

THE NOVICE



MARKUS & ATRANA MONASTERY

The Novice

Paladin Series

III. MANUSCRIPT

by

Markus & Atrana Monastery

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all our readers.

To those, who are looking for their paths. To those, who are not yet seeking, but they don't know where they belong in the world. To those, who are walking their paths, but got lost. And finally, to those brave readers, who are making their own trail, clearing the jungle ahead of them – we firmly believe that they will find this story particularly entertaining. And that is a good thing, for what else could possibly be the purpose of a story than to amuse and to mesmerise?

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The content of this novel is appropriate for an audience of 18+ years of age only! Due to the depiction of violence, sexuality, and sensitive topics, reader discretion is advised!

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Prologue

My Dearest Child,

My decision to share these instructive stories with you has not been one I have taken lightly since so many years have passed since they took place. It is a sad and heart-breaking truth how even the very best intentions can bring about such destruction and how the best and most noble community of men aspiring to realise a sacred goal can turn against itself, and moreover how men can murder their own and betray the noblest of values.

Of course the disintegration of the Community and the destruction of the Archives means that what they stood for has lost much of its significance. After all, who in the future will care about the battles between overlords and the conflicts between one opposing party and another when the world is engulfed in flames? The reasons that moved events in those times and which caused the destruction of the civilization have since become irrelevant, yet I must still give you these books so that you have the chance to understand those same events, which I myself cannot fully understand, though I lived through them.

Perhaps what really made me preserve these volumes was so that you could become a part of what kind of man your father truly was, a man that you could never know personally but whom you can perhaps still find somewhere deep in your heart. He was the one to whom I have so much to thank and from whom I learned that there is a reason for all that happens and that everything happens precisely in the way it should.

The collapse of the civilization is proof that if life is lived in ignorance it is not just a blessing but also a curse. Billions contributed to a concerted effort to destroy the world, while precious few attempted to stem the flow and avert our fate.

For this very reason it would not be at all right on my part if I remained silent about what you will learn from these books – things that future generations charged with the task of building a new society will also be able to learn from. We, the paladins, will continue to be part of the new societies and we shall continue to protect values and wisdom, while serving mankind will always be our first and foremost goal.

So read these books carefully and find out how things started and how conflict evolved between those who had sworn to defend one another, how the society they built and held to be more developed than any before it collapsed, and how even the last glimmer of hope came to nothing.

But above all never forget this: the Community may have disintegrated and the power of the paladins may be just a thing of the past, but you, like all of us, are a part of that tradition, which even now, in a time of destruction, still preserves the flame of humanity and nourishes the hope that one day it will all flourish again. Because the Truth is eternal, and since it exists it is therefore indestructible. Understand the wisdom hidden in the story you are about to read and let the sacred mission of the paladins come to new life in you.

With much love and affection,

Your Mother

Winter of 14 AF

THE NOVICE

I. Book
Montana

“The gods either have power or they have not. If they have not, why pray to them? If they have, then instead of praying to be granted or spared such-and-such a thing, why not rather pray to be delivered from dreading it, or lusting for it, or grieving over it?”

(Marcus Aurelius)



River Styx Frozen Over

Faint outlines of the mountain ranges of Montana were still dimly discernible on the distant horizon to the west. As the sun was going down, its brief passage into the world beyond, manifest in the earthly language as a romantic, darkening sky wrapped in otherworldly magic, slowly surrendered to the long, dismal evening. Now, towards the end of the freezing winter, the days were gradually becoming longer but were still only frail efforts in the face of the hegemony of the dark and cold winter nights.

On this particular evening the landscape was merciless and covered with ice – it was a region unfit for humans. Aris often wondered why people find it so hard to tolerate the weather of our planet, when other creatures have always thrived in symbiosis with our biosphere.

The same train of thought was running through his head now as he looked out through the side window of his car at the vista of bleak countryside, or at least what was still visible of it in the sparse light of a rapidly darkening sky. The mountains were still completely covered in snow and most of the valleys too; this winter had been unusually long, and although the milder weather should have started by now, there was little chance of that happening for a while yet according to the meteorologists.

He was appalled by the thought of having to get out of the car and had no desire to do so. The anticipation of the penetrating cold that would greet him made the action seem utterly senseless.

It somehow seemed that winter, and more especially the night, is a source of dread to most people, since reaching the nearby town and driving down streets illuminated by the car's headlights there was hardly a vehicle to be seen let alone pedestrians. The Satnav directed them off the main road, leading them to an older part of the small town where there were some blocks of small apartments.

'Are we getting close? It's still early, there's no way our man will be here,' said Aris, already feeling sorry for himself at the thought of having to endure the cold of the night.

'If our sources are right, he'll definitely be spending the night here,' the man sitting next to Aris pointed out with an air of self-confidence, though his voice conveyed more hope than certainty.

The car reached the vicinity of an apartment block, its headlights dimming as it slowly and quietly headed in the direction of the parking lot. Although it wasn't an especially expensive car (which was intentional), the metallic coloured paintwork and well-maintained condition of the medium-sized Sedan nevertheless made it stand out. Those who sent the two men here gave all of their people average looking cars to avoid being conspicuous and the person they had come after knew this all too well... after all, he worked for the same organisation, or at least he had until now.

'We're wasting our time Ryan,' sighed Aris to his partner as the car occupied one of the vacant, parallel parking spaces, still over two hundred yards from the target person, but keeping him in visual range.

Of the two men he was the elder and although his short beard and long hair made him look younger, he was already in his late thirties. He had served the same organisation for most of his life, and it had been everything to him ever since his master had taken him under her wing.

'Our intel is up to date,' said Ryan, who was just over half the older man's age, in his early twenties, and next to Aris looked even younger than his true age with his closely cropped hair and determined facial expression producing the air of a military man.

Aris knew this was just a facade and that Ryan was no more certain of himself than he was. His new partner had been with him for scarcely a year but Aris already had the measure of him. Immediately before this Ryan had been fresh out of training, equipped for just the type of work he was doing now, which at the same time would be a waste of time to try and define. It required some criminal investigation

since right now they were tracking down stolen information, and it also included counterintelligence, like now, as ignoring information would have endangered the organisation. Intelligence work was also required since they needed to find out who was behind the recent acts of espionage.

‘We don’t know much about this guy. Or does that just bother me? Who is he, and what should we expect? What did he steal anyway?’ pondered Ryan, all of which were irrelevant details for Aris.

‘Under normal circumstances we would have been told more about the target, but this is an urgent, top priority mission. He stole data from the centre barely a few hours ago, and we happened to be nearby, they had no time to give us more intel. Let me make myself clear; he stole the data, and we have to arrest him straight away, before he made a transmission. God knows what happens if these files are lost! Once he is here, we have as much time to act as it takes him to stick the pendrive into his laptop,’ emphasised Aris routinely, all the while getting more aggravated about the fact that his partner was such a rookie; Ryan got out of the training only not very long ago and have never participated in such a delicate mission before. That made him really worried if he could safely rely on his partner, but he said nothing, so both men were silent for a while.

‘Okay, so let’s discuss the plan again,’ Ryan suggested, making Aris frustrated.

‘We have discussed the plan five times, you have your training. You know your job, it is a standard arrest procedure! Just do your part!’ Aris became indignant thanks to Ryan’s incapability to handle his emotions and nervousness. He took a few deep breaths to be able to focus on their mission; *he will deal with Ryan and his worries after that.*

About half an hour passed by as they watched the few pedestrians before Ryan gave the signal.

‘I told you our intel was up to date,’ he said smugly pointing behind him, at which Aris also turned around in his seat to scrutinise their man with a pair of binoculars through the darkened back window. *Yes, he was their target* – he confirmed to himself, and the technology built into the binoculars also revealed that the man was armed with a self-loading pistol tucked into his belt under his coat.

The two men sat still and waited in the car for their target to enter the apartment building, aware that although he pretended to search for his key and then even dropped it, he was actually looking around for any immediate danger. However, he didn’t spot the parked car over two hundred yards away, or just didn’t show it as he finally entered the hallway.

They waited patiently for about half an hour, watching to see if the man really stayed in the apartment and hadn’t set off out at the same pace. Then they made their move. Aris got out of the front passenger seat – after making sure they were unobserved – then immediately got into the back of the car.

He collapsed the back seat, pulled a holdall out from the cargo space, opened it, and after a brief pause took out two torches, which he immediately started to disassemble. He gave the handle of one of them to his partner, while he held the other himself and screwed it onto the barrel of his handgun that he had taken out of its case... with this the hidden silencer was in place.

After taking out a few ordinary looking objects he put the holdall back, repositioned the seat and looked at his partner.

‘Synchronise. Eight fifty and forty-two seconds.’

‘Synchronised.’

‘According to plan then,’ he nodded to Ryan and got out.

Ryan had graduated from his training with flying colours; otherwise they wouldn’t have allowed him to do this job. But he did sometimes get too anxious and acting too slowly or hesitatingly; at these times could endanger missions, and he never participated in real combat-operations before.

Aris crossed the street quickly in order to reach the shadows on the opposite side, while at the same time thinking that it would have been a good idea to boost his partner’s self-confidence a bit more. Though now he had no choice but to trust that the young officer was capable of doing his job since he

was already halfway to his destination, and when he glanced back he saw there was nobody in the car, which meant his partner had already set off for his designated position.

When he was given this mission, Aris was also provided with information on his target in a sealed file along with a reminder that his task was top priority. He would have appreciated had he been given more time to analyse details, but there was no time for niceties because the perpetrator had downloaded a classified data package, after which he had immediately fled, and by the time the US headquarters of the organization realised that information had been stolen from the system, he was already out of the building.

But he hadn't disappeared without a trace, as counterintelligence had sufficient intel and set the technical department onto him. In the meantime, the case had been referred to Aris, for whom such work was routine. By the time he had looked through the report with his partner, he already suspected that his target would be hundreds of miles away by now, fleeing northwards. Since there was a safehouse in a remote corner of Montana that could be linked to him, Aris and his partner were able to get there airborne first.

Their suspicion had all been confirmed and spiced up by the technicians: as it turned out the target had discarded his phone and was using another, but since he entered one of his online accounts, it was now possible to triangulate his new phone, making it clear that the source of the mobile signals had truly been Montana.

Aris had wasted no time in travelling here, and now finally, he would be able to get on with asking the target, albeit nicely and politely, where he was off to in such haste with confidential information, and at the same time find out if it was an opportune moment for him to travel back to Kansas so the competent people could put some innocent questions to him. After all, good manners come first, and anyway, who knows, maybe he would be able to explain himself. Aris very much hoped this would be the case...for the man's sake.

Reaching the door, he tried to enter the stairwell. It was locked so he used the master key, which got him in, allowing him to go on in the direction of the designated apartment. It was on the first floor, otherwise there would have been no sense using it as safehouse, since escaping from the fifth floor would have brought its own difficulties. Reaching the apartment he glanced at his watch; there was still half a minute before he would knock, plus another few seconds until he would go into action if his target refused to surrender.

He waited impatiently for the time to pass, which it finally did, and moving on while staying close to the wall he stretched out his hand to knock on the door hard with his fist a couple of times.

'Counterintelligence! We know you're in there, open up and come with us peacefully!' This was the formula that was regarded by the experts as being of maximum efficacy, but it rarely had positive results in real life. He would have been happier if he could have simply kicked in the door, but this would have attracted too much attention so was something he intended to avoid unless rendered necessary.

'Status?' he enquired of his partner through the microphone radio pinned to the collar of his coat, since it was quite probable that the enemy had already made a dash for the fire escape.

'Still nothing. Wait, he's coming,' came his partner's voice from the back alley in which he'd parked to cut off the target's escape route.

Aris sprang in front of the door, kicked it in with one leg and leapt back against the wall; he had become familiar with the danger of scatter bombs activated by opening doors decades ago when he was learning the trade himself, and one of the nastier things he had experienced when kicking in doors was the activation of a nail gun.

But there was no such special device here, so Aris was able to swing forward towards the back of the door in order to block his escaping target. He made his way into the apartment and threw himself across the window without anticipating where he would end up; after all, they were on the first floor.

As he reached the ground, he rolled onto his shoulder while gripping his weapon and quickly looked around just when he heard the unmistakable hiss of a silencer followed by the grating sound of the gun's metal parts.

He threw himself flat on his stomach as he heard the second shot ring out and saw that it had not been meant for him but rather for his partner who had been entering the fray at the corner of the alley. Standing up suddenly he was unable to take a shot because his partner was in the line of fire, and on top of this a bullet hit the brick wall behind his head precariously close. He could see his adversary clearly but couldn't shoot in case he hit Ryan so instead he again rolled onto his shoulder and on next to a skip by the opposite wall in order to be at a wider angle to his target, but he was too late; he took aim again he saw that Ryan was lying motionless on the ground.

'Goddamnit!' Aris cursed, looking at his partners motionless body in terror, realising that things didn't proceed according to plans. His hesitation almost proved fatal as a bullet flew by only inches away from his head.

The next shot also made a hissing sound but reverberated with a crack from the side of the skip behind him so Aris knew that his enemy had tracked him down and was now closing in. He cursed to himself that he hadn't shot the target in the back when he'd had the opportunity, but it was too late now. Aris couldn't afford to make a mistake: he knew his situation was dire, that everything indicated that his enemy was a crack shot who precisely and carefully lined up his targets. As he crouched beside the wall and raised his weapon up to his face two shots rapidly discharged one after the other and hit the skip, one of which ricocheted and left a smoking, dusty hole in the other brick wall only an inch from his head.

Aris threw himself flat again, avoiding the next two shots as they hit the wall above him and knocked out fragments of brick. He felt that the unexpected way of thing made him lose composure and left him in disarray, while his enemy purposefully bounced his bullets, as if he was playing snooker. The ricocheting bullets lost a lot of energy but a bullet from a large calibre weapon such as Aris' nine-millimetre could still easily kill him.

Aris knew that somehow he needed get himself together again, reclaiming his control over the situation. He felt the smell of the gunpowder and heard the steps of his adversary on the icy ground, making his heart race.

When another two bullets slammed into the wall above his head he began to run and lurched forward from behind the wall. He wasn't able to move as quickly as he'd planned, cursing himself; *move on! You've been through much worse before, so stop whining and act!* As soon as he resurfaced his adversary discharged two more shots, but Aris dodged them and immediately started firing himself.

His target was standing about six yards away. In one hand he was clutching a briefcase and in the other a weapon just like his, a P226. When Aris opened fire, the man quickly leapt beside the wall but managed to return fire twice without aiming, just to give himself some distance. Aris was aware of this, and after taking up a kneeling position started firing back.

The man was fast and ducked back behind a corner, but he had less space there than Aris had had previously. Aris knew he had another seven bullets in his gun, while the other man's had to be almost empty so when he lunged forward he took a shot at every step forcing his adversary to go on the defensive and stopping him from aiming properly again. A bullet was fired, then another one, and his opponent's gun's slide locked.

Aris realised with some satisfaction that the man's gun was now empty and with one hand in his bag and Aris approaching there was no way he could reload, so Aris quickened his pace to force his opponent to surrender, though instead of complying the man went on the offensive and hurled his

briefcase. Aris sidestepped the flying object in the process finding himself right in front of the man who used the Aris's confusion to quickly clip a magazine into his own weapon.

From this point on he no longer had a choice, this was a fight for his own life. The whole scenario was reminiscent of the Wild West as the two men fought a duel in the alley, aiming their weapons at each other at the same time and then both discharging several shots. Aris crouched down. Blinded by the flash of his own gun he couldn't even see who he was firing at, but he kept on firing until he had used up his entire clip.

Panting for breath, the agent was crouching on the ground with his gun in his hand. He cautiously pointed its barrel on the motionless figure that he should have taken alive. It took a couple of seconds to collect himself after which he reloaded, and pointing his gun, he crawled to the man to feel for his pulse. He had partly failed in his mission and there was nothing he could do to remedy that now, so he scrambled to his feet, took two rapid steps to where the briefcase was left, and picked it up. After this he made his way over to Ryan.

He assessed his partner's condition; *another failure*. After a moment's hesitation he took his phone, which operated with his own satellite connection, and dialled the required number.

'We're listening,' said a young woman at the other end of the line.

'This is courier #14, courier #38 has had an accident and is totalled.'

'And the package?'

'The package is in the post, but the sender has changed address. Requesting instructions and cleaners.'

'Your condition?'

'Operational,' he replied, though he was not entirely sure of it.

'Copy that, courier #14. Team is on the way, go to your next address immediately,' ordered the woman before breaking the line.

Aris slipped the phone back into his pocket and following his instruction he set off leaving the bodies behind. The package was his priority now. He carried it to his car, got in, and then started off back towards his extraction point. *This wasn't how the whole thing was supposed to turn out...*

Just one hour later Aris found himself in the back of a van. The vehicle's cargo space had no windows and had garden and park maintenance painted on it. The van was trundling on at a nice, steady pace so as not to attract attention heading for the closest safehouse.

The cleaners arrived at the scene within twenty minutes and removed all traces of the shooting, collecting the cartridge cases, washing down the blood-stained tarmac and placing the two bodies in bags, after which they picked up Aris in the forest and vanished.

Aris was not in the least comfortable with the situation, perhaps because his partner who he had been working with just one and a half hours before was now lying dead next to him, but he might have simply felt nauseated having to breathe in the stench emanating from the bodies. Being winter and after such a short time this was not the fulsome smell of decomposition but rather that created when someone die, after which what takes place is something better done in a toilet, making the smell of fresh corpses as repugnant as does death smell with the older ones. Yet, Aris' despondent mood was not just attributable to the company; when he had been waiting for the cleaners two other agents had arrived to take the package from him. It was as if he was a child who had found a sack of money only to have it snatched out of his hands to avoid spending it. *It was extremely humiliating.*

The van arrived at the gate entrance to the safehouse. It was a solitary house at the end of a street, apparently vacant, and like the van, the logo and nameboard of the company dealing with garden maintenance was daubed on it, though a large sign reading "we have moved" was placed on the door. The gate of the dilapidated house flew open, and the car quickly drove into the carriage entrance and

disappeared into the unlit garage. Aris could hear the garage door being pulled down and after it was banged shut the space was illuminated with neon lights.

Overcome with nausea, Aris sprang out of the vehicle the second the door was opened, and after glancing around headed towards the corridor. Some of the rooms in the safehouse were disused and only the garage, corridor, and stairwell – which led down to the lower levels – were being utilised. There was more life down there, however, and without being issued a card Aris was quickly jostled on to a room assigned to him to rest in. There he was able to have a wash, change his clothes and then wait for instructions from above. He knew that there was little else he could do.

Some People Can Never be Pleased

Next day, Aris was stuck in a waiting area, a tiny square shaped room of just a few square yards, empty but for two doors and a few chairs. The rays of the sun were unable to penetrate because there was no opening in the grey tiled walls. In any case this part of the building was underground. He was less than happy about having to wait as he knew that they wanted to make him the scapegoat.

‘Master Aris! They can see you now,’ said the young woman who had accompanied him here earlier, motioning towards the door. He drew in the corner of his mouth and paused before standing up. He knew where this door led as he had been behind it himself several times, but he had never had to approach the room from this side.

As the door was opened the lights were switched on inside, illuminating a single circle of light on the floor which was just sufficient for Aris to stand inside. With no hesitation he strode over to the circle of light, stepping into it, and then almost with an air of routine turned to face the other people in the room besides himself even though he could see nothing of them. He straightened himself up, not wishing to allow the slightest indication of his anxiety to play across his face.

Aris could see nothing, but this was precisely the aim when the interrogation room was constructed. The spotlights illuminated him from above in the circular shaped space bathing him in a flood of light, while hiding the walls of the room from his sight. However, he was not intimidated by this. He had occupied one of the five seats next to the wall several times, while he was now struggling to discern their shapes. Now he was the one feeling uncomfortable, he who had been put under the glare of the spotlight so that the truth they wanted could be dragged out of him.

However, nobody addressed him at first, and he had enough sense not to speak without being asked to. As his attention began to wander, he looked around the room. If one wasn’t standing at the focal point of the beams of light, the room would have looked dimly lit and people in the seats were able to see well enough to take notes, but from his vantage point, looking out from the blinding lights, it was like standing under a light in a car park at night. It was not possible to see that the room was completely round with a diameter of about ten yards; actually, even if he hadn’t known for sure, he would’ve guessed that this was the bottom floor of a rondelle.

The room was a dark grey colour, and with its near-concrete colour gneiss tiling and marble flooring of a similar hue it exuded a dour effect, although this was not visible now, and neither were the vaults crowning the rather high interior concealed by the lights shining from above.

Somewhere in the dimness, five seats had been carefully placed against the wall, and in front of them was a narrow, curved table, the matt black colour of which made it dissolve into the darkness, as did the figures who took their places behind it. Their presence could only occasionally be discerned from the slight movements they made but as soon as they became motionless they were again absorbed into the contours of the wall.

‘Master Aris,’ announced a cold voice in a drawling tone from one of the seats. Aris straightened up and immediately directed his attention towards the voice, which he could not see but knew where to locate.

‘You lost your partner on your mission. The purpose of this hearing is to establish how this could have happened. However, what’s even more galling than this is that you failed to complete your assigned task,’ continued the stern voice.

Aris listened carefully during the brief monologue but he realised immediately that he could not recognise the owner of the voice. This was quite normal; when he had sat here in this room as an

interrogator those beside him had been of the same rank, but now that he was the one being questioned, he would obviously be faced with superiors. Although this hardly filled him with confidence it did not surprise him either.

‘I didn’t fail to complete my mission, gentlemen,’ remarked Aris, interpreting what was said to him as a question rather than a statement and thus containing a claim he could refute. ‘My mission was to recover the expropriated files, which I did.’

‘That’s only partly true,’ added another, this time female voice, younger than that of the man. ‘Your mission was to bring us both the expropriated data and the person responsible for their disappearance.’

‘I did recover the files and I brought back the person who stole them,’ unfolded Aris simply.

The woman sighed loudly.

‘It’s true, we didn’t give you clear instructions, but we wanted the person responsible back alive. If we had wanted you to arrange his death you would have been made aware of that.’

Aris straightened up uncomfortably.

‘He resisted arrest and he had mortally wounded my partner so I was forced to render him harmless. It was not my intention to kill him and I wanted to apprehend him in accordance with my orders, *ladies* and gentlemen,’ retorted Aris in defence, annoyed that they were creating difficulties in an already impossible situation.

‘That’s clear, and evident from your report,’ continued the woman allowing a hint of sarcasm to creep into her voice. ‘All we care about is how we are going to interrogate the perpetrator now.’

‘Ma’am?’ asked Aris, not quite able to follow his superior’s logic. The woman explained herself:

‘The person who expropriated the files obviously did so for some purpose. Nobody steals well-guarded data classified as top secret because they have nothing better to do. What was his objective? Who were the files intended for and what did he want with them? Exactly how was he able to steal them? How did he get out? Did he have associates? Was he helped by an insider or externally? Do you understand my point? We would have liked to obtain the answers to these questions, but something tells me that the perpetrator will invoke his right to remain silent.’

Aris pressed his lips into a hard line and clenched his fists. He was infuriated by the woman’s incriminations and no longer able to contain himself.

‘Ladies and gentlemen! The perpetrator removed confidential files from the centre. From a heavily guarded level. Wouldn’t it be more expedient to focus your attention on the security risks of that division instead of on me, who actually recovered the files that other people were not capable of looking after?’

‘Leave the formulation of the security protocol to us master, we can assure you that we are competent to do so and know what we are doing!’ broke in the cold voice of the man who had spoken earlier.

‘I beg your forgiveness,’ Aris said, trying to save face. ‘May I point out, that there was no time to be gentle nor to better consider our situation. We basically had no time to prepare for the mission and knew very little about our target.’

‘We fully understand that. But immediate action was required and yours was the only unit available,’ said the woman, her voice now sounding a bit more understanding.

‘None of this exempts you from your responsibility,’ noted a third voice, again from a man. ‘You were given a task and you failed to fully carry it out properly.’

Hearing this made Aris recall the image of his partners lifeless body lying on the ground.

‘That’s true,’ he replied overwhelmed by his discomposure. ‘My partner did all he could not to eliminate the perpetrator, and in the end the perpetrator eliminated him. You were all obviously cognisant of the abilities of the man we were searching for and whose capture you entrusted us with

since he was an insider, but you failed to inform us of this fact! We were totally unaware of how well trained the target we were facing was.'

'Elaborate on this!' instructed the chief interrogator, an older man, who from the direction of his voice was in the middle seat.

'According to our orders we were to apprehend an internal administrator. An administrator who had expropriated some files. It seemed like a routine job for two agents, but obviously that was not the case. Special operations units should have been deployed against such a dangerous target, not just two agents without backup! Instead, neither did you inform us that the administrator would be armed, nor that he was highly trained'.

'Because he wasn't. He was a just a systems analyst,' remarked the woman with some doubt in her voice.

'Then our own training is deficient, and it's therefore embarrassing that a mere systems analyst almost liquidated two special agents you sent to arrest him.'

'Maybe it is embarrassing,' conceded the woman, at which Aris could no longer control his rage.

'If I hadn't killed him and I'd died like my partner, then the perpetrator's body wouldn't be lying here in the cellar, nor would the stolen files have been returned to where they belong. Does this sound like a better scenario?'

'Calm down everyone, please,' interjected the third, younger man in a soothing tone. 'It's just hard for us to believe that an analyst could be such a dangerous opponent for two of our experienced agents.'

'Exactly,' noted the woman emphatically. 'It actually seems rather convenient that both your partner and the target are dead.'

'Just what are you implying by that?' Aris shot back furiously.

'You tell us!' demanded the woman.

'Enough!' came the vexed voice of the chief of proceedings. 'We've heard quite enough. We will assess what you've told us, but we can't see any evidence to substantiate your story apart from your own report. You do understand, do you not, that this may prove to be insufficient?'

Aris nodded. His questioner sighed and then enquired almost as an aside:

'Do you wish to say anything else?' Aris shook his head. He had said everything he wanted to in his report, to make sure it was in writing. 'In that case thank you for coming here. You know the rules of procedure; until we clarify the circumstances of this case and another partner is assigned to you, you will not be given any further tasks. You are hereby suspended. You may leave and wait to be informed in Commorium.'

Aris was raging inside but he knew that it would be futile to push things further. The regulation was clear, the committee would not alter its decision and he had no wish to incriminate himself. He bowed stiffly in the direction of the table opposite him, even though he was unable to actually see it, and then he turned towards the exit and strode out.

Aris was wrought up with anger, but there was nothing he could do to improve the situation. They had withdrawn his weapon and his badge, and there was no guarantee he would have them returned. However, he did not have to wait long for the former as the gun experts had dismantled it and replaced the parts they had removed for identification. It was returned to him within an hour, cleaned, oiled and with a new barrel, extractor and firing pin. Forensically speaking, it was no longer the same gun. His badge was another matter...

He saw no point in talking to anybody. He could have asked for help from his master but he mentally rejected this option. His master was in Europe, this was not something to be discussed by phone, and he was told to travel there anyway. And in any case, he was the master himself now, and –

although his erstwhile master still outranked him – Aris was not inclined to go back to ask for some favours. *He had done nothing wrong, and the committee would realise this* – he was quite confident about it.

At the same time, Aris had an urge to see the location again under peaceful circumstances. *What would he be doing differently if he was given another chance? Where had he made his mistake? He had to find out.* Aris mourned his partner, and he felt similarly sorry for himself. He personally knew Ryan's mother, and he made a promise that he would look after her. Now he was about to call her with the news of his failure, and that was even worse than participating in this investigation.

Ryan was a paladin, so he was going to be buried in the Grove of Souls of Commorium, in two weeks' time as Aris was to discover. He was told to go there and await further notice and he didn't intend to be disobedient. He would be back by then, but now he had to go and find answers to his questions.

Echoes

Montana's mountain country created exactly the opposite effect during the day than at night; the entire terrain was snow white instead of black. But apart from this the countryside had changed little since Aris had been here a few days before. The mountain peaks were still overlaid with snow but it was as if there had been a slight thaw in the weather, producing the effect that the layer of snow would soon melt.

Everyday life continued in the small town on the shores of a lake and had apparently not been turned upside down by the death-dealing, which meant that the cleaners had done their job well and their work had not been noticed. Despite this, Aris still circumnavigated the scene three times in ever diminishing circles in order to make sure that the house was not under police surveillance.

If the authorities had become aware of the shooting – as they quite possibly could have since despite the use of silencers there had been a hell of a noise – they might have placed the scene under surveillance in case the perpetrator returned. It was a basic principle of criminology that perpetrators return to the scene of the crime since although they may plan their crime meticulously the same cannot be said of their escape or their efforts to eradicate clues, so finding themselves on the spot and realising that the script to complete their plan has played out, they begin to panic and flee but then return to clear up imagined evidence. Given the circumstances, Aris had to admit to himself that there was much truth in this.

However, the area wasn't swarming with police, maybe they had already ceased the surveillance of the house – or they had never started. Ignoring the risks, Aris sneaked in and went to the end of a corridor. The police had sealed up the apartment he had broken into during his mission and he started searching for any clues left behind. He realised with a feeling of unease that he was wearing the same shoes he had kicked the door in with.

But everything seemed to indicate that the police were treating the crime only as a burglary because when Aris checked the alley behind the building he found no trace of forensics having been there. He actually found no trace of anything; the cleaners had been extremely fastidious. Apart from a few bullet holes in the old wall, which could have been crumbling because of frost, there was nothing to indicate that anything special had taken place.

As Aris took stock of the little alley he concluded that he could not have acted differently because if he had taken a shot through the window there would have been a greater chance of hitting his partner. Ryan should have been able to render his target harmless with one accurate shot but instead of this he had let out a barrage of fire, the two men shot up everything around themselves, and then Ryan took a bullet himself. He had put in a poor performance because the task of the man at the back, the *hunter*, was not so complicated and less dangerous, since all he had to do was jump out from behind a wall and with his weapon already aimed shout '*stop!*' However, the *drover*, who drives out the target, is in a far more dangerous position because a fleeing adversary could easily shoot backwards or set a trap for him.

Despite this, Aris felt sympathy for his partner. He had been a good kid who wanted to do what was expected of him and had paid with his life as a result. But he blamed himself too; *had he paid more attention to Ryan and his worries, would that have made a difference? Perhaps if they did go through the plan again, and he did tell him once more what and how to do, Ryan would have survived?* Aris started to feel as he was about to succumb to the whirlpool of self-accusation, pulling him down. He couldn't get rid of the feeling that if he complied with his request about going through the plan again, Ryan just might have survived. But he was also mad at the Command Centre that had ordered

them to come here; *they may well have been trained for this kind of task but they had not been given the necessary intel on the mission and so they had anticipated having to deal with a far easier opponent. Had they known better, they could have at least worn body armour, but it would still have been a dangerous process. According to protocol, trained and armed targets are to be neutralised by special operations, not just two agents.*

Aris mourned his partner, and he felt the need for a rest. The sun was still rising and sometimes blocked out only by the odd spot and streak of cloud, while the wind was slight so there was nothing to fear if he had to enter the forest. Besides, he was armed. A little walk would feel good and help him to relax, he could make a fire and sitting by it say his farewells to a life lost.

But the upcoming events of the day would prove him wrong; finally, when Aris, shivering away, sat by that fire, which he had had to throw together in a rush, he suddenly found the situation almost comical. He had entered the silent solitude of the forest to say his goodbyes to a life he couldn't save. To bid farewell to somebody whose body had returned to the cycle of nature, while his soul had rejoined the cycle of divine energies. He simply wished to say goodbye to his departed partner in his own way. As he stepped into the forest, he had no inkling that he would do precisely the opposite.

The forest was cold and the path under his feet was still frozen solid, but the thaw was soon to set in over the region. Aris was glad that just now it was again below freezing, since making progress in mountain country was a lot easier on frozen ground than when it was loosening up and had become muddy and slimy, which was going to be the effect of the thaw on Montana mountain regions in later stages of the spring.

Few people came this way and because of the wild animals and other dangers it wasn't worth penetrating the wilderness too deeply, especially at this time, when the landscape was still bare and hardly any natural beauty or sign of life revealed itself.

But how was this different from other aspects of life? Aris suspected that it wasn't different at all, since what most qualified life was its transitory nature, and in the end the only certainty was inevitable decay. As he cut through the mountain path striding like a soldier in the shade of the trees he began to wonder if he really felt sorry that his partner had died. Death after all was a necessary part of life, it caught up with some people soon and with others later; in the blink of an eye in some cases like Ryan's, while inflicting others with protracted suffering before finally taking them, but the final destination is always the same.

Actually Aris firmly believed that his partner had gone to a better place and had found peace. Yet, he still thought about him with pity because he knew at the same time that the boy was not prepared to die. Of course death didn't only reap those who were ready for it; indeed, quite the opposite was true. Nevertheless, Ryan was a fighter and knew the risks he was taking, so to some degree he had already accepted death.

The mountain trail led up onto the side of a ridge, and after a turn reached within close proximity of a mountain pass. The pass had been hollowed out by a rapidly flowing mountain river, which had burrowed its course into the depths, as if outraged by the high rocks having the audacity to block its way.

The path Aris was following ran almost dangerously near the banks of the river, as the brutal volume of water let loose from the deluge licked too closely at the bank of the path. But this was only at a short corner of the path which soon took a new turn and again headed upwards to the ridge, onto a safe bridge above the trail leading across the deadly, icy torrent of water.

Exhausted, Aris glanced up in the direction of the bridge; he had no inclination whatsoever to clamber along the path that ran along the ridge. Gazing ahead, he estimated that the bridge was a good hundred yards away, then something caught his eye. It was a patch of colour that was out of place there. *Great...* he thought, when he realised that what he'd seen was a colourful winter coat. He had no wish

to run into other people and so far he had been lucky because nobody else had crossed his path. But as he tried to work out which way the person in the colourful coat was going on the path, he noticed to his dismay that the stranger was heading in the same direction as he was: towards the bridge and the wilderness. As Aris was trying to decide whether to slow down or speed up and pass the stranger, an ominous foreboding began to well up in his mind. *There was something not quite right about the figure, but what was it?* He had scant time to think as he soon recognised the danger and had to act quickly. Even then there was no guarantee he would succeed.

In the Depths of a Well

Their house and home was constructed during the family's golden age, when they were just yet tasting the flavour of wealth and power. The interiors of the enormous rooms, or rather halls, were filled with priceless paintings and furniture, decorated in an ostentatious yet elegant way, demonstrating that Vanessa's family considered their home as the fruit of their lifelong labour, and treated it accordingly. Trinketries and antiques kept on arriving, while handmade and well-refurbished furniture lent royal grandeur to the rooms. With its inside pool, fitness room, sauna, and greenhouse full of exotic plants, the house was so marvellous that it seemed like paradise incarnate.

Her parents would invite friends to their home quite often and take pleasure in guiding the suitably impressed visitors around. In fact, that was all they were capable of doing well together. They loved to bath in the admiration and envy of others. Although Vanessa had never been too enthusiastic about these events she did like to see her parents sparkle, her mother's beaming, proud smiles, and her father as he straightened his back with the still gorgeous former Miss Montana at his side. Yet she couldn't forget and was saddened by the knowledge that her parents never looked at her in the same way.

But she could never even elicit the suggestion of a smile from them, despite all her efforts. When she was little, she would often give her mother little presents to cheer her up, and calm her down. Vanessa spent hours locked away in her room, painting, drawing, gluing all kinds of things together. In the beginning she would carry the little treasures to her mother, but since she gave no sign of appreciation or emotion whatsoever, Vanessa steadily drew away from her, realising that her affections were clumsy and unwelcome.

This made her withdraw into her shell and conclude that if anyone wanted anything from her she would be noticed. Until then it would be wiser to stay out of the way and not be under anyone's feet.

Over time the visits to their home became increasingly rarer, and the mansion started to deteriorate. The invaluable paintings, expensive furniture, and Persian rugs had to be sold off piecemeal and all the while the atmosphere of abundance slowly evaporated surrendering its place to a deafening silence and sense of desolation. A perfect reflection of the dominant ambience of the family.

Vanessa couldn't understand why her parents allowed this to happen. The mansion could have been decorated and furnished with less expensive stuff that wouldn't have cost a fortune, to make their home more modest and even cozy. But for some reason they insisted on keeping all the places left bare after the sales empty, almost as if they were hoping to one day buy everything back to once again imbue their home with luxury and splendour.

Anyhow, Vanessa now found their home depressing, an empty shell from which all the joy and happiness dissipates.

Saturday morning started in the same way as usual. Since it was the weekend Vanessa's alarm was switched off, but this didn't mean there weren't other alarms to drag her out of bed. Just for a brief second when she opened her eyes she thought a war had broken out and that the house was being bombed. The muffled rumbling sound that was still reverberating was followed by the hollow, exasperated tones of a man's voice, and then soon after, in chorus by the angry swearing of a woman. From this it was immediately obvious to Vanessa that she hadn't been mistaken; maybe there were no bombs but a war was raging nevertheless, or at least it was in their house, though this war hadn't just broken out now but rather half a decade ago.

Although she could have slept on, her mother obviously didn't care about waking Vanessa up, who would have wanted to sleep.

The morning racket broke out for the same reason as always; her parents clashed about the bathroom, coffee, the morning, the plan for the day, money, the car, his job and her unemployment, Vanessa, the plan for the week, and the house. Then, for the rest of the weekend, they ceased all communications.

This same scene generally went on for an hour or so and until it had finished there was little Vanessa could get on with. She couldn't sleep, study or do anything else that required concentration in her room because the noise level was so high that it made the paper-thin walls shake. She couldn't even leave her room because if she ran into one of them, they would drag her into their argument. Sooner or later, they would be feeling sorry for her as the victim, or alternatively look for fault in her (which of course they found), or they would simply criticize her and tell her to get lost because it wasn't her business.

Vanessa's father kept up the pretence of controlling the family's finances but had actually lost his entire sense of reality in this regard. The house was mortgaged at a tremendous sum that seemed impossible to ever repay. He would therefore occasionally put up the house for sale, but at such a price that no one would ever buy it. At other times, he would come up with yet another fantastic idea that would solve their financial woes so he did whatever he could, putting up any legal obstacle he could find to prevent the house from being sold or auctioned off.

Their situation became completely impossible; they swung back and forth in their own swamp, sinking ever deeper before finally both Vanessa and her mother became utterly apathetic and mentally exhausted as it became all too clear that they had had no idea what they had been doing and where were they heading, while Vanessa's father struggled with his obsession to claw back what had once belonged to them behaving like a man with a serious addiction to gambling. He was blind to everything apart from their former fame and fortune, and this turned him cold and rigid. He became lost, oscillating between hopeless brainstorming, unrealizable planning, excursive implementation, and inconsolable lethargy, and finally became absolutely unreachable.

Vanessa's mother needed eternal support to help her handle this emotionally. She swung between humbly gratifying her husband and demanding attention with staged scenes of altercations and hysteria, accompanied by authentic crocodile tears. She spent evenings regularly in Vanessa's room, pouring out her overflowed feelings to the only person around to listen. Vanessa had been her mother's sounding board from a very young age, she had grown up with this. At times she felt like her heart would break for her mother, whom she couldn't help. And at other times she was simply infuriated. She listened to her mother, absorbing all the desires, pain, fears, and hopes of a lost and bitter woman. She watched her mother mourning away her youth, watched her uncertainty and vulnerability.

Sometimes she felt that her mother needed her way more than she needed her mother. At first, she was proud of being in this role feeling all but indispensable as she could harness all the experience and wisdom of her brief life to support her mother as best as she could. She saw how defeated her mother was, and how the many years of uncertainty had worn away her nerves.

But in time, Vanessa slowly recognised that her mother, even if she became fully enervated, still depended on her husband. After years of simply listening, consoling, and appeasing her mother, Vanessa changed tactics for a while and tried to convince her to stand up for herself, and rein in her husband whose behaviour was driving the whole family mad. However, Vanessa was forced to accept the fact that her mother had no intention of changing things.

Somewhere deep inside, Vanessa's mother derived a sort of satisfaction from the situation, and gladly took on the role of the unfortunate martyr who followed her beloved husband wherever he led them, allowing her to shed all the responsibility, thus hiding the truth from everyone that she had never had a plan of her own. She had always followed the path presented to her by other people, and

compliance became the exclusive need of her existence. Accepting this Vanessa gave up on her mother, and no longer tried to prevent her from running to her doom with her pointless struggles.

‘Your father just had yet another great idea,’ her mother started with a pinched tone as she came into Vanessa’s room without knocking, sweeping a few books off the armchair opposite Vanessa’s bed, then sinking into it. ‘He made me listen to his new business plan all night long.’

Vanessa noted with an irritated hiss that the books she had kept accurately selected and bookmarked were now scattered all over the floor and crumpled. However, neither this, nor her mother’s laments surprised her.

‘Mom, c’mon, please tell me you talked him out of it!’ she asked resignedly. These conversations had become way too tiresome and depressing lately, and in most cases, they ended up in altercations or worse.

‘Okay, okay, I know what you think...’ her mother started, hushing her by holding up her hand. Vanessa knew this face of her mother all too well; she wanted to vent her problems and complain about her circumstances for as long as possible.

‘Mom, why have you come?’ Vanessa tried to stifle the conversation before it got started. ‘You know my opinion already. I can tell you how vile Dad is, and you can sit there cryin’ and feelin’ sorry for yourself for hours. Then tomorrow you start yellin’ at me as usual, since it’s always great to preach to someone in the morning who just solved your troubles the evening before. And we can fight all day long. If this is what you want, so be it, just get on with it, but I’m just too tired today for drama.’

‘Young Girl, where do you get the cheek to preach to your mother like this?! You’re just an insolent teenager who knows nothing about life. What did I expect from you when you can’t even sort out your own life?’ her mother asked with indignation.

‘If that’s your opinion what do you want from me?’ Vanessa asked again with a sigh, and fell on her back on the bed, closing her eyes; now it was time for the good old extortive hysterics that concluded almost every conversation they had, when her mother would tell her how foolish she was for not conforming. Vanessa knew perfectly that she was being rude, but this could save her hours and allow them to jump to the final phase in their interaction that couldn’t be avoided in any case.

‘I just cannot get my head around that! Why wouldn’t you work to make our dreams come true? Just get started with it, you’re still young, and you have the chance to be successful! You could be Miss Montana too, or even more if you accepted who you are!’ her mother raged, and that made Vanessa pissed, despite all her intentions.

‘Mom, that is your life, and your dream, not mine! Don’t force them on me! I’ve been listenin’ to this since I was a child. I’m not Miss Montana, I don’t wanna be on the front page with you, I don’t care about those, will ya please leave me alone with these! I hate publicity! When will you realize that it’s not my world?’ Vanessa blurted out, but her mother wasn’t satisfied.

‘There are no such things as “whose world”, you have to understand! The world is what we live in, it’s the only one there is! You refused to do your part and now you’re sulking in here alone, is that what you want?’ she said spitting out her bitterness and contempt on her daughter.

‘What I want? Don’t harass me with this again!’ Vanessa sat up in her bed, looking at her mother with anger. ‘I have my principles, is that a problem? I’m lookin’ for my own path instead of doin’ what other people expect of me. Is it really such a bad thing that I don’t give a damn about appearances? I don’t wanna play this show.’

‘This show is life. Everybody can do that apart from you!’ her mother said bluntly.

‘Well, sorry for not being the daughter you wanted. A little princess who could escort you to have a manicure and pose on the front page. Sorry but that’s not me! Mom, keep on chasin’ fame, and wealth and all the like if you really wanna do that, but please leave me out of it! It’ll all be gone in the end,’ Vanessa replicated cynically since such education from her parents seemed to limp a little; *if they knew their shit so well, why were their lives in ruins?*

‘Silly girl... you and your frenetic wisdom. But you see, it just proves me right,’ her mother went on theatrically. ‘You couldn’t fit in to your class since you had to make a fool of yourself.’

‘I defended my classmate, who was being bullied,’ Vanessa said correcting her mother dryly.

But this only seemed to make her mother more upset and more determined to put Vanessa in her place:

‘High school is not meant to be the place where you act the hero. You’re supposed to make friends there. The people who might provide you with connections in ten years if you made the least effort to make friends with them. You could be captain of the cheerleaders, or I don’t know... discuss things with that girl, Amelia! But you spend your time with these stupid books instead, reading about things that are gone for good. They won’t help you with the here and now! Life has its order, ask your father about it, and this is what happens when you try to change that! Did your... extravagance pay off? You made yourself enemies you’ll never be rid of! So, learn to shut your mouth and fix this while you still can!’

‘Thanks Mom, you’re helpin’ a lot,’ Vanessa murmured, while staring, expressionless.

‘I don’t get it how you can be so unviable,’ her mother started up furiously, moving towards the door. But before leaving she shot off one last comment without a backward glance: ‘Your sister should be here, not you! She would’ve known what to do with her life.’

The door closed behind her with a bang, while Vanessa felt that her heart skipped a few beats, her vision darkened, and her ears started buzzing.

Everything had been completely fine during the first four months of her mother’s pregnancy. But then one day after her fitness class she had a car as her attention was diverted by her dispute with her husband over the phone. No one knew for sure what had caused the trouble; the accident, the stress, or the forced exercises. An ambulance rushed her to the maternity ward of the best private hospital around, where after several hours of intense effort a team of medics managed to halt the miscarriage saving Vanessa, but they couldn’t do the same for her sister who was born in the 17th week of pregnancy and despite all the efforts couldn’t be saved.

This tragedy marked the fate of their family and especially that of Vanessa. She felt guilty because her sister had died in an accident that she survived; and what really had been impossible to accept for her was the fact that if she had been born that day, her sister would be alive today. Her whole life was stigmatised by this burden, making her feel responsible for her sister’s death. Yet still, even if their shared existence had only been in their mother’s womb Vanessa often felt that her sister was the closest person in her life, and her absence left an inexpressible emptiness in her life.

And in addition, whenever Vanessa proved incapable of complying with her parents’ expectations, her mother expressed that she would be happier if Vanessa’s sister was around instead of her, since Vanessa was nothing but a disappointment. And Vanessa, as always, was shocked at how easily this sentence, unlike everything else in her environment could hurt her, penetrating all her shields and armour to pierce right to her heart.

Following the heated exchange with her mother, Vanessa survived the weekend without any further challenges, however this achievement was made less meaningful since she refused to leave her room. Such motivational sermons were regularly delivered by her mother, draining Vanessa of energy, thus she avoided conversations with her parents whenever possible, staying in her room, passing time with reading, and listening to music.

Her mother was proficient in projecting her pain, frustration, and instability onto her environment, and if she had a bad day, she quickly managed to create misery all around herself. Not as if Vanessa was in a state of constant euphoria but her mother knew exactly what to say to hurt her the most.

Monday morning meant that the family drama was about to be overtaken by the horrors of the weekdays at school. Thanks to her mother who reminded her of the first occasion when she got locked in the crossfire of her classmates, Vanessa was now even less willing to set off than usually.

When it came to getting ready in the mornings Vanessa broke every record for teenage girls. She didn't need to put on any make-up since she had nobody to please, and anyway if she gave an impression of being dull, it would lessen the chances of her being picked on. She chose her outfit for that day in a similar way: whatever item of clothing she randomly grabbed hold of she quickly put on without thinking. She just reached into the wardrobe and without fumbling pulled out a top, then a pair of trousers and was ready, after which she swung her school satchel onto her back, picked up her headset and set off down the stairs. The entire procedure took her about three and a half minutes.

So Vanessa was able to calmly leave the house, take a deep breath, and walk over to the school to spend another day in the ring fighting for her survival. She couldn't even describe what a challenge it was to begin every day by entering the classroom fully aware that there was every chance that somebody would hit, humiliate or just laugh at her. She thought the best policy might be to regard this as a kind of Russian roulette, but a type in which more bullets are loaded in the revolver than are not.

As she ambled along the road to the school, she simply could not extinguish the memory of the first time she was humiliated, and it plagued her the whole way to school:

At that time, Vanessa had had no special feelings regarding school; it was her first year at high school, and most of her classmates were still strangers to her. Even though she had already made a few superficial friendships the school invoked neutral feelings in her. However, it was way better than being at home in the suffocating environment created by her parents.

She spent most of her breaks drawing imaginary sceneries or reading adventure novels, dreaming about an unexpected journey in her life so that she could escape from this place forever, leaving all the arrogant and narrow-minded people around her behind. *She would never come back...*

Her early high school days therefore passed without incident until a boy from another class ganged up with a few of his pals and picked out one of Vanessa's classmates, accusing him of stealing something. The gang assembled at a break time and right in front of the whole class circled around the "thief", pushing him around. He was a weak, little guy, no match for the bullies who soon realised that the scene was appreciated, and so kept on pushing him around more and more roughly while he yelled to make them stop. A member of the gang pulled the t-shirt of the "thief" over his head to cover his eyes, while another pulled his pants down to his knees as the bully continued to push and jostle the poor boy who floundered around blindly, constantly tripping over his pants. His pleas for them to let him go on the edge of crying could be heard even through the crude laughter.

Vanessa observed the events from behind her book. It was nothing out of the ordinary that this gang picked on somebody and openly bullied them, but this time it seemed particularly cruel. She felt the bitter taste of anger over the injustice she was witness to overwhelm her; got up, kicked back her chair she had been sitting on with a loud bang, and shouted at the gang to leave the boy be at last.

The boys were so surprised that they had forgotten to push the "thief" back to each other, so he fell to the ground and started to scramble to his feet while still shaking, then fled from the classroom. But the group's attention now turned to Vanessa who was yanked into the circle so she could be pushed around. Vanessa raged as she tried to fend them off and find a way out. Yet the boys seemed to have realised that it was way more fun to grope a girl while pushing her around albeit less roughly while mockingly addressing her as "Miss Montana". Vanessa frantically tried to resist the strong hands that kept on touching her breasts and ass, while the guys pretended to throw her kisses. Finally, one of the girls in the classroom got fed up with her boyfriend touching Vanessa, and brought the scene to an end by pouring a bottle of coke over Vanessa.

As soon as the boys backed Vanessa fled the scene and hid in the girl's toilet, wet through and infuriated. As she ran away tears had collected in her eyes, but she could still hear the guys laughing

behind her; “no one told us that the wet t-shirt contest was on the schedule”. Vanessa felt utterly humiliated and burst into tears.

The way home had been extremely long and arduous that day; her clothes stank and stuck coldly on her body. Her hair was wet as well, and clung in tufts, while her eyes were red, and her face tear worn. They could hardly have her disgraced and humiliated more than this; and all this for sticking up for a boy about whom she knew almost nothing apart from being almost certain that he hadn't been a thief.

This event had taken place a year or so ago, but as she recalled it she felt her stomach clench. The boys persecuting her proved to be a one-off; they probably realised they had gone too far or simply panicked when they thought about the possible consequences of molesting a girl at school. Therefore nothing so humiliating happened again, or at least not publicly. As a rule of thumb, boys left her be, to the extent that they blatantly ignored her, but this didn't mean that everything was completely all right.

It didn't look like this day would be any different from any other: when she entered the room to join her classmates the familiar scene was so perfectly set for her to suffer yet more new insults that it would even have helped the Marquis de Sade through a crisis of creativity.

When she stepped into the classroom, she navigated her way to her desk with her gaze rooted to the floor. While carrying out the manoeuvre she raised her head subtly to take a furtive glance around in order to take a quick rollcall. She didn't trouble to count the ones who were apathetic towards her as it would have been a waste of her energy; there were some girls in this group who were once actually good friends of hers, and it was a particular torment for Vanessa to concede to herself that such times were over. Wasting thoughts on them gained her nothing.

This morning there were only three of those she particularly hated. Vanessa was able to console herself that one of the friends, a fat, particularly repugnant girl was not in attendance today. However, she was less sanguine about the fact that the girl she loathed most was in attendance that morning, there she sat on the back bench with her two friends, all putting their heads together in whispers.

Vanessa shot lightening fast into her chair, but failed to escape the trio's attention and with this the mood for the morning was established...

‘What are you doing here? I thought they'd put you down a class,’ came a voice emanating from a pale, plain looking girl with blond-red dyed hair girl – the same girl that offered her a coke in the first place. The question was shot across the room with such volume that nobody could help but hear it.

Everybody's ears pricked up but few people commented. It was as if they had been listening to such remarks for years and now no longer regarded them as anything of special interest. Yet, most of the class was still induced to loud sniggering by the question. Her classmates had learned very well from her example that heroism wouldn't pay off, so most of them never openly confronted Vanessa, but they tacitly enjoyed such scenes.

The joviality subsided, replaced now by an oppressive silence. Yet still Vanessa offered no reply. The remark was nothing original, and one that the pseudo-redheaded airhead, Amelia, often threw in when she had run out of more flippant comments. For more intelligent people in the middle of the academic year this might already have been tiresome but it somehow seemed that no such people existed in this illustrious company. Although no reply was provoked, the audience seemed to be appreciating the performance, so the provocateur started walking up to her victim with an easy gait.

‘I'm talking to you! Are you deaf or do you just not understand the question?’ Amelia came to a stop at the desk and putting her hands and full weight on it she stuck her head in Vanessa's face. ‘Listen, we were just tryin' to figure out who you got laid by this weekend. We even bet on it, so could you just tell us, I'd like to win.’

Ratcheting up the tension, Amelia leaned forward within an inch of Vanessa's face. Vanessa was forced to look back at her, coldly holding her gaze, while knowing full well that Amelia would take this as open provocation that would soon call for a rebuttal. At first she did nothing but look down at

Vanessa's face, waiting to see if she would dare to respond in any way. Of course there was no move. What could Vanessa do after all when the person in front of her was much stronger than she was and had two friends to back her up? She could do nothing but hold Amelia's condescending stare and try to read from the muddy brown coloured eyes what vexations were in store for her that day. As Vanessa refused to reply, Amelia took courage and cast a glance around the class, raising her voice:

'I mean it seriously, I guess we'd all wanna hear. The high's whore shouldn't be shy! Seize the opportunity to promote yourself so you'll have something to do next weekend!' she said, mockingly encouraging Vanessa in a sneaky, suave, yet loud voice. Of course, this borrowed her the attention she longed for.

But this didn't affect Vanessa much; since Amelia's boyfriend had been groping her that day, this girl sincerely hated her, as if Vanessa had specifically asked to be humiliated. Amelia and her friends posted on the wall-newspaper, and even above the pissoirs of the boys' toilets that Vanessa was open to everything with anybody, so the boys joined in to humiliate her too, and regularly made offers discretely... or openly, while they took revenge when she rejected them by spreading stories to their pals about Vanessa's performance in the bedroom, adding that they expected more from such an experienced girl.

Amelia enjoyed the admiring snickering from their classmates, then turned her attention back to Vanessa, looking for new ways to rile her.

The blinking contest was finally brought to an end by the arrival of the physics teacher, whose entrance temporarily deprived Amelia of the chance to further torture her victim.

'You got away this time,' said Amelia as she scurried away, though judging from her smile she wasn't planning to retreat for the whole day.

Vanessa breathed a little more freely again. Vanessa often wondered that if she hadn't hated Amelia so much maybe she might have admired her. Because one thing was sure: she knew nobody else with such an ego and so full of self-adoration.

Amelia had broken up with the boy that had participated in Vanessa's humiliation a long time ago, less than a month after the ominous incident when she had been groped by the guys and drenched with coke by Amelia who turned furiously jealous at seeing her boyfriend touching another girl. Hearing this, Vanessa was strangled by the dark irony of the way of things; the "thief" she tried to defend managed to convince his parents to let him transfer to another school in less than two weeks after the ominous event. The boy who had been touching and harassing Vanessa, causing a trauma for her that made her shiver ever since in disgust, was dumped by Amelia in a month. The whole case was totally good for nothing, apart from making Vanessa the eternal target for Amelia's sadism that even levelled up from time to time and manifested in ever growing diversity.

When the school day was finally over, she made her way home. The way home wasn't unusually gloomy. She'd experienced worse. As the school bus would have picked her up a bit later and she would have had to share it with people she preferred to avoid, she decided to cut straight across the houses on foot. The school wasn't as far as the crow flies as it would have been by bus, and so she didn't arrive home any later than if she had caught it.

So Vanessa chose to travel alone. She was happy to be by herself in the morning and late afternoon, so much so that these two periods were her best part of the day: the one and a half miles she spent in the quiet suburban streets were all hers. She felt calm during this time, her thoughts were all her own in these enjoyable few minutes alone with her bag over her back as she made her way from corner to corner slicing through one street after the next, taking one step after the other quite automatically. Yet, all the while her soul was elsewhere, in an altogether different environment. At such times she wasn't merely walking to school or going home: when she took this route while listening to music of her favourite bands and lost in thoughts, her soul was transported to far away places where she was

surrounded by peace, warmth, and tranquillity. In places that bore no resemblance whatsoever to her actual environment.

Her feeling of foreboding in the morning that this day would be no different to any other was soon confirmed... Amelia was obviously bored stiff all day since having nothing else to occupy her she devoted every break time to harassing Vanessa. Her worst experience with Amelia had been when she and her friends caught Vanessa in the empty changing room and stuck her head down one of the toilets. Today it was not the toilet scenario, Amelia had only stuck her chewing gum in Vanessa's hair – something she often did when having no better idea how to annoy her, and so Vanessa's hair got shorter again by half a lock and the sandwiches she had brought for lunch ended up in the bin before she could take one bite. She didn't let this trouble her as she wasn't hungry anyway and she only took out her sandwich in the hope that Amelia would take the bait and limit herself to this one act.

Initially, Vanessa defended herself severely when the girls harassed her; she punched and kicked, clawed and bit, and no matter how many outnumbered her, she refused to surrender. But she lost every time and eventually learned to give up. All her helpless struggles, all her defiance, and all her desperate rage were repelled by the girls. She felt that she had a minimal effect on her environment, no matter how hard she tried, it was like she had one of those dreams when running is pointless because your body is too heavy and slow and it feels like you're buried in sand or are underwater while trying to flee something approaching lightning fast.

A kind of desperate, powerless anger overcame her when she felt she was no longer in control of anything, even her own life and body. Something infinitely naked and ridiculously ungrateful. In time Vanessa's wrath petered out, as did all she could do to fight the unjust way of things. She turned empty and resigned, and nothing could really make her interested anymore. Like convicts who, after weeks or months of tearing their bars, finally give it up, collapse and sink into themselves as they accept their fate. Vanessa was no different and felt there was nothing more to be done. After all her efforts died in vain and made no difference, with no one there to help her, she slowly got used to the balance of power, and decided it would be wiser to acquiesce.

It didn't matter – she thought. Vanessa was outside now, sighing, and along with it releasing the tensions of the day. The air around her barely stirred, except for the odd gentle breeze, but otherwise the weather was still and clear; especially for the end of winter, it was a pretty pleasant day. Vanessa had no cause for complaint as she liked to take a little walk at such times, making good progress along the tarmac. Although she usually wandered elsewhere in her mind, today was an exception as the events of the day made her thoughts revolve around her life, which, unfortunately, was extremely depressing.

What was worse than this was the dilemma that secretly oppressed her soul and that she was incapable of resolving. The people around her were incredibly cold or indifferent to her, often making it unmistakably clear how much of an insignificant nobody she was for them. There was almost no one who had a good word for her, or who didn't push her around if they could.

Was she really unlovable? What if everybody else was right and she was the one with the problem? If she was merely a nuisance for her whole environment, what was the point in trying and being under their feet? She slowly came to accept what her mother had suggested for so long. She shouldn't be here. Maybe it was a mistake indeed and she was now here in somebody else's stead since she was so different. She was really the odd one out... Perhaps her parents would have been happier with an "ordinary" girl, a daughter that could be the heir of Miss Montana and her father's business. Instead they were lumbered with a daughter who was weird, a loner, and an idealist that couldn't even participate in the simplest things like integration into school and making friends. Let alone having fun, partying, and dating. Vanessa felt that she was a burden to the world and could only disappoint others – apart from those who amused themselves at her suffering.

Vanessa was simply not capable of comprehending the sadistic inclinations of people. *Why did it make anyone happy to torment someone weaker than themselves? Do they do it to vent their own*

frustrations? Vanessa's own soul was burdened enough, yet it didn't occur to her to kick somebody weaker, though it was not as if there were many such people in this world. *And anyway, what kinda world was it where people revelled in the suffering of others, rejoicing in shallow victories over other people?*

Life for Vanessa was bleak and devoid of emotion. She took no pleasure in this world, nor in her life, which is what made her capable of entertaining thoughts that would probably never even occur to other teenagers. If it were possible to look into her mind, most people would think her completely mad, but Vanessa wouldn't have cared because she regarded the world around her, and consequently her own life, as insane and pointless. Her efforts to convince herself that her life, and therefore her suffering, had a purpose and were of some value were in vain, so in the end she always came to the conclusion that any hope it might one day be different was all just philosophical twaddle and empty self-delusion. Her rational self knew that nothing would ever change. Absolutely nothing.

Those parts of her that could laugh, cry, or hope were long gone, and she was certain that she wouldn't be able to revive them even if she wanted to. As a matter of fact, she didn't want to. Her apparent death sheltered her emotionally, even if her life was empty and miserable, it was at least also tolerable this way. She no longer had anything to hope for in her life.

The afternoon passed off uneventfully. Arriving home, Vanessa threw down her school satchel and looked around to see if anything needed doing around the house. Since she had only cleaned up quite recently the house was still in a reasonable state so she only needed to sort out a few things: she took out the rubbish, hung out the clothes to dry, and washed up the dirty pots left in the sink.

She wanted to sort out one or two things but then heard a car pull into the drive. Her mother had come home. Although Vanessa had originally been entrusted with helping out around the house and did exactly this, the situation was not so simple and she came to the following painful conclusions: she did all she could to meet the challenge, but if she spent the whole day tidying up, cleaning and washing, her mother would get it into her head that Vanessa was neglecting her studies and so would fail her exams because she would rather do the housework than study. Of course the opposite was true: if she spent the whole of the afternoon locked up in her bedroom ostensibly studying, this would become the target of her mother's criticism.

After a while Vanessa was able to come up with a formula: if she did her chores too quickly, they weren't done properly; if she put her heart and soul into it leaving no room for complaints about the quality, the quantity was the problem. This was all too simple but the question that all of this raised in her had a far more rhetorical tone: *if the work wasn't good enough, nor productive enough to ever be praised, why would anyone in their right mind do it?*

Since she just wanted to avoid the argument this would lead to, Vanessa broke into a run, quietly made her way towards the stairs and went into her own room silently closing the door behind her. She planned to lie low for the rest of the day and just become engrossed in herself while pretending to study.

This plan worked fantastically for an hour. Although her mother came into the room to say hello, Vanessa had enough time to grab her textbook and pull it into her lap as she was sitting on the bed, when all she had been doing really was sitting and looking out of the window contemplating the clouds that swiftly rolled by in the sky.

It was a text message that diverted her attention back to reality. The sender was familiar to her as was the message: "Can you make it?" That was it. Vanessa brightened up when she saw the message. She quickly typed an equally short, positive reply, pressed "send" and jumped off the bed. She lost no time getting ready, pushed aside her textbooks and picked up all the things she'd need: her phone, keys and a thick coat against the cold. She sneaked out of her room to the ground floor. Not that she wasn't allowed to go out or meet people, but still, if her mother saw her leaving she'd start preaching that

Vanessa should spend her time more usefully and if she was so bored, there was lots of work to do around the house.

Avoiding her mother, Vanessa hurried down the stairs casting a quick glance as she passed into the dining room. She couldn't see her mother but knew she was there from the noise she was making in the kitchen. Vanessa had no trouble making her way to the front door, which she silently opened.

Once outside the cold spurred her on to quicken her pace, but she also didn't want to waste any of her limited time getting to the meeting. As Vanessa speeded up, she recalled the day when her friend, whom she was about to meet, suggested a way out of the despair that featured in both of their lives. That conversation took place a couple of months ago, yet she remembered every word they exchanged as it had been a remarkably positive memory for her. Colin understood her situation well and made a plan that could mean a perfect solution to her adversities. Whenever she felt lost or lonely ever since, she just evoked her memories to sustain herself:

On that specific day, when they agreed to leave together, they met at the same place right here. But unlike now, it was fall, the weather had been quite pleasant, sunshine glowed in the sky and lent the illusion of flaming to the burning red canopy of the forest. Vanessa had been through a similarly awful day when she met with her earliest and actually last friend.

But Colin's idea cheered her up straight away; he suggested going to Florida for a semester with a scholarship as a possible option, and he wanted Vanessa to accompany him, should she be able to convince her parents to let her transfer to a local high school. Vanessa got so enthusiastic about this idea that she almost crowed in her happiness and of course agreed to go with him.

Since then she had spent her time making preparations; she had been surfing the web about Florida, learned how to get better grades, and revised her wardrobe since she was about to move to eternal summer. She gave herself over completely to this feeling. She craved for the journey, taking off and leaving her misery behind. All her troubles would be diminished just like the landscape as the plane ascends, and they would finally be left behind with the mountains. Everything that represented her life as it was, would be forgotten, and she would be given a clean slate in a new place. She would be nothing more than a stranger, a new schoolgirl that nobody knew.

This set-up seemed perfect for Vanessa. She desired nothing else but to lose herself in a new place, in a new environment, breathing in the colourful, sparkling, and sunlit milieu of Miami, drifting with the events without a care, immersing herself in new experiences, seeing new places, tasting new flavours.

For two weeks she avoided talking to her parents about this, as she knew perfectly well what their first reaction would be. But this didn't matter, Vanessa expected a negative response, but she was also sure that if she had been persistent enough, somehow, she would make them let her go. But to get this point, she needed the process to be initiated first, so she finally steeled herself and gave it a first try.

Naturally, her parents didn't even want to hear about it. They practically laughed at her, saying that she would never be able to look after herself and would be calling them in a week to let her come home while they couldn't afford to send her on a holiday to Florida with a guy who would be gone the next day.

The refusal hit her harder than she anticipated and made her upset every time it came to her mind. In addition to this, her parents remained averse to the idea, and even became more aggressive with their rejection of it. This made Vanessa angrier in every turn, so before she made another attempt to talk to them she turned her attention to the landscape around her still covered in snow which she passed through to meet the boy. She still had time to convince her parents.

Since the last occasion when they had met, a grim and gloomy winter had almost passed and had started to ease. Vanessa thought bitterly that she still had no approval from her parents to go with Colin; she'd have loved to tell him good news that all the obstacles before them had been eliminated, but this wasn't the case yet. She did whatever she could; she had tried to ask them kindly, bargain with

them, offered to get better grades at school, or take on jobs around the house that weren't hers to do, but so far nothing had worked. *But she wouldn't let go of their plans, she would travel to Florida this fall with Colin.*

The little suburban streets that she entered were empty with houses standing at both sides that were fairly orderly and creating a pleasant environment. Of course at this time of year this part of the town produced a rather uniform and boring vista.

The main road led to the right of the street and from there to the school. However, the edge of town could be reached by turning left. Vanessa went this way and began to speed up to get past the houses as soon as possible. It took her five minutes before she had passed the last one and was finally out of the town.

There was a forest and large clearings in the vicinity of the suburbs. Vanessa's street led into a large meadow for example but it didn't end there; the town stretched further on with a regular pattern of plots of land alternating with concrete roads, but there was no building work going on. The plans of the property investors had been thwarted by the financial crisis and although the plots were not sold in the end, public utilities and the roads were already in place.

Vanessa was now making her way down one such road. She had barely covered a couple of hundred steps when a movement caught her eye; a car was coming directly towards her and half a minute later the dark blue Chrysler pulled up almost next to her, allowing her to get in the open door of the front passenger seat.

'Hi Vess!' said the driver as Vanessa opened the car door and got in to sit next to him.

'Hi Colin!' the girl replied with a shy smile. They set off and passing the plots and the concrete roads they soon turned into a cul-de-sac that led into the middle of a field slowing as they approached the end of it.

Vanessa glanced at the young man sitting next to her and looking him up and down she realised with some consternation that it was too long since they had met last. Colin was two years older than Vanessa and his tall, slim build was evident even sitting in the car. His mature, serious countenance and alert expression belied his true age and this impression would have worked if not for the faint lines of stubble on his face that betrayed his youth. This always made Vanessa smile even on her worst days as she found it incredibly funny how he tried to appear more mature but ended up producing the opposite effect. After a while it occurred to her that Colin knew what she was thinking and made the effort to grow a beard just for her amusement.

Colin was her oldest friend; actually, the last real friend she had. Their friendship had started out years before in a summer camp for kids, as a childhood love. They had had their first kiss, but their bonds turned into something much deeper over the years, although not quite in the way they had expected.

The car came to a halt and although it looked like he didn't plan to drive on Colin left the engine running, perhaps to keep the heating going for Vanessa's sake.

'You haven't called me for a long time' said Vanessa sounding a little hurt.

'Sorry, but you know I've been busy. We did agree that it'll be that way,' he reminded her.

'I know,' Vanessa sighed, yet complaining about missing Colin felt good to her. 'Still, we used to meet a lot more often.'

'Yeah, but we used to be neighbors,' he pointed out before adding: 'And your parents liked me a lot more then.'

'That's true, but it's not you they have a problem with,' murmured Vanessa as she stared out of the window, scrutinizing the distance over the field in the last grip of winter.

'So, what's up? Is that bitch with the moustache still bothering you?' he asked, to which Vanessa merely shook her head. Now that she was finally with Colin she was in no mood to even think about Amelia.

‘Nothing changed. I don’t wanna talk about her. Just lemme forget about it when I’m with you,’ she implored.

‘That’s exactly why I gave you the bluestone bracelet on your last birthday so you’d always feel I’m with you.’

‘I’m wearing it now,’ she said, proudly showing her left hand. As she let the sleeve of her coat slip down towards her elbow the bracelet encircling her thin wrist became visible. It was made of golden metal links which in places had interesting pebble-like bluestones set into it.

‘I’m glad I finally managed to give you something you really like for your birthday,’ he said and smiled as if he didn’t really believe that she always wore the piece of jewellery and hadn’t just put it on now for his sake.

‘I wonder what I’ll get this year,’ she said pointing forward to the not too distant future.

‘Just a few months,’ he nodded, looking uncomfortable at the mention of Vanessa’s birthday. She didn’t seem to notice this, or at least didn’t show it.

‘I’m going to be seventeen. I’m getting old.’

‘Vess, we have to talk,’ said Colin in an unusually flat tone jolting her into a serious mood; he had never said such a thing before and she suspected that nothing good was coming.

‘I’m listenin’.’

‘They’ve accepted me onto the scholarship program. I’m going to do a term in Florida,’ he said, clearly proud of his accomplishment but worried at the same time since he knew full well what effect his news would have on Vanessa.

What Colin said carried such weight that at first Vanessa couldn’t take in the meaning and was about to ask for confirmation: ‘So you won’t be here for my birthday, will you?’ Her conscious mind struggled to banish the undeniable, but she nevertheless understood the seriousness of the situation. It wasn’t only her birthday that Colin would not be with her for. Somewhere deep in her heart she felt that something was already amiss; *the application should have been submitted for the autumn semester, but even its deadline was yet to run out, let alone the evaluation. This meant that...*

‘You’ll go to Florida this spring?’ she asked a little coldly, feeling hurt that his reference to the bracelet and his “I’ll always be with you” were just a lead-up to saying goodbye.

‘Tomorrow. I’m setting off for Los Angeles in the morning and from there I’ll be flying to Miami,’ he answered, upon which Vanessa felt her blood run cold.

‘Tomorrow morning!’ she retorted aghast. ‘Why on earth did you make your application to the spring semester? We’ve agreed to go together this fall.’

This question seemed to be quite sensitive to Colin, who started his explanation a bit languidly.

‘I met with a teammate, and it turned out that we’d both wanted to go to Miami for a semester on a scholarship. Going together this spring seemed a good idea,’ he explained while Vanessa glowered at him with a cold, but otherwise expressionless face.

‘Your teammate is a girl, right?’ she stated rather than asked coldly to which Colin finally nodded.

Vanessa didn’t want to ask him about the nature of his new relationship, nor did she need to; the fact that Colin decided to go with another girl instead of Vanessa was enough in itself. And this meant that he wouldn’t be coming back to her for several months, if ever. So, she was going to lose her best friend, and the only person around who still treated her like a human being.

This was so frustrating that Vanessa started to feel like she couldn’t breathe. *She had believed it so much that they would start a new life in Florida together, and perhaps then something more serious could have developed between them. But this dream was no longer going to come true.* And it was one thing that Colin would soon be leaving her but the fact that he’d be taking a flight in a few hours was more than she could bear.

‘And when were you gonna lemme in on this? I’m surprised you bothered to tell me at all and didn’t just call me from Miami,’ she said, feeling utterly overcome with hopelessness.

‘I didn’t know how to tell you. I wanted to spare you it for as long as possible,’ said Colin struggling to find an excuse, but his efforts were far too obvious and Vanessa had enough sense to realise that he had only not told her sooner, because he had no idea how to account for his new romance, and so she wouldn’t have the chance to talk him out of it. For her this was an extremely vile tactic.

‘You can’t do this to me! You can’t just leave me alone! You promised you’d take me!’ she exclaimed, even surprising herself at how angry and disappointed she felt having not experienced such strong emotions for so long.

She couldn’t stop the tears from collecting in her eyes but managed to quickly wipe them away, trying not to show him that he had broken her heart and preferring to keep it a secret. Just like he had kept it a secret from her that he was going away and leaving her.

‘Yes, and have your parents agreed to let you come with me? You knew exactly that they couldn’t be convinced. It’s not your fault, but I realized that we would never be able to go together. I’m only going away for eight months. I’ll be back home by fall,’ he said doing his best to embellish the news, but he failed to move Vanessa.

‘C’mon, even you don’t believe that! Don’t deny that you’d stay there with your girlfriend if you can!’ she responded, disappointed by the situation but already furious that Colin was capable of destroying her miserable life even further.

Colin made no attempt to answer since he knew she could see the situation clearly enough. He had been planning to apply to university in Florida for years, so he would be as far from here as possible. Vanessa had been aware of this possibility, as she intended to go with him. Now the idea that Colin would go and leave her here, had just seemed like a remote, awful nightmare, something she could ignore since she had no way of preventing it so she allowed herself to sink into a blissful state of denial. But she couldn’t sink deep enough to misunderstand that she obviously no longer played a part in Colin’s plans. These plans he had long since cherished and which it appeared would now slowly begin to come to fruition would tear him away from Vanessa.

He clearly realised that Vanessa understands the situation quite well, as he didn’t even respond, but instead glanced at Vanessa, as if to say sorry, almost imploring her with his expression to try and understand his point of view:

‘Please forgive me for this. This program is a big opportunity for me and I’ve been preparing for it for years. I really wanted you to come with me. But I met this girl, and things are different with her. You know that we’ve never been together like that, and we never could have,’ he explained. He was being honest, she knew him well enough to know this, but she didn’t care. He might not have wanted to hurt her but the situation was clear; he was her only friend and he had been forced to make a choice. But he had chosen another girl over her.

From his hangdog expression it was quite obvious Colin knew exactly what was going through Vanessa’s head but there was nothing more he could say that would have consoled her.

‘Have a good trip,’ she muttered, now resigned to her fate. She couldn’t quite take in the fact that Colin would no longer be with her, or what it would mean, but she accepted it. In the middle of her terse goodbye she opened the car door and got out.

‘I’ll call you when I get to the dorm,’ he promised her as she looked back.

‘Please don’t! Let’s not force things, you don’t owe me anything. Good luck Colin,’ she said casting back a glance, now no longer caring if he saw tears streaming from her eyes.

If he had had any parting words, it was too late as Vanessa was already heading towards the outlying houses of town. She clasped her fingers around the bracelet as the tears still rolled down her face, and in her soul the unfamiliar feelings of anger were overtaken by the all too familiar ones of loneliness and pain that suppressed every other emotion in her.

When she got home, Vanessa locked herself in her room, where she trembled from crying for hours. She couldn't comprehend this whole thing. She knew that Colin didn't love her, or at least not the way she loved him, but imagining Colin taking another girl to Florida where they had been planning to go together was deeper than any kind of pain she could ever imagine. She was sitting on the floor, holding her knees with one of her arms and rubbing her chest with the other to make this intolerable suffering go away. But it wouldn't.

Vanessa felt like she was buried under the collapsed ruins of her plans that trapped her with everything she had long tried to keep away from herself. It hurt her that her parents were unable to look at her, they didn't know her at all, and in fact they didn't even want to, while she had tried so hard to reach them for years. She always wanted just a bit of attention and an ounce of gratitude for doing her best to help them. But this was in the past now. Sometimes she felt like a little girl in need of a father or a mother to be there and give her a bit of support. She needed someone who could have given her a hug and console her after having the whole class and half of the school laugh at her being bullied, and she cried, feeling utterly abandoned. She needed someone to separate her from the darkness of the well, the suffocating, desolate loneliness. But no one ever came.

As she cried, she felt as if her whole life, all of her hopelessness had accumulated in her, overwhelming her last defences. She had believed it so much that Colin would take her with him! The promise of sunlit Florida had been shining in her heart for weeks, holding back all the misery that surrounded her. There was no way she could digest that this had now been taken from her. She just sat in the dark void of her room, a mirror of the one in her heart, and couldn't understand that there was nothing left at all.

She didn't want to fall asleep since she was tormented by nightmares every night. Some time after midnight she usually sank impossibly deep within her fears and experienced these encounters with obscurity in terror.

In her dreams she always found herself stuck in the depths of a dark well, feeling indescribably alone, as if no one else was left alive in the entire world apart from her. And no matter how hard she tried to get out, her frantic efforts were to no avail. Then slowly she was covered by creatures rising up from the darkness beneath her, making her heavier and heavier. And despite all her pointless struggles and panic, she was unable to free herself; the slimy arms of the infernal things coiling around her like seaweed, getting an ever-stronger hold on her, preventing her from breathing, moving, or even remaining afloat, until finally pulling her down, after which the water would close over her head.

On finally waking up Vanessa was always covered in sweat, gasping for breath, feeling that her heart was almost breaking out from her chest, and notoriously trying to be rid of the slimy, cold arms wrapped around her that she could still feel on her skin. When she became fully awake, she usually just nuzzled up to the end of her bed, pulled her knees to her chin, and tried to convince herself that her nightmares were unfounded, yet as she had a look around in the empty room, she could still feel the presence of depravity; as if whatever it had been pulling her down the well was real, backing off just a little, keeping an eye on her and waiting for the next opportunity to launch an onslaught upon her again.

Vanessa was lying in the bed feeling exhausted and apathetic at dawn. Her demons had been tormenting her for a while already and actually she had no idea when she had managed to fall asleep because at night there was no distinct difference between being awake and asleep. When she was awake her fears and pains swirled around her in just the same way as when she slept, but they all seemed to penetrate her deeper, bringing more hopelessness, as bleakness overwhelmed her.

She knew that she was supposed to keep on with her mundane activities, but now she felt that she no longer could. Or would. Instead of getting ready for another school day, she rather inserted her headset and started her playlist.

Vanessa felt that his was the final straw. *She'd had enough! There was no reason for her to be here!* She clearly felt that there was no way she could get up from this. And the experiences of her life didn't make her optimistic about the future. She had no one, no dreams or hopes, and had nothing in herself that could long for anything.

All the shadows in her soul rived and her path illuminated among them. *Yes. She would do it. It was enough.* A kind of cool tranquillity started to revolve in her veins, and a strange feeling of sedateness. *This was her terminal point.* She felt as the determination was born in her soul, perhaps not even now but quite a while ago. She felt strong, as if a decision she had postponed for a long time was finally made and now she could see exactly what she should do. It was decided then. She didn't make up her own mind; something deeply hidden inside her had finally presented itself, and now this something called her to action, and she knew perfectly well that this was what she wanted with her whole essence.

Having made her decision, the awareness that this would be the last time she would share her bed with her nightmares almost made Vanessa happy. She walked across to the bathroom, cleaned her teeth, got dressed and was on her way in minutes. She didn't wake her parents: it was too early and she didn't want to spend her last morning with them. She had spent her entire life fulfilling their expectations and jumping through hoops for them. This day was all hers and she was not willing to waste it on them. A silent goodbye – “All the best Mom and Dad” – was all she intended for them and nothing more.

After stepping through the garden gate she looked around the snow covered street. At a quarter to six the sun had not yet risen but the sky was already completely light and to the east the horizon was bathed in orange and red. Vanessa closed the gate behind her and pulled her coat tightly around her chest.

A cold biting wind got up and dropped, leaving a humid cold in its wake close to freezing. Then the wind started up again whistling through, shaking and breaking up the tops of the trees before ceasing. This repeated continually. The wind blew to the west, driving her towards the town. This was the direction she should have taken on this day to go to school, the usual route she was expected to take for years to come. It was interesting when she thought about it: *not only the wind but the world itself wanted to push her along. The wind was like her parents and her teachers. They didn't ask her which way she wanted to go either, they just wanted to push her somewhere.* The wind was oblivious to her, it blew her with the same indifference as it did everyone else, but Vanessa had made up her mind to set herself against it and turned left in a direction she'd never taken before.

As the snow condensed with a crunch beneath Vanessa's boots her last physics lesson flashed through her mind, when her teacher had been talking about temperature. The cold hardens materials, and not just water, as it was hardening her heart right now. *But how frozen was it? Water freezes at zero Celsius yet the lowest temperature is not zero Celsius but zero Kelvin, absolute zero, which prevails in space in the harshest parts of the universe. A point below which it cannot get any colder.*

Vanessa felt that she had reached this point. The only remaining source of warmth in her life, the sun, which had stood at the centre of her soul, was her last friend Colin. Even though they had been far away from each other, this sun had provided her with enough warmth to stop her soul from becoming a completely dead, frozen block of rock. At least this warmth was left in the chilly and desolate recesses of her heart, keeping her from sinking into abysmal freezing darkness.

But now this had been taken from her too: Colin had gone, leaving only the impenetrable darkness and cold. Absolute zero prevailed in her frozen heart, while every trace of her soul and life force had been covered by an icy fog.

She hadn't gone too far when she looked back at the house and realised that she never wanted to return to it. She'd lived there but it hadn't been her home for years. The two people who had brought her into the world were there but they had long ceased to be her parents. She never wanted to see them again. For a fleeting moment a strange half smile of curiosity drifted across her sunken, expressionless

face, exhausted with the task of continually conveying her flood of pain to half the world. It was a faint manifestation of her joy over the promise of change. But as quickly as her smile disappeared Vanessa knew that she would have the courage to leave all of this behind, believing at this point that she had made the most important decision of her life.

It is strange how you can be surprised after having lived in the same place for as long as you remember... She knew perfectly what lay to the right on the road and would have found anywhere within a hundred miles of the district she lived in since the little side street led to the main road and from there onto various places; route 93 leads north into Canada, south to Glacier Park International Airport, Flathead Lake and Evergreen, while west to Idaho. But she was clueless when it came to left and east from there. She had never been that way. The town came to an end after half a mile. The concrete roads were there, the plots of land no one had built on. Though she knew what was lying ahead of her, she had never been there.

She knew that she wasn't far from the edge of Montana Glacier Park but this information had always just been an abstract fact for her and nothing other than a counterweight of sorts symbolising the antithesis of the town and civilisation.

Glacier National Park. An interesting and rigid name that exuded danger with its bears, cougars and other sources of danger lying in wait, which used to be sufficient to keep her from even stepping foot in the wilds. Up to now she had feared for her life. But now this world of danger in the wilds had the opposite effect and she began to feel drawn to it.

The concrete road came to an end at the edge of the forest, where a sign had been erected warning of the dangers beyond that point: *Beware of bears!* She wasn't especially bothered by this and repeated to herself that she had nothing to fear...

The trail went on for miles through trees that were letting in more and more light now. Vanessa kept strictly to the path, not deviating an inch and when she came to a fork she took the direction which she felt would lead to the depths of the wilds. She walked for hours at a comfortable pace, not stopping for a rest and thinking that this sense of freedom had never touched her soul before.

It must have been past noon by the time the forest began to thin out, and the trail soon led to a steep bend by the bank of a river swollen by the spring thaw. From there the riverbank continued in the direction of a bridge that stretched over a gorge and a little waterfall followed by bigger waterfalls and gushing stretches of a river.

Vanessa felt she had found the right place. The river flowed as if with mad abandon around the bend and freed from its icy winter prison it rushed onwards to the sea inebriated with freedom. But for this the nature around her was beautiful: the singing of the birds of the forest continued unabated as it had all winter, the sky was dotted with clouds, and even the biting wind that had harassed Vanessa in the town had dropped here. The air was not as freezing as it was where she had come from, and the noise of the main road and the town had been replaced by the chirping of birds, the rustling of the pine trees and the babble of the water.

The rumbling was created by the massive volume of water rushing over the wide riverbed beneath, which with its incredibly clear white waters and whirling currents was both alluring and terrifying. In addition to the melting snow, the onset of spring was also marked by the retreat of the glaciers. At this time of year the waters of the little mountain streams were swollen and collecting the melting snow from higher altitudes they converged into huge, expansive rivers surging through the valleys.

The wooden bridge that stretched over the river before the waterfall was just wide enough for Vanessa to comfortably walk on as she held onto the barriers that came up to her waist with both hands. Looking to the right she saw the river coming from the same height as where she was standing and then plunging down a good ten yards and turning left to rumble on along its course.

Vanessa stopped in the middle of the bridge and looked down at the waterfall, then turning she surveyed the whole landscape around her. The sun was now directly opposite her and despite being past its zenith, it was still quite high in the sky. Although the sun's rays could not reach her directly because of the passing clouds Vanessa could have sworn that she could feel the sun on her face. It was the first real warmth she had felt for years. She was grateful for the feeling as tears streamed from her eyes and even a faint smile crossed her face. It was a perfect moment and exactly the kind she wished to be her last. She closed her eyes for just a little while and breathed deeply, filling her lungs with the fresh air, allowing her ears to be filled with the music of the forest and gurgling song of the water. She finally felt relaxed and imbued with a sensation of peace.

Stepping on the icy, slippery handrail was difficult, so she did it cautiously. She gazed at the river as it foamed beneath her, while feeling her clenched stomach, thinking about the freezing water, but this didn't matter anymore. A feeling of freedom had already descended upon her. Vanessa laughed out loud, thinking about her imminent escape from all her torments. She hated her miserable life so much by now. Annihilation in the darkness, getting consumed by nothing – this was all that she desired.

Finally, she looked up to the sky, spread her arms and let herself fall. For moments, the ecstatic feeling of weightlessness and liberty permeated her, then finally darkness engulfed her.

All Ends are New Beginnings

All she could hear were completely hollow deep sounds as if she was being called to from the depths of an expansive cave. She could see light too but it was definitely not heaven because this light hurt her eyes. Events overtook one another and she no longer knew exactly where she was and why she was in this place. She ached in every part of her body she could feel, but the most terrifying part was that there were other parts she couldn't feel at all. Far away, from somewhere in the depths of her consciousness where her mind had taken refuge from the icy cold that penetrated her body, she was aware that it was futile to try and wrap her arms around her body to warm up, as they stubbornly failed to comply.

Her legs were not willing to react and everything indicated that as far as she could foresee nothing would change. As she attempted to look around she found that her eyelids refused to obey her and even then when she managed to partly force them open all she could see was that sharp, blinding light.

She was seized with a feeling of dread that the cold had frozen her extremities and that her eyes had also been damaged. Her fears left her behind, remaining at a distance and waiting, while she hovered between life and death. This time her dreams were free of demons, and, mercifully, she didn't relive her drowning in the icy water. In her dream she felt neither the cold nor any pain but merely floated in the infinite void.

Finally, hours later, she woke up to the warmth of a crackling fire from which a line of smoke shot up into the black sky. Although the cold still permeated her, she no longer felt like she was in the freezing grip of death. As she raised her head to look at herself she saw that she was lying, shivering on the ground wrapped up in a long fur-lined brown coat, not too far from the fire and under the shade of a makeshift shelter made from log stumps and pine tree branches.

The fire was burning away not far from her and she longingly looked in the direction of the quivering warmth. But then she became aware of a figure stirring at the border of the fire's circle of light. The man she saw had just emerged from the edge of the forest carrying more logs and branches.

She didn't know who the man was, but she could see that he was not dressed for winter and that she was alone in the middle of the wilderness with him. For a moment she considered running away but then when she tried to move her limbs she realised it was impossible; her fingers, hands and legs still only reacted as if from some land of frightening remoteness and with the dragging slowness of a sloth, but at least she could feel them now, and this filled her with an incredible sensation of relief.

The man must have noticed her move as he looked over at her. Instead of approaching her he picked up another two or three pieces of kindling, and only when his hands were full did he walk back to the fire. He carelessly threw the pieces of wood he was holding next to the fire and crouched down.

He seemed like a tall man, strongly built and muscular, which was clearly evident as he was just wearing a t-shirt and presumably his coat was the one she was wrapped up in. His red hair was long and wavy; he had three tufts of hair, one at the back and two at the sides, braided together with an elastic band. With his closely cropped red beard and his lean physique he reminded her of a Viking warrior.

'Can you remember what happened?' he asked in a deep voice. She tried to summon up an answer but found herself unable to, instead she merely shook her head trying her best to make this gesture distinct from the shivering she was gripped by.

As she took a better look around she realised that the river was still there with only a few trees in front of it, but she could see a shallower, wider stretch of it from where she was. As she looked up

with difficulty she followed the course of the river with her eyes, spotting the wooden bridge after a bend. When she had seen it last she had been standing on it.

‘It’s alright,’ he assured her with a sigh as he built up the fire. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Vvv... Vvvvv...’ she tried to say, and only after several attempts was she able to master her own tongue. ‘Vvvvvvanessssssssaa,’ she uttered, shivering with cold.

‘Vanessa. I’m Aris. I’m not going to hurt you.’ he told her as he took an aluminium thermos that had been propped up with a stick over the fire, into which he mixed in some kind of forest plant and added a bit of snow. He shook it up a little so the hot liquid and the cold snow would mix together, took a testing sip and handed it to the girl.

Vanessa eagerly clasped it in her hands, and as quickly as she could swallowed down the contents unconcerned with what it was. It must have been some kind of improvised tea as it had a mildly sour taste, but she couldn’t have cared less even if it was cyanide. The tea was nice and warm and smoothly slid down her throat into her stomach. When the mug was empty Aris took it back, while Vanessa collapsed back onto the ground. There would be more questions for her and she would have some for the man too. She knew she couldn’t get away with not having to explain herself but for now she simply couldn’t arrange her memories to be cohesive and she didn’t have the strength, so her mind slipped back into the darkness.

She only came to her consciousness again after several hours, but now felt much better. Opposite her the man was also awake, making a meal for them, or at least she hoped that she would have a part of it. So far there hadn’t really been an opportunity to talk to the stranger, and she couldn’t get a close look at him. All she knew about him was what he’d told her: his name was Aris.

From what she had been able to observe, he was middle aged and an experienced outdoors man. The wall supporting her had been made out of logs and branches and reflected the warmth of the fire so her back was warmed up too. Cooking over the fire on a spit were two fish that looked like salmon, which sizzling away were very appetizing as they filled the air with a pleasant aroma.

Wrapping the coat around her, Vanessa moved closer to the edge of the fire, and eagerly watched as Aris took the spitted fish from the fire. He produced a large knife from his boot, and cutting the fish along its stomach he opened them up to check if they had cooked properly. After he had nodded with satisfaction he handed over one of the spits to Vanessa, who reached out and took it. She wasn’t too keen on salmon but it didn’t even enter her mind to be choosy now. From what she could tell it was quite late at night as the Moon had passed its zenith in the black night sky and had begun to slowly descend.

‘Could you tell me how you got here?’ he asked without beating about the bush and in the meantime sat by the fire himself and started on the fish.

Vanessa didn’t want to stay too long but she didn’t see how she could leave either. However, he seemed to be able to read her mind:

‘We’re not going anywhere at night. At least I’m not, that’s for sure. Your snow boots are still wet, pulling them on would make your toes freeze, while it’d be hard to set off at night without them. You’d freeze for sure, or a wild animal would kill you. It took me several hours to walk here from the hotel behind the church, there’s no way I’m starting off back in the middle of the night. Of course, go if you want, but unless you insist on freezing slowly to death you can tell me what happened instead,’ Aris encouraged her, while cutting a piece of fish off.

His tactic worked as Vanessa started shivering again at the mention of freezing to death. She would have frozen within ten minutes in the water, and that would have been horrible enough, but for hours... she simply didn’t have that sort of courage. She finally gave in and felt that she would be happy to talk. It was pointless being angry with the stranger and she couldn’t think of anything better than telling her story to him. She had never talked about her feelings with anyone else, so maybe it was worth

giving it a try. In addition, she had a weird feeling that just might she owes the man who saved her life with an explanation.

Crossroads

Light was just beginning to filter over the horizon by the time Vanessa had reached the end of her story. Aris neither spoke, nor gave any indication that he wished to express an opinion or be in any way judgmental about her story but merely sat and listened. This suited Vanessa fine as she was in no mood to endure some sanctimonious lecture. Since neither she, nor Aris had stirred from the fire to bring more wood, this, along with her story, the fish and the tea had all run out, and without more material to feed the flames the fire began to fade. By morning all that would remain would be glowing, charred embers.

‘I think I get the point,’ said Aris, glancing at the girl.

‘Did you know I was gonna jump?’ Vanessa shot back.

‘Yes, I knew before you actually jumped. That’s how I was able to get to the river in time and pull you out,’ nodded Aris. This vagueness and the faux mystical air of his reply touched a nerve in Vanessa, and she vented her anger on Aris, the only other person nearby.

‘In case you didn’t know this is a free country! You had no right to pull me out!’ she angrily exclaimed.

‘Oh, please excuse me for saving your life!’ Aris retorted, infuriated by her outburst. ‘Maybe you should be thanking me!’

‘Thanking you what?! Do you think I jumped just so you could rescue me? Wasn’t it obvious that my jumping was intentional?’

‘I just... I felt it was the right thing to do,’ Aris answered tensely, but then asked back with a bit of temper: ‘What would have you done in my stead?’

‘I’d have done what I could to save your life,’ Veronica murmured quietly.

Aris seemed to have settled hearing this answer as if it was a sort of absolution for him. Yet still, he felt a bit lost in the silence in which they had found themselves. After all he just had come here to be alone for a while, contemplating about his lost partner, and saying his farewells for him. He expected to be alone, and he was not prepared to deal with so complex matters of somebody else’s life and feelings all of a sudden. This made formulating his thoughts and words a bit delayed:

‘We will have to figure out what’s to be done about this situation. This whole thing made me feel dumb and guilty, I admit that. I stole a decision from you that was yours to make, so I believe I should offer you something in return. I’m going to have to think it over,’ Aris said to the girl, and got up to stretch, and to help him make up his mind. Bringing more wood to the fire to make sure it would last until morning would suffice.

But before going he made a suggestion to Vanessa:

‘Get some rest, we’ll figure out something.’

They didn’t exchange another word until morning. Aris knew everything he wanted to know about the girl, and more. He was proud of himself and ashamed at the same time. Vanessa was the first person whose life he had intentionally and specifically saved. This was both a wonderful feeling and indescribably shameful too. His gun, without which he felt utterly defenceless, and which was now tucked under his coat, was his chief ally. *But what did that say about him?* His work was important, he had even been trained in Israel, and he served an organisation which exerted a great deal of influence and did much good in the world. But not him personally, not Aris. *Never Aris. He did the dirty part that nobody else wanted to.*

Now he had saved this girl's life though she herself had wanted to throw it away. Not that he was surprised since he might have wanted to kill himself in her shoes. But he wasn't in her shoes. He had his own situation to deal with and although he thought he'd helped the girl, maybe he had really just held her back from making her final escape and forced her to suffer more misery before she would try – and succeed – in killing herself again. He felt sorry for her, but although he didn't do much for her by saving her, maybe there was still something he could do.

As he was pondering on this he took a closer look at Vanessa. She was thin, almost morbidly so. But not like somebody who has done without food, rather as if she didn't eat because she couldn't see the point of eating to maintain her existence. Her skinniness seemed strange: the subtleties of her movements and the unnaturalness of her gait all suggested that she had once been a strong and healthy girl whose muscles had now wasted away because she no longer had need of them. Her crouched bearing exuding a sense of humiliation that might have served as a shield, so that no one would attack her.

Although the overall effect of her appearance wasn't attractive she still had a beautiful face, and even though Vanessa was pretty emaciated Aris could imagine that if she pulled herself together and found peace of mind she would soon become more shapely and charming. All of this would be complimented by her wavy hair, which now thin and full of split ends was tangled up as it covered her back. But if it was rejuvenated back into its original lustre, it would impress with its light, sheen and warm tone. A bit like peanut butter. *Yes, if she pulled herself together a bit inside and out she could regain the traditional, good attributes of a teenager.* And on top of this he could sense something of Vanessa's character too, which made him think...

Vanessa threw herself into breaking up the camp, wiping the pots that had been rinsed and scraping dirt onto the smoking embers, even though there was hardly any danger that anything would catch fire in the wintry forest. Humility seemed to be her second nature, this being demonstrated by her precision and perfectionism when it came to work. She also gave the impression of a smart girl, the kind whose abilities are fine but lacking the drive does not know what to do to free herself from her situation. And this was where Aris could help her, if of course, she accepted his help.

After Aris had packed everything he'd brought back into his rucksack, he turned around without a word and set off. Vanessa followed on behind him: after all, she wasn't going home and there was nothing else for her to do. She didn't ask where they were going, and she realised she didn't even care. It didn't occur to her that he would ask her a question, to which she'd have to provide an answer... one that would determine the rest of her life.

Aris silently trudged on for miles, while she continually lagged behind. Finally, after two hours, they stopped at the edge of the park, where they could see a parking area through the trees from the top of a hill. Vanessa realised she'd seen this parking area before. It was at the other end of town from where she lived but she knew how to get to her house from there. *A few more miles and I'll be home,* she thought bitterly and imagined that her life would all go back to square one. Just then Aris stopped at the crossroads, where the paths diverged, and turned towards her.

'I was thinking. You're right. I would have just gone on my way feeling satisfied and could have patted myself on the shoulder for saving a life and being heroic. But you wanted to die for a reason, and this reason hasn't gone away. But if it did go away, would you try it again?'

Vanessa looked at him wide eyed. He was being serious, and more so than in the last twenty-four hours. It didn't seem like he was joking but she still didn't understand the question.

'I don't understand what would you do to...,' she began, having no idea what he meant. But Aris just shook his head in exasperation.

'If your problems could be solved and you wouldn't have to go back home or to this school or anything else. Answer that! We'll talk about the how later,' he said insistently. Vanessa began to think; *she didn't actually wanna die – she wanted to find a way out, and this solution seemed logical and final. But things would be way more complicated if there was another option.*

'Maybe I wouldn't do it then,' she said finally, unable to add anything else.

'You said that your life's pointless and you don't know why you're here in the world,' he continued, to which Vanessa had nothing to say so she just listened on. *She indeed did say such things...*

'I can offer you a way out. Your house is to the left, and you can go home. But I'm going right. You can come with me. I can take you to a place where you'll get all your answers. If you come with me, your life will change. A completely new chapter will start but your life as you knew it so far will be over. Finally, and irreversibly,' he added to hammer the point home. 'It's up to you to accept it or not.'

Vanessa's jaw had dropped as she was listening. None of it made any sense to her.

'Where do you wanna take me?'

'Far away,' he answered curtly. 'To a community of special people who have great knowledge and power at their disposal. If you decide to come with me and you keep at it, one day you'll also be powerful and wise. You will understand every act and step of society and mankind, because you'll be above the system, walking the path you're destined for. I offer you the knowledge that everybody is looking for, but most would never find. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you more for as long as you are still an outsider.'

'Is it a sect?' she asked since this was the closest she could come up with as a synonym for what he had described.

'Call it that if you want,' he said shrugging his shoulders. 'But I would rather call it a secret society. It implies a bit higher quality.'

'If I come with you, does that mean I can never go back home?' she asked, though she already knew the answer.

Aris shook his head with the expression of an all-knowing philosopher who belabours every point.

'I don't think you would ever want to go back home. You'll get a new identity and a new life,' explained Aris as Vanessa tried to imagine gazing into the distance what this would be like, though she knew nothing about it yet. She was jolted out of her reverie by Aris's note of caution: 'But I'm warning you: what I'm offering comes along with responsibility. Don't say yes just to get out of here because you'll have to meet serious challenges and expectations while undergoing difficult trials to gain an insight into knowledge that presently is inaccessible to you.'

Vanessa pondered what he had said, while staring at a squirrel's den in the trunk of a huge tree. *What answer could she give to this? And how could she know he was telling the truth? Should she leave without a word, her parents would definitely kill her! She did jump from the bridge of course, but she expected that to take her so far away from where she would never return. Going away with a stranger was something else entirely. And how could Aris expect her to simply go off with him?! The hairs on her neck tingled from the idea of leaving the world she had known behind. The world that was horrible and depressing for sure, yet it was still hers.*

'I can't leave without a word. My parents didn't even let me move to Florida for a semester, let alone going to... I don't even know where you'd like to take me!' Vanessa said as she became upset by this impossible suggestion.

'Why, did they allow you to jump and drown in a river?' Aris leaned closer to her, asking in a cynical tone.

'That was different,' Vanessa declared appalled. 'I wouldn't have moved, but...'

'You wouldn't "move" if you came with me. Don't think of this as if you were moving to the other side of the street yet calling Mom every second day. I offer you a brand-new life.'

'Sure, in a sect?' she asked back sarcastically.

Aris sighed heavily.

'Perhaps you are right. This wasn't a good idea,' he left it to the girl with a twinge of guilt. 'Sadly, I have nothing more to offer.'

‘But I can’t accept it like this. My family needs me,’ Vanessa said desperately, as she couldn’t imagine what to do. She was totally confused by the events of the last few hours.

It looked like Vanessa’s refusal to accompany him was almost a relief to Aris. He moved close to the girl, and with far more sympathy than he had yet shown he touched her shoulder and said in a soft voice, uncharacteristic of his harsh personality:

‘That’s a shame. I firmly believed that you were special somehow, destined for way more. That you could have found your bliss to follow. I interrupted you from choosing whichever way you wanted to go, I feel sorry about that. But I will not make your decisions anymore,’ Aris said with sympathy, bidding her farewell. ‘You’ll find your way home from here and I’m sure you’ll get through your difficulties and find where you belong. I wish you that much.’

Vanessa couldn’t answer, her tears began running down her face, but she choked them back and wiped her face.

‘I’m so sorry. Thank you for what you’ve done,’ she said finally but without looking into his eyes. Aris nodded once more and turned his back to the girl to move rightwards on the path, leaving her behind at the crossroads.

Vanessa froze even in dry clothes and boots. Or perhaps she didn’t freeze, only the last day made her shiver. Everything seemed so surrealistic that she wasn’t even sure if it hadn’t been just a dream.

Aris’ offer surprised her. Or rather shocked her, to be more precise. She couldn’t really understand what he had said; the words were clear, but their meaning was too vast to perceive. *A new life... he promised her as much. But how could he expect her to say yes? What kind of a naive idiot would take off with a stranger, even after being saved? Though she could hardly end up in a worse situation than the one she’d been in. The worst they could do would be to sell her into prostitution, but even this possibility was better than having to go home.*

Still, this was the wise decision of course. Choosing the other way would have been an impossible idea. Aris promised her a new life, and bliss that she could follow. Though this made her more enthusiastic than anything else in years it still had no solid base in reality. *She could only be herself, and couldn’t become somebody else at a magic touch. If she couldn’t find herself here, why would she find herself elsewhere?*

Although she walked as fast as she could in the snow, almost to the point of running, it took her almost two hours to get out of the forest and reach the vacant plots of land. She didn’t want to go through the town so instead took the road through the forest. She ran through the field and along the street.

When she got home it looked like the house was empty. The car was gone and the gate was closed. Vanessa stepped through the gate and carefully opened the front door. It was completely silent inside. She walked in without a sound and looked around. A note was lying on the table for her. It wasn’t folded, just a paper sheet covered in writing. She stepped over and skimmed through the letter without picking it up. If she had deluded herself so far that her parents had been worried about her, such delusions would now be shattered. Fortunately, Vanessa wasn’t naive enough to be surprised. She stared at the letter in her mother’s handwriting: she wrote that she was shocked Vanessa had been out all night and that she couldn’t be reached, then gave thorough instructions to call her as soon as she got home, since she had better things to do today and had no time to scuttle about after Vanessa.

Though she had no illusions it did hurt her that her parents couldn’t see what was going on with her. They couldn’t see her at all. She had almost drowned and froze the day before, and her mother’s only reaction was a howler on the table. Vanessa pursed her lips. This all confirmed her parents hadn’t looked for her at all yet, or they would know that she hadn’t gone to school the day before.

Her stomach contracted as she imagined what she was going to get for the night, even if her deeds would remain secret. *Or... in fact, it didn’t, for the tragic reality was that she couldn’t care less,*

only she wasn't in the mood to listen to yet more preaching. Nor to go back to school or do anything. But what could she do then? Going back to the river straight away seemed an awkward idea.

She turned away from the note, nimbly ran upstairs, stepped into her room, and locked the door despite no one else being at home, as if she could lock the whole world out with this symbolic act. But that couldn't be done so easily, as she knew perfectly well when she lay down on her back in her bed.

She came to regret saying no to Aris. Now she would never learn what her fate might have been if she had left. *Sure, the world was full of opportunities, that had been a lie told to her all her life, and she did her best to make herself believe that. But Aris presented her a path that she could walk upon here and now. And she refused, that was the pitiable reality – and now that truly made her stomach shrink.*

As she thought it over with a clear head, she couldn't imagine why she had said no; *if she was ready to dispose of her life, what was she afraid of now? She said that her parents needed her. But she knew exactly how false that was! Not even God could help them as they were too stubborn to realize that they were in trouble and should accept assistance. What could she do to help them that she hadn't done already in recent years? Anyway, Vanessa thought as she felt tides of anger spreading in her soul, her parents chained her here intentionally. They didn't let her go to another school, and it was also their fault that she couldn't accompany Colin to Florida as she was forbidden to do so. Should they have let her go, Colin wouldn't have had to take somebody else in her stead. What had they ever done to deserve her loyalty? Or was this plain fear that she tried to justify?*

She started to grow angry, but mainly at herself already. After yesterday returning to her treadmill seemed like such an impossible idea. *But what could she do?* In fact, she did know the answer to that question, and took a long, deep breath. She did what she often did in such situations; she imagined her sister being here with her, telling her what she would do or simply giving a piece of advice.

But thinking of this made her even more desperate; she honestly couldn't imagine what her sister would have done in her shoes. *If she was here and not Vanessa, would she have been able to manage her life any better? Their initial deal would have been the same, that is for sure, but that didn't mean much; maybe her sister would have been happy with this life, or perhaps now she would be lying in bed helplessly. No, Vanessa thought, her sister wouldn't have tolerated what she had for so long.*

There was one thing that Vanessa somehow knew but couldn't express even to herself; her mother was the only link in the physical world that still connected her to her sister. Her womb was what they had shared during the short weeks of their common existence; *perhaps she was afraid of letting her mother go, because she felt that by doing so, she would let go of her sister too? But what would her future hold then? Staying with her mother forever, because that would make her feel like being with her sister too? And what would her sister want Vanessa to do?* As she imagined her sister, she always saw herself, but with a more confident, wiser, yet kind appearance. *That girl would have accepted Aris' offer right away and followed her bliss wherever it led – or at least that was how Vanessa imagined it, but her sister wasn't here to do so this. But Vanessa was, and maybe she still had a chance to do that. If not for herself, then for her sister.*

For yet another moment she just kept on staring at the ceiling, visualising her life if she stayed here. Then she closed her eyes again briefly and tried to imagine what her life would be like if she had accepted Aris' offer. When Vanessa finally exhaled, her eyes opened, she took another breath and stopped speculating.

She jumped out of bed as fast as lightning, opened the drawer of her desk and took out her documents that she'd kept ready at hand. She stuffed them into the side pocket of her rucksack, opened the zip and tossed out the heavy textbooks in it to make room.

She bundled clean clothes into the rucksack, zipped it shut and put it on her back. There was only one thing left she wanted to take. So, she glanced down at her wrist, checking if the bluestone bracket was still fastened on her wrist. She decided that Colin had always been with her up to now and

even though they had parted ways, she still wanted to take this memento with her – she was still unable to leave him behind. She needed at least one joyful memory from her life, even if she had never been happy about it ever. Vanessa glanced briefly at her room by way of good-bye, turned and left pulling the door shut a little so it was the same as when she'd opened it. Then she went down the stairs and left the house.

With the rucksack on her back she rushed her way to the end of the side street. She decided to take the street that ran perpendicular to the main road as she wanted to minimise the risk of running into somebody she knew and being held up. Earlier, when sitting by the fire, Aris mentioned in half of a sentence that he had had a room at the hotel behind the church. This was Vanessa's only link left to him, and this link was thin enough and getting even weaker with every passing second.

As she crossed the main road panting heavily without even looking around, she prayed with every cell in her body that Aris was still in the hotel. After circumventing the church, the hotel came into view and she had only a few more steps to go, and therefore she ran, no matter that she couldn't breathe, and her body was leadenly heavy.

She practically fell into the hotel's lobby and all but collapsed at the desk of the receptionist. The man behind the desk stared at her with a flabbergasted expression and wide eyes as she tried to explain what the man she was looking for looked like. This wasn't easy as she still didn't have enough air to speak, but it seemed that the man finally got it.

'I know who you mean. But unfortunately, he left already. He checked out about an hour ago,' he said apologetically.

Vanessa felt utterly devastated, as her last hope seemed to have faded away. *She had a chance. Just one. And she managed to screw it up, like everything else.* She murmured her thanks to the receptionist without looking at him, turned around in slow motion and left the lobby with her head down.

For the first time, she felt totally lost; she didn't want to go back to the river anymore. She wanted what Aris had promised her, but there was no way she could ever get it without him. He knew how to cover his tracks so Vanessa had absolutely no idea about what she had been looking for actually. She could go back to the receptionist and ask for Aris' phone number or something alike, but she had her doubts that Aris had given real contacts while checking into the hotel in the first place. So, she just stood in front of the hotel, and couldn't imagine what to do next. *She wasn't gonna go home, that's for sure! Nor was she returning to the river, not again. But what other options did she have?*

As she was just standing there, a crossover's engine started a few steps away from her, but it didn't move. Vanessa looked towards the car and knit her brows. She began to carefully approach it with a few unsure steps, and tried to make out who was in it when the door flew open, and Aris stepped out. He didn't say anything, just looked at her questioningly.

Vanessa couldn't hold back her wide, rushing smile, and felt the urge to hug him, but finally just stepped to him.

'I'll stick with you and look for the answers you promised,' she said resolutely.

'Are you sure this is what you want?' he asked her, to which he received a nod.

'You were right. Perhaps I didn't jump from the bridge to die, but so you could pull me out. Now I feel that this is where my path leads. I just panicked. But I thought it over and now know that this is the right decision,' she summarised the conclusion of her past few hours' consideration.

Aris nodded and opened the car's door for her, then got in himself.

'Thank you for waiting me,' Vanessa said gratefully.

'I was pretty sure you'd come,' he replied. It clearly cheered him up that Vanessa joined him in the end. 'What made you change your mind?'

'I owed that much to my sister,' she answered quietly.

Aris said no more, and the car pulled away from the hotel.

Stay on the path; the journey has just begun!

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