do we, but the people here call us “meddlers.” They open their gates for us only as long as we keep killing BSA followers. Other than that, you’ll find little help in this city. Regina is a friend and she wants to help, but everyone else only tolerates us. Keep that in mind.’

‘Only a few years ago?’

‘Yes. The BSA is thriving again.’

That’s why he wanted a male apprentice. To help kill people who kill people. My head spins. Would I be able to pull the trigger? Not a thing one decides within minutes, I guess. But then, wouldn’t I have to decide within a fraction of



a second when it comes to it? ‘What did you do before you came back for dinner?’

‘I organised our next leg and talked with the council. Next time, you’ll join me.’

I yawn quietly. ‘Where do we go?’

‘Far away. I’d rather show you. Tomorrow we’ll be taking a train from here, and then you’ll see.’

I’ll have to keep in mind never to ask Runner another question when I need a distraction from the awful things he’s only just told. I’m dead tired, but my brain races in circles. Murdering? Dying? Gang rape? Beheading? Next destination?

Chance is a bitch. She can suck my...whatever.

‘Runner?’ I whisper

‘Hmm.’ A sleepy answer.

‘What’s *heterosexual*?’

# PARTY



We enter the last wagon. Music pumps through my ears and into my body. The beats mess with my heart. My chest goes *woooomp woooomp woooomp*. The onslaught of flavours is overwhelming.

Only minutes ago, Runner had knocked at the door to my compartment, handed me my negative TB test and told me to come and have fun. With the corners of his mouth curving upwards, he'd said, 'We might be a serious bunch most of the time, but when you find four or five of us in one spot, you can be sure we'll throw a party.'

'Why?'

He didn't seem to understand my question. 'A party or two before humanity goes down the drains cannot be such a weird idea, Micka. Wouldn't you want to shake off hard work once in a while, forget all the good-byes you have to say, and enjoy the company of whoever managed to hang around?'

When I gave him a single nod — not my most affirmative one ever — he grinned, leaned closer and said, 'There'll be smoking, drinking, dancing, and love-making until sunrise.' Then he turned around and strolled ahead.

The moment he mentioned that "make love" thing, my legs decided to walk in the other direction. My imagination keeps showing me a hundred writhing, naked bodies.

'What's wrong?' Runner calls. He squints down at me, and I pull myself together. Writhing naked bodies? Who gives a shit. I'll be shooting people soon. Did I just think that?

Men and women fill the wagon to the brim. Their laughs and chatter trickle down my throat and demand a response. I clamp my mouth shut. The floor rocks from the moving of the train and the wild dancing. Smoke wafts through the air and mingles with scents of sweat, fruits, and...I don't even know what else. There's so much. So many word-flavours mix with scents and music, I have to focus to tell them apart. I strain my eyes but I can't find anyone without clothes, not a single naked person. I'm so relieved, I begin cackling like mad. Runner has a sense of humour I totally don't get. Next time I'll think twice before I tell him I'm a virgin.

That made no sense whatsoever. What's wrong with my brain tonight?

A few windows are slid down a crack, and the speed sucks out smoke and

pushes in cold air. Runner walks through the masses and I have problems keeping up. He climbs onto some kind of stand, takes a small black button between his fingers, and holds it close to his mouth.

‘Ladies and gentlemen!’ thunders through the room. The dancing stops, but not the laughing, drinking, and smoking. Most people look up to him. ‘A few of you have met Micka already.’

Everyone’s gaze follows Runner’s outstretched arm and lands on me. I’m growing hot.

‘She’s my apprentice now.’

Yeah. When I told him I want this, he didn’t seem to like it much.

Dead silence falls, flavours dissipate. No one laughs. All eyes are on me, round like saucers. Then heads turn, and Runner gets his brunt of cold stares.

‘I know you don’t approve. I don’t, either.’ His gaze holds mine and I feel my cheeks reddening with anger. ‘Micka, if anyone offers you an apprenticeship tonight, I want you to take it.’ He nods at everyone in the room, puts the button back on a black box — the thing that makes the loud music — then he jumps down into the crowd.

Someone pushes a glass into my hands, claps me on my shoulder in an *I’m-so-sorry* way, frowns, and leaves. I sneak to an open window and stick my nose in the draft to clear my mind. I know why he did this. But still it hurts.

I search for him in the dancing crowd but can’t find him. The wind ruffles my hair. The night is crisp. I nod at myself. I’ll tell him the flavour of his name should we say goodbye tonight.

An outstretched hand interrupts my thoughts. A stranger smiles, bends close to my ear, and shouts, ‘Nice to meet you, Micka. I’m Yam.’ And he laughs as if he’s just made a joke. Maybe he did and I didn’t understand it. ‘I have an apprentice already, but maybe you’re up for a dance?’

Shocked, I shake my head until my bangs flap. I have no clue what to do with my limbs in combination with music. Even if I knew how to dance, I’m not in the mood now. Actually, I’d rather be alone. But sitting in my compartment doesn’t entice me in the least. Being alone in a crowd is something I’m good at. I stuff my hands into my pockets. Yam touches two fingers to his temple then throws himself into the boiling mass of dancers. There seem to be no rules. Throw out your arms, legs, hair, and hips in whatever style strikes your fancy. It looks like fun, though. Runner certainly has fun. Dickhead. He put me up for auction without warning.

I turn away and plop down onto a bench, close my eyes, and let my body vibrate. I know it wants to move and do something radical, but it just doesn’t know how. I lift the drink to my mouth. Looks like fruit juice. I take a sip and

my eyes widen in shock. That stuff burns! I cough, slap my own back as well as I can. Tears roll down my cheeks. Did someone pour battery gel in there?

I down this drink for courage — slightly tipsy, I might be able to trick myself into hitting Runner in his arrogant face. But maybe I need another drink for that, because I'm not even sure I want to hit him.

When I spot him, I almost gag on my saliva. He's wrapped around a stunning woman. Her curves are soft and voluptuous, her hair a luxurious gold, reaching down to her waist. She laughs and they step away from each other then press their bodies back together again. He seems to whisper something into her ear. She squeals, slaps at his chest, and leaves him with the other dancers.

When she catches my gaze, I grow hot. I think my face looks like a tomato now; it does that to me all the time. I hate it.

She walks, undulating and graceful. I don't like the direction she's taking. Or maybe I do, very much so. Only a moment later, she sits down next to me and speaks into my ear. 'Runner bit my earlobe, can you believe that? Is it bleeding?'

She tilts her head to the side and lifts her hair. I see teeth marks. 'Nope,' I shout over the noise. She has a beautiful pale neck and an earlobe so delicate, I immediately want to bite it, too. I'm sure she tastes of almond and peach with a sprinkle of salt. Her mouth twitches as she notices my gaze.

She bends closer. 'Ever kissed a girl?'

I inhale. Fruits, smoke, her hair, her mouth. 'Nope. Kissed a boy once,' I croak. 'It was gross. Is kissing a girl any different?' Uh, I think I'm drunk, but I'm not sure it's from the alcohol.

'Every kiss is different,' she says. Her voice has a beautiful lilt. All I can focus on are her lips and the scent of her skin. She leans a little closer. Her breath caresses my neck, her cheek warms mine. 'Are you curious?'

Between my glowing hot ears, my mind stutters, *Can a woman kiss a woman? Can I...try, at least?*

'Um...always curious,' I hear myself say. Other than that, I'm quite frozen.

'Hmm.' She nods slowly, then shakes her head a little, the tip of her nose brushes my cheek, and an instant later, her lips come down on mine. They feel wonderful. She feels wonderful — soft and sweet and inquiring. When she flicks the tip of her tongue over my teeth, I'm on fire. Something melts in my pants. Sighing, I lean into her, her softness, her large boobs and wide hips. Oh dear. I want to sink in all the way and taste every square centimetre of her body.

'So. Is it comparable to that boy's kiss?' she asks when I catch my breath.

'Can you kiss me again?' Actually, I want to ask if she can take me to her compartment, or to the bathroom.

'I'll break you, honey.'

Am I that obvious? ‘I’ll pick up the mess, don’t worry.’

She frowns. ‘I prefer multiple partners. You need a one-on-one treatment, I believe. Are you a virgin?’

Yeah, shit, I’m almost sixteen and still a virgin and I even look like one. Mortified, I nod just a tiny bit.

‘Hmm. Sweet.’ She kisses my neck and sends trembles down my thighs. She stands before I can pull her closer. ‘Dance with me,’ she says.

My hand reaches up. Nonplussed, I stare at my arm, wondering why it didn’t ask my brain for permission. She grabs me, walks me to the dance floor, and begins tossing her hair and her curves.

Now I know why my arm accepted hers so quickly. I let myself be moved by the beats, by her hands and hips. I’ve never once considered wanting to be close to another person, never realised someone could smell so delicious or feel so good.

What the heck was in that drink?

‘You are thinking too much, Micka,’ she whispers in my ear.

‘kay.’

She laughs and presses me to her. I can feel the dimples of her ass cheeks through the sheer fabric of her dress. I pinch her there, lightly, but enough to make her wiggle her hips closer to mine. My anger fades. Thoughts of Runner and what he asked disappear. When the music changes yet again, she takes my hand and pulls me with her.

‘Where are we going?’

‘My compartment,’ she says. My hand in hers switches from too hot to very clammy and wet as a fish. How does one do it with a woman? I can totally picture the male-female coupling thing. Every kid in my village has seen Lampit’s billy hump the goats, so we learned how that goes.

But...two women? Impossible. I tell myself that she wants to talk. Offer an apprenticeship or something. Yeah. Right.

We reach a door and she looks at me. ‘I have only two rules. One: you tell me what you want and what you don’t want. Two: Only tonight.’

‘Why?’ I manage to say.

‘Because that’s how I want it.’

My mind goes *oh, yes, sure, pffffff*, but at least I get my head to nod. I’m being pulled inside the compartment, a tiny space with a narrow mattress, a small washbowl, a dresser. We barely fit. I begin to panic when she pushes her hands under my shirt.

‘No. Wait. I don’t want you to see...me.’ I almost said “them” — my scars. ‘I mean, I’m...’

‘It’s okay,’ she says, places a soft hand on my chest, bends to the side, and flicks a switch at the wall. Darkness falls. ‘Better?’

‘Yes,’ I breathe.

In the pitch black, my rattling brain calms and I can focus on my less annoying senses — to smell, feel, listen. Oh, and taste! ‘I don’t even know your name.’

‘Sandra,’ she blows at my neck. Goosebumps race down my spine when her name blooms honeysuckle at the tip of my tongue. I let myself fall into her embrace, we land on her bed, and our clothes...oh, well, who cares where our clothes went.

I love her skin. I try to kiss her everywhere, but she wiggles from my grasp, slides down and kisses my breasts, my stomach, and — oh shit!

I unfold for her as she ravishes my body until I cry. She giggles, and licks, and giggles. I’m trembling all over. And then I explode.

Just like that.

---

I draw lazy circles around her nipples until she slaps my hand away. ‘Can I ask you something?’ I say.

‘Yes.’

‘Why did you invite me to your cabin?’

‘You are sweet.’

Sweet. That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard. I frown at the dark, glad she can’t see me.

She sighs and rakes her fingers through my hair. ‘I was shocked to see he chose a girl.’

‘What does that have to do with anything?’

‘Everything. I asked him about it when we danced. He told me to shut up. Then he bit my ear, the asshole.’

I clamp my lips together so as not to laugh out loud. ‘You didn’t look like you hated it,’ I tell her. ‘Did you have sex with him?’

‘A while ago. Are you jealous?’ Her hand freezes on my skin.

‘You told me, only tonight. So, no. I’m not jealous. I think.’ I wonder how jealousy feels. But I can’t muster the energy to bother much.

Sandra chuckles softly and kisses my fingers. ‘Listen, Micka, I don’t think it’s a good idea to be his apprentice. As a girl, anyway.’

I’m tired of this crap. This is my apprenticeship and none of her business.

‘Runner spends much of his time in battle,’ she continues. ‘That man has

seen so much shit in his life, no one should be around him for longer than necessary. He'll pull anyone down. He was talked into recruiting a warrior personally, to teach him his skills. He's the best sniper and strategist we have, but he's not a good teacher. He's bad company for anyone not as calloused. My guess is that he planned to teach that boy what it means to fight like a man, and then drop him as soon as possible to get back to the front lines or wherever he finds his...calling. Problem is, he found a girl where there was supposed to be a boy.'

'And you cannot fathom why he didn't walk away.'

'Exactly.'

I find myself liking Sandra more when she's not talking. I imagine seeing myself with Runner's eyes when he showed up at my village for the first time — a scrubby girl with barely enough strength to hold up a light air rifle, who couldn't even properly forage for food in summer, who got sick and pooped all over the forest floor. How embarrassing.

But that's not what's bugging me the most. It's the way Sandra is talking about Runner behind his back.

Her fingertips trail up my arm, and my scars act like amplifiers. I take her elbow and push her hand towards my back. I want her to feel them, feel me. She wouldn't be able to read what's written there, anyway.

Lightning hits when she touches **DIE**. Electricity shoots down my spine and into my thighs. 'Spread your legs for me,' I demand, hungry for distraction.

---

I'm lying on the bed of my own compartment, staring at the ceiling and watching the small fan spin. A dim light makes sure I see only what's there, what's here. Darkness brings violence and I can't handle it now.

One tear crawls down my cheek and tickles my ear. Sandra was nice to me, in her own way. She was interested in whether I wanted to be kissed at all, where I wanted her hands, and what I felt. People usually don't do that. People aren't interested in what other people feel, or what they want, or what they are able to bear. They don't want to know if what they do makes me die inside!

I'm choking. I long for my knife, but try to pull myself together. Enough scars for a lifetime...

There's a soft knock at the door. 'Micka? Are you all right?' Sandra's voice. She didn't offer me an apprenticeship and I didn't expect her to. 'This once,' she'd said and I wouldn't want her as a...wife? I laugh. I wouldn't even want her as a close friend.

I left her compartment with a quiet, ‘Thank you.’ She lay on her bed and did not reply.

There’s nothing like the aroma of a woman. I tried to wrap my head around the taste while I licked her. Salt, a hint of treacle in warm milk, and...maybe yew berry — slightly sweet with this peculiar succulence the fruit reaches after the first frost, and deadly should I dare sink my teeth into its centre.

It bugs me that I can’t describe her taste with precision. Maybe I have to open a new category for the scents and flavours of sex — the intensity, sweetness, and tanginess of the skin, the urgency of the moves, the soft hoarseness of sounds. What a fantastic spectrum of impressions that cloud the mind and sharpen the senses.

I wonder when, or if, I’ll get to taste a woman again, or how a man might feel. Right now, I want to cover everyone in this train with my body, crawl into embraces, taste personalities, experience. Experience.

I sigh and open my eyes.

The small ceiling fan hides behind a dusty grid. A dead fly, wrapped up in spider silk, tumbles back and forth with the moving air.

Pulling the trigger. I think of the rabbits and hares I’ve shot. I didn’t feel sorry for taking their lives. I ate them. But people? I wonder if I care enough about anyone as *not* to shoot them. Maybe I do, but I’m not entirely sure.

Runner said we have ten or fifteen years left. He wants to show me why tomorrow. I cannot imagine the world coming to an end for everyone. My own world, yes, I could very well imagine this not too long ago. But everyone else’s? Maybe I do care about other people.

Another knock at the door. ‘Micka?’

What the heck is up with Sandra? Can’t she just leave me alone? I grind my teeth and press the pillow to my face.

*BLAM!* and the door flies open. Startled, I throw the pillow aside and look up. Runner’s hair is ruffled, his expression wild. Sandra looks puzzled. We stare at each other. ‘What the heck?’ I manage to say.

‘I was worried,’ she says.

‘I’m okay,’ I answer and lie back down to stare at the ceiling. The door closes.

‘Micka.’ Runner’s voice. He’s still here.

‘Fuck off.’

‘You hate me.’

‘Yes.’ I watch the dead fly spinning in circles.

‘Why?’

‘Because most of the time you treat me like a person. It makes me trust you.’



Then you treat me like a weakling, and this hurts.'

'Sandra told me that she wants to offer you an apprenticeship.'

'I don't give a shit.'

'Look at me, Micka.'

I sit up.

'I want you to take the offer.'

'You said we'll all be dead in ten or fifteen years. I'm not spending the little time I've left going on hikes with *her*, sticking my feet under *her* armpits, and dragging *her* around wrapped up as a tent-sausage. If I have to shoot people to keep us hanging in there for a little longer, then I'll shoot people.'

He is leaning against the door, his jaws are working, and his eyes are the deepest black. 'I have one condition.' A raspy whisper.

I nod. Whatever.

'You'll get a poison implant. The moment you are captured, you'll use it to kill yourself. You'll die within two minutes.'

I nod again.

He lowers his head and leaves my compartment.

# APPRENTICESHIP



‘This might come as a little unexpected.’ Runner’s cautious tone pricks my ears. He slides the wagon door open and beckons me into...

...absurdity.

‘What...is this?’ My chin feels loose, as if it’s about to come off its hinges. The room is filled with screens that show moving images, a babble of voices without owners, and an illuminated round thing hovering above the floor. It looks precisely like the globe we had at school, except for the lights flickering and trailing across it. But this one is huge! And punch me in the face if a woman didn’t just walk *through* it!

*Bleep bleep bleep* a machine complains as she hurries to it, pressing buttons, reading something off a screen.

My knees feel a little wobbly.

‘The flight is delayed by five hours. Snowstorm,’ she says.

I hear myself producing a weak ‘Fl...’

Runner flicks his gaze toward me. He’s obviously enjoying this. ‘We are flying to Taiwan. You are pale.’

‘Of course I’m pale!’ I bark. ‘The fastest I’d travelled before I met you was with a donkey cart!’

I really want to slap that grin off his face.

‘Come.’ He nods to the globe. The door slides back into its frame. ‘We are here.’ He points to where the Alps slide into the lowlands. As if I don’t know where we are. I’m not brain-amputated, I’m just...ignorant. As are most of the people living in small villages, tending to their cabbages and goats while having no clue about satellites, artilleries, the BSA, or the end of the world.

‘The train’s destination is here — an abandoned military airport west of former London, where our plane will be waiting for us,’ he says.

‘There’s water,’ I point out.

‘Yes. A ferry ships the train across the channel.’

“Channel” makes the wide stretch of water sound rather cute. But when I compare that to the vast seas, it’s tiny. ‘Will I see the ocean?’

‘Yes. Taiwan is here.’ He walks around the globe and points to an island in the pale blue.

‘The other side?’ I cough.

‘In total, we’ll travel forty-eight hours. Most of this time will be spent with an introduction to various assault rifles and an assessment of the situation. I don’t think we should start on explosives this early.’ He scratches his chin.

Explosives. Assault rifles. Situation. Sure. I nod, matter-of-factly. Nothing can rattle me.

I’m not good with bullshitting myself. And I need to get my breathing back to normal.

‘Kat,’ Runner says to the woman with the efficient movements, the severely short brown hair, and quick eyes. ‘The first simulation, please.’

She clicks buttons on a rectangular...whatever thing, and the globe begins to grow hot. No, pink, all over.

‘This is the human population before the Great Pandemic,’ Runner begins. ‘And this is how it shrank during the pandemic. You’ll notice the characteristic pattern. Coasts and large cities clear before everything else. The first cities to disappear had three factors in common: a population size of greater than ten million, an elevation at or below sea level, and an air hub...’ He looks at me, making sure I follow. ‘...an international airport with at least fifty incoming and outgoing flights each day.’

I nod as if I could grasp anything of what he’s saying. Ten million or more in a single city? How is this even possible? How do you feed so many people? Didn’t they all starve to death in winter? Maybe they flew in food, but from where? I shake my head; it doesn’t want to wrap itself around all this strangeness.

Kat and Runner show me how ten billion people in pink die. It takes only seconds. Cholera comes down in purple, pushing pink aside like waves washing away grains of sand. Tuberculosis is yellow and has always been there, thinning the pink gradually, while purple swallows big chunks. Black is the blossoming of the BSA and similar groups, the spreading of violence, raging like fire across the planet, leaving only small and scattered dots of pink behind. Then, for a moment, the BSA dissolves to seemingly irrelevant black pinpricks, scattered by disease and war and a lack of people to recruit. It looks peaceful, the lit-up globe. Green and blue, but mostly blue.

‘How does the ocean taste?’ I whisper.

‘Salty,’ Runner says.

Nothing happens on the globe until slowly, gradually, more and more of the tiny pink dots blacken, only to disappear a second later. Then it stops.

‘This is our current situation. The data we collected allows us to make a rough assessment of the BSA’s future development. Kat, the predictive model,

please.'

She pushes another button and all pink dots are washed away by black streaks travelling across the globe until Earth is wiped clean of human dots, no matter the colour.

'We tested more than five thousand variations. The predictions all fall into a window of ten to fifteen years. After that, our species is gone. But that's not the remarkable part. The next one, Kat.'

I'm not sure I heard correctly. Did he say it's not shocking that all of us will be dead soon? My palms are hurting and I look down at my hands. My nails have left red half-moons on my skin. I flex my muscles and try to breathe.

Runner's hand points to Taiwan — healthy-looking pink splotches, not a single black one. 'This happened in the past three months.' He gives Kat a nod. At the edge of the island, one pink dot after the other blackens then fades into nothingness.

'It began at the west coast and slowly spread inland. So far, we have observed a population loss of twenty percent, until two weeks ago, when we lost contact. Not a peep from Taiwan since.'

He walks to a large screen. His fingers fly over small buttons that have letters printed on them. 'Satellite images show that the BSA stopped moving two weeks ago; one day later we lost contact. The problem is...' He looks up at the woman. His expression reminds me of the day he lay bleeding in the snow.

'In the past two weeks, Kat and her team screened every single satellite image we took of this region. They can't find anything.'

'Why is that a problem? The BSA is gone. Shouldn't we all be happy?'

'No, Micka, the *people* are gone. Within days, every single one of them disappeared.'

# EPILOGUE



My tongue is still a little swollen. Gingerly, I push it around in my mouth and let the bead click against my teeth. I like it, this oyster pearl on a steel stud impaling my tongue. When I bite down hard on it, a liquified gas will be released from the hollow pearl. I can choose to either die alone, or take someone with me. The toxic kiss. There's something magic and sexy about it.

The intrauterine implant sits silently in my teenaged womb, ready to poison whatever might lodge in there. I told them I don't plan to get pregnant anyway. All male Sequencers have an implant, so there seemed to be no need for me to get one, too. They said it didn't matter. They said that sometimes, it's not the woman's choice with whom she has sex. I told them my toxic oyster pearl will take care of rapists. The white-coats shook their heads no. 'If all raped women killed themselves, there wouldn't be any women left,' they said. 'You keep the pearl intact until you are captured by the BSA. Then you take down as many of them as you can.'

With that, the topic was closed.

I press my forehead against the window while watching the Tibetan Plateau slip past. It's so near, I feel as if we could touch down softly any moment now. The rising sun paints the snow orange. I wish I could walk there forever, eating snow and sunshine.

Runner believes that whatever awaits us in Taiwan will decide our species' survival. If the Taiwanese were able to kill the BSA's troops in such a short time, we could learn from them. But he's not sure why they would be hiding now. They might still be fighting, concealed by the dense jungle. Ever since he spoke about the prospect of a good fight, his eyes shine clearer and his body stands taller. Runner is itching for battle.

But chances are that it was disease killing everyone in only a few days. Soon, birds will transmit the pathogens to the continent and an epidemic will spread like fire through the whole of Asia. He's told me of the Black Death, and how it travelled along trading routes from Asia into Europe. It happened in the fourteenth century, killing one-third of the European population. But the remaining two-thirds did not murder each other. 'Our ancestors must have been nicer people,' I said.

‘Unlikely,’ he’d answered. ‘They had primitive weapons, and killed each other in hand-to-hand combat mostly. Their witch-hunts were disorganised. We, on the other hand, are extraordinarily effective killers. Push a button and end millions of lives.’ Then he gave me a single nod and stuck a pin the size of a fruit fly to the cockpit door while I walked to the back of the aircraft.

With my left fist tucked under the stock of his unloaded .50 calibre highly accurised rifle, I gazed through the scope, taking aim at the tiny target only thirty metres away from me. I exhaled, emptying my lungs of air, and curled my right pinky, the next finger and the next, and — in one smooth move — the index finger, too. The trigger produced a *click*. The green laser dot didn’t stray from the pin.

‘Good. But this rifle is made for long-range shooting. Once we arrive, you’ll need to learn triangulation and the effects of gravity, spin drift, and wind force on the bullet’s path. I’ll teach you how to hit a target from a great distance. And we’ll not be using the laser pointer.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

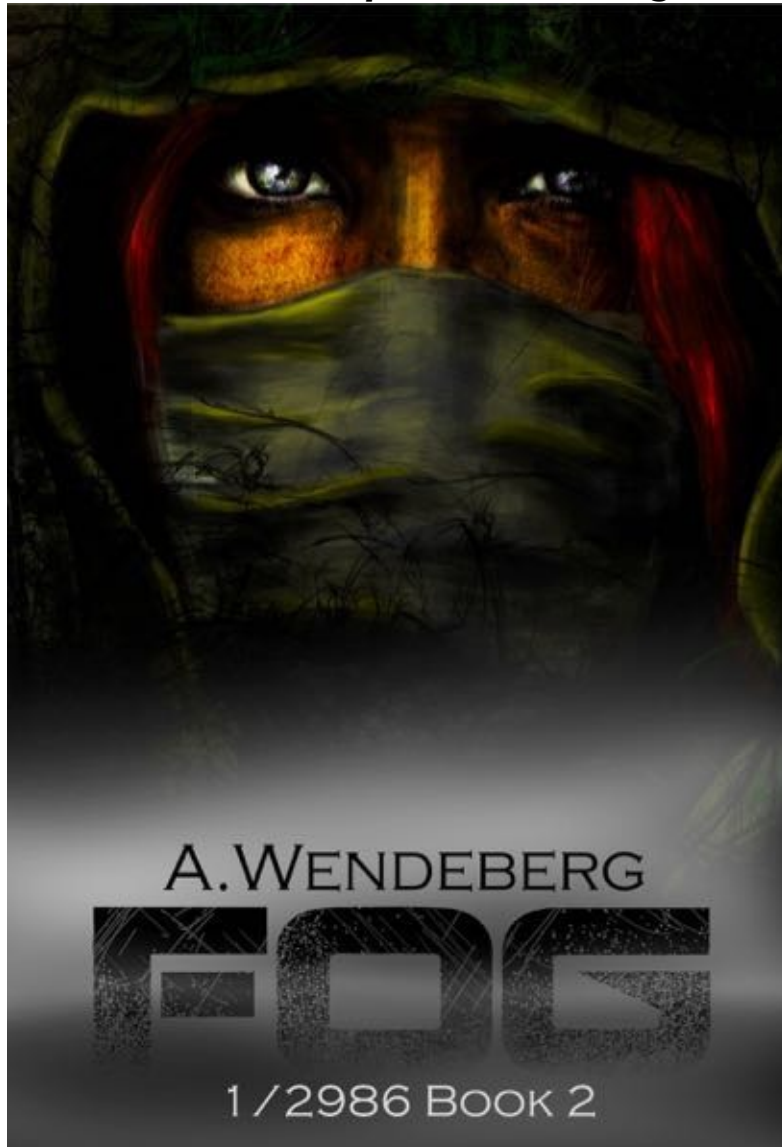
My indifferent answer gave him a pause. He took the pin from the door and stood. ‘The muzzle velocity is one thousand metres per second. This rifle doesn’t punch holes into people; it rips them apart. Whoever shows up in your finder, Micka, you own them. You own their lives.’

I remember how cold my face felt when Runner finished speaking.

It was as cold as it is now. With my cheek pressed against the icy plastic window, I try to catch a last glimpse of the Tibetan Plateau. After a short moment, it’s gone.

Is this how it ends? I wanted to take my own life and now I’ll take the lives of others.

*Preview of Book Two: Fog*



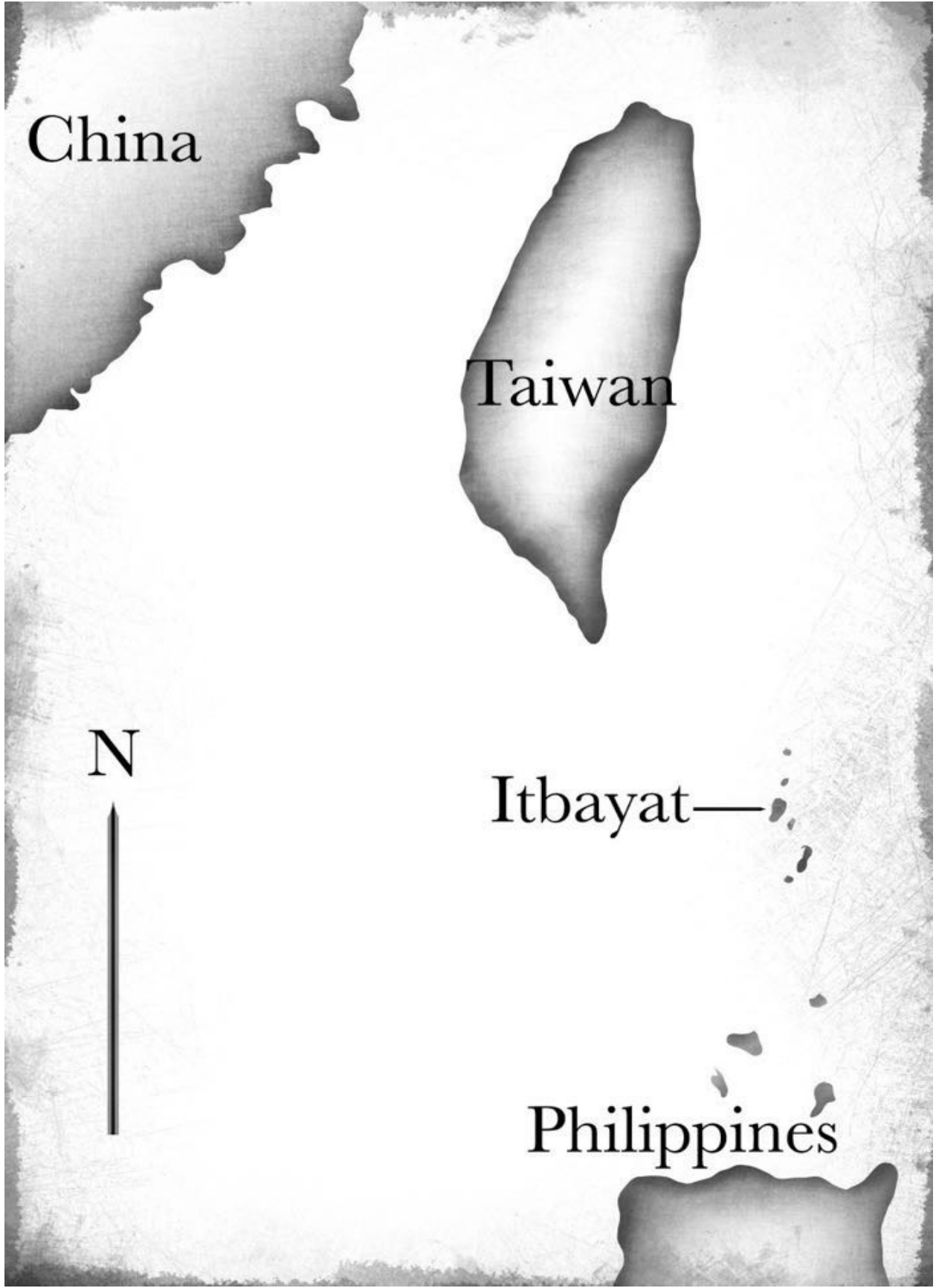
A. WENDEBERG

FOG

1/2986 BOOK 2

## ***Part One - Itbayat***





China

Taiwan

N

Itbayat—

Philippines

*You darkness, that I come from,  
I love you more than all the fires  
that fence the world*

Rainer Maria Rilke

## KILL ZONE



My breathing is calm; my lungs know what to do before my finger pulls the trigger. Long breath out. Long breath in. Hold, release. Fire.

But not yet. Not quite.

My cheek brushes the stock of my rifle; the crisscross patterns carved into it feel rough against my skin. My index finger rests against the trigger guard, ready to squeeze off a round at Runner's chest.

The hunt began three days ago and I've spent much of that time in trees. He prefers to dig himself a hole in the ground, disappear and wait for his targets to walk past. I have a hunch he's expecting me to do the same. But maybe he's expecting me to do the exact opposite, in which case, I'll be screwed.

The circular view of my finder shows the forest in crisp shades of grey and green, with crosshairs and mil-dots stamped on it. The night-eye fastened to my scope works perfectly, but my vision doesn't. Until last night, my brain compensated for the monocular vision — my one eye receiving the combined signals of image intensification and active shortwave infrared through the scope, my other eye seeing nothing but pitch black, and both combined to a neat picture in my head.

Now, it's all jumbled. No matter how hard I stare, the world is drifting in and out of focus, the circular view flickers this way and that. If I shut my eyes for a few seconds, I would fall asleep and out of the tree. The muck a few metres below wouldn't soften the drop much.

My limbs tremble. Whether from being cold or exhausted, I'm not sure. Probably both. I'm not even sure if my soaked clothes help at all. My skin temperature is about 32°C, the outside temperature is 19°C. That's 13°C difference; enough to show up in Runner's night-eye, even with the ghillie — a sniper's fuzzy camouflage suit — blurring my outline. Every now and then, I climb down, shed my ghillie, roll in water or muck to lower my skin temperature by unknown degrees, and then pull the ghillie back on to blur whatever thermal

signature is left. I have no way of knowing how well this works, since I can't look through my own night-eye and check how much I glow in the infrared channel.

I think I slept for a total of four hours, a few minutes each time I couldn't hold myself upright any longer. Four hours in a total of seventy. It's stupid to sleep, but it's even stupider to aim a highly accurized rifle when the one aiming has lost her sense of what's up and what's down. I could just as well be drunk. Same difference.

The food problem hasn't been a problem, really. There is enough to forage, although mostly low-calorie stuff like fruits and small nuts. I don't dare eat the mushrooms since I don't know them all yet and a poisonous one might slip my notice. If I lit a fire, Runner would find me in a flash. That'd be awkward. *Hey dude, hold your fire, I have this extra delicious...*

Anyway.

No wild goat or crab meat for me, although they are all over the island. I don't dare kill a goat. It's too large an animal to cleanly get rid of blood and guts and the excess meat I wouldn't be able fit into my stomach. The carcass would attract attention and that's the opposite of what I want. Raw crab tastes like snot. I tried it and almost puked. I had raw lizard, though. It's tolerable as long as one doesn't think about taste and consistency. But the thing was tiny and not one of its buddies was willing to cross my path after they'd seen what I did to lizard number one.

I'm lucky, though. Runner hasn't gotten a glimpse of me in three days and nights, and I'm uninjured, healthy, and strong enough to go for another six to twelve hours without toppling over. My rifle feels like a third arm, third eye, and second heartbeat to me. My trap is set. Despite the rain earlier tonight, my footprints are laid out clearly — from my far left all the way to my far right, before elaborately snaking back to the tree I chose as my hideout.

I shift my weight and flex my fingers.

The hairs on the back of my neck begin to prickle. Cicadas are clicking. Birds are hooting. All is as it should be. And yet...

I'm not cold anymore. I move my head a fraction and scan the perimeter. The waning moon cuts leafy shadows across the forest floor. Fog begins to rise in silvery tendrils. And there! A movement to my right, subtle and easy to miss.

Shit, he's good. His thermal signature is nonexistent; his movements are exceedingly slow and most of his body is hidden behind a thick tree. I can't get a clean shot. I'll have to wait until he steps away from the trunk. From the little I can see, he seems to be wearing a mask under the hood of his ghillie.

He doesn't look up. I'll be the first to know when he does. He moves forward

a fraction. The barrel is pointed to the ground. He doesn't seem to know I'm here.

I inhale slowly, exhale, and hold. My index finger increases the pressure on the trigger. Just a little bit more. Come, Runner. Just one step farther. Put your centre mass in my kill zone.

He takes that step and, in a move too fast for me to comprehend, he lifts his rifle and points the muzzle in my direction.

I hear the *plop* at the same moment the pain spreads through my ribcage, slamming all air from my lungs. Shocked, I jerk, slide, and lose my grip. My hands flail, trying to catch the branch that now quickly evades my reach. Pieces of moss shred off the bark and fall with me.

The shortest moment of wind in my hair.

Then, the forest floor hits me hard on my back. I gulp. My lungs are a frozen clump of agony. My eyes burn. The singing in my ears drones out the soft noise of approaching footfalls. But I can see him, his weapon at the ready, eyes glittering in the moonlight.

Fuck.

He slips off his mask. 'What did you put on your face?' He bends down and dips a finger at my cheek. 'Mud. Hmm. The thermal imager picked it up. Good hiding spot, though. Why did you wait? You could have shot me.'

'Hhhhh,' is all I can answer.

'Are you all right?'

The asshole hasn't asked me how I am since we arrived here. He has his toughen-up-Micka project going. As if I needed any of that. On my second day of training — after he chased me through the surf for twenty-four hours and the sand rubbed my skin raw, especially the private places — I decided that whatever pain he dishes out, I'll take it and ask for more.

As usual, I show him my middle finger.

'Excellent. Debriefing at sunrise, land-navigation training at oh nine hundred. You have two hours. Get patched up.'

Yeah, sure. As if I have the habit of asking anyone to bandage my ouchies. I touch my side where the marker hit. My fingers find the slimy paint. I bring my hand to my face, but can't identify the colour. Last time he used a purple so intense and sticky, I couldn't get it off me for hours.

I blink and turn my head to watch him leave. Slowly, the world drifts into focus. Runner's gone.

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It took me twenty minutes to reach our camp. Kat was already up and about. She saw me limping past, raised an eyebrow and told me to follow her into the comm tent. Knowing that a physical would entail getting undressed, I shook my head. Besides, I don't trust her. There's something off with Kat. She's tough as nails, efficient, and rarely expresses any emotions. But that's just the obvious. It's like she has this space around her, a bubble of harshness that keeps people away. When you dare to step into this bubble, her pupils contract and her eyes grow cold. She's a communications specialist — not someone you'd find in the first line of defence, but I could swear she knows from experience how to kill. And something tells me there's no soft core underneath all her rough layers.

So when she grabbed me by my arm and stopped me half-way to my tent to examine me for injuries, I automatically switched to counter-attack mode. It's like someone flicked a switch in my brain. There's never fear. My skin heats and the flavours of cold brass and iron spread at the back of my tongue. Time slows and I know where precisely I have to hit and kick to cause a shitload of damage.

But when her fingers pushed and probed through my shirt, I wasn't so sure anymore what to do first: pass out from the stabbing pain, or punch her throat. She told me that fractures of the ribs are unlikely — seeing that it doesn't seem to be hurting much — but should I experience breathing difficulties, I'm to let her know at once and Ben will fly me to a physician on the mainland. A pneumothorax isn't fun.

Haha.

As if flying with Ben is any more fun. He would probably pull one of his loopings while I'm trying to hold on to dear life, puking all over his airplane.

I wasted another thirty minutes on peeling my body out of mud and clothes (splattered with lovely pale-green marker slime), wiping the sweat and dirt off my skin, and replacing a few items in my rucksack. There'll be no sleeping until we are finished with debriefing and land navigation training and whatever else Runner comes up with today. But I'll not worry about it until I topple over. He can either leave me snoring wherever I plop down, or ask Ben to carry me to my bunk. Ben would be delighted, I'm sure.

Right now, I'm wolfing down a bowl of Yi-Ting's delicious crab soup. I love the spices she's using. They come in all colours, aromas, and strengths. From the yellow flower petals that add the barest hint of sweetness, to the ground hotness of small red seed capsules that had once scorched my thoughts for hours. I couldn't even hear properly. Not to speak of all the spilled snot and tears. I'll never try *those* again.

A hand touches my shoulder. 'Micka? Wake up,' she says in her sing-song dialect.

My butt slides off the chair. My legs react quickly and counteract the fall.

Yi-Ting's slender fingers pinch my nose. I have yet to find a fruit or flower that does full justice to the flavours of her name. Yi tastes a bit like the little green plums that grow here. Ting is close enough to one of those impossibly quick fish from the ocean nearby. But not quite. I think they are called "tuna." I'll ask her next time she cuts one up and serves it raw with this salty brown sauce and that hot green paste she grates fresh off a rhizome. There are so many new words to learn and so many new flavours attached to them and to the food they describe. Sometimes, the word-flavour and the food-flavour collide so strongly I cannot remember which is which.

My mouth tugs itself to a silly smile when I push my emptied bowl towards her. 'Thank you. You can revive the dead with your soups.'

She snatches the dish gracefully and plops it into a bucket with soap water. Everything about this girl is delicate: her neck, her hands, her feet. My gaze drops down to where her shirt touches her waistband. I can't help it. I love it when her pants slide down a bit. They don't do me the favour today, but once in a while they do and when she re-ties the strings holding her pants up on her hips, they sag another tiny fraction just before she hikes them back up. And there, right above the wing of her hipbone is this shadow of a ledge, or groove, or gentle valley that would divert the warm rain, maybe, if it doesn't fall too hard, and lead it a little sideways to where her thighs meet.

Whenever I think of the smooth skin above her hips, my lips want to rest there. Exhaling a sigh, I lower my chin into my palm. Yi-Ting turns and catches my eyes (I'm probably at the idiotic end of the sheepishness spectrum now), then her gaze strays away and over my right shoulder. She smiles a lovely, heart-warming smile. I can't keep my head from turning. Behind me, I spot Runner; hands in pockets, head lowered. He turns away and I can see the heat in his cheeks and the smile that only reluctantly dares to show.

My first thought is to snatch Yi-Ting's hand and run far away with her. On the way past Runner, I'll kick his balls. At least I know now, why he's shaving the scruff off his cheeks every morning for the past weeks.

My second thought is to collapse on my bunk and punch my pillow.

But all I do is stretch my aching limbs and make my way to debriefing. I know I fucked up the heat signature cloaking. He's shown me how to do it, but I thought I knew better.



Who would have guessed it? At noon, I dropped into my bunk, not once imagining Yi-Ting in my arms. I was half-dead. That's how it felt, at least. I slept until nine o'clock this morning when Runner rapped his knuckles against my skull. Now, I'm following his orders yet again. There's no time for breaks. The *Brothers and Sisters of the Apocalypse* don't wait for my sorry arse to be ready. Truth be told, they are only the Brothers of the Apocalypse. Don't know if there have ever been any "sisters." To the BSA, women are the birthplace of all that is evil, useful only as slaves in the kitchen and in the bunks. I call them the Bullshit Army.

The hollow, gas-filled pearl sitting on my tongue is a constant reminder of what the BSA is capable of. Runner's one condition to take me as his apprentice was that I get a toxic implant I can crack with my teeth if the BSA captures me. I can take one or two men with me when I exhale the gas into their faces. That won't be too hard, for they'll be very close then — between my legs, raping me. I shudder, trying to push the thought away. Women have inherited the shitty end of war. Not only do we get killed, we get raped until we beg to die. Sometimes, I hate humans and I can relate to the BSA's motives to get rid of us all. But then I have to remind myself that it's only the BSA who acts like that. Well, mostly.

I'm an irregularity. Runner has never had a female apprentice, and neither he nor his fellow Sequencers think it was a particularly good idea to take me in. Since the night he told me exactly what he does, I think he and his friends might have a point. Not that I regret my decision. I love it and hate it at the same time. I've never been more alive than I am now.

Should I survive my apprenticeship, I'll be a Sequencer and join the ranks of the guardians of humankind. Sequencers have existed ever since the Great Pandemic snuffed out three billion lives, and the remaining seven billion took up weapons and murdered each other — sometimes in hand-to-hand combat, sometimes by pushing a button, dropping a bomb, and ripping apart thousands while radioactively contaminating vast stretches of land.

The pandemics aren't gone yet and I doubt they ever will be. Tuberculosis has had a grip on humankind ever since we began crawling around on this planet. The disease kept spreading until antibiotics were discovered, then it slowed down for a while until tuberculosis bacteria learned to neutralise the drugs. After all, it was microorganisms that invented antibiotics, so why

shouldn't they invent countermeasures? Sadly, humans were slow to realise this and now, with multiple drug-resistance genes in all kinds of pathogens, many diseases cannot be cured. The cholera pandemic — the seventh in human history — hit some time in the 1960s. I can't even imagine how the people lived back then. Cars, a moving-picture-thing they called "movies," and food in such abundance that vast amounts were thrown away every day. I grew up with a donkey cart being the fastest way to travel, and with turbines and solar paint as the only means of energy production, besides wood from the surrounding forests to heat our houses. Even if we had had "movies," there was no time to sit idle and watch them. School was somewhat of a luxury for kids from well-to-do parents — although I never considered it as such. To me, school was torture. Kids from poor parents had to work in the fields from dawn to dusk to put enough food on the table. When winter came, it often proved insufficient, though.

I think of the first day of my apprenticeship and almost stumble over my own feet. What a shock it was when Runner led me to an aircraft the size of...of... heck, I don't even have a comparison. The thing was at least fifty metres long and produced so much noise that my ears screeched for minutes after I climbed into its belly. When it took off, I thought I would die from terror. And all Runner did was to calmly place his rifle on the floor and show me how to aim, how to hold the stock steady, and how to exhale and pull the trigger.

I'll have to shoot people soon. I know it's going to be members of the BSA — a bunch of sickos with the goal of eradicating all humans. They believe that God (or whoever wants us all gone) sent the Great Pandemic to get rid of us, because apparently he believes his latest job — the creation of humans — has turned out to be sort of unsatisfactory. Since the course of the Great Pandemic was unsatisfactory as well, considering three million of us survived the disease and the ensuing wars, the BSA feels compelled to help God bring an end to all human life. I don't know what they think God will do after that. Start from scratch and have another unsatisfactory result?

So...to save lives I'll have to take lives, and that's what Runner teaches me. I don't want to think of my first time. I really don't. But I can't help it. He's told me that his custom-built suppressed .50 calibre rifle doesn't just plop holes into people — it rips them apart at a maximum range of two-thousand five-hundred metres and a muzzle velocity of one thousand metres per second.

My own rifle is a suppressed .357 calibre highly accurized rifle with a maximum range of one-thousand five hundred metres. The thing can punch voids into folks. A shot to the head would tear half the skull off. I don't know how I'll keep my eyes open when a man is in my finder and I squeeze the



trigger.

Although my rifle is much lighter than Runner's, the thing weighs heavy in my hand now. My pack carries fifteen kilograms, and half of that is a bag of the rice Yi-Ting packed with a grin. No, I'm not attempting to suffocate my enemies with grass seeds. I'm exercising. Endurance, Runner calls it. Fuck it. I can endure a lot of shit. I've starved every third or fourth winter. I've seen people die from bloody coughs and infected wounds no matter how much I helped our physician with infusions, cold wraps, and broth. I've had my hands in blood up to my elbows when I saved Runner's life. And I saw my brother die.

I wipe the last thought away and focus on running. He wants me to run a certain distance in a certain time. No idea which numbers he mentioned precisely and I don't really care. I give my best and that's all there is. He knows that, anyway.

I'm not complaining. I had a whole night's sleep and the sweetest girl on the island is with me. She thinks Runner is treating me too harshly. He can treat me much harsher if it makes Yi-Ting run with me.

Her bare feet tread lightly in the sand. I stare at the swing of her narrow hips and her long black hair that is so shiny one would think it's bathed in oil. Maybe she can guess I'm watching.

As long as the ground isn't freezing, I prefer to be barefooted. Here in the subtropics, there's no reason for me to squeeze into footwear. Boots make my toes useless for balancing and my footfalls get loud and clunky. But in moments such as this, I'm reminded of how much more vulnerable naked feet are — I have to watch out to not break my ankles. The dark-grey rocks are round and slippery. The sea washes over them, allowing algae to grow on the surface and mussels in the cracks between. I'm pretty slow and can't focus on anything but my feet and where to place them. Once I reach soft sand, I increase my speed and let my mind wander.

So here I am, at the edge of the Indian Ocean, chasing a beautiful girl while carrying combat paraphernalia on my back, a sniper rifle in my hand, a .40 calibre pistol strapped to my thigh, and a large knife at my hip. Yi-Ting wears her loose cotton pants and shirt, she's unarmed, smiles a lot, and is as fast as a deer. The two of us must make for a curious sight.

'Are you okay climbing this?' I huff when we reach the cliffs.

'Are you kidding me?' She rolls her eyes.

I love the lilt of her voice and how her words taste. Sometimes, I beg her to speak her wild mix of languages for me, and when she does, it makes my tongue prickle. The dominant Min dialect tastes of a handful of berries tumbling through a wooden bowl — round, soft, and quick, with a tardy sweetness and a

slight rasping across my palate. The Japanese fragments mixed into it are softer, strewn with grating *dsh* sounds that spread flavours of unripe plums in my mouth. When she speaks English, her linguistic flavour seeps through and I find myself adopting her speaking patterns just to taste her from a distance.

I dig my fingers into the rock and begin pulling myself up. I'm not allowed to sling my rifle over my shoulder, Runner said. If not for the weapon and the weight on my back, I'd be up there in a flash. But one-handed and with a shitty centre of gravity, the wind could probably blow me off the cliffs.

I climb and kick very inelegantly, scraping a chunk of skin off the side of my right hand, until finally I scramble over the edge.

Yi-Ting stands with her hand on her hip, her pants showing a pale gap between waistband and shirt. My heart pounds a double beat. I long to see more of her smooth skin but right now I'm dirty, sweaty, and ridiculously red-faced. She's too pretty, anyway. She'll never let me kiss her, even if I polish myself.

I inhale a deep breath and tackle the final stretch of the run. Only two kilometres on flat terrain left: stupid muscle-producing exercise. After that, sharp shooting. Runner wants me to be exhausted, trembling, and hypoglycaemic to see how my aim is under simulated battle conditions. I'll probably plop my bullets into some poor gull high up in the sky instead of the targets on the ground.

After half of the final distance, my legs and lungs burn, but I don't slow down; I'm probably too slow anyway. Yi-Ting runs like a dancer. She doesn't appear the slightest bit tired.

'Yi-Ting?' I manage through elaborate breathing. 'Tell me about your flights. I need a distraction.'

She chuckles and slows until we run next to each other. 'I'm both Ben's and Kat's apprentice and in my third year.'

She always begins her stories like this. You can tell she's proud having two mentors; she keeps them both busy and happy with her performance.

'I switch back and forth between the two, but this is the first time the three of us are working together. Kat teaches me everything about communication and intelligence. It's exciting but too much sitting on my bum for my taste. With Ben it's much *much* more fun.' She grins. 'I love flying.' Then, the corners of her mouth pull down. 'Only...the bombs.'

The bombs. I still can't wrap my head around this gentle girl throwing huge packs of explosives down at BSA camps. Or Ben! Compared to the serious Kat, he's a fun guy. I've never seen him angry or sad, and the mop of tight blonde curls make him look like a small boy, harmless and funny.

Ben and Yi-Ting pull off all kinds of dangerous things with his small solar

aircraft. The machine is so quiet you hear it only when it's about to slam right into you. I once saw her fly a loop while Ben cheered from the ground. My stomach was about to blow lunch just from watching.

'What about the cooking?' I grunt. I need a break and probably shouldn't spend the little air I've got left on chatting.

'My dad is a cook. I was raised in his kitchen and soaked up all his secret recipes.' She shows me her white teeth. 'Cooking is second best to flying. Besides, someone has to feed you crazy people.'

On my first day, I mistook her for kitchen help until she smacked the towel at Ben's butt and made him do the dishes. Then I thought there was something going on between the two, but soon Ben started flirting with me for some bizarre reason, and Yi-Ting didn't seem affronted. We are only three women on the island, me, Yi-Ting, and Kat. I'm guessing Ben tried his luck with his apprentice and she told him off. And no one in his right mind is going to mess with Kat. So that leaves only me and the ants and bees.

The wind is whipping salty air into my face. I can see Runner far ahead. He stands unmoving and watches my progress. Maybe I should be faster? I pump my legs and spend the last bit of energy I didn't know I had. Puffing and grunting, I run up to him, and drop my ruck next to his rifle.

'No, you'll be fifty metres to my left. Put your earbud in. Move.'

'See you later,' Yi-Ting calls and I'm not sure if she means only Runner, or both of us. I pick up my stuff and make my legs run a bit farther. Then I drop my ruck, take the earbud from my pocket, plug it in, and make myself comfortable on the ground.

'We'll practice synchronised sniping,' sounds in my left ear.

Okay, so we'll be aiming at the same target, alternating shots, calling out corrections, and acting as each other's spotter to make sure the target is very very dead.

'We begin on the far left,' Runner says. 'Total of four shots per target. I get the first shot.'

I gaze through my scope, blink in confusion, and check the set angle.

'Runner? Did you fiddle with my scope?'

'I might have *bumped* against it.'

'Asshole,' I growl.

'It's your responsibility to never let your rifle out of your sight and to check its functionality before you even think of walking into battle,' he reminds me.

'I'm sorry,' I mutter.

'Distance and windage?' he demands.

I assess the distance to the first target. The grass bends sharply to the right.

‘Eight hundred and fifty metres, stiff west wind. No cross winds.’

Runner fires and I see a spray coming off the wooden target’s left shoulder. ‘Favour right,’ he tells me and I aim and shoot. Spray flares up at the target’s centre.

‘Favour right,’ I say and he fires, hitting the target’s left shoulder.

‘Wind is settling. Hold left,’ I hear in my earpiece. I aim and shoot, the bullet hits the left side, a little too low, but if that had been a man, he’d now have both shoulders taken off, a huge hole in his chest and his guts flying every which way.

We work our way through the other three targets, each one hundred to one hundred and fifty metres farther away than the previous one, pushing my rifle’s range to its limit. I’m good at this, out of breath or rested. But what makes me itch all over is when people are shooting at me when I’m trying to aim. Runner had me crawling across our range every day for a whole week. I had to hit the targets’ centre mass while he fired right over my head. On the first day, half of my bullets didn’t even make it to their targets. Although I knew he wouldn’t shoot me, I was shaking with terror when the bullets zipped past my ears. When we were done a few hours later, it felt as if I’d let Runner down. He tried to hide his disappointment, but it was painted all over his face and posture.

‘Grab lunch and meet me for camouflage at thirteen hundred,’ he speaks through my earbud.

‘Where?’

‘Find me here, if you can.’

Yeah, shit. I’ll most likely be in his crosshairs for half an hour before I even see a trace of him. Humping my pack and my rifle, I make for my tent.

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I take a large sip of whatever Ben has brewed. It burns nicely down my throat. As I roll my tongue around in my mouth the pearl clicks against my teeth. It irritates Runner when I do this, but I don’t give a damn. He wanted me to have it, so he can deal with my clicking.

I’m the one who has to learn to deal with it. The pearl evokes images of violence, even in my sleep. Blinking, I focus on the aromas of fruits and flowers and the sea — the air is thick with them.

Itbayat is a tiny splotch in the middle of the Indian Ocean. We are the only humans here. Everybody else, some three thousand people, were overrun by fleeing Chinese, who then found themselves facing a bunch of desperate Japanese. The battle was short, if one can believe the reports of the few survivors who left the blood-soaked island to itself. The torn remains of villages and small

cities with their houses built of neat round stones still bear witness to the violence that swept the island clean of the human species.

Sometimes I wonder what the people planted in their gardens, what livestock they kept in their meadows and in which trees they carved their short messages to loved ones. They must have kept many goats, because their progeny are populating the island in great numbers. Their meat is deliciously mild, yet dark like game. I've yet to find birches and lime trees, but maybe there aren't any in this region. There are short cycas, tall tree ferns, wild pear trees with sweet round fruit that are less gritty than our mountain pears at home, and the countless old trees with trunks so thick one needs three people or more holding on to each other's hands to span their girth. This island is saturated with noises and life, the clicking of cicadas or crickets, buzzing of beetles, soft hooting and screeching and singing of birds of the strangest colours and shapes — all of them changing with the appearance and disappearance of the sun, with the gusts of wind and rain.

I peer up at the canopy of red cypresses, follow their wind-battered trunks with my gaze, and close my eyes.

'Want another one?' Ben asks me. His voice pulls me back to our small unit sitting among a group of trees. I open my eyes and look down at the sea. The sun is cut in half by the ocean, bleeding dark orange across the rippling dark blue.

Ben steps in my view. 'Earth to Micka.' He waves a hand in front of my nose.

'You are not earth, not yet, Ben.'

He snorts. He's as pale as the sand down at the beach. His short curly hair is the colour of straw, his eyes are light blue. He's a nice guy and I like him, but he's flirting with too much desperation for my taste. Everything about him screams, *I need sex*.

'If I have another one, I might do things I'll regret tomorrow morning,' I answer.

'Such as?'

'Puke.'

Kat clears her throat (she never laughs) and rocks her chair far back, so far, I'm afraid she'll tip and bonk her head. But she doesn't drink, so she's probably in complete control of chair and gravity and all.

'I thought you might mean something...different,' Ben says. Okay, here he goes again. I sit up straight deciding to amuse him a little.

'You should be careful with alcohol,' Kat tells me. 'Last time you passed out after your second drink. I don't think your system tolerates it.'

'It will have to adapt,' I retort just as Yi-Ting arrives. I never hear her

approach. She treads so softly her bare feet don't make a noise. She places a large bowl with rice and strips of vegetables on the table, takes the offered glass from Ben's hand, and sits down on a fallen tree next to Runner.

Shit. I should have put my behind there instead, and she'd be sitting next to me and not him.

I notice my own irritation and let some of it leak out. 'Such as?' I dare Ben.

He puffs up his cheeks, wiggles his eyebrows, and smiles some kind of *can't you guess* smile at me.

'What?' I huff, faking naiveté. 'What do you mean?'

The corners of Runner's mouth pull up a little. The sunset reflects in his black eyes. He doesn't buy it; he knows me well enough.

Ben clears his throat. He's about to say something, but I'm faster. 'Okay, Ben. Give me another one of...whatever that stuff is.'

'It's a cocktail,' Kat informs me coolly.

This woman is a machine. There's not one smile inside her soul. She says weird things and the corners of her mouth don't even twitch a fraction.

'Doesn't look like a cock's tail at all. Looks like juice to me.' And down goes the first half of the stuff. I feel much better already. I decide it's time to flirt with Yi-Ting, but a hand sneaks into mine. It's attached to Ben's arm. He's sitting next to me.

'Um...Ben?'

'Yes?' he says and moves his chair closer. His arm is touching mine. I can feel the soft fuzz of blonde hair tickling my wrist.

'I'm...'

'Overwhelmed?' he whispers into my ear. His breath runs down my neck when his lips touch my earlobe.

I burst out laughing. I've never heard anything so ridiculous. 'Oh, oh...No, I'm...Shit, I can't even remember the word for it. There's a word for it, dammit. Gimme a second.' And I'm still laughing and holding my stomach and I know it's cruel, but *how* can he believe he's overwhelming in any way?

I can't remember the word that's used for women like me, so I splutter, 'Ben, I fuck girls.' The hand disappears and a squeaky 'Oh,' comes out of his mouth.

'Sorry, should have warned you earlier.' I don't dare look at Yi-Ting now that she knows I'm into girls. Would she feel repelled? Shocked? Or relieved? Enticed, even?

The word "overwhelmed" plays back in my head, over and over again.

'So...girls, huh? Exclusively?' That's Ben. He's pathologically over-convinced of himself and nothing really shocks him much.

‘Never thought about it,’ I say truthfully and without thinking. The only person I had sex with was Sandra, and it was lovely until she spilled her guts about Runner. ‘I could have sex with a lot of men and women as long as they don’t talk much.’

Did I just say this? I clap my hand to my mouth. I feel very sick all of a sudden. ‘I need to...’ I manage to stand and stumble to a nearby shrub. Ben’s cock’s tail or whatever it’s called is expelled from my stomach and hits the ground.

# VISUALS



‘Get your ass into the comm tent.’

‘Morning, Kat,’ I grumble, pick up my breakfast, and follow her. Runner is already there, nursing a cup of tea, his straight black hair resting on broad shoulders. ‘How’s the head?’ he asks without taking his eyes off the screen.

‘Attached,’ I reply. And ringing, but he doesn’t need to know that. I settle in a chair and gingerly shovel rice and fruit into my mouth; I don’t want to upset my stomach any further.

Kat nods to a screen. It shows a live-stream of the small camera attached to the belly of Ben’s airplane. ‘They just flew over the observatory; it appears untouched.’

Puzzled, I look at Runner. ‘Didn’t the BSA attack it, kill everyone, and cut off our contact to the island?’

‘Odd, isn’t it,’ he says.

Ben and Yi-Ting have been taking high-resolution images of Taiwan since we arrived at Itbayat. They’ve now scanned more than sixty percent of the southern half of the island. The northern half is so contaminated with radioactivity that little but moss, ferns, microorganisms, and insects thrive there now. Taiwan used to have four nuclear power plants, three at the island’s northern tip and one at the southern tip. The southern plant was modern enough to be equipped with a fail-safe mechanism that forced it to shut down slowly without human assistance. The other three wreaked havoc.

Nuclear power plants were the main reason for the first Sequencers to organise themselves into a task force. They weren’t called Sequencers back then. They were a bunch of engineers and scientists who knew enough about Earth’s technical infrastructure to organise the emergency maintenance. When the world wars began and human maintenance was erratic at best and nonexistent at worst, the older power plants went into overdrive without adequate cooling. The results were identical all over the planet: melt-downs with intense and long lasting fires fuelled by radiation. The radioactive smoke and dust clouds contaminated land and water for hundreds of generations. There were only a few Sequencers and they managed to shut down only a handful of reactors. But the main problem the Great Pandemic and the ensuing wars brought was the sudden loss of knowledge. Whom do you ask how to lead people into battle if there’s no one left to ask? Whom do you ask how to safely do a caesarian section if all doctors



were killed while tending to injured soldiers and all midwives have been raped and tortured to death?

As humanity went down the drain, most of our knowledge was flushed as well. Entire cultures, fields of science, and engineering were lost to disease, aggression, and utter stupidity. I learned a bit about our history when Runner and Kat called a council meeting a few days before we left for Itbayat. The one thing I found almost as unsettling as our violent past, was that all we know about combat and warfare today only comes from two high-ranking Russian military guys, a stack of books, and from experiencing war first-hand. I wonder how much the BSA has learned in the past decades.

Runner waves me closer and bends to the mic. ‘Ben?’

‘What’s up?’ crackles through the speakers.

‘On your way back, go farther south and show me the power plant once more.’

‘Okay. We’ll fly to the west shore to cover today’s area then we’ll go down to the plant.’

‘Thanks.’ Then he turns to me. ‘Not one more drop of alcohol for you. Your system can’t take it and I can’t work with someone who’s not in her best possible shape. If you need to calm your nerves after a stressful day, go for a run, do pushups, whatever. If I see you drinking again, you’ll find yourself a new mentor.’ He waits for a reply, his expression fierce.

‘Calm down, man. Nothing happened. I puked and went to bed.’

Abruptly, he stands. His hand flies towards my face faster than I can comprehend. A finger flicks my nose.

‘Ow,’ I say, more pride-hurt than nose-hurt.

‘Your reaction time is one of the best I’ve ever seen, except when you’ve had a drink. Two drinks and you are useless for twenty-four hours. You didn’t even think to move your head.’

I had no idea. Last night was only the third time we had drinks together. Most nights I’m either too tied up in training or too tired to move. ‘I’m...sorry,’ I croak, hot with embarrassment.

‘Good.’ He sits back down in his chair and taps at the screen. ‘Ben and Yi-Ting have finally found a Taiwanese settlement and I want you to take a close look at the footage. Tell me what you think.’

Treetops fly by, then the jungle opens to reveal a group of huts before it closes again. ‘Whoa! Too fast! Can we go back, please?’

‘They flew two circles. Wait a moment.’

The horizon tips as the solar plane flies a loop and soon, the huts come into view again. I squint and strain my eyes but all there is to see are huts and trees.

‘No bodies, but the BSA might have killed them two months ago and animals had time to scavenge. But then...there should be parts, bones, skulls at the very least. Did someone clean up? No signs of explosions, no damage whatsoever. The huts are intact. No signs of a battle. How can that be?’

‘They could have used poison,’ he says. ‘In the water or in gaseous form, but then again — where are the bodies? The BSA could have lured the people out of their village and butchered them in the woods. But why the effort? There might have been survivors who buried or burned the victims if they were killed in their homes, but so far we haven’t seen signs of survivors or the BSA.’

‘Would the BSA clean up their own mess?’ I wonder aloud.

‘Why should they?’ Runner asks. ‘They kill, move on, and let the people rot where they fall.’

Kat coughs and points to her screen with the live-stream of Ben’s plane. Another settlement. There’s a large hole in the centre, huts have been blown aside. We get the full view a few moments later when Ben pulls the machine around.

‘Still no visuals of the BSA camp,’ Ben says.

This settlement is largely destroyed, but we don’t see corpses anywhere here either.

‘Large amounts of explosives might have been used.’ That’s Yi-Ting’s voice. My stomach goes all fluttery.

‘What do you mean by “might have been used?”’ Runner asks.

‘No scorch marks.’

Before us, the huts lie flat on the ground, ripped wide open, pieces strewn away from the centre of the village, away from the crater.

‘Hmm,’ is all Runner says, tapping his index finger against his lips.

Kat takes two steps back, her face a stiff mask. She flicks off our mic and says to Runner, ‘It doesn’t match the satellite images.’

He looks up at her. The silence in the tent is deafening.

I flinch when Runner speaks. ‘I’m going in tonight. I want you to analyse all data you have on your hard drives, all satellite images of the weeks since before the BSA cut off our comm to Taiwan up until today.’

‘What am I looking for?’ she asks.

‘Any activity between the BSA’s entry point and the observatory during these past weeks. If you don’t see anything, and I mean nothing at all, no movements, no people, not even the faintest trace, I need you to run an image analysis on overlays or brush-ups of the area. If you find any, you know what to do.’

She nods pressing her mouth to a thin line, then reaches out to flick the mic

back on. I gnaw on my cheeks. This is fucked up.

Half an hour later, we get a live-stream of the nuclear power plant. It, too, appears untouched.

When Yi-Ting and Ben return, things begin to happen faster and more quietly than usual. While we cook and eat lunch, Runner appoints tasks.

‘Ben, you get your machine ready at nightfall, not a minute earlier. What’s the reach without sunlight?’

‘Four hundred and fifty to five hundred kilometres, tops.’ Ben wears a frown. He doesn’t like to fly his machine without the fuelling sunlight. It doesn’t give him much manoeuvring space for the unforeseen.

‘You could get to the continent?’

‘If the winds are good, yes.’

‘Ah!’ Runner says and presses a hand against his forehead. ‘Doesn’t work. They’ll see the plane is missing.’

‘Are we all on the same page?’ Kat asks. When Yi-Ting and Ben shrug, she says, ‘Walk them through, Runner.’

‘What our satellites show us is not what you two showed us today. Neither of the two villages should exist. The last comm of the Taiwanese Sequencers stated that the observatory was under attack. After that, Taiwan was cut off. We have to assume they took control of our satellites, and have been feeding us fake images to conceal their activities.’

Ben leans against the tent’s wall, stumbles a step back when the fabric doesn’t carry his weight, and almost drops to his butt. The rice spills from his bowl. ‘Well, fuck,’ he mutters.

‘Now, the bad news,’ Kat adds. ‘They seemed to have also hijacked the Taiwanese satellite control. Taiwanese satellites are part of the Chinese satellite cluster. Problem is...’ She looks at every one of us. I feel the taste of metal on my palate. I always feel that when shit is about to hit the fan. ‘I didn’t use the Chinese cluster in the past couple of days. I used satellites of the ESA.’

‘They hacked the ESA, too?’ Ben whispers.

‘Can someone please tell me what the heck this *ESA* thing is?’ I demand.

‘European Space Agency,’ Runner says. ‘I don’t need to tell you that the consequences are far-reaching. We might lose the war before the end of this year. Do you all understand what that means?’

We all nod, our heads hanging low as if an unbearable weight is sitting on our shoulders. How could we possibly misunderstand the consequences? The BSA winning the war means only one thing — the crazy extremists get to wipe out humanity. The only force that stands between them and their goal are hundreds of Sequencers who can observe their every move and intervene. Weird.

Shouldn't we have...

'There's one thing I don't understand,' I say. 'Since the BSA exists, Sequencers can see what the BSA is doing. Now, the BSA seems to turn satellites against us and is about to win? How can that be? Why didn't we win first what with satellite control and all?'

'The BSA has always been very loosely organised, if at all,' Runner explains. 'They don't have a command structure. If a handful of them decide to invade a city, then we can only see it when it's already happening. Often it's too late for us to stop them. We have to move our forces and that can take hours or even days. Then the BSA is already done killing and is moving on. It's impossible to anticipate their moves. They are everywhere and nowhere. They can be anyone. If you look from far above you see people. Who's a BSA member? You can't tell. If they only pull out their black flags and uniforms right before an attack, how would you know who's who until it's too late? That's their advantage — they look like you and me until they pull out their guns and cause a bloodbath.'

'If they were more organised, their movements would follow a pattern and it would be easier for us to predict their next actions,' Kat says. 'But they don't behave like troops. They are erratic, chaotic and extremely brutal. Each small BSA group is autonomic. Once in a while we get to watch one BSA group attacking another. They have no idea they are both BSA! Can you believe that?'

'What happens then?' I ask.

She shrugs. 'The attacked group whips out their black flags, the attackers stop, and everyone has a party. Sometimes we get there soon enough to take them down, sometimes they disappear before we can move in our forces.'

'Isn't that...isn't that an unusual degree of organisation for the BSA to shut off an entire island and gain satellite control?' I turn to Runner. 'Is that even possible? Don't you overestimate them?'

'It has happened before. Two...no, three times.' Ben says. He still sits on the floor, the bowl of rice between his feet. 'Not the satellite control stuff, but the assembly of a number of BSA subgroups. One man, talented in organisation and leadership, took command and turned BSA followers into soldiers. Trained them in combat. We saw it and took them all down. No problem. We prefer it to this,' he waves at nothing in particular, '...chaos of factions.'

'And now you can't see them anymore,' I note.

We all stare at Ben's rice bowl as if a solution could be dug up there.

Yi-Ting clicks her tongue and grins. 'It will work,' she says. 'You can fly, Ben. Let's assume the BSA can control satellites and fake satellite imagery. I don't quite believe it; it's way too sophisticated compared to a simple failure of transmission, for example. But let's pretend for now, it's possible. So they see we

are here and we have fun playing with our airplane, and you have fun with your sharp shooting and torturing Micka.'

Runner frowns at that, but she continues undisturbed. I suppress a smile. 'So far, we've given no sign of knowing they can see us, let alone modify satellite data. So far, all we do is quite boring, except of course, when we fly to Taiwan to search for their base camp. Am I correct so far?'

Kat and Runner nod. 'Cool,' she says. 'They watch from far above and probably want to cover our whole camp, if not the whole of Itbayat. I doubt they'll zoom in to check if I brushed my teeth this morning, or to count the screws on Ben's airplane.' She claps her hands together and smiles at us. 'So you guys do what you have to do, while I build a paper airplane, or...tarp airplane. I'll pretend to be Ben fixing his machine which, very sadly, can't fly for a few hours. I'll be all of you guys plus myself, walking in and out of our tents, wearing the clothes you usually wear. But I'll have to find something that looks like your pretty hair.' She reaches out and tugs at my bangs. My heart goes *thump-thump*.

'And I promise I'll not point my middle fingers up at the sky if I can help it,' I say. Yi-Ting bursts out chuckling and I have to fight the urge of curling my arms around her slender waist and kissing her neck.

Runner draws his eyebrows farther down, then nods slowly. 'Excellent idea, Yi-Ting.' He brightens up and smiles at her. Her answering blush hurts my chest.

'This is bigger than I can handle,' says Kat. 'I'm not a satellite expert, but if I know one thing, it's this: if the BSA gained control over two systems, what keeps them from gaining control over others? Ben, you and I will go to the continent. I need to talk with the council and a...friend.

'Whoa! No way,' Ben holds up his hands. 'If you want me to fly to Taiwan and then all the way to the mainland, I can't take everyone. Sorry, Kat, but...no way. Runner, his equipment and me is all the machine can carry that far.'

'Take out the seats,' she says.

'Yes, we'll rip out the seats. But you, Kat, will stay here. Micka will accompany me.' Runner throws a glance at me and I will my lungs to breathe normally. Doesn't work as well as I hope.

'I don't like it,' Kat growls, hands deep in her pockets. 'I'm the intelligence expert, I know how to handle these things, I—' She breaks off, seeing Ben shaking his head. 'Okay. I'll write my friend a letter and give you his name and location. Ben, if you open it, I'll kill you.'

'What the fuck, Kat? Am I suddenly not trustworthy enough?' Ben flicks a rice kernel in her direction.

‘Of course you are. I’m sorry. It’s just... This is not the way I want things to happen,’ she answers. ‘I hate being stuck here while you guys get all the action.’

‘You can help me build a paper airplane,’ Yi-Ting quips.

Runner coughs to hide a snort but it doesn’t work. He receives a cold stare from Kat in return. Now, I know what bugs me about her — she mistrusts everyone. I wonder why that is. Does she trust herself?

‘I’m busy with image analyses,’ she retorts.

Rain begins to tap on the tent. The wind picks up and tugs at the fabric.

‘Micka, your apprenticeship might be coming to a very quick end.’ Runner squints at me and instantly I know what he means. It has nothing to do with having learned all my lessons. ‘You and I go in tonight. Ben will pick us up in four days.’

I swallow. Am I even ready?

‘Yi-Ting will prepare provisions for us. And you have precisely ten minutes head start. Two paint bullets only. I want to know how well you function when you’re unprepared.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Sniping practice. The time is running, Micka.’

‘You cannot be serious! We have to pack our things, prepare for...for...’

‘I’m preparing you right now. Eight minutes head start, Micka. Move. Now.’

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## EXTRAS

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*For the first time in evolution, a species evolved that was able to teach its young about objects and events not present, to pass on wisdom gleaned from the successes — and the mistakes — of the past, to make plans for the distant future, to discuss ideas so that they could grow, sometimes out of all recognition, through the combined wisdom of the group.*

Jane Goodall

*The seventh cholera pandemic started in the 1960s. It occurs in more than sixty countries, affecting more than 7 million people. **From:** “Oceans, Climate and Health: Cholera as a Model of Infectious Diseases in a Changing Environment,” [lecture by Prof. Rita Colwell, former director of the United States National Science Foundation](#)*

*Recent studies have associated temperatures and rainfall anomalies with diarrhea and cholera, and stress the role of climate variability in cholera transmission... [Trørup et al., 2011. Int. J. Environmental Research & Public Health](#)*

*Tuberculosis (TB) is a global health emergency that demands concerted management efforts. Recent World Health Organization reports reveal that multidrug-resistant TB is a substantial problem in every region evaluated. [Cohen & Murray, 2014. Nature.](#)*

*[World-map showing the spreading of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis](#) (World Health Organisation)*

*“...understanding global disease dynamics has become a major 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge.” [Brockman & Helbing, 2013. Science.](#)*

*Sustainability: A development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987.*

## Q & A with the Author

**Q:** You've written a Victorian thriller series that took off quite well. Why a SciFi now?

**A:** The idea came to me in early summer 2014. I was in a meeting with twenty environmental scientists. We discussed our visions (nope, we didn't smoke stuff) and future projects. I wanted to know how to lower a person's CO2 footprint to the recommended level. To my surprise, none of the people in the room (all senior scientists, all in the environmental and biotech field) knew what the average German CO2 footprint is (11 tonnes of CO2 per person per year), or the recommended level (2.5 tonnes). What surprised me even more was that none of them thought it had anything to do with science to find out how one can lower one's footprint, none of them believed it could be done on a per-individual basis, and some thought new technologies could help us reach the 2.5 tonnes goal. I then asked which technologies could help us reach this goal in the next ten years. The answers were...sobering, to put it mildly. So a bunch of experienced environmental scientists, who have known about climate change for roughly twenty years, had no idea how to fix it and certainly didn't think it necessary to change their own habits significantly. This pissed me off so much that I killed ten billion people in my SciFi. Talk about anger management...

**Q:** So we are all going to die?

**A:** Yep. The average life expectancy of a human in a first world country is 80 years.

**Q:** What I meant was — is the science in your SciFi sound?

**A:** A simple "yes" doesn't nail it, so let me put it like this: It is abundantly clear that our planet is warming. But not only the warming itself will change our world as we know it. We are already seeing changing weather patterns with extreme weather and droughts. We are already in the middle of three pandemics: The HIV/Aids pandemic is slowly retreating, the seventh cholera pandemic that started in the 1960s is still not under control, and the tuberculosis pandemic infects roughly one third of the human population. The World Health Organization warns about the spreading of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis



bacteria with 900,000 cases each year. Microbiologists warn about the spreading of antibiotics-resistance genes in a great number of pathogenic bacteria, and they expect us to reach a point when antibiotics are no longer effective. Think of Victorian London with diseases like syphilis, cholera, typhus — there were no antibiotics available back then and a lot of people died a gruesome death. What has disease to do with climate change you might ask — a lot! The warming of the oceans will not only cause sea levels to rise, but will also raise groundwater tables. Imagine the dramatic input of faeces from flooded sewer systems into groundwater — our most important drinking water resource. In combination with elevated atmospheric and sea surface water temperatures, the spreading of disease will speed up. Add this to the warning of hydrologists: clean drinking water will soon be a very limited commodity.

**Q:** So you do believe in climate change and global change and other weird stuff?

**A:** Duh?

**Q:** Anyway. Where is the proof?

**A:** Umm. You could, for example, check the “extras” in the next section that gives you a few examples of the things that are already happening and a few data from predictive models. Or you can ask a scientist. They have blogs and stuff.

**Q:** Ooookay. Back to the interesting things. Will we hear more about Micka and Runner?

**A:** Yep.

**Q:** Cool! When?

**A:** Should I ask my predictive models? Just kidding. There’s the sequel “fog” and I’m writing on the third book now.

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The people at [Sniper Central](#) for feedback on Runner's rifle. Be warned! I'm coming back and bugging you guys some more.

2<sup>nd</sup> edition: Many thanks to Janis MacDermott and Tom Welch for proof reading this edition. If there are any mistakes - it's all my fault because I was either too hasty or I thought I knew better.