РУКИ ПРОЧЬ ОТ МАГИИ!

Диана Рейн



16+

У ХЭЛА ОПЯТЬ ПРОБЛЕМЫ...

Hands Off the Magic!

Standalone

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Руки прочь от магии!

An English translation of a Russian-language original.

Hands Off the Magic!

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Translated from the Russian. No official English edition of this work exists.

This edition was prepared with the assistance of machine translation, then reviewed and edited.

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Number K44. “The Injection.” Jem

As it turned out, that was my last Finding Day. My seventeenth. It wasn’t a date of any great consequence, but like anyone else in my position, I had been expecting presents.

A present, to my mind, is something material — something you can touch, smell, or eat.

I have no idea what Hal counted as a “present,” but on my Finding Day he very nearly beat a classmate of ours to death.

In my dimwitted friend’s defense, I can only repeat what a million people have said before me: a secondary power is a curse.

It’s a half-and-half sort of thing — neither this nor that, neither fish nor fowl. Too feeble to count as true magic. Too strange for an ordinary life. Practically useless, yet a bottomless source of trouble.

I couldn’t say exactly how matters stand across the rest of the world, but at our college by the Lake of Dreams, more than half the students and professors carry some secondary power or other. Or a secondary appearance, which is far less dangerous to those around them. Here it’s considered perfectly normal. People aren’t accustomed to fearing those with secondary powers, and no one has ever tried to keep them apart from everyone else.

The cruellest part of all is that you can never know whether your child will be born with one. It may slumber for generations, then erupt without warning and shatter your entire life. The magic of the eytalits is incomprehensible — even to themselves. Those it touches are also called defectives. Perhaps that sounds harsh, but no word fits them better.

So, Hal and the Twin got into a quarrel that threatened to escalate into a proper fistfight. Nothing new there, honestly — barely a week

goes by without Hal picking a quarrel out of thin air. His nerves aren't quite right, and that's common knowledge.

But this time, mere fisticuffs weren't the end of it. The moment Hal raised his voice, the Twin went hurtling to the far end of the lecture hall. It was as though a shockwave had flung him into the wall with such force that it broke his arm, two toes, his nose, and a rib. And rattled whatever was rattling around in his skull, too.

You never quite know what to expect from Hal's secondary power, but this time it surpassed all fears. The onlookers' jaws dropped at the spectacle, and the hero himself managed to gasp, "What the kuryuk, I was just—" before promptly blacking out.""

In short, that morning show was well worth witnessing. Only I wasn't there.

At the time I was sitting in the college dining hall, looking lovely, with cake and tea, waiting for the boys. Finding Day is like a birthday for podbryshes like me. The college that took us in does its best to throw us proper celebrations, and honestly, I have no reason to complain. Thank Cat, I have neither a defective power nor a defective face, the professors adore me, and the other students are a little afraid of me. What more could one want? And yet today my hands were oddly itchy, and the butterflies in my stomach refused to settle. I couldn't admit it even to myself — that I was expecting something unusual this Finding Day. Maybe a special gift. Maybe an important message meant just for me. Maybe something else entirely.

Acquaintances drifting past offered me quick words of congratulation, and I nodded in silence, still waiting. My tea was going cold; the scent of the fruit cake filled my mouth with saliva one moment and left a lump rising in my throat the next. I sat motionless, hands resting on the table, stealing the occasional glance at the clock, plainly visible

from every corner of the cafeteria. Not much time remained before the end of the lunch break.

Every year, you want the Day of Finding to be special. You want the people around you to behave out of the ordinary, and life to hurl surprise after surprise your way. In the TV shows girls watch, that sort of thing always happens to the heroine on her Birthday. So what makes the Day of Finding any less worthy? Or do I simply resemble a typical heroine too little? I carry no weapons or magical artifacts as they do, and I have no friends to roam the mall with. My boyfriend wouldn't invite me to the spring formal or any other ball, because I don't have a boyfriend, and I wouldn't turn up my nose at the most popular girl in college, because no girl would dare cross my path. Does that mean, then, that I haven't earned myself a wonderful Day of Finding, like the heroines on television?

All around me, students chatted, ate, and drifted back and forth, and I was wrapped in the familiar, comforting clamor of lunchtime. Everything was as it always was. No announcement came over the PA system, and in the murmur of voices I couldn't make out Hal's name—or anything else that might have put me on alert.

The boys never showed up, and I had just about decided they'd forgotten all about me — their memories are hardly anything to boast of. They can lose track of absolutely everything, sometimes even their own names; you can call until your throat gives out, and they won't so much as turn around. No amount of patience would ever suffice for them, but I tried anyway.

I dropped my gaze, lamenting the heavy burden I had to bear, then looked up again and was genuinely startled to see Kyle. He was making his way toward my table, smiling warily, revealing just a sliver of teeth. For the occasion, the big fellow had knotted a bow tie about his neck and, judging by the smell, had doused himself with an entire

bottle of cologne. He carefully set a little box wrapped in red gift paper on the table, cleared his throat, and bellowed at the top of his lungs:

“Happy Finding Day! Health, brilliant grades, and all that... And guess what — Skrip nearly did the Twin in!”

Certainly, I had been expecting to hear something interesting or out of the ordinary, but nothing from that category! All my excitement evaporated on the spot, and anger took its place. I slammed my fist down so hard the cake and cups jumped.

“I’ll wring his neck when he gets back!”

“If he gets back…” Kyle corrected me, then immediately flashed a guilty smile, stretching his mouth nearly to its fullest width.

His is a secondary appearance — Kyle’s mouth is as broad as a frog’s, stretching clear to his earlobes, and it can gape wider than any ordinary person’s ever should. Concealed within are sharp shark teeth that grow in two rows in places. He doesn’t care to smile, and heaven help you if you ask him to.

“So it’s all grown-up already, is it?” I muttered, reaching for my present. “Was there even blood?”

I hadn’t wanted to worry about this kugalung, but since there was no helping it, the least I could do was keep it hidden. Everything would be fine — it wasn’t as if this were the first time Hal had landed in the Director’s office thanks to his secondary power. Not that I was going to read anything into it…

While I fiddled with the ribbon on the box, Kyle gave me the whole account. He’d seen it all with his own eyes: Hal walking up to the Twin, the Twin hurled against the wall, and Hal collapsing right after. And he was far from the only witness — nearly the entire group that had come to the biology lecture had watched it happen. Naturally, all hell broke loose at once. Professors came running, students too, along with one security guard. The Twin and Hal were hauled off to the

infirmary, but it certainly wouldn't end there. The police might be called, and Hal's parents dragged into it. The news might even reach the eights — though I doubted that.

What troubled me far more was the thought that Hal could be expelled from college. Three months before graduation!

I gave the wrapping paper an angry tug and stopped short when I saw I'd torn it. Kyle — a hopeless spendthrift and dandy — might just as well have used newspaper. I smoothed the paper out, set it aside, and reached for the little box with reverence. Curious as a pig, I — I receive gifts far too rarely to grow used to them, and at that moment I'd even forgotten about Hal — hurriedly opened the little hiding place. Last Finding Day Kyle had given me a crystal pendant, and Hal a pack of cigarettes. The pendant broke the very next day, and I traded the cigarettes for a bag of almonds, since I don't smoke. In the end, nothing remained of either gift. I hoped this time would be different…

At last I opened the box and eagerly plunged my hand inside — and jerked back with a sharp pain.

"Kyurukian!.."

"Hey, watch it," Kyle jerked back from his lunch and reached out toward me. — Meant to warn you. Sorry.

I brushed his hand aside and plunged my fingers back into the little box — slower and more cautious this time. And what on earth was this thing? A cactus with pink spines, each the length of my index finger. It sat in a tiny pot, bristling belligerently, and now my hands stung. Was it poisonous too, on top of everything else?..

"What do you think?" Kyle asked, shoveling chunks of boiled fish into his maw. — It reminded me of you, so I figured I'd give it to you.

There was no point in taking offense — he always says exactly what crosses his mind. Though I'll admit, he'd caught me with a sly jab. My current nickname is "Prickle," and my hair happens to have

pink streaks in it right now. Even I was starting to wonder whether I shared some kind of kinship with that cactus.

“Thanks,” I exhaled, facing reality and realizing the poor plant would be dead within a week under my care. — It’s very… um… what’s the word? Cute.

My friend nodded without pausing his chewing. I kept stealing glances at the cafeteria doors, expecting Hal to stroll in at any moment. He’d clap me on the shoulder, announce that some dreadful thing had happened to him but everything was fine now, then sit down beside me and… Kyle began rambling about his latest music project, hoping to distract me. However you slice it, his life is nothing but projects.

While the two of us were absorbed in our riveting pursuits, a student with the number B19/1 suddenly materialized beside our table.

She was the twin whose sister Hal had nearly killed.

It takes no great effort to guess: the twins and I were never friends. I can’t even recall any clear reason for the animosity—no real grounds for it at all. And yet the twins and I always seemed to find ourselves near each other at the worst possible moments. The basketball opponent who shoved you that much harder. The one who grabbed the last roll in the cafeteria. The straight-A student you were forever held up against. Trifles on their own, but they accumulated over the years, turning dislike into hatred, and a random shove into a brawl in which one of us nearly lost his life. And I can’t speak for anyone else, but to my mind the twins always seem to stand at the center of attention. Everyone adores them. They have no secondary appearance or secondary power, they frequently work as a pair, and they possess that rare number with a fraction. Both have beautiful blond hair, pale skin, and long arms and legs. If I’d been granted Hal’s secondary power, I’d have broken something of theirs sooner or later, too.

“This has gone too far!” the Twin Girl declared, as though summing up our old quarrel. “This time your little friend is going to be expelled —maybe even liquidated. And I won’t stay out of it! It’s long past time to put an end to this: keeping him around people is dangerous, he can’t control himself in the slightest!”

I’ll admit that similar thoughts had crossed my own mind, but I certainly had no intention of saying so aloud. I barely speak to the twins at all—it isn’t worth my while. Though whenever an opportunity presents itself, I never fail to shove them, hit them with a ball, or “accidentally” pull off some other nasty trick.

But Kyle couldn’t stay silent. He shot to his feet, nearly toppling his chair, and towered over the girl. Sometimes, watching him, I think he’s the strongest, bravest person in the whole college—until I remember that Kyle is terrified of spiders, and I banish such thoughts at once.

“We’ll deal with that when it happens, all right? Go sit with your little brother in the infirmary.”

Our classmate slowly lowered her eyelids, though you’d have thought they couldn’t sink any lower. What I mean is, they were already permanently half-closed beneath heavy pink lids, and somehow, without uttering a single word, she managed to humiliate everyone around her. Her voice was a lazy drawl tinged with perpetual grievance, and every now and then she’d sweep a hand through her hair, tossing it to one side. Any one of these habits was irritating on its own; together, they made up a downright lethal dose. Oh, and there’s one more reason for my collection of grudges.

“He’s been taken to the hospital district, the girl said, flipping her hair.” Now do you understand what’s in store for your kugalung?

I saw Kyle’s arms go rigid as he drew a deep breath. A chill swept through my whole body. Things were looking worse and worse for Hal. No wonder they hadn’t released him yet.

“I’ll make sure as much trouble as possible is waiting for him, the Twin concluded.” He won’t get off that easy, not in a million years. — She turned to leave, but suddenly cast me a brief glance. — Oh, and happy Founding Day, Little Prickle. Enjoy your special day to the fullest.

She turned away, and a second later I snatched the cactus off the table and hurled it at the Twin’s retreating back.

Yes — in secret, I had even hoped they might take me to see the Director himself, or somewhere else where I might cross paths with Hal. But nothing of the sort: the duty officer simply handed me a note and let me go, right there, without ever leaving the dining hall.

I have no idea how hard the cactus actually struck the Twin — it may not have scratched her at all — but she screamed loud enough for the whole hall to hear. Kyle’s gift lay on the floor, toppled from its pot, its needles snapped. I felt a pang of pity for it, yet at the same time it had done its duty admirably — it had given me pleasure.

Kyle walked me to the classroom where my history lecture awaited. By then I was paying attention to nothing. Such a strange day, too much of everything all at once. I was exhausted.

Unlike me, my friend seemed remarkably cheerful, despite everything the morning had brought. He was big and strong as a mountain, with a bristle of black hair and coarse features. I have a feeling that even if the whole world cracked open, I would still feel safe beside him.

“I understand everything, but pull yourself together,” he whispered on the way to class. His hand settled on my shoulders, heavy and warm. “We don’t need any more trouble than we already have. Your behavior could only make things worse for Hal — do you understand that?”

I stayed silent the whole way, trying to decide whether all this was truly so serious, or whether I was merely worked up. Would the students forget everything by tomorrow, or had the upheaval only just begun? Hal was forever getting into trouble — or rather, he never managed to climb out of one mess before tumbling into another. But never before had the injured party been taken to the hospital district. Would he escape with a harsh reprimand, or was a real trial waiting for him? Great Kata, these dreadful thoughts were driving me out of my mind...

“I’ll come pick you up after your lectures,” Kyle added as we parted, having reached the right classroom at last. He glanced around the corridor with a bewildered air, as if he’d forgotten how he’d ended up there, then suddenly blurted out, meeting my eyes: “Maybe... we could head over to the neighboring district? Order a pizza. They usually run birthday discounts—and Findings discounts too... probably. Huh? After all, you ended up without a present.”

I could tell he simply wanted to take my mind off everything—cheer me up, feed me, make me happy. It was sweet, but it wasn’t what I needed just then. The only thing I wanted was to see Hal.

“Maybe another day,” I said quietly, avoiding his gaze. “I don’t feel like going anywhere today.”

“Okay, understood. See you around, then.”

“See you.”

Kyle hurried off to his lecture, and with a heavy heart I made my way into the classroom. Hal and I shared the same history professor, and he was meant to be sitting here beside me right now. But the seat next to me stayed empty. The professor began the lecture as usual, yet whispers kept drifting my way from every corner. Classmates stole glances at me, trying to fathom what I was thinking, straining to read my emotions straight off my face. Mishaps involving magic or plain

human foolishness weren't exactly rare at our college—but murder, or anything even close to it? That had never happened. Not in the last seventeen years, anyway. I kept telling myself everything would turn out for the best, though hope was vanishing faster than food down Kyle's throat. Hal hadn't been gone all that long—but after what had happened, would they release him anytime soon? Trouble was heading straight for my friend, and I hated it. And it wasn't the fun kind of trouble, either.

And now here I was, surrounded by a crowd of prying eyes and curious ears. For two whole hours. And all of this—right on my Finding Day, of all days! What a splendid gift. Thanks ever so much.

The professor's voice faded into a distant, droning hum, utterly incomprehensible. I stretched my legs as far as they would go and tipped my head back. It's fine. I'm strong. I can handle this. And afterward, Hal would answer to me for all of it—and then some.

A small hand patted me on the shoulder, and turning my head slightly, I found Mimosa beside me. She leaned in, whispering in a rush, barely catching my attention:

"Where's Skrip? Is he all right? I heard he fainted. And what about the Twin? Do you know anything?"

By the Almighty, all I'd needed for perfect happiness was a curious Mimosa. Fine—I'd been trying so hard to stay strong and decent, but this proved to be the final straw.

Without so much as a word to my classmate, I swept everything off my desk into my backpack, raised my hand, and waited for someone to notice.

"Yes, K44?" the professor called on me, and at least a dozen pairs of eyes swung my way.

"Professor, I'm not feeling well. May I be excused?"

It took him a couple of seconds to decide; then he nodded. I snatched up my backpack, slipped past the desks, and was gone. My marks rank among the highest in our year. The professors like me—even if I often drive them mad—and I like them too, despite how constantly they drive me mad. But this time I wasn't lying; I truly did feel wretched, and perhaps the history professor, number I1, had worked that out on his own. Clever man.

I stumbled out into the corridor and stood frozen for a few seconds, staring straight ahead. On the wall hung a poster announcing a fencing tournament in three days—one of my roommates was competing.

Everything around me had gone utterly silent; I couldn't even hear voices from the classrooms.

That Mimosa, apparently, had nothing better to do than worry about Hal. She could have asked someone—anyone—else. I'd noticed, in general, how often she poked her nose in where it wasn't wanted. Oh well—thanks to her, I'd gained a whole two free hours, so I wasn't going to waste them lingering in a corridor. I needed fresh air, coolness, open nature. That was always the urge that rose in me when unease began to creep in. My hands were itching again.

I made my way down to the first floor without incident, and there I slipped past the security guards to the entrance doors with ease. The whole journey took less than five minutes, for the college is my home, and who but I would know every shortcut and hidden passage?

Though at first glance, admittedly, it does look enormous. Outside, the main building curves around you in a ring — identical latticed windows on every side, dark pilasters, and lilac ivy swallowing the whole edifice. From the ground you can't see it, but an alarm against strong magic is mounted on the parapet. Not that we'd be unwelcoming to the eights — if they ever turned up, we'd naturally invite them in for tea and pastries. But the college isn't a girlfriend you can drop in on

whenever boredom strikes. Hal has complained more than once that his ears ring when he walks past the main building, though I suspect he's exaggerating. If he didn't know there were sensors up there, he'd never have said a word.

Several gargoyles also perch along the parapet — bulging eyes, gaping jaws, wings half-spread. All sorts of tales are told about them: that they come to life at the new moon and wheel about the college grounds, terrifying passersby; or that they are caricatures of the eights who sat on the council while the college was being built. I prefer a third theory — rarer, but more to my taste — which holds that they are enchanted guardians, something like magical sentinels, ready to pounce on anyone who comes to UKOG with war in their heart.

The college — the main building above all — is so ancient that you can feel its power, sense that it is almost alive, and if it fails to take a liking to you, you have only yourself to blame. Standing before it, you get the impression of having been lured into captivity, of being caught in a trap whose ring is about to close around you. Some students don't care to linger; they hurry past or dart inside as fast as they can. Some professors do the same.

Thoughts like these would never have occurred to me — they were shared with me, at various times, by different people who found themselves here for the first time. As for my own first impression of UKOG, I don't remember it at all; I was less than a year old, and now, for the life of me, I can see nothing frightening or strange about the place. But beside the houses in town, lined up in two rows along the street — identical, faceless, and tall — I have always felt uneasy.

The college is my fortress. A bit like Kyle. I know I can walk into any building, any classroom, ask any member of staff for help, and I am certain to receive it. As a child I was forever getting lost, wandering through kilometres of corridors and past hundreds of doors, yet I was

never afraid. I explored the college, and it let me — it even helped. I could not have wished for a better home.

From the direction of the arch came a thunder of footsteps — so forceful that the ground trembled beneath me. It was too late to run, and there was nowhere to hide in the park in front of the building — not that it would have mattered; they would have tracked me down by scent in no time. I turned around, ready to come face to face with danger.

An adolescent puppy wriggled through the doorway—shaggy, ungainly, and spoiling for play. He stood three meters tall and weighed half a ton. His white coat was speckled with green and brown splotches of grass and mud, smeared across his muzzle from the water. At the sight of me, he puffed and snorted.

The puppy's name was Yo-Yo, and he served as the college mascot. His forebears, giant wolves, had once prowled the castles of the eytalite world, striking terror into visitors and driving off enemies. Yo-Yo, by contrast, wrought nothing but mischief, fell for every student prank, and cowered at the sight of crows.

"Easy there, pal," I pleaded, stroking the dog's muddy muzzle. "I have to go. I'm not going to play with you."

I squeezed my eyes shut as the pink nose with its brown spot dipped toward me, snuffing loudly enough to make my short hair stand on end, while hot breath washed over me, rank with the stench of rotting scraps. Rummaging through garbage cans was one of Yo-Yo's favorite pastimes.

"Honestly, pal, I really must go!" I gave the dog a feeble shove and wriggled free from beneath his muzzle. "Go find someone else to play with."

Yo-Yo shook his head in indignation and fixed me with his big dark-brown eyes, gleaming. You could hardly blame him — he was

lonely just now, with everyone off at lectures and classes. But playing with him was no small matter: he could easily hurt someone without even noticing. Few people were eager to cross his path in the college corridors or out on the street. They tricked him into running off or losing interest, and Yo-Yo tried with all his might to be a “good boy.”

I sighed as I looked at him. I love animals far more than all humanity put together.

“Oh, fine — come along. But you have to keep quiet.”

Yo-Yo whimpered with impatience, then suddenly shoved me with his nose, sending me sprawling, and tore off at full speed. A second later, his loud barking rang out from beyond the ring of buildings. I picked myself up, wiped the dog’s slobber out of my hair, and hurried after him. Had I seriously imagined Yo-Yo would obey me?

And yet his unexpected company proved remarkably useful, for I intended to find out where Hal was. And for that, I would have to pay a visit to the Lake of Dreams.

Room K44. “The Injection.” Jem

The territory of the Universal College of the Lake of Dreams (or UKOG) sprawls across half of Rosedale, if not more. It comprises fourteen academic buildings, eight dormitories for students and five for staff and professors, four parks, three altars, and three libraries, along with a museum, two cafés, a menagerie, a shop, and a bell tower. All this richness is jumbled together and threaded by winding paths, gardens, and avenues. UKOG takes such pride in the chaos of its grounds that it even holds an annual hide-and-seek tournament among all the faculties and groups.

But the holiest of holies of the college is, of course, the Lake of Dreams.

The Lake of Dreams is a living fragment lifted straight from the world of the eytalites. Magical, breathtaking, and at the same time merciless. Every child, ordinary or defective, knows that magic always demands something in return for its power.

The whole way to the Lake, Yo-Yo galloped around me in leaps nearly a kilometer long, barely missing me with his bulk. Every now and then he let out a short bark, dropped onto his front paws, and gazed at me as if, like other dogs of ordinary size, he intended to knock me down and lick my face. But since in his case that could end very badly, I shot him a withering look and sternly ordered him to keep his distance.

When we were nearly at the right spot, Yo-Yo suddenly perked up and bolted back toward the main building at full speed, forgetting all about me. No one knows why he avoids the Lake — perhaps he senses the eyts’ energy and doesn’t like it?

Fresh air washed pleasantly over my face and bare arms, carrying the faint scent of the suklok plant, which came into bloom by the lake

around this time of year. Its fragrance was something like vanilla and oatmeal mingled together, and many people swore it whetted the appetite. Some of the girls would gather the flowers, dry them in little pouches, and tuck them into dressers and wardrobes to lend the fabric a sweet smell. Hal could certainly have used an armful of those pouches in his locker, right alongside his basketball gear…

The moment I thought of him, that sad, anxious feeling crept back. In the four years I had known him and Kyle, we had stumbled into all kinds of scrapes. It was frightening and fun, thrilling and utterly glorious. We never feared dying or being gravely hurt — we were even certain nothing of the sort could ever befall us. So why should this time be any different?

The lake lay nestled in a hollow, easy to reach down any of the dozen worn paths. From above, it looked like an enormous black mirror that reflected nothing yet gleamed in the light. A narrow bridge, with a small platform at its middle, stretched across the water. Along the banks, half-hidden among thickets of sedge and suklok, stood benches, and farther on rose two wooden gazebos. Right beside the lake one could find an old wrought-iron plaque bearing information about the place — though by now everyone knew the rules of the lake by heart anyway.

By good fortune, no one was about — it was class time. Dragonflies alone skimmed the air, and somewhere in the distance a duck quacked. I hesitated a moment, drew a deep breath, and stepped onto the narrow wooden footbridge. At once the wind rose, flinging my hair to one side and shamelessly lifting my skirt. Without pausing I pressed on, both hands gripping the low railing, until I stood at the bridge’s center. The scent of suklok kept drifting to my nose, though it now seemed faint and far away.

Leaning over the rail, I gazed down at the purple water, which glimmered feebly in the light. It seemed far too dense to be ordinary water — more like ink. And there was little use in peering into it: even the Lake refused to show reflections. No one knew how deep it ran; many people shrank from so much as touching its surface. Laden with all these extra mysteries and unsettling speculations, the footbridge felt a slightly frightening place to stand —

for anyone, that is, except me.

I let out a sharp breath, slipped my backpack from my shoulder, and unzipped it. Among the scattered odds and ends — stationery, sunscreen, mint candies, my room key, my wallet, and the belts for the ingela — I found a plump, dog-eared paperback. It told of a fictional king who had not left his castle in years, and then abruptly resolved to journey through every known dimension. I had never once read it, yet I had been hauling it about in my backpack for a year now. All I could do was hope that had been enough — that the book had absorbed my energy.

I leaned over the railing once more, holding the book above the water. The breeze stirred its wavy, yellowed pages, and the king on the cover gazed up at me in despair. My hands had suddenly gone very weak, and I clenched my teeth harder, as though that could help.

“Show me Hal,” I whispered, letting the book slip from my fingers at that very moment.

It sank into the water without a splash and vanished at once. No ripple marked its farewell; the Lake lay deathly still, as it always did.

“If you fall into the Lake, no one will ever know. Your body will never be found, and every memory of you will be wiped from the minds of everyone who knew you” so the older children would whisper, frightening the little ones.

I waited, peering into the shimmering, dark-violet depths. Faint swirls of pink and nearly black drifted within it, and against that backdrop tiny stars glimmered, slow and majestic — now gathered in whole clouds, now scattered singly.

I waited. The Lake paid me no heed whatsoever.

Well, honestly, no surprise there. Magic demands something precious to a person, something that holds a piece of their soul — not an old book that had never once been opened.

“Hal,” I repeated, though still not loudly enough to be speaking a true name. “Show him to me. Come on.”

My arms began to itch, and I absently scratched the skin of my forearms beneath the tattoos, never taking my eyes off the water. When five minutes had passed and I was beginning to wonder what else I might possibly hurl into the Lake, the dark water began to lighten, slowly turning as clear as glass.

I had leaned so far out over the dock that my sneakers nearly slipped from the weathered planks. There, beyond the veil of the Lake, now grown visible, the outline of my friend emerged. The colors were unnaturally vivid, the faces blurred, the contours of bodies wavering and smearing at the edges. It looked the way pictures look in dreams—for that was the only way the Lake of Dreams could show a person.

Hal lay on something—a bed or a couch. He was shirtless, his eyes closed, his face tinged with blue. Several shadows loomed about him; they might have been Mr. Director, Madam Doctor, or someone else entirely. They passed some object back and forth, turning their heads, presumably speaking. Then one of them bent over Hal and drove something sharp into his chest—something very much like a long, thin knife.

A scream tore from my throat. I clapped a hand over my mouth, but the “dream” was already fading, and within moments the water lay impenetrable and dead once more.

My chest heaved and my hands shook. My throat tightened; dizziness crept over me. I tried to make sense of what I had just seen, to think clearly, but my head was pure chaos. My brain flatly refused to process what I had witnessed. Even my nose began to sting.

I slid down and dropped onto the sun-warmed planks, clutching my head in my hands. A sudden chill seized me—my teeth even began to chatter. My breath caught. I could not believe what I had seen—I refused to. Hal could not be dead. He could not have been killed. It was all utter nonsense.

But was it really him? Could it have been some other Hal—any Hal but mine? And was it even a knife? It was… it had been so hard to see, hadn’t it?

I pressed my hands over my ears, screwed my eyes shut, and began rocking back and forth, trying to pretend the outside world simply wasn’t there. To hide from my own thoughts—go deaf and blind, lose my memory, all but vanish. Switch off. It was the only way to keep myself sane just now, and, above all, to keep from crying.

It took me ten minutes—or perhaps two hours—to convince myself I had misread the “dream.” Believing Hal was dead was far harder than believing the world had ended. He couldn’t be dead when I had seen him alive only last night. And today was my Finding Day. There was simply no way he could be dead.

“That kugalung has probably been back for ages, sitting in class right now,” I muttered as I made my way toward the main building. “He got a telling-off, a wagging finger, and a warning to behave himself. That’s how it always goes.”

But near the porch I stopped short. It was too terrible to imagine walking into the college and finding no trace of my friend anywhere. I simply couldn't bear it. What would become of me in lectures? Everyone would notice I was rattled, even though I never get rattled. That Mimosa— or someone else—would start needling me again, I'd lose my composure entirely, and end up killing someone myself.

Stepping back a pace or two, I surveyed the enormous building sprawling around me and decided to stay out here alone a little longer. After all, that could count as a birthday present too.

I hadn't gone looking for a hiding place in preparation for some grand future game of hide-and-seek. All I wanted was to be alone somewhere no one could see me or pester me — especially Kyle or Yo-Yo, who were far harder to shake off than any of the professors or classmates.

I skirted the Lake and soon came upon a small grove pretentiously dubbed the Moon Grove. Under a full moon, every tree there turned a bluish silver, as though conjured from an illusion. Some people grew dizzy in it — they'd start imagining phantom figures and ghostly music. None of that ever happened to me. I was probably too ordinary.

Hal's side power — the very gift that had nearly finished off the Twin — never left him. All it took was for him to grow angry, upset, or sometimes even overjoyed, and heaven help anyone within reach. He could blow a door off its hinges by accident, set a sweater smoldering, shatter a glass. He didn't even need to lay hands on the object; it happened as though a discharge of magic leapt through the air from his thoughts or emotions and struck the nearest thing — or the nearest person. Though, Kata as my witness, his power never once touched Kyle or me.

The professors turned a blind eye to it: what could anyone do with the fool, after all? He wasn't strong enough to find a place in the world

of the eyts, though he caused plenty of trouble among humans too — still, no one had ever been seriously hurt.

Until this morning.

With Kyle, the only side effect is his looks — and nobody minds those. As for me? Not a single one. I'm a primitive down to the last drop of blood. The only remotely interesting thing about me is my tattoos. They've been with me for as long as I can remember, wrapping both arms from shoulder to wrist. Nothing spectacular — just zigzag stripes encircling my arms in rings, a purple with a pinkish tint, almost the color of a bruise. In a few places, small offshoots branch away from the zigzag, each ending in a square squiggle. As far as I can tell, it's simply a joke my loving parents played on me before they threw me out. I haven't the faintest notion where else they could have come from.

Would I want Hal to be an ordinary person, like me — or even Kyle? On one hand, it would have spared us a great deal of trouble; on the other… he wouldn't be the Hal we know, and spending time with him wouldn't be half as much fun. But what if it could have saved his health? His life?

I tried to think about that, and only that, as I dangled head down. Hooking my feet over a thick branch and hanging there is my favorite position whenever I need to think about anything other than the thing that matters most. The thoughts get shaken up that way: the heaviest ones sink and bury themselves at the bottom, while the light, silly, empty ones rise to the surface. I'd love to shake every useless thing out of my head for good, but simply turning myself upside down won't be enough to manage that.

Pulling myself up, I settled onto the branch, crossed my legs, and closed my eyes. I don't need much space — a tree limb, a fence post, a ledge of rock, the arm of a chair — and I'll make myself comfortable

on that little patch. As for shutting out the whole world and meditating, I can do that anytime, anywhere.

Meditation and my ingela exercise routine are what keep me sane. Without them, I'd have lost my mind long ago—or possibly hurt someone. My friends tease me about it, but I keep telling them: for any problem you can name, do a couple of ingela exercises. Anything from a migraine to an uncontrolled flare-up of secondary power. Ingela is the answer to everything, and meditation is, for an ordinary little person like me, nothing short of magic.

And today, right now, of all moments, I needed that magic desperately. I had to push the image I'd seen in the Lake out of my head until I gathered the strength to face it.

Or until I saw Hal himself, alive and unharmed.

I hardly know how I made it through to evening. Moving with miraculous stealth, I managed to steer clear of Kyle and slipped into cabin number three.

Hal lived in one of the rooms there, sharing the bedroom with two other guys. Our college still kept separate housing for men and women, a rule some people periodically tried to break.

I reached my friend's door without difficulty, then stopped, nervously rubbing my fingertips together. What was I supposed to do? Just knock and see if he was there? Wait outside in case he turned up? I didn't want to come across as some frightened, hysterical girl—that's exactly how they'd take me. And besides, wouldn't Hal have come to me or Kyle first, rather than barging into his own bedroom as if nothing had happened? I didn't want to think that way.

"Jem?"

I flinched, as I did every time I heard my name. I would never get used to it.

“Why don’t you announce it to the whole camp,” I hissed, glancing back over my shoulder.

Kyle shifted from foot to foot a few steps away from me, tilting his head so the brim of his hat threw his wide mouth into shadow. Scarves, bandanas, high collars — he kept trying to conceal that maw of his as though it were something to be ashamed of. If I’d been saddled with a secondary appearance like that, I’d have made the most of it, grinning at every opportunity — which, these days, I never do. What’s so terrible about a mouth full of shark teeth?

“He hasn’t shown up?” Kyle asked, more quietly now, casting an expectant glance at the locked door.

I shrugged, keenly aware of how ridiculous I must have looked — standing guard in front of Hal’s room without the faintest idea whether he was even inside.

Or whether he was still breathing.

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

Kyle stepped closer and hammered his fist against the door twice, nearly knocking the thing off its hinges. And it was a new, solid door at that — Hal had accidentally blown the previous one to pieces by slamming it in a temper. That made it… let me think… the fourth time.

Someone hurried to answer, and a short fellow nicknamed Lace appeared in the doorway. He looked as though we’d caught him mid-change: he still wore the shorts and knee socks of his sports uniform, but had swapped his tank top for an oversized T-shirt. Better than nothing, at least.

“Where’s Skrip?” Kyle barked, without troubling himself to apologize for the intrusion or even say hello.

Lace looked up at him, then shot me a brief glance, and winced. I returned the favor.

“Haven’t seen him all day,” he finally squeaked. — Did something happen?

His voice rang out high and shrill almost without exception. He scratched his backside, blinking rapidly with dry eyes as he looked us over. His grimy hair stuck up in spikes at the crown of his head, his chin was completely crusted with dried blemishes, and above his upper lip a few short, greased-down hairs darkened untidily. I could never share a room with him — it would be like bunking down with cockroaches. I’d swear he flings his socks onto the nightstand, drapes his dirty underwear over the bathroom doorknob, and clips his nails in front of everyone.

“Skrip nearly killed the Twin,” a bass voice drifted in from the depths of the room. “I was just about to tell you.”

Out of the light stepped Hal’s second roommate, one who hardly needed describing at all. His nickname, Skeleton, said it all. But I knew firsthand that beneath the apparent frailty and slightness of that scrawny frame hid a killing machine that swept everything from its path on the basketball court. Skeleton was no stranger to roughness: he’d think nothing of flattening a man and trampling right over him — maybe even swatting the ball away in the process.

“Again?” Lace drawled carelessly, pulling a face. “So what? That’s hardly a reason to go wandering about until all hours. The game’s tomorrow.”

“He. Nearly. Killed. Him,” Skeleton repeated slowly. “The Twin’s been taken to the infirmary.”

Yes, rumors and news traveled through the college faster than any other contagion. Lace gave a nervous snicker and scratched at his back. I tried not to wonder when he had last washed.

“Well, that sucks… So where is he now? I mean, our very own Skrip?”

“With the Director, I’d guess, Kyle replied, though not very confidently.”

I stayed silent. Nobody wanted to talk about what I’d seen in the Lake of Dreams, least of all Kyle. Meanwhile, I was feeling worse and worse — at any moment I’d slide right down the wall. Hal would be back soon, he was fine. I even started thinking about leaning on Kyle, just to be sure I wouldn’t fall. The air wouldn’t reach my lungs.

“Kicked out? the Skeleton asked bluntly.” Eliminated?

Shnurok angrily shoved his neighbor in the side, but winced at the pain himself.

“Bite your tongue off! He didn’t actually kill him, did he? What would they eliminate him for? And anyway, has nobody gotten used to Skrip’s stunts by now? He always gets away with everything. It’ll blow over this time too.”

His voice sounded distant to me. I quickly licked my dry lips, feeling a warm weakness in my head. He’s just running a little late, as usual.

A group of guys walked past, crunching on chips and nuts. They mockingly wished us good night and moved on, cackling. There was something bloodthirsty and amusing at once about it, from the management’s point of view: housing two teams that were enemies in every sense in one cabin. Yes, yes, just imagine how many cruel pranks and traps the boys set for each other here!

Tomorrow they were supposed to have a game with Hal’s team, though that had now receded to the farthest corners of my mind.

“They’ve probably heard already, the Skeleton muttered, watching the group go.” They’ll be gloating.

Shnurok just grunted irritably.

“Nonsense. We’ll tear them apart without Skrip anyway. And maybe it’ll even be easier, come on, admit it..”

While he was still speaking, I heard it—unmistakably—the squeak of sneakers on a wooden floor, directly behind me. The dull, warm languor drained away in an instant, and icy shivers raced down my spine.

“Feeling better? You sure about that?”

I whirled around, instinctively clutching at the wall to keep from collapsing.

Hal—or rather, Skrip—stood there, his left shoulder propped against the wall behind us. He looked the very picture of health, alive and whole: no blue lips, no blood-soaked chest, nothing of the kind. He was alive! A thick mop of hair, as though freshly combed; a healthy flush; a carefree grin. Hal looked perfect, good as new.

Having secured our attention, he raised his hands and shaped his fingers into pistols, aiming them at us.

“Pew-pew! Tried to write me off, did you? Kyruk damn you!”

Number T23. Skrip. Hal

When I opened my eyes and realized I had, once again, survived being switched off, my mood soured at once. Leaning back against the pillows, I swept a bitter glance around the infirmary. I'd spent more time here than in my own room, and I knew every detail of the place: rows of iron beds, gray walls, a white ceiling, the harsh glare of the lamps. Even the sharp medicinal smell had become sickeningly familiar. I felt wretched, as I always did after coming back, and today my chest ached besides, as though I'd slammed full tilt into a corner.

"Slept well?" the Head Doctor giggled, stepping into view.

I wanted to shut my eyes so I wouldn't have to look at her—but then I noticed the syringe with the long needle she was playfully twirling between her fingers. So they'd pumped me full of nico-oxylaxicillin? Had it really been that bad? That explained the pain.

"Another minute and you'd have been done for," the Head Doctor confirmed my thoughts. "I had to drag you back. Not grateful?"

She looked the very picture of a solid, serious woman pushing sixty—tall, stately, crowned with an enormous bouffant. She didn't walk; she glided like a steamship, shamelessly shouldering aside any students in her path, and even the occasional professor. People said you couldn't stay near her for long, for the stench of medicine soaked into her clothes and skin was poisonous. Without so much as a glance, this woman could give one patient an injection of nico-oxylaxicillin, administer cardiac massage with her other hand, and still find time to smoke a cigar. A monster lived inside her.

To dodge answering her, I glanced around for the Twin, but the neighboring cots stood empty. Crap. Had that kugalung worn off ages ago, leaving me out cold far longer than I'd realized? Just how much time had passed?

“Oh, you’re really in it now,” the Doctor drawled, packing away her instruments without so much as a glance at me. “How do you like your new jewelry, buddy?”

I propped myself up on one elbow, squinting against the electric light, and had no idea what she was talking about. Jewelry?..

Then I spotted it — and marveled that I hadn’t felt it sooner. Bracelets sheathed my arms, all the way up to my armpits. They were tight, biting into my skin. And most telling of all, they were crafted from a hard crystal, pinkish in hue, faintly translucent in the light. It took me a moment to grasp what they were…

First a dose of nikho-oxylaxicillin to bring me around, and now “barriers” to smother my magic — clearly this whole business was nothing like the casual affairs of previous times. What if I had beaten the Twin to death?

When Mr. Director strode into the ward, I decided that was exactly what had happened.

For as long as I can remember, my secondary power has flared up at the worst possible moments, behaving with utter unpredictability. Even so, no one had ever thought of shipping me off to the world of the eits, and I had spent a full seventeen years quietly raising hell in the ordinary human world. Plenty of people disliked me, some were a touch afraid of me, some downright hated me — but on the whole, life wasn’t bad. Whenever I accidentally broke something or zapped someone with my secondary gift, I’d simply say “Sorry about that!” and never once had anyone strapped “barriers” onto me before!

The Headmaster explained that word of the incident involving me and the Twin had already reached the world of the eights. The ruling council, under whose authority Rosedale fell, would consider his petition and then determine what was to become of me. Until then, I was to remain at the college awaiting the verdict, bound by “barriers.”

They couldn’t seal away my magic permanently, but the barriers served their purpose well enough — they restrained it. With that settled, they let me return to my room.

That was the tale I told Jem and Kyle when I finally tracked them down. Or rather, I had been hoping to avoid them until morning — by then I might have invented a prettier, more polished version than this rambling, pitiful account of what a wonderful day I’d had. But when I reached my room, that darling pair was already there, exchanging polite pleasantries with Skeleton and Shoelace. Truthfully, I wasn’t the least bit surprised.

Jem and Kyle were among the few who neither feared nor despised me. Kyle, because others kept their distance from him too — and besides, hatred was simply not a thing he knew how to feel. As for Jem, there was nothing on earth that frightened her, and at the same time she took an equally hearty pleasure in disliking everyone around her. Oh, and of course, they both shared my passion for basketball — that part went without saying. I couldn’t have asked for better friends, though I had never actually told them so.

Now we were sitting in the dormitory hallway, having chosen a corner far from the rooms. Curfew was long past, everyone had retreated to their bedrooms, and not a soul was stirring. But you could never be entirely sure, so we huddled close and spoke in whispers.

“No way! Kyle hastily clapped both hands over his mouth, then added more quietly:” You mean they’re actually going to take you to the eights? For good?

Who on earth asks questions like that at this hour?

“No clue. But whatever those creeps decide, it’s bound to be bad.”

I pictured the council of eits poring over my biography, the detailed account of the incident, the complaint—deliberating and deliberating over what to do with number T23 from the human world, the fellow

they'd never given a damn about... How long would it take them to reach a verdict? Five minutes at most, plus another couple of weeks to make everything nice and official and deliver the answer to our world.

Kyle was mulling the situation over in earnest—frowning one moment, letting his jaw hang slack the next, then starting to fidget with his shirt sleeves. In general, he loved to turn things over in his mind, examining a topic from every angle and drawing all manner of conclusions, but as a rule it was all utterly pointless. Jem was idly picking at a scratch on the back of the sofa, not the least bit concerned about my fate.

None of what was happening suited me at all. Everything had begun to change at precisely the moment I wanted change least in the world. The end of my final year of college, a reputation as one of the best basketball players, more or less respectable grades—and now, thanks to some petty squabble, the whole lot was flying straight to hell!

At thoughts like these, I almost regretted not finishing the Twin off. At least that would have justified all the trouble.

I couldn't take it any longer and shot to my feet. Weakness immediately rushed to my head, and I staggered, nearly collapsing back onto the sofa. That's what skipping lunch and dinner gets you. I should have passed out from hunger by now, yet for some reason I didn't feel hungry in the slightest. A strange sensation.

My friends proved about as useful as the walls, though what had I expected of them? That they'd weep over my misfortune? Square their shoulders and vow to follow me to the ends of the earth? Please. At the very least, I'd have liked to hear them cursing Mr. Director, the Twin, and all the eights while they were at it. That alone would have made me feel a touch better.

"Are you going to finish your studies here?"

Kyle rose after me and nervously laced his fingers together. His small, wide-set eyes regarded me with something almost like pity, and the long line of his mouth twisted. I even felt a bit sorry for him — now he wouldn't be able to sleep over all this, either. Though who said I'd slumber like a baby? I was utterly exhausted, yet sleep was nowhere in sight.

"What difference does it make?" I snorted. — Looks like it's time to pack my bags.

Jem slid slowly off the arm of the couch where she'd been perched until that moment. It honestly infuriated me to see how calm and indifferent she was about everything. I'd wager that were she in my shoes, she wouldn't be lounging about like a lazy cat — she'd have chewed her nails down to the quick with worry. Then again, what am I saying — she'll never understand what it's like; she's too normal, without a single offbeat bone in her body. Now she stretched sleepily, rising onto her toes, and waved us goodbye with a little hand.

"Do try very hard not to kill anyone else," she asked me waspishly, as though I'd actually beaten the Twin to death. — At least before breakfast.

With a light slap on Kyle's hand, she walked away without a backward glance and vanished within seconds. All that lingered in the air was the faint, almost weightless scent of the flowers that grow by the Lake of Dreams.

Kyle leaned toward me and whispered:

"She's upset that all this happened on her Finding Day."

I hiccuped in horror. Jem's Finding Day! It seemed something far worse than the eits' verdict was waiting for me in the not-so-distant future.

It took me a while to figure out how the barrier bracelets worked. Yes, they suppressed my secondary power — perhaps not all of it, but

certainly most of it. And for that “service,” I had to pay with my own energy.

I hadn’t slept at all, and I’d skipped breakfast, then lectures too. My agile, strong body had turned clumsy and sluggish. All I wanted was to lie down and rest, or at least close my eyes — just close them, for a single minute. The noise around me throbbed in my skull, and my mouth carried the same taste — stale, long-forgotten cookies from the bottom of a jar. If things went on like this, I’d be dead before the Director ever received the eits’ answer.

At lunch in the cafeteria, I took a cup of coffee and nothing else. I had no appetite, even though my last proper meal had been yesterday morning. Even Kyle and Jem stared in surprise at my nearly empty hands as I approached our table.

“I’m not hungry,” I muttered in response to their silence, and took a sip of coffee.

Scalding, bitter, foul-smelling coffee. A pity you can’t find energy drinks anywhere in the college.

“This day will go down in history,” Jem remarked with her usual sarcasm and bite.

Kyle shot his friend a reproachful look, but what good would that do? Nothing was ever going to reform her. Once again I remembered that I hadn’t congratulated her yesterday, but Kyle cut into my thoughts at once:

“Maybe I should ask the Doctor for some pills?” he suggested. “It puts a strain on your body — you ought to support it.”

I shook my head without meeting his eyes. I had no wish to see the Doctor again, let alone plead with her for medicine. Things would sort themselves out somehow. That’s my philosophy of life.

An uncomfortable silence settled over the table for a while, broken only by the clink of cutlery. I kept catching the glances of the other

students; my number, or my nickname, kept surfacing in the whispers and murmurs around us. The college was delighted. Nothing juicy had happened in ages, and now there was gossip to feast on. I had become the local star once more, though this time the honor brought me little joy.

Then Jem decided to steer from one painful topic to an even more unpleasant one:

“Are you going to watch the game? They’ll be replacing you with that horned fellow — I’ve forgotten his nickname. They say he handles the ball beautifully.”

I stared at her without blinking, wanting only one thing: for her to shut up. But Jem finished her sentence and fluttered her eyelashes innocently, waiting for my answer. She hasn’t the faintest idea how her words land on other people.

“Thanks, I can do without that spectacle,” I replied politely when our staring contest had dragged on long enough.

“Suit yourself,” his friend said with a shrug. “I’m going.”

The traitor!

Kyle fidgeted in his seat, at a loss for how to break the tension. He had long since finished off his clam salad and boiled potatoes with fish. Jem listlessly prodded at a bowl of raw broccoli and carrots drizzled with lemon juice, picking at it with her chopsticks. Maybe it was her strange diet that had dulled all her emotions and feelings?

“Were you out long yesterday? Kyle asked abruptly.” How are you feeling?

I took another sip of coffee, just to buy myself a moment before answering. My blackouts after my secondary power had manifested were one of the few—if not the only—subjects I went out of my way to avoid with my friends. Typical, though—the big oaf never thought before speaking; of course he had to bring it up.

“A whole hour. I felt fine, apart from the “barriers.””

Kyle dropped his gaze, realizing I had no wish to discuss it. But Jem suddenly leaned across the table and pinched my arm with her chopsticks. I flinched back and nearly spilled the last of my coffee all over myself. She’s always doing this! No wonder her nickname is Prick.

“Out with it, she ordered sternly.” Out with it—what happened?

I wouldn’t have told them anything anyway, and what happened next turned out to be the perfect excuse to put the subject off a little longer.

I simply can’t figure out how to explain to the guys why I don’t want to share with them what happens when I black out. They know everything about me—even my real name. And yes, they ask about my troubles only because they can genuinely help. I’d trust them with my life without a second thought.

But my blackouts are simply my blackouts—a small, quiet corner of life where there’s just me and one other person.

The blackouts have always gone hand in hand with my secondary power. As a baby—or so my parents love to tell it—I would pass out for hours whenever that power decided to show itself. In elementary school they nearly ceased altogether, there was so much happening around me to keep my body occupied. I simply had no time for magic: every single minute I was flitting between failure and fresh discovery, blunder and triumph, and I couldn’t afford to fall off that schedule even for an hour.

Then puberty hit me hard. As if it weren’t enough that your own body suddenly turns against you and strange, frightening thoughts begin creeping into your head—during all of that, the secondary power starts laying waste to everything around you, without rhyme or reason. I set fire to my chemistry teacher’s mustache, blew up at least ten

lockers with a single glance, sent a classmate sprawling for merely brushing my shoulder, and nearly burned the library to the ground. And of course, the blackouts came often, without warning, and sometimes lasted a long while. That's when I got a proper look at the place I'm transported to during them.

I don't believe it's a kind of dream—it's a genuinely, fully real dimension, one you could actually find if you set your mind to it. Whenever I end up there, I know I'm blacked out, and that at some point I'll come to. I can't wish for fantastic things like flying or indulge in anything else strange, but I don't need to. In that place I can rest and be alone… or almost alone.

This place always looks the same — a seashore, and a small hill rising above it, where a single tree grows. In place of grass there are blue dandelions, and two moons hang over the sea — one full, the other a thin crescent. From these signs it is easy to guess that this place belongs to no world of humans. Usually I wandered along the shallows, sat on the ground, or climbed the tree. I never tried to leave and search for some other place. I felt content here, anyway.

Soon a girl began visiting me. Or rather, sometimes she was a girl, sometimes a woman, a little child, or even an old crone. She shifted with age and could alter her appearance slightly, yet her manner toward me never changed.

She cared for me, and perhaps even somehow helped me recover faster after the manifestation of a secondary power. I did not know her name, did not know who she was or where she came from. I could not even say for certain whether she truly existed in one of a thousand worlds. But to me she was more than real.

Most often she would simply appear out of nowhere and settle beside me. She might not touch me, or even glance my way, yet her presence alone was enough. It soothed me in a way nothing and no one

in the real world ever could. Perhaps she was a sorceress, and this was her great magic. I often told her what I had done this time to black out again, and what was happening in my world in general. Sometimes I said nothing at all.

She never answered me. In truth, she never speaks at all.

I had nothing to hide — plenty of strange things swirled around me. But the strangest, or rather, the most wondrous of them all was my encounters with that girl. They felt like such an intimate, personal, fragile thread of my insane life that sharing them with anyone — even my closest friends — was simply out of the question.

So I was actually relieved when Mr. Director's voice boomed over the cafeteria loudspeaker, sparing me the trouble of inventing excuses to dodge that conversation.

"NUMBER T23, REPORT TO THE DIRECTOR'S OFFICE IMMEDIATELY!"

The announcement was repeated twice more, and I, ever the model student, was already hurrying toward the third floor of the main building, where Mr. Director held court. I hoped Kyle and Jem wouldn't manage to trail after me — I truly wasn't in the mood to chat with them just then.

I had been inside Mr. Director's office more than once and felt almost at home there. It was spacious, and he kept no secretary. White paneled walls, a gray striped carpet, a withered plant in an enormous pot. Mr. Director himself was the most ordinary man in the world, and terribly proud of it. He often remarked on how vital it was to keep the bloodline pure so as to avoid problems — holding himself up as the shining example, naturally.

And yet I never heard him speak ill of defectives or treat them unkindly. He always helped the students — turning a blind eye to overdue rent when he knew someone was struggling financially.

Persuading the professors to grant another chance to some hopeless klutz who had failed everything there was to fail. And offering bread and shelter to the children abandoned on the college's doorstep.

Perhaps that was why everyone held Mr. Director in such respect. Of one thing I was certain: Jem absolutely adored him.

"Well now, T23, come on in, he said graciously, swiveling lazily in his chair, first one way, then the other."

He greeted me with a smile laced with condescension and fatherly warmth, but I knew him well enough by now to see at a glance that something was troubling him — something he was striving to conceal. Something had happened. Could a reply from the eits already have arrived? No, they couldn't possibly have answered so quickly; they had troubles enough of their own without me. Then what else could have gone wrong, on top of everything else? My fingers tingled with unease. If it weren't for the "barriers," I'd surely have set something ablaze or blown something sky-high by now.

"Take a seat, son."

The furniture in the office was generous, the chairs soft. The whole room seemed a mirror of Mr. Director himself — his broad face, his bald crown, his thick, yielding frame, and the deep creases of his suit. I perched on the very edge of the snow-white armchair, poised to leap up at any moment. I dearly disliked what I hadn't yet been told.

"Today we received a response from the council of eitalites concerning yesterday's incident, the Director began formally, and I clenched my hands into tight fists, wrestling against a sudden swell of panic." The response was... succinct. — He hesitated once more, nearly driving me mad with the pause. — They want to see you.

I nearly leapt out of my seat. I knew it! I was a thorn in their side. They were astonished it had taken them so long to discover me. They were enraged that I wielded their magic without shame or conscience.

So they'd run some experiment to probe what my secondary power could do? Try to strip it from me? Toss me in prison? Destroy me? Those freaks were capable of anything—no human decency would stand in their way!

"As you understand it yourself," the Director shifted his tone, his voice growing graver and sterner, "the Aetalites are unlikely to let you return. Your power strengthens with every passing year, and it is dangerous to leave it loose in the world of humans. I won't deceive you—I don't know what they intend to do with you."

"Eliminate me," I muttered.

"Now, why such gloom?" The paternal warmth returned to his voice, only to be replaced a moment later by the crisp tone of a man in command. "But we're not their puppets, ready to tear you out of here at their first demand and hand you over. We've asked for time on your behalf—one month. That will be enough for you to sit all your exams and receive your diploma. You'll finish college after all, rather than walking away two days short of graduating."

I nearly choked at such generosity. Had he lost his mind? What good was a diploma in the world of the Aets? Hang it on the wall for show, or what?

"I dislike leaving things unfinished," the Director explained slowly, running his thumb along the rounded edge of his desk. "You must close every sentence with a period before beginning a new one. I'll speak with the professors about arranging your testing. You'll have roughly two weeks to prepare—no more. That's all I can offer."

Anger was swelling inside me, my palms aching faintly. Worse still, the weakness was deepening by the second, and my pulse kept quickening. I was livid and frightened all at once — and with no outlet, nothing to blow up or smash to give my feelings free rein, I was essentially devouring myself.

“That’s everything, the Director repeated, watching me and probably guessing exactly what was going through my mind.”

I laced my fingers together, clenched them into fists, then tried to relax. The Director truly had done all he could for me — he’d asked the eits for a little more time. Even though he knew I couldn’t remain in the world of people — and what if, heaven forbid, the “barriers” failed to hold? He had asked, though asking the eits simply isn’t done. For my sake. So that I could finish his kyuruk college.

“Thank you, I muttered” and was startled to feel the weakness beginning to ebb; the tingling had stopped. I could even breathe more freely.

The Director nodded farewell and added, with real feeling, before I stepped out the door:

“The world of people will be losing a talented basketball player.”

Was that meant as praise, or was he trying to flatter me? Either way, that remark was the final straw. I shut the door behind me, sincerely hoping it would shatter into splinters.

But nothing happened.

Number L5. “Cachalot.” Kyle

A month? One month?! In a single month Hal will vanish behind that heavy door bearing the sign “Eitalites”? Just one month to accomplish everything he has yet to do in the world of humans? In one short month I’ll lose my best friend?!

Mr. Director’s words left us all stunned. Well, I can say that of myself with complete certainty, at any rate. I was simply terrified. Hal, though, looked remarkably calm — but I understood it was thanks to the “barriers”; otherwise everything around us would already be burning with black flame.

Jem folded her arms tightly across her chest and lifted her sharp chin, and Hal and I braced ourselves for an angry tirade.

“Excuse me, what? The Eits are hauling you off like some kind of object? And they gave you a single month to sit your exams? So that, damn kyruk, you can collect your diploma? Did I get all that right?”

It suddenly struck me that if our Jem had stood before the entire council of Eits at that very moment and repeated her question with the same intonation — and, of course, that same look — no one would have dared take Hal away from us. They’d have been too frightened.

“Correct,” Hal replied, more impassive and indifferent than he had ever been in his life. — I suppose it’s time to start preparing for the exam.

Jem swung round and seized him by the collar. Hal fell silent with surprise and doubled over almost in half. He isn’t actually all that tall, but Jem is still shorter than he is.

“You should have just killed the Twin, since they’re carting you off anyway,” she hissed through barely parted teeth. — You should have been born a proper Eit and never set foot here at all!

She shoved him away so hard that Hal nearly stumbled, then strode off swiftly, never once looking back, saying nothing more. He hadn't seen her this furious in a long time.

"Comforting to know who'll miss me least," Hal rasped, rubbing his neck. — If she had a secondary gift… ugh, even the feeblest one… — he tugged at his collar and swallowed. — Frightening to think what would have become of the college and everyone in it.

I gave a faint smile and nodded. I wasn't in the mood for fun, but I wasn't about to weep over it all either, after all.

"Are you under arrest?" I asked, my eyes drifting involuntarily to his hands.

The bracelets were hidden beneath the long sleeves of his shirt, yet showed as dark shadows through the white fabric.

"What for?" Hal waved a dismissive, weary hand. — If I ran, I wouldn't even make it to town. They've accounted for everything… — he swore quietly under his breath.

Ran?

"So, care to head to the central district after lectures?" I suggested. — We'll grab some pizza — you're hardly going to be served anything like that among the Eits.

I can't say for certain, but I've heard the Eits have no taste for modern cuisine, refuse to acknowledge fast food, and eat little beyond raw meat with wild herbs.

Maybe it sounds primitive, but I believe food is one of the surest ways to lift one's spirits. Some people do ingela, some smash things in a rage — me, I prefer to eat.

Hal tried to smile — he really did, though his mood was anything but cheerful.

"I wouldn't say no."

If you stay inside the college grounds for too long, you soon start to feel as though the whole world is the college itself. Your own role in it seems to swell with importance, the rules of the game stop looking so daunting, and everything feels comfortably within your control.

But the instant you step beyond the gates, something like the opposite of claustrophobia takes hold. You suddenly remember that there's enough space outside the fence to fit another college just like yours. Then it dawns on you that it doesn't end there — that somewhere beyond your home island lie other continents and islands, each of which could hold ten colleges at least. Panic seizes you, and your breathing quickens. Next you recall the world of the eights, which is, well, at least five times larger than your entire world. You're on the verge of fainting. You go pale… and you begin to ponder all the other worlds hidden deep within reality, realms that might dwarf even the eights' domain... Your brain feels ready to burst from the overload.

I get out to the neighboring districts fairly often, and Hal comes and goes constantly. It's the ones like our Jem who hardly ever leave home (and the college truly is her home, in every sense of the word), and I can see how ill at ease she feels in the city. Or perhaps it's just my imagination, and Hal is right that our friend doesn't have any feelings at all.

The college rented out skateboards, bicycles, and rollerblades, but we decided to do without any of them. The chief reason, of course, was that Hal was strapped for cash again, but there was also something to be said for strolling at our leisure, wearing out our shoe leather while we thought things over. Though, honestly, there was nothing for me to think through. What could I do for Hal? How could I sway the Head Director's decision, or the eights'? Who was I to them, after all? I didn't rage against my own helplessness — I took it philosophically. I

might have offered Jem the same advice, but she'd hardly have listened to me anyway.

We trudged through the streets of Rosehill without glancing around or paying attention to anyone, and people paid little attention to us in return — even in our college uniforms, we drew no stares, for the locals had long grown used to gangs of students wandering from district to district. There were few other teenagers about — nearly all the town's young people between ten and twenty were gathered at the college. Let them feel awkward among adults and old folks; we had nothing to be ashamed of.

Before setting out, Hal had changed into a sports uniform, for he detested trousers and collared shirts, and above all the times a tie was demanded of him — and worse still when cufflinks entered the picture — besides which, his shoes had all but shredded his feet. True, the college basketball kit was scarcely less recognizable than the ordinary everyday uniform, so he would never have managed to pass for one of the townsfolk in it anyway.

That thought merely flashed through my head — I'm not hinting at anything.

Rosedale occupies the entire island that bears its name, hemmed in on every side by the Great Ocean. Unfortunately, I grew up in the central district, where you can't hear the crash of the surf or catch the scent of sand and salt water. I'd snatch at every chance to reach the shore, yet—simple as that sounds—it hardly ever happened. Something was always claiming my time, and never by my own choosing. You know how parents set out to raise their child as a jack-of-all-trades? They pack him off to dance classes and music school, enroll him in the ham radio club, sign him up for astronomy courses too. What you end up with is a blockhead like me, who understands nothing about life and

still hasn't a clue what to do with himself, but can at least tap-dance and sing "Shine On, My Lantern."

Rosedale is hardly the most advanced of cities, yet cars abound, every household has electricity, radio, and telephone service, and color television has lately made its appearance. New phone booths were sprouting along the streets, and in any café you could play a jukebox or an arcade machine. I delighted in watching technological progress—taking note of each novelty, learning of each new discovery. I loved Rosedale dearly, and however I felt about the eights and their deeds, I had to admit that all of this was ours only by their grace. The eights hold power over humankind, and no matter how the people rise up, no matter how loudly they grumble, so it will remain. People work for the eights, and the eights permit them to live amid every modern comfort. A perfectly fair price.

The town had one genuinely good pizzeria, housed on two floors with a terrace besides. A colour television glowed on the first floor; a radio murmured on the second. The menu offered some two dozen varieties of pizza, along with appetizers, desserts, and drinks. After the wholesome but soul-crushingly dull fare at college, this was the place for a proper feast, whatever the occasion — provided you had decent funds, of course.

I don't mean to boast, but money has never been my problem.

The place was always packed, and Hal and I barely managed to claim a table by the window upstairs. The young waitress — the sort of girl who'd flunked her exams — threw us a frightened glance, dropped the menus, and scurried off. Yes, students aren't exactly beloved in establishments like this. Our reputation is such that all anyone expects of us is to make noise, hurl food about, abuse the staff, and then whine that we're broke and could the bill perhaps go on our parents' or friends' tab…

I love demolishing bad stereotypes, and I have never behaved that way in my life.

“My Kata, I am so done with this day,” Hal drawled, sprawling across the little sofa, throwing his head back against the rest and stretching his legs far out in front of him. “Right now I’m sitting here thinking about how I have to frantically cram for tests and an exam and… ugh, maybe I should just go hang myself, huh?”

I drummed the menu against the table, glancing at my friend over its edge. Behind Hal stretched a panoramic window overlooking a bustling street, and all at once the glass seemed to vanish—the illusion that he was about to plunge straight down into it seized me. I bit the inside of my lip to shake off the feeling and waved a hand awkwardly in the air.

“I can help” with the exams, or the hanging, hardly any difference. Just say the word, dude. But let’s eat first, I’m literally starving…

“Lunch was two hours ago.”

“I know, but nerves always make me ravenous,” I smiled faintly and ducked behind the menu, studying the list of dishes.

In truth, I didn’t think I could swallow a single bite. Still, I kept hoping that when they brought us a steaming pizza crowned with pink shrimp, pale ribbons of squid, dark mussels — and olives too, we could have olives on it… Breathing warmth through a crust of fresh bread, with that delicate, teasing scent of salt water and the most tender, tender flesh… Even now, merely imagining it, something rumbled in my stomach.

“Kyle,” Hal called to me quietly, edging closer, — do you really think they’re going to expel me?

I had to wrench my mind away from thoughts of pizza, repeating his question to myself several times before it truly sank in. Liquidation? How I loathe that word—so unpleasant on the tongue, so jagged

in the mind. Chiefly because none of the humans really knows what the liquidation process is like for eights. And where ignorance reigns, wild speculation and rumor run rampant. I'd heard, for instance, that the person (or the eight himself) is killed, then dismembered, cremated, and the ashes scattered over the human world, where they mingle with road dust and grime, or simply settle inside people's houses. Nothing material of the person remains at all. He vanishes from every known world at once.

Whenever that version crossed my mind, I would immediately try with all my might not to picture people breathing in these poor unfortunates, the ashes accumulating in their lungs... Brr!

A lump rose in my throat again at the mere touch of that subject. Hal, by contrast, was perfectly calm and serious—a rare thing for him. It was all down to his "barriers," believe me.

"Oh, come off it, old pal, I said breezily, flipping through the menu without so much as a glance at my friend." Nobody's ever been liquidated merely for having a developed secondary power. At worst they'll pack you off to a college for eights and make you a full citizen of their world. Or maybe they'll take one look at you and send you straight back. Anything could happen.

I hadn't the faintest idea what went on in the minds of eights, or what they actually did in such situations, so my words carried about as much weight as "the wind blows because the trees sway." But I was doing my level best to cheer my friend up.

"Why did the Eits answer so quickly and immediately offer to take me?" Hal said suspiciously, barely listening to me. — I don't like that reaction. I thought…

He suddenly fell silent and sat up straight, gazing past my shoulder. I didn't even bother to turn around — I simply got the menu ready, preparing to place our order.

“One seafood pizza, the large one, and…”

The menu was snatched from my hands and smacked over my head. I yelped in outrage and spun around, but while I was still floundering, the invisible assailant had already slipped past me and dropped into the chair across the table. When I finally faced forward again, I saw Hal doubled up with laughter and Jem glaring daggers at me. That lunatic — some days you couldn’t track her down with a search party, and then she materializes the very moment you least expect her. Still, I was glad to see her.

Jem was in sports clothes too, but she’d left her knee socks and jacket back at college. All she had on was a tank top and short shorts, and in place of sneakers she wore roller skates. She pulled them off right there and climbed into the chair, legs tucked beneath her, cross-legged. The whole maneuver took less than ten seconds — and there she was again, staring straight at me. Her plump lower lip was pressed tight, her eyebrows had slid down over her eyes. I lifted the corners of my mouth in a faint smile in return, but it did no good.

“You two kugalungs, why didn’t you take me with you?” Jem demanded, seizing our full attention.

“But you left, we never saw you again, how were we supposed to know…” Hal began to protest, but Jem simply punched him under the ribs.

Hal slid to the far end of the little sofa and shot me a meaningful glance. I gave the faintest nod in agreement. Girls are as unpredictable as natural disasters—especially when the Eits send one your way!

Catching our exchange of looks, Jem grew genuinely furious. She snatched a rollerblade off the floor and brandished it menacingly.

“Stop smirking, you idiots! Start telling me right now what you two cooked up without me!..”

She scowled as the waitress approached our table. The girl stared at our friend in bewilderment, nearly with alarm, while Jem kept the skate clutched in one hand. And before a scandal could erupt, I blurted out:

“We’ll take the seafood pizza, the largest size, plus a medium pepperoni and a small vegetarian. And three virgin mojitos, please.”

“And a spinach salad,” Jem added, in a voice colder than ice.

Once the order arrived, the waitress collected her tip and departed without a word about our unexpected and rather rude addition to the party, and at last we could talk like civilized people. I mean, without anyone waving footwear about, without anyone threatening to hang themselves, and without anyone’s stomach growling loud enough to fill the whole pizzeria.

“We were discussing liquidation,” Hal began calmly, and I nearly choked on my mojito. “What do you make of it?”

“Of liquidation?” Jem didn’t bat an eye, working a spinach leaf loose from between her teeth with her tongue. “Never had occasion to consider it. Why, do you dream of being granted that honor?”

There’s nothing sacred to a girl—she’ll mock absolutely anything.

“But isn’t that the only logical conclusion from everything that’s been going on lately?” Hal was growing nervous. He even set down his slice of pizza and turned fully toward Jem. “The Aites don’t need me. And neither do the people here. Do you understand? Not there, not here. Liquidation is the only way out, and that’s exactly what they’ll do.”

“Don’t spoil my appetite,” Jem cut him off, calmly continuing to chew her own portion. “Did it ever occur to you that you might not surrender to them at all, and they’d simply send you back?”

“Too unlikely,” he objected stubbornly. “They’ll decide I’m too dangerous to leave wandering around, in either world.”

I didn’t like where his thoughts were heading, but I couldn’t come up with anything convincing to say in reply. Jem, apparently, was amused by his fears. Was there anything at all capable of truly frightening her—enough to steal her breath and set her heart turning over in her chest? I didn’t want to think about it, yet I understood that if something happened to me or to Hal, even then, Jem would scarcely give it a second thought.

“Somebody’s got a bad case of star fever. Liquidation is an expensive business. Wasting time on yet another defective? As if.” Jem looked away and picked up her mojito.

Hal was about to respond, but instead he did something rather wise—took a bite of his portion, chewed in silence, and only then spoke again: quietly now, and without any visible emotion:

“I have no desire whatsoever to find out which of us is right. None at all to go to those freaks and wait to see what they decide to do with me.”

Jem swallowed the last slice of her veggie pizza and stretched, eyes half-closed. She was uncannily like a cat and a bird at once: a small, supple body, and short hair as soft as feathers. She usually seemed utterly relaxed and drowsy, yet the instant you touched her, she would lunge into attack—she could peck you to death or shred you to ribbons with her claws. Then, as though nothing had happened, she’d retreat to her little nest and settle straight back into her dozing.

“Told you. You’re up to something,” she said at last, looking at us. — Out with it. Right now. What. Are. You. Up. To?

I was about to protest that we weren’t planning anything and what on earth she was going on about, when Hal suddenly said—quietly, but with perfect clarity:

“Time to get out of here.”

I naively hoped he meant the pizzeria.

Jem missed her aim, striking her chopsticks down beside the salad bowl instead of into it.

“You want to run away from college?” she whispered, eyes going wide. — Where? For good?

She even opened the menu and propped it upright, as though she could hide from the entire world behind it. I scooted closer to the table as well, glancing around the whole time. True, we hadn’t drawn any attention before, but now we looked like super-secret agents who had suddenly become visible to everyone around us.

Hal leaned across the table, pushed his empty glass aside, and whispered, cupping his hand over his mouth for extra secrecy:

“I refuse to be a doll, jerked around on strings by humans or eits alike. I’ll take a leave of absence from the college for a while and return once everyone’s forgotten and the fuss has blown over. It shouldn’t take long. I’ll still make it back in time to dance at the graduation ball.”

Perhaps Jem had anticipated something of the sort, but I certainly hadn’t. After Hal’s announcement, my jaw hit the floor. In all my memory, no one had ever attempted to run away from the college before. Nor had the thought ever crossed my mind — there was simply no reason for it.

“But what about the exams?” I muttered, bewildered, unable to believe it could all be so simple, so easy.

Hal merely shrugged with studied indifference, not even sparing me a glance.

“Oh, come on. I’m one of the best basketball players” they’d never dream of...

“Throwing you out, just like that,” Jem cut him off brutally. — That’s hardly the same as skipping a single lecture, you know.

I noticed Hal's hands go taut. Yes, he truly hates bad news — but at least, for now, he couldn't work himself into a genuine rage, and that, oddly enough, unsettled me even more.

"Miss Goody Two-Shoes, I think you're milking the drama," he drawled. — If I'm back just in time for the exams, everything will be perfectly fine, I'm more than certain of it. The higher-ups and the professors love to paint us as hopeless screw-ups destined to fail everything, ready to expel us for one dirty look. Relax — it's all just theatre.

"Well, well, we shall see," Jem replied, matching his tone, then pressed on: — Besides, what will this little escapade of yours actually accomplish? You think they won't track you down? That they'll simply forget all about it? You're either hopelessly naive or absurdly optimistic.

Hal pushed back from the table and folded his arms across his chest. He seemed already to regret having told Jem about his plan. And really, could one ever expect blind admiration or approval from her? She was a Prick. She didn't praise — she hunted for weak spots, prodding at them, pinching them until she had defeated her opponent.

Or forced him to defend himself better.

"I'll think it all through," Hal muttered stubbornly, drumming a finger against one of the barrier bracelets. "But I have no intention of sitting around waiting for my execution. I'm not the sort you mess with."

Jem sighed in exasperation and raked a hand through her short hair, ruffling it. She dyed her strands different colors — right now, for instance, pink streaks showed against her very pale brown hair. I sometimes hint that she'd look striking, and probably genuinely beautiful, with long hair, but every time she hears this, Jem fixes me

with a look as if I've lost my mind, and stubbornly crops her hair short the moment it begins brushing her shoulders.

If only Hal guarded his own hairstyle so zealously. His thick, chocolate-colored hair constantly overstepped the bounds of what was permitted, tumbling into his eyes and curling into rings at the nape of his neck. Yet he kept putting off the barber until one of the pretty college girls hinted at it.

Or volunteered her services.Understand this, you silly boy—life doesn't end when they ship you off to the eits, Jem was saying, calm and unhurried, while I ran my hand absently over my own cropped hair. "Perhaps that's exactly where you belong?" She paused, then added, glancing away: "Though I doubt they'll keep you around. You're too weak for their taste. Maybe they'll just give you a closer look, lecture you about keeping your composure (and on that point I'd side with them), or perhaps they'll even leave you one of the 'barriers' (which, for the record, I'd approve of as well). And that would be the end of it. Don't flatter yourself about how much you matter to those creatures. They have problems aplenty without you. To them, you're merely another line on a list to be crossed off as soon as possible. 'Escape'! 'Elimination'! 'Uproar'! Even if you had beaten the Twin to death, things wouldn't have been so dire. You're not the only special one out there—there are thousands like you in this world."

I couldn't speak for Hal, but Jem's words completely set my mind at ease. Like a weight lifted from my soul. I leaned back in my chair, caught my breath (I hadn't even noticed I'd been practically choking on air), and looked over at Hal. He, for his part, was irritated, but he had no wish to argue with Jem in front of the whole pizzeria. Perhaps those 'barriers' really do serve some purpose after all.

By then the diner had filled with people; all around our table there was laughter and chatter, the rustle of paper and the clink of dishes.

The air hung thick with the scent of hot dough, tomatoes, smoked meat, bubbling cheese, spices, and sweet drinks. Any more of this, and my stomach would have decided we hadn't eaten in five-odd hours and demanded a fresh serving.

Probably Hal was thinking something along the same lines. He glanced around irritably and suddenly rose to his feet.

"Let's go home — there's nothing more to do here."

Home. Did he even grasp what he meant by calling the college that? Did he understand what he was giving up by walking away? Abandoning his home and family? No, Jem was right — he had nowhere else to go, and all of it was nothing but childish threats hurled out in a boyish fit of temper. Why pretend otherwise? Everyone passes through a stage when they long to run away — from someone, over something. Even if it's only to a treehouse in the backyard.

Jem strapped on her roller skates, Hal took her hand to keep her from tumbling, and we pressed through the crowd of visitors, squeezing between them as fast as we could. Adults, families with small children, elderly people, elementary schoolers. No other teenagers or students — which was why people's eyes lingered on us a moment longer than on the rest. It seemed to me that all anyone was doing was staring at my mouth. I pressed my lips together more tightly, feeling the sharp points of my teeth sink into the tender flesh, and lowered my face, regretting I'd forgotten to bring a hat. In my head, I knew that people gaze at all sorts of things: at Jem's tattoos, at Hal's "barriers," at my height and build, for that matter — and that they don't care a whit what my mouth looks like. I knew it, and still I felt ashamed. As always.

We made our way down to the ground floor and were nearly at the exit when we collided with a crowd of noisy women hunting for a free table. As we began edging around them, I recognized one — the

loudest of the lot — and felt a sharp pang in my chest. At that very instant, she turned toward us and gasped.

“Kyle! What on earth are you doing here?”

I swear, half the pizzeria must have heard my real name — I watched several heads swivel in our direction. Hal and Jem shot the woman looks of open displeasure, but what could anyone do? I smiled, taking care not to stretch my mouth any wider than the limit I’d set myself, and returned her greeting:

“Hi, Mom. How’s it going?”

It’s always awkward when you’re out with friends and suddenly run into your parents. Twice as awkward when your parents happen to be mine.

My mother is conspicuous everywhere, at all times. She favors clothes in outlandish styles, flashy jewelry, and a passion for vivid makeup. Whatever she lacks in secondary powers or striking looks, she more than compensates for with an ability to talk — a great deal, and very loudly. Arguing with her is pointless, and she can talk anyone into anything — quite possibly even the Elites themselves.

From her, I inherited only her black hair and her height. All the social graces got lost somewhere along the way to me.

And so, while some of her friends fussed over me (“my, how you’ve grown!”, “what a stylish uniform!”, “so grown-up already!”), while another group spotted Jem (Hal somehow dropped out of notice) and, naturally, began exchanging sly smiles and whispers, Mom threw her arms around my neck and planted a big kiss on my cheek. Apparently she still favored that thick scarlet lipstick…

“Honey, what are you doing here? Is everything all right at college?” she gushed, finally stepping back to look at me.

I hadn’t seen my parents for an entire quarter, or a little more — not since winter break, when I’d gone home for ten days like most of the

other students. And there was something odd about me turning up before the next vacation — or, let's be honest, before graduation.

"Everything's fine, Mom. College is wonderful. We were just out for a walk."

Mom seemed to relax, but then she instantly seized on the sore subject:

"What about your exams? Are you studying properly?"

I caught Jem and Hal trading meaningful glances and shuffling from foot to foot. Meanwhile, my mother's friends had already lost interest in us and gone back to hunting for a free table. It was time to bring this unexpected encounter to an end — though truthfully, I'd have liked to talk with Mom a little longer, about Dad, for instance. Still, lingering for a half-hour chat while my friends waited for me would have been unbearably awkward.

If only I'd known then that the next time I saw Mommy, she would be in tears, terrified, convinced her son was no longer alive…

"Of course I'm studying. Everything will be fine," I promised. "Mom, we have to go. Give my love to Dad and Walt."

Walt is my younger brother, and I'm more or less obliged to remember him — pass along greetings, ask how he's doing, even when the mood doesn't strike me. And no, he doesn't attend the Lake of Dreams College, though he's already fourteen. He has… a rather awkward, defective appearance.

Here Mom suddenly remembered that I was already a grown-up and terribly busy student. Parents often forget such things.

"Yes, of course, sweetie! I'll pass it on to Walt, but Dad isn't home right now."

That didn't surprise me in the least — Dad was often away. He's the mayor of Rosedill, a rather busy man. But Mommy couldn't resist adding the next line, to lend his absence a little extra weight:

“He was urgently summoned to the council of the Eitalites. Something’s happened there.”

My friends and I exchanged glances. Honestly, nothing new — the Eits sit at the center of both worlds, as though nothing could ever befall them! — yet the announcement still left us uneasy. Because if something has happened to the Eits right now, just as they’re preparing to snatch Hal for themselves, then we need to know about it. What if it’s somehow connected to him? Highly unlikely, but if they’ve got some festival coming up like “Purge All the Defective Ones” or something along those lines, they ought to warn us.

“What exactly? Is it something to do with the city?”

Mom hesitated, looking at me helplessly. Apparently she’d blurted out information never meant for the general public. But catching the big question in my small eyes, Mommy gave in, leaned right up to me, and quickly whispered in my ear, breathing out a sweet cloud of perfume:

“I don’t know exactly, sweetie. Something like a manhunt” as if they’ve lost something, or someone. There are more Eitalite agents in the city now, and they keep convening councils. It feels to me like another one of those shifts. Lots of people have been summoned there from here. And nobody knows what’s actually happened… at least, I don’t.

She stepped swiftly back from me, straightened her little hat, and smiled her goodbye as though nothing at all had happened.

“Study hard, dear. Write and call more often.” She gave Jem and Hal a fleeting wave, unaware of their real names, their nicknames long since faded from her memory.

She hurried off to rejoin her friends without a single backward glance at me, as if fearing she had said too much—that the eithalite agents might pounce on me for it at any moment.

Noticing that Hal and Jem were devouring me with their eyes (one grey, one hazel), burning with impatience and curiosity, I remarked quietly:

“Curiouser and curiouser.”

Number T23. “Skrip”. Hal

Deep in my gut, I knew bad news was waiting for me.

If Kyle had received good news, he couldn’t have kept it hidden no matter how hard he tried. He has always struggled to conceal his emotions — fear above all.

Right now he wore the expression of someone who had walked face-first into a wall — eyes locked on a single point, lips compressed into a long, tight line, his big nose looking wider and flatter than ever. Every feature had frozen under the strain. Impatience was burning through me. I wanted to seize my friend by the shoulders and shake him until everything his mom had told him came tumbling out.

Jem, who frequently liked to pretend she didn’t know us at all, seemed as indifferent to the world as the rest of us — yet every so often she shot curious glances at Cachalot. I could even partly understand why she keeps her emotions and feelings under wraps — and not merely because she doesn’t want to appear weak or vulnerable. When Jem grows interested in something and lets it show, she turns into a child: a girl with big round eyes, fingers splayed and ready to grab at anything, mouth hanging slightly open. I had seen her like this perhaps twice in my life, and now I was startled to catch glimpses of that second nature of hers surfacing in the smallest details — her gleaming eyes, her fingers anxiously clutching the straps of her backpack, the way she kept chewing her lip. She wanted to know what Kyle had learned just as badly as I did.

But the big fellow had been right not to hurry into unburdening himself back in the city. To be honest, there was nowhere you could discuss something confidential and feel entirely safe, though at least at the college we could duck out of sight of prying eyes in nooks we knew well.

Everywhere, always, people were afraid of saying one word too many — wary of the eights, the informers, the jumpy authorities. You practically had to invent a whole new language, keeping under wraps any scrap of information that was even remotely important or secret. For you could suddenly find yourself of interest to the eights, who believed themselves entitled to know everything, at all times and in all places.

Rumor had it they showed little ceremony to those who fell into their clutches.

You could count yourself a lost cause if the eights ever learned your true name — hence the whole system of nicknames and numbers. Even so, it bordered on paranoia; sometimes people concocted more than a dozen names for themselves as camouflage. Indeed, some no longer knew their real names at all.

The Eits had always been a little touched in the head, but of late—roughly twenty years ago—matters had gone entirely off the rails. One Eit on the council lost his mind outright. What he wanted, whom he feared, what he was even thinking—no one knows to this day. Yet within mere days, that madman had turned most of the Eits against humankind, and our already precarious standing in the world grew shakier still. There were interrogations, house searches; everyone without exception fell under suspicion of conspiracy and espionage. Many were arrested and done away with in those days, often on no solid evidence whatsoever. Things have relaxed since—the Eits have settled down somewhat—but people still sleep uneasily and take care not to draw attention to themselves.

The strange thing is, I found myself in precisely the situation that would be anyone’s worst nightmare, yet I felt no fear at all. Though, by all rights, I should have.

Rumors and tall tales still drifted through the city: whispers of Eit agents darting through the streets on the lookout for suspicious characters, of magical surveillance systems, of mind parasites supposedly unleashed by the Eits to drive people mad. Some even spoke of summoning the ghost police—the finest officers and detectives who had ever lived, and who were, moreover, already dead.

Truth be told, Kyle would have done better to keep his mouth shut entirely, whatever he happened to hear about the Eits.

I have no idea how we made it across nearly the whole city without exchanging a single word, barely even glancing at one another. Oddly enough, that in itself must have looked the most suspicious of all—if the Eits had truly wanted to find us, they would have noticed us long ago.

Once we were through the college gates, we slowed our pace. Where to go? Inside the buildings, we could easily be overheard—and who was to say there weren't magical listening devices tucked away somewhere? The woods and parks were out of the question too: far too much nature there, and nature is always in league with those creatures. As for the altars and the Lake, don't even get me started—we might as well have marched straight up to the portal into the world of the Aites and loudly discussed everything we'd heard.

So we settled on what seemed the least bad option: the outdoor basketball court.

It stood outside the college proper, yet there was almost nothing natural left about it. True, the place was completely exposed, and people congregated there all the time—between the shouting, the stomping, and the thud of bouncing balls, an actual conversation was impossible. But then, we had no intention of talking.

Kyle would write everything down for us on paper.

When we reached the court, we took seats in the empty spectator stands, and while Jem rummaged through her backpack for a notebook and pen, Kyle and I, for the sake of appearances, watched the kids play. “Watched” was putting it generously—the younger boys were fooling around, shrieking and shoving one another, nearly forgetting the ball existed. Contemplating what a hopeless generation of basketball players was growing up around here, I felt gloom settling over me again. Before long, once I was gone, the sport would wither and die out here entirely.

Jem produced a small notebook with a stiff blue cover, flipped it open somewhere near the back, and handed it to Kyle along with the pencil. A straight-A student — straight-A in everything; even her school supplies still looked brand new at the end of the year. Before the big guy could even raise the pencil to write, we were already leaning over the notebook, impatient for words to appear on the page. Kyle hunched his shoulders awkwardly.

“This looks stupid,” he whispered — and immediately got Jem’s palm clamped over his mouth.

I managed a quick glance at her, and the next second I was tracking every nervous twitch of Kyle’s hand. The pencil scratched softly, shedding graphite dust across the paper. Clumsy letters sprawled over the page, composing the most ridiculous sentences I had ever seen.

“The Aites are all over the city. They’re searching for something. They’ve shifted again.”

The moment the pencil came to a halt and dropped its period, Jem snatched the notebook out of Kyle’s hands and glared furiously at the page. She opened her mouth to say something, then caught herself, grabbed the pencil before Kyle could start chewing it out of habit, and began scribbling furiously — frowning, biting her lower lip, pouring

her anger into the paper. It seemed to me the notebook was about to burst into flames. That's exactly what would have happened to me.

"What's the big deal?! They shift all the time as it is!"

She tossed the notebook back to us, slumped against the seatback in thoroughly wretched spirits, and stretched her legs out into the space before her. I read Kyle's brief message over and over, straining to grasp what even he couldn't. The Eits were lost? And on what grounds had his mother decided that? What did "the shift" mean? Was their paranoia flaring up again? No sooner had one question formed than a second and a third crowded in—yet not a single answer arrived.

In frustration I kicked the leg of the seat in front of me. Why does everything always go wrong for me? All I have to do is show up somewhere and something is bound to happen, and it inevitably blows up in my face! Why can't I live an ordinary life like everyone else?

Because you're not ordinary, kugalung.

"Whatever happened, they're certainly not letting you back in," Kyle said quietly, glancing my way.

My throat tightened with anxiety and anger. He was right. The odds had been slim enough already, and now it was perfectly clear that no sensible decisions would be coming out of the Eits. Which only confirmed my idea—everything pointed to it!

We have to run.

My friends, who had known me for years, understood exactly what I was thinking. Kyle frowned and dropped his gaze, and Jem hushed me with a warning:

"Put that thought out of your head. At least until tomorrow."

"And what's going to change tomorrow?" I was heartily sick of them treating me like a child. I rose to my feet and stretched, working the stiffness from my muscles. "Or maybe the day after, hm? For all we

know, by then they won't feel like waiting and will come crashing in here themselves. That'll be the perfect moment, won't it, Uk?.."

"Hal!"

Real names still carried an unimaginable power — I shut my mouth at once, though mostly out of the familiar dread that someone else might have overheard "Jem." But she had no intention of stopping:

"You can't just make decisions like that! Simply because the notion popped into your head! People shout at you whenever you switch tactics mid-game in basketball, and life isn't going to coddle you any more gently. If you're going to do something, think it through first. And more than once."

We were supposedly the same age, yet at times she fussed more than any old granny. I waved her off irritably and turned to go. I'd had my fill of these lectures. Perhaps I shouldn't have told my friends anything at all — just slipped away from them quietly and been done with it.

"See you at dinner?" Kyle asked hopefully as we parted, naively convinced that any unpleasant matter could be settled over a meal.

"I'm not hungry," I muttered in reply, already weaving between the rows of seats toward the exit.

The skin beneath the barrier bracelets burned as if stung by nettles.

I refused to consider that this might have been our last meeting, my last conversation with Kyle and Jem. No — of course I would see them again, whatever I decided to do. And yet that fear lingered all the same, buried in my pathetic arsenal of thoughts. I would never have wished for that.

But neither did I intend to keep brooding forever instead of acting. I loathed turning things over in my mind and second-guessing myself a hundred times — that's how it was on written exams, that's how it was in games, and that's how it was in life. It didn't always bring success,

but hesitating and weighing alternatives was worse than torture for me. If I'd resolved to act a certain way, it wasn't for nothing — I'd felt it had to be that way, that it was unquestionably the right answer! And if others disagreed, that was their problem, not mine.

So if I decided to flee the college, then flee it I would. Before the Eits showed up here, and before Mr. Director clapped me in chains. I'd simply run off, wait for everything to blow over, and then return. I wouldn't betray anyone or kill anyone — there'd be nothing truly serious to punish me for. Mr. Director would grumble for five minutes and then take me back like a lamb. After all, I was one of the best basketball players in this dump!

Buoyed by thoughts like these, I trudged toward my cabin — though only because I had nowhere else to go. If only I'd known how and where, I would have bolted straight for the place I ended up during my blackouts. That land where blue dandelions grow. I couldn't even get there artificially, by deliberately working myself into a rage or doing something else to force my secondary power to reveal itself. I was wearing "barriers," and as long as they stayed on, there was no way I'd ever see that silent girl again…

At that point I genuinely felt wretched — I even stopped walking as the full weight of my helplessness sank in. If only I knew her name, I could summon her image in the Lake of Dreams, if only to gaze at her. I couldn't even carry a photograph of her with me.

Of course, I know plenty of fellows who fancy girls and will seize any excuse to draw near the object of their devotion. Last year, Snurok fell head over heels for a girl from the fencing club. You should have seen the lengths he went to — he'd slip her didus flowers, which supposedly plunge a person into something like a lovesick daze; he tried to enchant her with fire; he even schemed endlessly to learn her

true name... The girl carried on as though he didn’t exist, and Skeleton and I mercilessly tormented poor Snurok about it.

I’m not that much of a fool, and I understand I feel nothing of that sort for the mute beauty. I don’t know her at all, and she is most likely nothing more than a figment of my overwrought imagination. But even so — I missed her. I missed her far too much in ordinary life. Merely the image of her, a glance, a touch, would soothe me, and everything around me would recede into something distant and unimportant. The world blurred like a watercolor, growing simple, quiet, and small — no longer worth my anger or my fear. Near that girl, I truly felt capable of a great deal, certain of my mastery over myself and my secondary power. I treasured those thoughts and feelings she stirred in me. No one else could call them forth.

It was far too humiliating to speak of it with anyone — even my friends wouldn’t have understood. It was mine alone: private, secret — and now they had stripped even that from me! Furiously, I rubbed one of the “barriers,” feeling the smooth plate beneath my fingertips. Slirium crystal — one of nature’s finest magic absorbers. Many years ago, people had forged swords and spearheads, armor and shields from this very stone, and marched to war against the eits. Strangely enough, they lost all the same, and the conflict came to be known as the Fragile War. Don’t ask me why — I was never much of a historian.

Then a thought struck me: I would have to rid myself of the bracelets before making my escape. While they remained on me, I was far too weak — anyone could easily run me down and seize me. Absolutely not. Somehow, I would remove the “barriers” and pray that no one caught so much as a glimpse of my secondary power. The odds were slim, of course — but far better than charging forward weaker than a child and foolishly believing everything would fall within my abilities in such a state.

I never made it to my room. Instead, I turned off toward the Lake of Dreams, vaguely hoping it would be less crowded there—and above all that Jem and Kyle would give the place a wide berth. I had no wish to see them or hear them again. One was too much of a coward to defy the rules; the other obeyed them too faithfully, and took pride in it. I shouldn't have confided my plans to either of them—they were no use to me in any case. The mute girl, though, I would gladly have taken along. I could have talked her round, seized her without a word, begged her to come with me. And since she wasn't truly alive—not a real person—it was all the easier: she was always with me, tucked away somewhere in my thoughts. That, too, was a comfort, even as it planted stubborn little sprouts of sorrow and hopelessness about my situation.

The path to the Lake wound through an unnamed grove, paved with cobblestones—the only trace of human hands in this corner of the world. The dense undergrowth rang with birdsong and whistles, with the droning of insects and the rustle of leaves. It was always cool here, heavy with the scent of damp earth, pine needles, and wildflowers of every kind. The towering trees nearly shut out the sky altogether; tilt your head back, and you could catch only fleeting glints of sunlight flickering between branch and leaf.

I had never once strayed from the path, never tried to push into the depths of the thicket, though nothing forbade it. The sense of untamed nature here was too overpowering, and I secretly feared that once I stepped into that kingdom, getting back out would be no simple matter. Where nature remains untouched, magic is bound to reveal itself, even in the smallest measure. And I had not yet found my footing with it.

Jem is partly right — it would have been better had I been born a full-fledged eit from the start, without this "half-and-half middling." Everyone else would benefit, and my own life would be simpler. I could wield my power with ease instead of being ashamed to show it.

Maybe — why pretend otherwise — I'd even rank among the most powerful eits, and from there it's a short step to a seat on the council. I have no desire to play politician and rule the world, or even a corner of it, but there's something undeniably pleasant about having strength and doing something genuinely good with it, isn't there?

And the first thing I'd do would be to loosen the eits' grip on the human world. They have no idea how cruelly they squeeze it in their paws.

There weren't many people at the Lake of Dreams — mostly students from the younger groups, sitting in the gazebos with their books and notebooks. In a couple of hours they would dutifully retire to their rooms, and couples would take their place, vying for the right to stand on the bridge or claim one of the secluded tents.

There had been two girls on the bridge just moments before, and even they scurried off the instant they saw me. I really must terrify people now. They were already wary of me, doing their best to keep their distance — above all, not to provoke me. Honestly, there's little joy in that; I don't want to be treated like a psychopath or a wild beast. I want to be treated like anyone else, with all the obligatory trappings.

The Twin wasn't afraid of me. Yesterday he made a careless remark about Jem and her Finding Day, and I — glad of any excuse for a fight — nearly killed him.

I walked slowly out onto the bridge and stopped at a small, circular platform at its center. From here, the voices on the banks faded to almost nothing, and if you gazed down at the water, you could nearly convince yourself you were entirely alone. Just like in that place with the blue dandelions.

A cool breeze, fragrant with sukloki, ruffled my hair into a careless tangle and stirred the loose fabric of my basketball uniform. Yet it held no power to disturb the water's glassy surface. I've never been quite

sure why — some say the Lake of Dreams exists in another dimension, only loosely tethered to this one; others insist the water is simply too thick and dense.

Gripping the wrought-iron railing, I leaned far over it, bending as close to the Lake as I dared. Only when the bar dug into my stomach and my heels lifted off the planks did I stop, staring down into water so still it showed me not even my own reflection. But what if I tried? If the mute girl existed only in my imagination, then she couldn't have a name at all. What if fortune favored me, and the Lake granted so strange a request?

I hauled myself back, shrugged off my backpack, and began rifling through it in a hurry, clinging to the faint hope that had just kindled inside me. If only I could try — if only I could see her, even for a couple of seconds. That alone would give me strength to carry through the rest of the day.

There was nothing in my backpack useless enough to discard, yet dear enough to my heart for the Lake to accept as an offering. It was long past time someone opened a stall selling trinkets meant specifically for casting into the Lake of Dreams. And if people spoke their true names to one another when they met, all the world's troubles would be mended for good.

I was turning a sports headband over in my hands, wondering whether it had soaked up enough of my sweat for the Lake to accept it, when a voice rang out nearby:

"Skrip! There you are!"

Mimosa dropped onto the bridge boards beside me, her striped school skirt riding up nearly to her armpits. Oblivious to it all, she gaped at me with those enormous eyes of hers, as though a miracle had appeared before her. I even began to feel self-conscious, which is utterly unlike me.

“As you can see…” I began, but the instant I opened my mouth, my classmate burst out:

“I was starting to fear they’d expelled you from college! Where on earth have you been all this time? Are you all right? Oh, wait—are you here to speak with the Lake? Have I interrupted something?..”

Had I not known Mimosa, I might have taken such gushing for a crush. But this dear girl behaved exactly the same way with everyone, from the smallest children to the most venerable professors. She was forever worrying over someone, forever lending a hand and turning up at precisely the right moment.

Though, no one would deny it: at times all that fussing of hers could drive you up the wall.

“Everything’s fine, don’t fret,” I said, winking at her as I rose to my feet. — I’m returning to the sacred pursuit of learning—if that’s any of your business.

I held out my hand to help her up. Her skin was so smooth and soft that I was almost reluctant to let it go. I like Mimosa, but I couldn’t really call her a friend. She’s simply not that kind of material—too normal, without a single drop of the Eights in her. Jem, of course, is purebred too, yet she’s the most abnormal person you could ever meet. And her tattoos are fantastic. Mimosa, on the other hand, is just a sweetheart—one of those girls who always hand in their homework on time, are back in their rooms before curfew, and never pick their noses. Sometimes it’s pleasant enough to take girls like that to a café, ask them to dance, or feel a glow of pride when they turn up at a match to cheer you on. But it never went any further than that.

“What will they do to you for what you did to the Twin?” Mimosa whimpered, searching my eyes.

I looked back at her, then quickly glanced away. Mimosa is genuinely pretty: tall, slim, with long golden hair and, of course, blue

eyes. She manages to look elegant and lovely in any of the college uniforms, even though plenty of girls complain and protest that college clothes could make anyone look ridiculous. Who in their right mind would wear striped skirts past the knee, thick knee socks, and dull—utterly dull—blouses trimmed with childish lace at the chest? The girls would pin their skirts up, roll their socks down, and do whatever they could to turn the identical outfits into something of their own. They were forever getting notes sent home for it, but that never deterred the fashionistas.

Mimosa's only ornament was the number badge pinned to her chest. In the sunlight it gleamed like a medal of solid gold. I17 — even her number had a certain elegance to it. What's more, Mimosa attended an ingele club together with Jem, and one look at her made it easy to believe the sport kept everyone slim. A walking advertisement.

Then, suddenly, I spotted Jem just beyond her shoulder, emerging from the Lunar Thicket and heading straight for the Lake. What was she doing here? What if she and Kyle had come to their senses after all and abandoned my plan?

The moment Jem noticed me, she stopped. It took her a couple of seconds to take in the situation; then she flipped me an obscene gesture, turned on her heel, and marched back the way she had come.

Perhaps I truly am dense, but I understood nothing at all.

Number K44. “The Sting.” Jem

Alone at the empty end of the basketball court, I dribbled the ball, slamming it against the asphalt in fury, unable to stop.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

One more blow and the ball might burst. If I possessed even a drop of secondary power, this whole place would be in flames by now. Be grateful I’m just an ordinary girl!

Thud! Thud! Thud!..

Never would I have imagined that Hal, finding neither Kyle nor me willing to back him, would run scurrying off to that flirt Mimosa. Does he honestly believe she’ll help him? Is he truly that pathetic? Or perhaps he was simply delighted to have an excuse to abandon us for that upstart? I scooped up the ball and, hardly bothering to aim, hurled it at the hoop. Two points. Caught it and kept dribbling, going nowhere, pouring every ounce of my anger into the ball. Thud! Another thud! It’s so unfair! So despicable! Thud, thud, thud! I nearly beat my palm raw, striking the hard, unyielding ball with all my strength. Its drumbeat against the asphalt kept time with my pounding heart. I hate them! If only I could hurl the ball with everything I’ve got straight into the faces of those…

“Hey! You all right?”

I turned and blew a strand of hair from my cheek. Hal was strolling toward me at an unhurried pace, his sneakers squeaking softly with every step. His usual smirk lingered faintly on his face, but his eyes looked weary. Behind him, at the far hoop, a small cluster of guys was playing, and thankfully they paid us no attention. On my half of the court there was no one else. Yet the last thing I wanted just then was to share a game with Hal.

“Oh, just wonderful, I replied flatly, and without winding up flung the ball at the hoop. Missed.”

I went off to fetch it, hoping that by the time I returned, Hal would have gone. I wasn’t in the mood to face anyone. But he hadn’t budged an inch. Of course he hadn’t.

“What are you so worked up about?”

I was sorely tempted to say I wasn’t worked up at all — and then beat him to death with the ball. But not long ago a truth had dawned on me: people cannot read minds. And whatever Hal’s shortcomings, mind-reading wasn’t among his talents, either. It’s absurd to resent the people around you for failing to understand you when you’ve told them nothing — worse still, when you insist on the opposite.

Such a simple, obvious truth, yet I’d spent years blind to it. Or unwilling to admit that everything could be that easy. And that hard, all at once.

So I drew a breath, turned to Hal, and said as evenly as I could manage:

“I didn’t like what you did. You blew up at me and Kyle, then went straight to Mimosa. Don’t tell me you honestly believe that coward wants to run away with you?”

Blood flooded my cheeks the instant I’d finished that brief speech, which had cost me so much. I wheeled away, hurled the ball at the hoop again, and missed again. My heart hammered with horror at what I’d actually just said. But luckily, Hal was oblivious to my embarrassment. His face registered nothing but utter bewilderment and overload. At last he snapped his fingers and cried out happily:

“Oh, now I get it! You thought I’d gone to tell Mimosa about my plan? Please” it never even crossed my mind! She came up to me herself.

“And so you told her?”

“Of course not! Why on earth would I do that?”

“But you’d want her to come along? Kyle and I both said no.”

“What does Mimosa have to do with anything?.. Hey, hold on—are you jealous?”

I shot him a withering look.

“Kugalung. Do you have any brains at all?”

Hal broke into a mocking grin, and I decided I’d had enough and hurled the ball at him.

He tried to catch it and fumbled; the ball struck one of the “barriers” instead. For a moment I was genuinely afraid I’d shattered the bracelet.

As it turned out, the same thought had crossed my friend’s mind. He rushed over at once to check whether the plate—the magic blocker—was intact. Judging by his crestfallen expression, it was perfectly fine.

“We need something stronger for this,” he muttered, running his fingers over the bracelet, already forgetting I was standing there. Forgetting our conversation entirely. — We need to work out how... Fräulein Miss Perfect! — he suddenly exclaimed, wheeling toward me. — If people used slirium against the Aites in the Fragile War, then how did they protect themselves?

Seriously? He’d decided to start cramming for the final exam right this instant? That was it—I’d definitely had enough. Friendship is friendship, but a girl has to look out for herself too.

“See you tomorrow,” I said, and set off toward my cabin.

“Jem, wait, this is actually important!..”

“Good night, Hal.”

I walked away without so much as a backward glance. I’ll have you know I have my self-respect too.

If it hadn’t been for that conversation, I wouldn’t have returned to the cabin so early—before curfew, no less. But I had no wish to linger outside, where I might easily bump into Hal, Kyle, or worse still, Mimosa or the Twin. So the cabin it was; no one would dare come barging in on me there.

I don’t much care for spending time in my room, especially when my roommates are lounging about in it, but at the moment I had to choose the lesser of two evils. Honestly, I’m being ungrateful—I ought to remind myself more often to sing Kat’s praises for not bunking me with the Twin or that slim little snob. Otherwise I’d have hanged myself by now, or shoved one of them off the roof.

I live in cabin number two, on the ground floor, and at any hour of the day it’s a regular thoroughfare. The girls bring friends over from the first cabin, drag boys in, and cluster in chattering groups in the hallway. Oh, right—there’s a television on the ground floor too, and whenever a show is on, getting into the lounge becomes simply impossible.

I burst into the bedroom, slamming the door loud enough for the whole floor to hear, and made straight for the bathroom—but Melody stopped me:

“Darya’s in there right now!”

Oh, of course! Holing up in the bathroom for three hours at a stretch was Darya’s favorite pastime. You’d think she kept some secret club stashed away in there. And she vanished into it precisely whenever I desperately needed to be alone. Melody—a short brunette with a ringing voice—shrugged apologetically as she looked at me. Well, fair enough; what could she possibly have done about it?

Darya is one of the few who took a different name as her nickname. Some say that’s dangerous, because over time such a name gradually

acquires nearly all the properties of a real one. But my roommate doesn't seem to care.

I reached my bed and collapsed onto it, unable to take another step. So much had been happening lately that I was already worn out from keeping an indifferent face. I dropped my backpack right there on the floor. Normally it drives me mad when someone scatters their things all over the room, but at that moment I couldn't even work up the energy to care.

My roommates are real slobs, but at least they try to keep their junk from drifting over onto my side of the room—and as for the permanent disaster in the bathroom, I simply had to look the other way. They're no better, and no particularly worse, than any of my previous roommates. Just two ordinary girls. Darya has a secondary power, though not as strong as Hal's. When she's nervous or angry, her hair can rise up or coil into curls, and sometimes she wakes in the morning with an absolute crow's nest on her head. She cuts it very short, but every now and then the power still shows through. My other roommate, Melody, does fencing, and there's nothing unusual about her—just like me.

I closed my eyes, trying to shut everything out, the way you do in meditation. I needed to think carefully through everything Hal had told me.

Of course, I understood his urge to drop everything, given the situation. But running away from college is only half the job. Where would he hide all this time, and for exactly how long? And what if nobody wanted to hush the case up, and they started looking for him? What then? What if they brought in the forces of the Eits?

The plan was riddled with holes—but what else could you expect from a frightened kid? At least he'd had the sense to share it with me

and Kyle. Did he want us to come along? If he hadn't, he would simply have slipped away in silence without telling a soul.

But if he did want company, he might at least have dropped a hint. Or was it I who had forgotten how to take one?

Just then, Darya emerged from the bathroom, hair dripping wet and a berry face mask smeared across her cheeks. A cloud of steam billowed out behind her, fragrant with strawberries, herbal shampoo, and bubble bath. She tossed a damp towel onto the drying rack and noticed me.

"Hee-ya, Prick is back among the living! How was the game?"

Full marks to my roommates for remembering what I cared about. But why, though? I'd always assumed they asked purely out of politeness.

"Fine, I muttered, shutting my eyes again."

I hadn't gone to the game.

"And the day after tomorrow, there's a tournament! Melody suddenly burst out. She snatched a hairpin from the table and brandished it before her like a sword, sweeping her left hand back." Shortened lectures for everyone, and a banquet to celebrate!

She had been talking of nothing else for a couple of months now, but that didn't stop Darya from clapping her hands in delight. I yawned. Just another excuse to make noise, gorge themselves, and—for some—to start a fight. All these festivities grated on my nerves.

"Will you come and watch? Melody asked me hopefully." I'll wipe the floor with every last one of them, just you wait! The Academy students will limp back to Smoxhill with holes burned clean through their backsides!

"I'll come if I can, I answered honestly, knowing full well I could always summon a reason not to."

Once the bathroom had cooled a little and the fragrances had dissolved, I took a contrast shower, blissfully letting the water cascade over my body, washing away dust, sweat, and every unpleasant piece of the day's news. How it chilled my scalp, soothing my inflamed, overburdened mind. After turning off the water, I lingered in the stall for another five minutes or so, absently tracing the curves of my tattoos with a fingertip, listening to what my body was telling me. Cool, clean, free. Silence and emptiness. I was very rarely left alone in the bedroom, so the bathroom became a genuine refuge. When everything around me grated on my nerves, when I wanted to kill someone and simultaneously dissolve into furious tears, nothing served better than shutting myself in here. After a hot bath or a bracing shower, my thoughts transformed entirely. I'd counsel the Ates to resort to this trick as often as they could. Who knows—life might grow a little easier for all of us.

The girls whispered a while longer before sleep claimed them, but soon they fell quiet. They were, on the whole, among the calmest roommates I'd had in seventeen years. Just yesterday morning they had even congratulated me on Finding Day, though I invariably forgot their Birthdays.

Sleep refused to come. In my cooled, cleansed head, clear and practical thoughts were ticking away. How Hal would carry out his escape, what he would need for it, and how I could help him.

The next day I saw neither Hal nor Kyle until lunchtime, but that was probably just as well. I still needed a little more time to think everything through. Deep down I knew I was fully resolved and wouldn't back out, but my mind insisted on observing all the proprieties and mulling things over for another couple of hours. For appearances' sake.

At the morning ingeloy lesson, I tried harder than ever to seat myself as far from Mimosa as I could. Hal had almost certainly told the truth yesterday, and he had no reason to blab his plans to that little sweetheart. Yet the moment I remembered the two of them standing there together on the bridge over the Lake, something seemed to clamp down on my chest—an unpleasant, constricting sensation that smothered me. Like that kugalung had said yesterday—was I jealous of him?..

He was partly right. But there were reasons for it.

You see, I live at the college. It's the only home I have. I'm here all the time. It's the other students who come and go, scattering off for the holidays.

The same goes for Hal and Kyle. Whatever comes of our escape, next year they won't be here anyway. Their studies will be finished. I don't yet know what will become of me, but perhaps I'll be offered the chance to stay on and take special courses. Or be given some simple job. I don't know. I don't want to worry about it yet.

Anyway, soon I'll have to wave goodbye to my boys. I don't want that. The older you grow, the harder it becomes to make room in your heart for new people. And when you do, letting them go again hurts as much as stitching up a wound without anesthetic.

Every minute and hour my friends granted me grew more and more precious. So whenever they chose to spend time with anyone other than me, my temper flared at the slightest provocation.

Perhaps that's selfish. Perhaps it's wrong. But when you possess neither Hal's secondary power, nor Kyle's secondary appearance, nor the charm of Darya and Melody—and certainly nothing of Mimosa's figure—you're genuinely delighted when someone wants your company in spite of it all. Yet the fear of being traded away, at any moment, for someone more interesting, never quite leaves you.

“Cold.”

“Huh?..”

“Twenty-three degrees below zero Celsius, and lower.”

“Jem, what on earth are you rambling about?”

“The answer to your question from yesterday, kugalung. Satisfied?”

Oh no—it took him another three minutes or so to work it out. In the meantime, I finished my lunch and moved on to dessert. A slice of mango and oatmeal pie—mmm!

“Ahh!” Hal snapped his fingers, and an almost Kyle-like smile spread across his face. — It’s about the Fragile War! About slirium! Cold, you say? Then everything’s far simpler than I imagined!

He cast a quick glance around and rapped one of his “barriers” with a fingernail.

“I want to be rid of them,” he confided in a loud whisper.

I widened my eyes in feigned astonishment.

“You don’t say! Well, what a revelation! And you, clever one—have you given any thought to how you’ll dispose of the bracelets themselves, and not just the crystals?”

Honestly, this one had him stumped—a genuine puzzle of world-class proportions. He frowned, plunged into deep thought, even rubbed his chin. Then he began carefully inspecting one of the “barriers,” trying to pry the bracelet loose with a fingernail. I smirked as I watched him.

“You’re such a kugalung...”

“Wait, I just never thought of that...”

“They’re just fabric wristbands.”

Hal’s head snapped up, and for the first few seconds his face was so comically bewildered that I actually smiled. It’s not every day you get to witness such a sight.

“You witch!” He seized his fork, already speared with a chunk of boiled chicken, and thrust it right up to my mouth. — There, take that for the correct answer! Come on, eat it! Mmm, it’s delicious!

The instant the barely warm, smooth meat touched my lips, I recoiled in disgust and nearly toppled over along with my chair. Hal managed to catch my arm and yank me toward him. My chest struck the edge of the table, and my palm landed smack in the middle of my dessert plate.

Hal laughed so hard the windows rang, and the whole dining hall turned to stare at us. But that didn’t stop me: I reached over and seized a fistful of his thick hair until he stopped cackling and let out a loud yelp.

Struggling to free himself from me, he nearly flipped his lunch plate clean off the table and even tried to kick me. I didn’t let go—my grip on his hair stayed firm, even as it meant practically climbing onto the table. The soft strands tickled between my fingers, while my forearms throbbed where Hal was pushing against them, straining to shove me away. He grimaced with laughter and pain all at once, baring his snow-white teeth, and the freckles across his flushing cheeks stood out sharper than ever. I always notice little details like that at the most inopportune moments.

“Let go of me, you psycho!” he finally shouted, and lashed out at me again, though halfheartedly.

I couldn’t tell whether anger or amusement won out in that moment —the blend of the two was dizzying. And his pleading got him nowhere with me. No chance.

That was how Kyle found us, walking up to our table.

“Am I interrupting something?” he asked cheerfully, his gaze darting from me to Hal and back again.

Perhaps it really was a bad moment, but Hal had already shoved me away with force and stretched out his hand toward Kyle expectantly. His mop of hair looked as though a hurricane had swept through it, strands jutting out in every direction and falling partly across his eyes. A few clumps had stuck together from the sweet dessert I'd managed to smear into his hair along the way, and the sight made me smile. What a ridiculous kugalung.

"Did you bring it?"

Kyle snorted and pulled a rolled-up sheet of paper from his bag. But before handing it to Hal, he arched his thick eyebrows in a questioning look. Hal, who spoke his language, jerked his head to one side. Over there, at the far end of the table, sat a plate heaped with a generous lunch: boiled fish, seaweed salad, rice with caviar, and a tuna sandwich. It wasn't hard to guess whom it was meant for.

"Now we're talking!"

Kyle tossed the paper to Hal and hurried to sit down and seize his cutlery. Before Skrip could unroll his prize, I snatched the sheet from his hands and held it high above my head. Hardly much of a defense, of course, but no one was willing to pick a fight with me over it.

"What's going on here?" I asked calmly.

The boys traded guilty glances, as though they had genuinely hoped this little performance might pass unnoticed. Kyle crammed half his plate into his mouth at once and mumbled through the mouthful:

"Hal is running away from college."

"I already knew that."

"I've decided to run away with him."

I probably should have seen this coming, yet a phantom chill still washed over me. I stared at Kyle wide-eyed. What did he want with this? Had he grown bored of late? Had he even stopped to consider what his father would do to him once he found out? Or was this simply

the norm for a boy from such an influential family? Did they believe they could get away with any escapade, any mischief, because powerful parents stood behind children like these? Catching my stunned look, Kyle seemed either to grow smug or to grow sheepish — he flushed faintly and looked away.

“Hal’s going to need my help,” he muttered, dragging his fork across the plate, trying to corral the stray strips of seaweed into a little pile.

While I studied Kyle, thinking for the first time that even the big fellow had a streak of adventurousness and a taste for excitement in him, Hal made a grab for the paper. I dodged nimbly and wagged a finger at him.

“So you dragged the Cachalot into this, and I got left on the bench? Well, thanks a lot.”

While Hal mumbled his excuses, I unfolded the paper. A drawing made of dashes, lines, and squares. A few circles, hatch marks, and other symbols. Even in this form, I recognized the place without the slightest trouble.

“A map of the college?”

Hal clamped his hand painfully over my mouth. His skin reeked of chicken, and I wrinkled my nose.

“What are you shouting for?” he hissed furiously. — Do you want to blow the whole thing for me?

“You need a map to escape?” I lowered my voice, though only a little, so he wouldn’t imagine I cared about his hide.

He really was frightened: he glanced around, head drawn into his shoulders. But the crowd had tired of our little scuffle, and no one was paying us any attention anymore. Kyle chewed on, placid and bovine, watching us. How on earth had he managed to steal the map — and from where, exactly?

“Of course!” Hal finally hissed. — You think it’s that simple? I have to disable the security system. Pick the route least likely to be seen. And above all, not go wandering lost in the dark.

“And how exactly is a map going to help you with all this?” I asked with heavy sarcasm. — Does it have some special path marked on it, labeled “Hal’s Escape Route”? Does it also show you how to slip past Yo-Yo, how to dodge all the magical sensors — which are probably far from all marked on it? Does the map tell you that too?

I watched my friend’s eyes slowly grow dull. The eyes of defectives are a curious thing, really — they flicker with the magic of the eights, they can glow in the dark or shift their color. I’ve never witnessed it myself, but people say it happens fairly often.

And what did the eyes of the eights themselves look like?

Hal turned away from me and glanced down at the map spread across the table. The corners of his mouth drooped, his shoulders sagged. Even his hair, which I’d ruffled, seemed to wilt. He hadn’t thought a great many things through, but courage was something he never lacked. Or desperation, for that matter.

“I told you it wouldn’t be that simple,” Kyle muttered, picking at the scraps of meat left on his plate. — The two of us won’t make it through.

“You can say that again,” I cut in before Hal could get a word in edgewise. — The two of you will be caught the moment you set foot outside your rooms. You’d stand out more than Yo-Yo on an open plain!

Hal brought his fist down on the table, making the dishes rattle. His knuckles had gone bone-white.

“We’ll figure everything out,” he hissed stubbornly, refusing to meet my eyes, his words forced through clenched teeth. — Nothing you say will stop us!

I know Hal — stubborn, brave, a little reckless, and insufferably sure of himself. I loved him for it, and hated him too.

“There’s no need to plan anything,” I replied, just as calmly, almost indifferently. — Something will slip through one way or another. That’s precisely why I made my own plans.

Number K5. “Cachalot.” Kyle

“Sleep well!” they told me. — “And don’t you worry about a thing!”

Yeah, right. How was I supposed to close my eyes when this was my last night within the walls of my home college? My nerves had me so wound up I felt like I was being turned inside out!

Though if Jem hadn’t stepped in, Hal and I would probably be making our escape today already. And who’s to say which is worse — rushing headlong into things, or this agonizing wait.

I rolled over, and the bed creaked. It was well past midnight, and I was still tossing and turning, without a wink of sleep in me. My back had begun to ache, and the whole sheet had bunched beneath me. Nothing is worse than insomnia — especially when there’s nothing to do but lie there and stare into the darkness.

The only things breaking the silence were the ragged snoring of my roommates, and now and then a strange scraping from the neighboring rooms — the walls here are thick, yet for some reason you can still hear everything going on with the others. When the fellows in the adjoining room start arguing, the whole building shakes. And argue they do, and often.

I glanced around my bedroom. There was nothing to see in such darkness, of course, yet the room was so familiar that I could picture it almost as though it stood before me. The two beds of my roommates — Bobr, who had webbing between his fingers, and Khlyst, who was unremarkable in every way. A small nightstand beside each bed, three desks claiming nearly all the free space, and clothes tucked away in a nook. A modest shelf of books, a rack of audio cassettes, a radio mounted on the wall. A baseball bat leaned against Khlyst’s bed, though I had never once seen him play the game. On Bobr’s wall hung

a map of Rousedill covered in his marks and symbols, but no one knew what they meant.

Still, I was fond of my roommates, even if they raised more questions than they answered. And it felt wrong to simply up and abandon them like that, without so much as a warning.

I gazed at the wall above my bed. You couldn't see it, but a corkboard hung there, covered with my notes and reminders—which I forgot anyway—and three photographs of me, Hal, and Jem. My greatest treasure. Last year, Mom had given me a Polaroid, and we photographed everything within reach. Plenty of the shots were terrible, but far more of them were funny—blurry, out of focus, faces cropped off at the edges. We ran wild all over UKOG's grounds, Jem laughing, Hal pulling faces. We snatched the camera from one another, hid from the lens, and tried to squeeze into the frame all together. Little picture cards spilled around us like a waterfall, and we crawled through the grass, terrified of losing a single one. It was a true celebration. I had pinned the three best and funniest shots to the board. Tomorrow evening I would have to take them with me...

I pulled the blanket more tightly around my shoulders, imagining what tomorrow would bring. My stomach tightened with excitement. A mad, daring plan! UKOG had surely never seen anything like it. No one had ever had a reason to run away from here—college was the perfect place to live. Everything your heart desired was yours for the asking: club gatherings for every interest, the chance to meet remarkable people you'd never encounter anywhere else, modern comforts and endless entertainment. And in the end, a diploma that would get you hired anywhere. The price for all this? A trifle. Be an ordinary person—or at least keep your oddities to yourself.

Remembering my last conversation with my mother, I couldn't deny that I understood Hal as well as I understood myself. If the Eits

arrived here as soon as tomorrow and demanded he be handed over, who would dare stand in their way? And in the grip of another fit of madness and panic, they were capable of anything—as unpredictable as wild animals.

I speak of all this so confidently, yet in my whole life I've seen the Eits no more than five times.

There was something human in them, and at the same time a conspicuous share of the "monster," as ordinary folk sometimes called them. Wings, tails, fangs, spikes, fur, or extra heads. The Eits could command all manner of magic—fire, water, air, or earth. What the defective ones received were miserable scraps; they wouldn't last a day beside a true eitalite.

Every Eit possesses a gift of their own—no two alike, each so varied and distinct. To them, I suppose, humanity must look like a gathering of clones.

The last Eit I'd laid eyes on came from the government council; my father had spoken with him. That "monster" stood well over two meters, clumsy yet powerful. His voice, thick with a strange accent, rumbled and boomed. His skin gleamed tautly in the light, a deep violet; his neck, wrists, and the crown of his head were shrouded in coarse black fur, curly as a goat's. He wore nothing but a cotton kilt that barely concealed his crooked legs, ending in hooves. I tried to work out what was human about him. His thick blue lips? His body, shaped like a man's? Or his mind?

I rolled over yet again and let out a loud sigh. If only people and the Eits were separated by a distance so vast that mixing between them was simply impossible. But a fellow can dream, as they say.

Second lecture, and still I hadn't snapped awake. The physics professor was droning on about matter, but not a single word reached me. Propping my chin on one hand, I rolled a pencil back and forth

across the desk with the other, battling a yawn with every ounce of strength I had. My yawns are always spectacular affairs — people nearby actually edge away, afraid I might swallow them by accident.

“Hey, Cachalot, I can see all the way down to your guts when you open that trap of yours!”

Ha-ha. Hilarious.

“There’s a test the day after tomorrow — don’t forget it,” the professor reminded us as she gathered her notes at the end of the lecture. “No retakes.”

She truly is strict — she never cuts anyone the slightest slack. I never needed any, but now I’d landed in a genuine predicament. How was I supposed to finish college on my own? I’d been chasing that question around all evening and through the night, yet right now it struck me like a ton of bricks: since I was in league with Hal, I might as well kiss my studies goodbye. Three years here, spiraling straight down the drain! Sure, Dad could fix it… but I’m not about to ask. Trade on his authority and influence? No — that’s not for me.

But what about Jem? She was with us now—yet she was one of the finest students in the entire college! Everyone had tipped her for a brilliant diploma, one that would secure her a prestigious post. How could she simply walk away—no, throw it all away? I couldn’t fall asleep until three in the morning, and the poor girl must have lost her rest entirely! She might look indifferent and aloof on the surface, but the college had been her home—she had never known anything else. What must it have cost her to leave it all behind?

And all for Hal’s sake?

I froze, no longer stuffing my things into my backpack. The thought of Jem struck me like a club blow. Had Hal even considered what would become of her? Would they forgive her for running off like this? And if not—what then? Perhaps I could help somehow?

“K5, you all right? the prof called out cheerfully, jangling her keys.” I’m locking up the classroom, so hurry along.

I barely glanced at her, nodded, and swept the rest of my belongings into my bag in a single motion. I left the classroom and drifted toward the next lecture on autopilot. All the while, a heavy worry churned inside my head.

None of this was fine. I had to find a way out of this tangle, and quickly. Hal could afford to sacrifice his studies, his place in college, even his basketball career. Nobody had forced Jem to follow him, yet every consequence, one way or another, landed squarely on Hal’s shoulders. I couldn’t simply stand by, and so I kept searching for a good answer to these thorny questions for both our sakes—hunting for even the flimsiest compromise. Maybe she could leave a note for the Headmaster?

By rights, the plan called for me to play one more small part in helping Hal — but who was going to help me when I got expelled, and in such disgrace, too? I slowed as I reached the stairs from the third floor. I should have thought all this through sooner! It was too late to turn back now — my friends were counting on me to take the next step. But if you keep wearing yourself thin for your friends, you might just end up worn down to nothing. Had I ever done anything like this for my own sake? And who would, if not me?

It was a horrible dilemma, and I felt panic tightening its grip on my throat. For better or worse, the events that followed shoved me forward and left me no choice.

Shoved me, in the most literal sense of the word.

All this time I’d been standing practically at the top of the staircase, and until then everyone had somehow managed to steer carefully around me. But then a crowd of the most rushed and clumsy students

came along, barrelled straight into me, and knocked me off my feet. The world spun like a top, my ears whistled, and my stomach clenched.

“OWW!!!”

“Watch it!”

“Sorry!.. OW!”

“Hey!”

“Where do you think you’re going?..”

“Don’t touch me!..”

“Ow, I didn’t mean to!.. AAAH!!!”

“Quit shoving!”

“Sorry!.. OWWW!!!”

“Out of the way!”

“AAAAHHH!!!”

By some miracle I made it past the first half of the steps without landing anywhere, though I bulldozed through every student in my path; the second half, however, I took head over heels, and it all ended with a spectacular slam into the very last step.

Jem had said, “Do something to get yourself into the infirmary — just don’t kill yourself.”

Consider it done!

“Ooooh…”

“Hey, are you all right?”

“Where’s all that blood from?”

“Did you break something?”

“Ugh! What happened here?”

“Everyone, step back! Buddy, are you all right?”

“Shall we walk you to the infirmary?”

In an instant I found myself hemmed in by a swarm of first-years, who were staring at me with a mixture of fear, curiosity, and just a dash of bloodthirstiness. At the very least, I certainly wouldn’t lack for

witnesses. I coughed and spat out blood, holding two knocked-out teeth and half of a third in my palm. Honestly, what troubled me far more was the knee I'd bashed against the step — but it didn't look impressively injured, unlike my teeth. And that was nothing, really; I'm not short on teeth, and new ones can grow in where those two were — it's happened before. The others, of course, knew nothing of this.

"Ooooh, he must be in agony! It's like his jaw is shattered!.."

"What did he say? His jaw is shattered?"

"Off to the infirmary with him, quick! What are you all standing around for?"

"Someone clean the blood off the floor!"

"He'll drop dead any second" why are you just standing there, you kugalungs?!

Anyway, two eager helpers hurried to escort me to the infirmary, supporting me by the shoulders, asking whether I was feeling worse and how on earth it had happened. It was genuinely sweet — I was even a little touched, and I felt awkward about having to lie to these fellows. True, the moment we reached the threshold of Madam Doctor's domain, my kind escorts hastily evaporated. And no wonder — I wanted to vanish myself.

"Ah, Kata the Great," drawled the mistress of this kingdom, looking me over. — Handsome visitors like you rarely come calling. What happened to you?

I showed her the broken, bloodied teeth, and then the empty gaps where they had sat until an hour ago. The Doctor settled me into the dentist's chair, reluctantly peered into my mouth, and immediately stepped back.

"I can't imagine how you keep track of it all!"

Fair enough — I swapped out my toothbrush every week, and dental floss snapped the instant it saw what it was up against.

“Does it hurt badly? the Doctor pressed, still scowling down at me.”

She loomed overhead: big, powerful, terrifying. I swallowed, blood still tingeing my saliva. What if she sees through my lie?..

“Oh, yes! Terribly! My jaw is simply splitting!.. Could I have some water?”

“You’ll wait. Come on, open up again… And just try snapping at me!.. Absolutely dreadful” that’s not a mouth, it’s a cavern! Nothing serious, only a little bleeding. Have you lost teeth before?

“Aaaoo…”

“What? Number L5, stop clowning around! Close your mouth and answer properly!”

“No, ma’am.”

“Not even once?”

“No. New ones grow back, don’t they? And the broken one? Will I need a denture?”

The Mistress Doctor frowned as she examined me. These defectives are nothing but trouble — you never know what to expect from them. And I kept right on wailing:

“What if it gets infected? What if all my other teeth fall out? Will I be entirely toothless by thirty? And my jaw hurts so much… What if it’s cracked? I fell really hard…”

“Quiet! the Doctor barked.” If your mouth hurts that much, then stop moving it! I’ll be right back — don’t go anywhere.

I sat bolt upright. At last—here was the very reason for this whole charade.

I had to steal the pills for Hal.

Niko-oxylaxicillin was among the most potent remedies for restoring strength after a secondary power manifested. Ordinary folk like me or Jem might never even have heard of it, but for Hal it was nothing

short of a lifeline. A mere quarter of a pill meant he no longer had to dread blacking out whenever his magic flared up. And it replenished his energy remarkably quickly, too. In short, we simply couldn't manage without it.

The instant the door clicked shut behind the Doc, I began a frantic search. The pills wouldn't be left out in the open, but neither could they be tucked away too deep—besides Hal, there were other students and staff at the college who might need nik o-oxylaxicillin at a moment's notice.

The shelves and cabinets were crammed with dozens of blister packs and jars bearing long, labyrinthine names. I rummaged through them, scanning labels and shoving everything back into place. The vials and boxes rattled precariously, and I lived in terror of toppling something and shattering it. My thick fingers had never been so clumsy, so slick with sweat. Nerves made breathing nearly impossible; my eyes darted across the unwieldy drug names even as they kept flicking toward the door.

Where were they? Could they really be hidden that well? I was checking only blister packs and boxes—we had no use for the injectable kind. The convoluted names were already swimming before my eyes, and I began to fear I'd simply overlooked the very ones I needed.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed in the corridor, and I dropped the little box. I snatched it up at once, shoved it back into the cabinet, closed the door, and sprang toward the armchair.

I flung myself onto the seat so hard that the back of my head cracked against the backrest, and there I froze, curled up like a worm, dreading the Doctor's return.

Ten seconds passed. Half a minute. A full minute. Still no sound from the corridor, and I allowed myself to breathe a little easier. There was time yet, so I hurried back to the cabinet.

When the plate of pills I needed was suddenly in my hands, I could scarcely believe my eyes. I read the name over and over, nearly beginning to doubt whether I really knew which one I was after. Niko-oxylaxicillin. That was it, wasn't it?

Then came footsteps again, far louder this time. I slipped the precious find into the inside pocket of my jacket and dove back into the armchair. My heart was hammering like mad, and I prayed it didn't show.

The door opened, the Doctor strode in, and immediately eyed me with suspicion. I couldn't help shrinking away, pressing myself against the backrest. Why was she looking at me like that?

"Scared?" the woman drawled with evident satisfaction, advancing slowly toward me. "No need to be. Your teeth will grow back. That's how it is, in most cases."

I attempted a look of astonished delight, but the Doctor's tone shifted at once and she snapped at me angrily:

"I'll give you a painkiller and a glass of water, and then you'll hop straight back to your lectures. Understood?"

And that is precisely how it went.

As it happened, I never made it to class at all — by the time I'd finished lingering in the office, more than half the literature lecture had already slipped away. Unwilling to barge into the classroom with every eye upon me, I resolved to go find Hal instead — or Jem, if fortune favored me. If I was going to be expelled from college anyway, I might as well go out with a bang: after lying to the Doctoress and cutting lectures, what more did I have to lose?

Only once I had locked myself inside a bathroom stall did I dare examine the pills properly. Yep — nico-oxylaxicillin, three whole tablets and a sliver of a fourth. I judged that plenty for the two of us, unless Hal decided to unleash his secondary power at full throttle.

As luck would have it, I learned my friends had PE together. I hurried outside at once — in warm weather, the coaches and professors seized every excuse to push students into the open air, whether for PE, painting, or botany. They ought to be at the basketball court, where just yesterday the two of us had sat talking over a notebook and a pencil.

My bruised knee throbbed worse with every step, and I had time to regret never mentioning it to the Doctoress. How much good would I be if I couldn't walk and run properly? Then again, perhaps it would all fade by evening. My jaw had stopped complaining ages ago — I'd entirely forgotten about the knocked-out teeth. No big deal.

When I spotted the crowd of kids playing basketball, I spent several long minutes scanning the court for my friends. They weren't there. As I debated whether I'd blundered and mixed up the schedule, or whether they'd bolted the night before, I resolved simply to sit in the bleachers and wait out the time until my next lecture. And then, unexpectedly, I saw them.

Hal and Jem were dressed for sport — coral jerseys for the girls, turquoise for the boys, each with a black number on the chest, three white crystals, and the college name across the back. Identical black shorts, sneakers, and white knee socks completed the uniform for everyone.

Our friends sat in the front row, following the game with listless eyes. Jem had her legs draped across Hal's knees and lounged lazily against the armrest, while he had tipped back in his seat, watching the field through half-closed lids.

I came up from behind and tapped him carefully on the shoulder. Without so much as a glance at me, he held out his hand. Casting a wary look around, I passed him the pills almost furtively, half expecting a furious Mrs. Doctor and Mr. Principal to come bearing

down on us at any moment, the pair of them together. Jem stretched and sat upright in her seat.

“So our clever girl’s L5! What did it cost you?”

“Three teeth.”

“What, seriously?”

Jem rose onto her knees to reach me and, in the process, accidentally jabbed her heel into Hal’s stomach. Paying no heed to his grumbling, she held out her hands demandingly, and I opened my mouth a little, showing her the gap with my tongue. Hal glanced back at me as well, though without much regret or interest. His attention was far more absorbed by the pills, which he turned over in his hands with almost reverent awe.

“They’ll grow back,” he said with confidence. — Sharks always grow new teeth.

“Kyle isn’t a shark,” Jem muttered, holding my cheeks and peering at the gaps. — He’s a cachalot, and that’s an entirely different creature.

“But his jaws are shark jaws all the same.”

I hate it when people talk about my other side, whatever name they choose to give it. I tore free of Jem’s grasp.

“Is everything set on your end?”

Hal shifted one shoulder, drawing attention to the “barrier.”

“Not quite. Tonight we’re going into the freezer to smash the sliriums. Are you in?”

Jem said nothing, and though I wanted no part of it, I still heard myself say:

“Yes.”

“Great,” Hal replied, and promptly forgot I existed, turning back to the game.

We sat in silence, forced to watch the kids chase each other and toss the ball back and forth. There was something strange, almost unset-

tling, in how calmly and indifferently we regarded the whole escape scheme—as if it were merely a lark. But had we known then what it would become for us, would it still have seemed like one?

“Why aren’t you two playing?”

I asked only to say something, to break the uncomfortable silence hanging between us. And only after the words were out did it strike me as odd that I hadn’t asked sooner.

Hal turned around. A smug smile spread across his entire face, and his grey eyes met mine with a sly glint.

“We used the LPD.”

Jem snorted in agreement. Then everything fell into place — the guys had decided to go out with a bang on their last day. The LP was their pride and joy: it drew gasps of astonishment from the crowd and frothing displeasure from the judges. The plan was that once the ball found its way into Jem’s hands and the moment was right, Hal would cup his hands for her, and our friend — sprinting, leaping, and pushing off his palms — would pull off a spectacular dunk. From the sidelines it looked genuinely dazzling, though as far as I can recall, more than once Jem lost her balance mid-flight and tumbled, or cracked into Hal’s shoulder and crashed to the floor along with him — which was rather less jaw-dropping. In any case, today they managed to pull off their favorite stunt one final time and bid the college a beautiful farewell.

And I’ll go down in memory as a clumsy oaf who broke his teeth on a staircase.

Cell T23. “Skrip”. Hal

It’s true. We were running away from college. Tonight, in fact.

Right up to the very last moment, I couldn’t quite believe it — even though it had been my idea. But there’s a gulf between imagining a pretty little scene in your head and thinking, “Yes, that would be lovely, since nothing else seems to work,” and actually holding stolen pills in your hands, seeing your friends gathered round, and working out the hour when the fewest eyes might catch you on the street.

Jem had thought of everything. There was a fencing tournament that day. Guests from the Academy of Arts in Smoxill had come to the college, lectures were cut short, and a festive air hung everywhere. In spite of the chill evening, crowds were lingering outdoors, and everything — absolutely everything — was strung with fairy lights, candles, and little bonfires. In that glow we’d have been visible from a mile off, but that was precisely what would save us: we’d look no different from the hundred other students drifting about late at night, and we could stroll calmly all the way to the gates.

When Jem had explained all this to us in careful detail earlier that day, a strange thought crept suddenly into my head.

Had she been planning to escape before this day?

But before we could stride off into the wide world without a backward glance, one last important task remained, so Kyle and I made our way to the walk-in freezers. Getting in proved a piece of cake — students were often drafted to help with food deliveries, and today the cooks were run completely off their feet, so we couldn’t have arrived at a better moment. We were handed a sack of fresh herbs and told to fetch some frozen squid. Honestly, I half-feared Kyle would get jittery and swallow the meat before we ever made it back to the kitchen. Who

knows what could come over him on an empty stomach, with all that stress weighing on him?

But everything went smoothly. We dumped the herbs into the first freezer, snatched the squid from the third, and pressed on to the ninth, where the temperature hovered around thirty below zero. My temples throbbed faintly with the dread that it wouldn't work — that the "barriers" would hold fast. What then? How would we get out? I scarcely noticed the cold as we stepped inside.

"Oh…"

Kyle exhaled and swallowed. He wrapped his broad arms about his shoulders, trying to coax a little warmth back into himself. We hadn't bothered with thermal suits, so we stood there in whatever we happened to be wearing — Kyle in trousers and a shirt, me in my sports uniform. Thank Cat, at least I'd thrown a jumper over mine.

"No wonder Jem stayed behind!"

The words burst from my mouth in pearly white clouds of breath. My teeth and throat ached with the cold, and my eyes stung, parched and dry.

The narrow room was crammed with tight rows of skinned sheep and pig carcasses. They hung motionless, nearly brushing the floor, frankly displaying their ribs, taut muscles, pale sheets of sinew, and corded tendons. What's more, the place was rather dim, and the red bodies suspended from their hooks looked especially gruesome.

"I understand her, Kyle squeezed out."

Poor fellow had gone entirely green, blinking rapidly and staring ahead in horror. His lower lip was bitten raw, the triangular points of his teeth showing.

I couldn't help myself and burst out laughing. The echo swept past the carcasses, and I could almost swear they swayed in answer. Why,

our brave Jem would have fainted the instant she set foot in here! That's why she'd refused to come along. She was simply scared.

"I'm sure Jem doesn't eat meat because she's terrified of getting fat, I remarked, hoping to cheer my friend up a little." You know how jealous she is of Mimosa?

I remembered how Jem had once caught us together, which made the comparison seem especially apt.

Kyle swallowed with difficulty and looked away from me.

"But I wouldn't say Jem is fat… he mumbled, missing the joke entirely."

"Oh, next to Mimosa everyone looks fat!"

I set the bag of squid down at my feet and shook off my jumper. The cold instantly burned my hands, but I scarcely noticed.

"Look, it's starting!"

The translucent pink plates of the "barriers" clouded over and turned a matte white, like the eyes of the blind. I touched one of the bracelets, and the crystal suddenly crumbled beneath my fingers, the hard grains spilling onto the bare marble floor.

How quick and effortless it all was! After only a heartbeat of hesitation, I swept the crystal fragments away with a single flick of my hand. They vanished from the black wristbands at once, as though they had never existed. White dust also rained down from inside the "barriers."

Triumph and pride surged through me. Take that, Mr. Director and Madam Doctor! Take that, cursed Eits! So what if I'm defective — I'm no weakling and no fool!

I swiftly repeated the process with the second "barrier," and less than ten seconds later I was free.

Kyle wrapped his arms tighter around himself and hunched his shoulders as he watched me. He looked rather strange, as if he were

trying to shrink and fold into himself — remarkable, considering his build.

But I had already forgotten all about him, absorbed in my own sensations. It felt as though I'd downed a couple of cans of energy drink at once! A tremor coursed through my body, warmth spread across my chest, and a sense of boundless power flooded me from head to toe.

"Excellent," I breathed, rolling my shoulders and bracing myself for the wildest journey of my life. My legs felt springy, aching to break into a gallop, and even in that cold my palms had grown warm. "Just excellent. Well, shall we head back, then?" I glanced at the frightened Kyle and barely kept myself from laughing. He really could be odd sometimes! "We have a date with Jem in half an hour." I tossed my friend the bag of squid and, unable to restrain myself, was the first to dash for the chamber's exit.

My fingertips tingled in that familiar way. My side power was itching to show itself again.

Imagine having your handcuffs unlocked… the ropes slipping free from your wrists. Being released from a cage. Shedding a straitjacket. Casting off your chains. Now picture all of that, multiplied a hundredfold, and you'll have only a rough sense of what surged through me in that moment.

I was ready for anything — aching to prove it. Without a second thought I'd have taken on every guy in the college, brought Yo-Yo to stand meekly at my feet, and swum clear across the Lake of Dreams. I could have blown the entire UKOG sky-high with a snap of my fingers — I felt it in my bones, knew I was capable of it!

True, the wristband bracelets still clasped my arms, but shedding them was merely a matter of time. For now, I could wear them openly

— no one would ever notice the missing plates, not with my hoodie covering me.

Brimming with the power now mine, I could scarcely contain a wild, mad laughter. To everyone around me I was weak, limited, harmless. The whole walk back to the dorm, I hunted for any excuse to show them how wrong they were. If only someone would shove us. Hurl an insult. Laugh a little too loud. Oh, if only the Twin had been there — I wouldn't have needed an excuse at all!

But perhaps it was just as well that no such reason ever surfaced, and Kyle and I reached the boys' cabins without incident. All that remained was to gather my things and meet Jem at the Moon Thicket.

Just as I'd expected, the room stood empty. Skeleton's and Shoelace's belongings lay jumbled among mine, but I wasted no time rummaging — everything had been packed in advance.

Honestly, I didn't lose much sleep over it. We were planning to crash at my aunt Dee-Dee's place. Dee-Dee was fun, a little eccentric, and sharp as a tack. She lived alone in an enormous house with a rooftop garden, and rumor had it she could brew magical herbal tinctures. But that was pure nonsense: everyone in my family were the most ordinary people imaginable. And the secondary power had come to me either from my great-grandfather or from my great-uncle, whom no one living had ever laid eyes on.

My aunt's house sat on the outskirts of town, which was one more reason I'd picked her. The Ayties and Mr. Director would never think to look for us there. True, I hadn't breathed a word to Dee-Dee yet, but I had no doubt she'd welcome us with open arms the moment we showed up. I didn't have to fret about her blabbing to my parents, either — my aunt had always been in my corner. I even felt a small pang of guilt that I was nothing like her.

My backpack held the money I had left, a change of clothes, a pocketknife, and a deflated basketball. I cheerfully abandoned the textbooks and notebooks to their fate in my room. The precious pills Kyle had stolen for me went into the inside pocket of my hoodie, snug against my body. One Kata only knows when they might prove useful.

Okay, what else? I glanced around the room, then down at myself. It took me a second to spot the usual thing I needed to shed as well.

The badge with my number.

After our escape, our numbers — or even our nicknames — would surely end up in the local papers, and I had no intention of making it that easy for anyone to sell us out.

Not without a certain pleasure, I unhooked the badge from my sweater and kicked it under the bed. Being caught on UKOG grounds without your number meant punishment, and students moved the medallion from one set of clothes to another purely out of habit, without a moment's thought. Losing the thing carried a small fine, too, and a couple of times I'd had to pay it out of my stipend. It wasn't my fault the clasp came undone and the wretched badge vanished!

I just hope nobody notices, on the way to the gate, that we aren't wearing our numbers. It would be terribly unfair to get caught over something so stupid.

Locking the room behind me, I hesitated, my gaze snagging on the table in the half-dark. Textbooks lay there — mine or my roommates', I couldn't tell. I felt an almost-pang of regret that I hadn't even said goodbye to Skeleton and Shoelace: decent fellows, both, and we'd played on the same team. But this was no hour for sentimental mush. I gave a snort and barked one last time into the empty room:

"Good luck, you dummies!"

In the deserted dorm corridor my sneakers squeaked loudly on the wooden floor. On the first floor some idiot had spilled soda, and I very nearly went flying. And yet I was going to miss this place, just a little.

Farewell, UKOG!

Outside I met up with Kyle, and we hurried off to our meeting with Jem. My friend said nothing, but I noticed the corners of his mouth had drooped. Oh, Cachalot had always been far too sentimental! I slapped him on the shoulder with all my might — and at the last instant panicked, terrified I might blow him apart.

“Graduation came sooner than we expected, eh? Chin up — we’ll throw a ball of our own, with drinks, dancing, and girls. I promise.”

Kyle’s lips curved in a faint smile, then he frowned once more.

We wandered one last time past the familiar college buildings, crossroads, and other landmarks we knew so well. None of it felt real —as though it were all a joke, some elaborate prank. I couldn’t imagine waking tomorrow to find it all gone. Living at the college had worked its way so deep into my bones that I’d almost forgotten I’d ever lived in the city at all.

We’d been given the following day off for the championship, and everyone was determined to make the most of it. Students danced, belted out songs, gathered around bonfires, strummed guitars and played flutes. With any luck, no one would even notice our absence tomorrow. Jem had thought of everything.

And there she was, in the flesh.

Jem stood motionless beside the Moon Thicket, like a flower with her pink hair. My friend was fully packed as well—a sweater with the tag torn out, a bulging backpack, a flashlight tucked into her belt, and, as a bonus, a face carved from stone.

“Where did those kyuruki drag you off to?” she hissed. — Did everything work out?

She asked that last question with a hefty dose of disbelief—as if all Kyle and I ever did was wreck things! With great flourish, I rolled up my left sleeve and showed her the empty wristband. Jem barely spared it a glance before turning at once toward the Moon Thicket.

"Then let's not waste time. I suspect Yo-Yo won't be allowed to stay at the party long."

I couldn't help but agree—no matter how much everyone adored the puppy, he was more trouble than he was worth. His antics were endearing only up to a point, and after that, the clumsy rascal got shipped off to "take a walk" around the UKOG grounds—and the odds of us running into him shot up to nearly one hundred percent.

Kyle hurried past me to catch up with Jem. He murmured something to her, bending down toward her—whether a question or a remark—and Ukol snapped at him so sharply that he drew back:

"And what exactly do you want from me?! You think this is a stroll, do you?"

She picked up her pace in a sulk, and I had to break into a near-run to keep up with her. Kyle trudged at my side, guiltily hunching his head down into his broad shoulders. I hadn't seen him so deflated in a long while.

Meanwhile, the Lunar Thicket began its games with us.

Every tree in the Lunar Grove looked absolutely identical—tall, slender, flawlessly smooth trunks rising around you like the teeth of a comb. On moonlit nights (tonight included) they gleamed silvery white with a faint bluish sheen. They made your eyes ripple and your head swim, as though you had stumbled into a hall of mirrors. Which way to go? How do you get out of here? Is that gap between the trunks real, or merely a trick of the light? Would this ever end?

I suspect the Lunar Thicket belonged to the world of the eits as well, just like the Lake of Dreams, and there was nothing the college

could do about it. There used to be a sign by the forest warning of its perils, but Yo-Yo had devoured it not long ago.

Now that my powers had returned, I was going out of my mind in there. The music drifting from the main building seemed far louder than it should have been — the silken shimmer of strings and pipes swirled through my skull. I stumbled on flat ground, and my heart hammered faster and faster. I couldn't blink, couldn't tear my eyes from the identical trees. They seemed to shift around me, melting away and reappearing in different spots.

I felt unbearably stifled in my sweater and tried to pull it off without letting my gaze stray from the identical silver trunks before us. Some figure glided elusively between them, as though dancing to the enchanted strains of the melody.

"What are you doing?" Kyle whispered.

Nothing seemed to faze him — he merely frowned and pressed his lips together tighter than usual. I freed one arm from the sweater, and it instantly broke out in goosebumps against the cold.

"Can't you feel anything?" I shot back, trying to shout over the music, jerking my shoulder nervously as I wrestled my other arm free.

Kyle never got the chance to answer — Jem turned toward us and stopped.

"Kugalungi, what the hell is wrong with you?" she cursed.

As far as I could tell, I was the only one alarmed that we had wandered into some mad maze leading to an unknown dimension we'd never escape! My gaze fell on Jem's flashlight, and I pleaded:

"Turn on the light! Maybe we'll find our way more easily that way?"

"Find our way?" Jem's eyes widened slightly. — We're walking right along it, you idiot! Or do you think I can't see it?

"Then give me the flashlight!"

Muttering yet another curse under her breath, Jem reluctantly unhooked the lantern and handed it over. I fumbled for the switch… and was horrified all over again. The deathly white glare only deepened the illusion, catching the tree trunks and turning everything around us spectral and unreal. Even Kyle cried out and clapped his hands over his eyes. I dropped the lantern, shuddering with a wave of dizziness and nausea.

Jem scooped it up — then, without warning, cracked me over the head with it.

“You two are behaving like a pair of preschoolers!” she snapped furiously. “I thought we were supposed to be sneaking out of college — quickly, quietly, and without a trace — not wandering lost through an old forest and shrieking our heads off across the whole UKOG grounds!”

Well, what did you expect? She isn’t the least bit defective, after all.

“If you know the way so well, then get us out of here as fast as you can!” I pleaded.

“I’d have had us out ages ago if it weren’t for your little jokes,” she retorted, spun on her heel, and hurried ahead at nearly a run.

Kyle and I made sure not to fall behind.

The sound of a violin and a pipe swelled louder and louder in my ears, and I even began to make out a woman’s voice — high, melodic, achingly tender. It would all but fade away, then suddenly ring out right beside my ear. My palms grew warm, charged with the magic of the place. The dark figure kept spinning, glimpsed only at the corner of the eye; the instant you turned to look, it vanished — only to reappear somewhere else. The music came from every direction, as though it seeped from the tree trunks themselves, and the voice rang out, drawing me toward it.

I'll admit I'd never been here during a full moon before — but had I known, nothing on earth would have brought me here; we could have reached the gates by another way entirely!

Once we had escaped that sinister Lunar Thicket, I genuinely believed the worst of our adventure lay behind us. Beyond the forest, my headache finally faded, my legs came back to life, and as I peeled off my hoodie I realized just how chilled to the bone I'd been. The music and singing had stopped abruptly.

Kyle shook his head like a wet dog.

"What a place! he exclaimed, still shaking his head as though water had gotten into his ears." And that dreadful silence! Any longer and I swear I'd have lost my mind!

"You didn't hear the music from the party? I asked, surprised. Apparently the big fellow really did have something blocking his ears." Or the singing?

"What music?.."

"Quiet, both of you! Jem cut in." One more word and I'm turning straight back to my room!

We clamped our mouths shut at once — it turns out having a sensible person around does wonders — for Jem wasn't even out of breath after our trek through the Lunar Thicket.

"All that's left is getting past the fence, she went on, dropping her voice to a whisper." We're not going through the main gates, so don't even dream of it. But there's a tree growing not far from the wall. Two or three times I've managed to climb over with its help. It's tricky, but entirely doable. And we're out in the open now, so keep extra quiet! Or at least try!

Who did she take us for? Did she imagine I didn't know what I was getting into when I decided to leave UKOG? I could have vaulted that fence without any tree — easy as pie. But I was magnanimous, and

followed my friends without a word. Not everyone is lucky enough to be born with strength like mine.

We walked in silence. Open ground stretched around us, broken only by a small summer café, an old gazebo, and a signpost. The amber and white lights, the music, the reveling students—all of it lay behind us now, as if belonging to another world entirely.

From somewhere nearby, a fresh breeze drifted the scents of the flowers that grow beside the Lake of Dreams, and it somehow brought to mind the mute girl from the Dandelion Field. When would I see her again? With the nikoxylaxicillin pills, such a chance wouldn't come for a long while—and risking my freedom and my friends' safety on a blackout, just to pay a visit to that place… No, far too dangerous.

We soon reached the tree by the fence that Jem had told us about. In the semi-darkness everything seemed shorter than it really was. I gauged the distance and judged it no more than three meters.

Kyle was already giving Jem a leg up, and she seized the lowest branch. My friend offered to help me as well, but I declined with a smile. Did he still take me for weak and helpless? Well, he was in for a surprise!

I ran, sprang onto the trunk, pushed off it, and seized a branch with both hands. It quivered slightly beneath my weight, yet it looked as though it could have borne five more Hals without complaint. Pulling myself up with ease, I settled onto the branch and rose to my full height, savoring how firmly my feet gripped the rough, narrow wood, how my body instinctively found its balance, and how sweet it felt in my chest to know my own strength — and my command over it. Jem had already clambered over the fence and sat perched on its edge, glancing back at me while warily checking that no one was about. Kyle kept watch on the ground. A couple of seconds later I joined Jem, arranging myself comfortably atop the fence. It had all come far too

easily, far too quickly; I could happily have thrown in a few acrobatic flourishes. My body was as obedient and supple as ever.

From the height of the fence, the Lunar Thicket lay clearly in view, along with the spires of the main building. Listen hard enough, and you could even catch the faint music drifting from the party — which made it all the stranger that Kyle hadn't picked it up back in the grove.

"Well? Where are you?" Jem hissed down at him.

The big fellow was pacing beneath the tree, trying one angle, then another. Yes, he'd always been a touch clumsy — but the main thing was that it not wreck our operation right now!

He began hauling himself up the tree, gripping the bark with crooked fingers and clasping the trunk between his legs. He puffed desperately, his lips contorting into a strained grimace that bared his sharp teeth. Jem and I were watching from up above when suddenly I felt, more than heard, a steady drumming against the ground. Jem straightened and even rose halfway, clinging to a railing no wider than ten or fifteen centimeters.

"Kyle, hurry up, darn it! Yo-Yo's coming our way."

We had already worked that out for ourselves, and I could see the grey shape of a puppy bounding swiftly toward us. If he barked the alarm—or worse, tried to follow us—our venture would be a failure. A really stupid failure.

Kyle was doing his utmost to scramble up to at least the lowest branch, but whether from nerves or plain clumsiness, he simply couldn't manage it and kept sliding back down. Yo-Yo, meanwhile, had all but reached us, wagging his tail in delight. You could already make out the dirt on his white paws and hear his quick little breaths. Like some monster from a fairy tale disguised as a giant puppy, he drew closer and closer, poised to catch the runaways.

Kyle at last managed to swing one leg over the lowest branch—which was an accomplishment in itself. Jem clutched my shoulder tightly, stretching her free hand toward Kyle, even though he was still a mile away. Yo-Yo made one final dash and stopped at the foot of the tree, which turned out to be only slightly taller than the top of his head. He began sniffing at Kyle with great interest, twitching his wet brown nose, and our friend suddenly performed a feat worthy of a knight.

He lunged forward and hurled his heavy bulk straight onto Yo-Yo's head. Before the dog had the faintest notion of what was happening, Kyle shoved off him with every ounce of strength he had and vaulted clean over the fence.

The UKOG mascot was knocked sideways by the impact and toppled over, flinging his grimy paws into the air. He let out a startled yelp — no student, in all likelihood, had ever treated him with such audacity.

Meanwhile, Kyle crashed right into Jem and me, and the three of us tumbled off the fence and over the far side.

Only the tall grass, which no one had ever troubled to mow, saved our bones from ruin. The ground sloped away there, and we rolled downhill for a good stretch, smeared head to toe in grass and mud. Kyle shed his backpack somewhere along the way; I finally came to a stop sprawled on top of Jem. All things considered, it went rather well.

Well — apart from the last bit.

"You're crushing me!" Jem puffed, struggling to push me off her.

She turned out to be surprisingly solid, with sharp knees and elbows that dug into my back. By the time Kyle caught up with us, we were already clambering to our feet, brushing off dirt and grass and wincing at our assorted aches. The big fellow was running his tongue across his teeth.

“Two more gone,” he grumbled. “Any more of that and I’ll be left entirely toothless.”

“Better toothless than clumsy!” Jem snapped irritably, smoothing herself back into order. “What on earth is the matter with you? If it hadn’t been for Yo-Yo, we’d have been stranded on that fence all night!”

Kyle silently brushed the grit from his scraped palms without so much as a glance at her, saying nothing. I looked back toward the fence, beyond which the puppy’s pawing and snuffling could still be heard.

“Let’s go before he climbs over.”

Sharp spikes had once crowned the entire perimeter of the fence, placed there to make certain Yo-Yo never even dreamed of scrambling over and running off. When he was tiny, they did their duty faithfully. But once the mascot had grown and scraped his nose one day, it was decided the spikes had to go before he hurt himself again. A healthy mascot meant good fortune for the college. Luckily, after that episode, the pup had shown no further interest in the fence. And I hoped we hadn’t put the idea into his head.

We made for town, glancing back warily every so often, ears pricked for pursuit. How long before anyone at the college noticed we were gone? Would we be reported missing? Would flyers go up all over town, our faces printed in the newspaper, even broadcast on television? We’d have to disguise ourselves and venture into town only in the evenings, when there was less chance of being recognized…

And what would the Eits do if they learned of my escape? Would they dispatch agents here? Pin the whole thing on the college? Arrest my parents?..

“I never even said goodbye to him,” Jem murmured suddenly.

I had just begun mentally running through the list of boys she might have been secretly seeing, before it dawned on me that my friend meant the college.

Her real home.

Number K44. “The Injection.” Jem

Nighttime Rosedale was nothing like the UKOG after dark. While the great house of a thousand students dutifully drifted off the moment curfew fell, its neighboring city never slept. It was nearly midnight, yet the streets still thronged with pedestrians and cars; shops and cafés remained open here and there, drawing people in. Everything glowed—advertising boards, streetlamps, headlights, floodlights, and strings of lights looped beneath the wires. Truthfully, we felt a little uneasy, unprepared to find ourselves in the thick of the nightlife whirl. The college—with Yo-Yo, the Lake of Dreams, the Moon Grove, and all the rest—suddenly seemed small and distant, and somehow terribly old. A lump rose in my throat at the thought of it.

I pictured myself back home right now: a long, unhurried shower, then burrowing into a cool bed and drifting off, knowing there would be no lectures in the morning… It all seemed so perfect, so snug and familiar, that I ached to return before it was too late.

But I held my feelings in check. I knew what I was getting into, and I understood it would be no easy thing. I couldn’t abandon my friends. Kyle had risked everything to steal the medicine; Hal had dealt with the “barriers,” and now only Kata knew what would become of him. I couldn’t turn my back on them simply because I was so attached to the college.

We came upon a luminous map of the city on a display stand, checked our bearings, and set off once more — glancing warily about, hunching our shoulders whenever a passerby drew near. We had no wish to draw attention, yet we couldn’t help studying every figure that emerged from the dark. What if someone recognized from our clothes that we belonged to UKOG? What if they began asking questions? Called the police? But it soon became clear that the passersby took no

interest in us whatsoever — they never so much as looked our way, wholly absorbed in their own affairs and their own precious selves.

What unsettled me most about the city was the strangers. I don't know every student at UKOG by number or nickname, but I've heard of many of them, or see them often enough to know their faces. And nearly everyone knows me — "college kids" there number only a handful. But Rosedale! Here people neither greet one another nor even smile, and you'd scarcely dare walk up to a stranger and ask for help. People don't know one another, and they don't need to.

And there was something else I couldn't stop turning over in my mind: did my parents live here? What if I ran into them and they recognized me by my tattoos? That would be a disaster. I tugged my sweater sleeves down almost to my fingertips, concealing my hands. Kata might forgive me, but I would honestly rather my parents were dead — it would have come as a relief.

It was a warm, dry night. The city air carried no scent of blossoms —there were barely any trees to be found here either—but, oddly enough, there was a certain charm in that. The city promised fun and freedom, all the things college lacked; it beckoned with the life of adults, with new acquaintances, opportunities, and adventures. I was swept up in the atmosphere and even came close to believing that we were like heroes out of a book or a TV series—the kind who cannot die, for whom adventure and discovery wait around every corner.

We pooled all the money we had and stopped when we spotted taxis parked along the curb. Perhaps we should take a car to Hal's aunt's place? It was only a twenty-minute ride, and we would be safe there, hidden from the eyes of every passerby and every eit. Besides, dinner, a hot shower, and a bed were waiting for us.

It struck me as the sensible choice, and I would have agreed without a second thought. But the boys already had their heads full of

dreams of a real journey across the whole city, and they brushed aside the idea of hailing a cab. I found myself outvoted.

To be fair, Kyle made a solid argument: a driver could easily remember such a distinctive trio as ours and turn us in if it ever came to that. Even I had to concede that a bit of a walk was a fair price for the peace of mind.

If only we had known then what would come of that decision.

The flutter of wings.

And not just a faint flutter, either—it was loud and sharp, as if a pigeon the size of Yo-Yo had swooped right over my head. I looked around, squinted up at the blinding streetlights, but saw nothing. I'd never been prone to hallucinations, which meant the sound had to have a source—even in a mad, unnatural place like the city after dark.

Yet there was no one in sight, and I tried to soothe myself: whatever it was, it had flown off long ago. Only my hands kept itching nervously, for some reason.

"Want to go in?" Hal offered, nodding at the neon sign of the café beside us.

He was in high spirits—I'd already fallen out of the habit of that version of Hal, the one he became without his "barriers." They say you get used to good things quickly…

"Maybe we should move farther from the college," Kyle objected uncertainly. He wrapped his arms around himself, hunched his shoulders, and glanced at us from beneath his brows. "We haven't gotten all that far from it yet. Just… just in case."

Wow—Kyle turning down the chance to grab a bite? I was so astonished I forgot all about the strange bird that had no business being here. What had gotten into him? First he'd barely managed to climb the tree, and now he was frightened of something and even passing up food. Was it time to start worrying about him?

“Then at least let’s buy some soda,” Hal called over his shoulder, already skipping toward the invitingly lit doors.

A second later he was gone, only his bright sweater flashing past the glass.

Kyle and I stayed outside to wait. He kept watch on the side we’d come from, while I kept glancing up at the sky. Somewhere in the distance, music was playing, and cars and motorcycles rumbled past us, but by now we had almost grown used to the noise.

Kyle stood beside me, anxiously gripping the wide straps of his backpack. The tension had him clenching his teeth so hard that his mouth twisted into a strange grimace, and his broad nostrils flared like a frightened horse’s. I even wanted to say something encouraging to calm him down—but the trouble was, there was every reason to worry. If anything, I would rather have shared my suspicions with him: that something enormous and incomprehensible had flown over our heads.

“I think we’ve missed something, the big guy suddenly murmured, voicing the thought aloud.” We overlooked something.

I assumed he meant the flutter of wings he had heard too, but that wasn’t what he was talking about at all.

“We left in such a hurry, we barely had time to think anything through, he went on.” It would be easy to forget something.

Well, if his worries ran no deeper than a light left on or a forgotten toothbrush, then I could safely tell him about my observations without fear of triggering a full-blown panic.

“Did you notice... I began—but just then came the squeak of sneakers, and there was Hal returning from the café with three cans of soda and a paper bag.”

“Hungry? They’ve got hot sandwiches in here!”

He was radiant with happiness, like a hero striding triumphant from the battlefield, proudly bearing off his trophies. I couldn't help feeling irritated by how carefree he was.

While he handed the snacks to Kyle, I cast another cautious glance around the street, trying to steady my nerves once and for all. The road, the cars, a handful of pedestrians, the shops. Nothing that would strike an ordinary person as odd. Yet even though I was one myself, everything struck me as strange and uncanny just now. How could it be so bright and clamorous at night? Why were all these people wandering about at such a late hour? Why so many cars? Why did some shops stay open after dark — did they never close for a rest? A chill crept over me at the thought that the city never slept, that it pulsed with life around the clock, every single day of the year. It felt wrong, pointless.

And while my mind churned through these unsettling thoughts, I let my guard slip — at the worst possible moment.

There came once more the beat of wings, followed by the sharp whistle of wind. Before anyone could so much as blink, a man dropped out of the sky and landed right in front of us.

I shrieked and stumbled backward, colliding with Kyle, who fumbled and dropped the bag of snacks. Hal let out a loud cry.

The figure straightened and lifted its head, and we saw that it was not quite a man. A shiver ran the length of my body as I took a good look at the creature.

It resembled a bird, except it stood as tall as Kyle, if not taller. Its legs — avian, cloaked in scaly skin, tipped with long talons — gave way to a man's body, and where arms should have been, wings spread instead. Real wings — long, powerful, their splayed feathers serving in place of fingers.

His head was shaved bare, though a whitish down showed at his neck, and truly everything about his face suggested a bird — a sharp,

triangular nose, wide-set eyes, and a receding lower jaw that pushed his upper lip out like a beak. No ears were visible; the bridge of his nose was humped and crookedly fused, and his left eye squinted. The creature wore a loose black tank top that bunched slightly over his keeled chest, along with ragged cut-off shorts, aviator glasses shoved up onto his forehead. His plumage was white but filthy, matted, and unkempt; his skin looked paler than a human's, with hard little bumps cropping up here and there, as though he had been plucked. Round golden eyes stared at us.

A lump rose in my throat, and my stomach fluttered with a strange unease. I had never seen an aetalite before, and this blend of the familiar human and the hideous anomaly filled me with revulsion and dread.

An aetalite. This was a purebred aet, not some defective one.

While we gaped at him, the bird-man stretched lazily, watching us with a mocking gaze, then aimed the feather of his right wing at Hal:

"Number T23?"

His voice was creaky, loud, and grating. His glittering eyes narrowed in a smirk, his lips stretching and parting slightly. Light from the nearest sign fell across his wings, tinting them green and blue. He looked repulsive.

"What do you want?" Hal replied, none too politely, the soda still in his hand, utterly forgotten.

Something gurgled in the Eitalite's chest, and the smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth climbed higher still, twisting his battered face into something grotesque. I noticed him dart a quick glance at the sky before speaking again:

"So you're running away from college, eh? You weren't expelled, were you? Got cold feet, and now you're making a break for it with these two useless ones? Scared of the council, are we?"

I couldn't say what was going through the boys' heads, but I had worked out long ago that the Eits had been shadowing us. They were biding their time, and now they'd caught up, taking us completely by surprise. Whose bright idea was it to cross the whole city on foot? Well, there you have it. There was no going back now—that much was certain.

Before anyone else could react, I sprang into action.

Snatching the can from Hal's hand, I charged at the Eit and hurled it at him on the run. He batted it aside with a wing, but by then I had closed the distance and drove my foot into the bird-man's stomach with everything I had. The Eitalite kept his feet, but staggered backward. Straight onto the road.

A car plowed into him and roared off without stopping. The Eit crashed down, missing me by sheer luck. He landed awkwardly, chest-first, his long wings splayed out on either side. He didn't cry out. He didn't try to rise. I hoped to heaven he wasn't finished off—the last thing my record needed was the death of an Eitalite. I leapt back from him and spun around.

"Run!"

Hal and Kyle stood frozen like statues, gaping at me. No time for admiration! We had to get out of here, and fast!

Hal lunged suddenly toward me, eyes wide, shouting something—though exactly what, I couldn't make out. The thunder of beating wings and the whistle of wind drowned every sound. The next instant something seized my backpack from behind and hauled me into the air. My leg caught Hal as he rushed forward, and he failed to grab hold of me.

"JEEEEM!" Kyle bellowed, utterly forgetting about such a thing as real names.

The backpack straps bit painfully into my armpits, pinning my arms so I could barely move them. My T-shirt, sweater, even my skirt had all ridden up, and the cold air crept against my skin. I screamed, sensing the void beneath me, sensing how high I hung above the ground.

We climbed in powerful jerks, and each time, dipping slightly before surging upward again, everything inside me bounced. I drew my legs up and tried to recall how you're supposed to tuck yourself in when falling from a great height.

My stomach lurched when I glanced down and glimpsed the roof of a nine-story building. The street shrank rapidly, dissolving into the city's maze. Only by the white bird-man could I still trace it. He lay sprawled beside the roadway, wings spread wide. But then, who was carrying me?..

"Stay calm!" ordered a cool voice above me.

I lifted my head, straining to make out anything at all. The dark blue sky with its silver stars had never seemed so near.

The paws gripping my backpack were exactly like those of the white eit in blue shorts. Above them, all I could make out was a jutting nose. Grey wings beat rapidly, scooping the air with powerful thrusts and bearing us ever higher. It seemed scarcely possible that they could keep us aloft at all. Honestly, everything about flying struck me as far too complicated and bewildering—precarious and perilous.

Once more the wings rose, then spread wide and froze. For a few moments we hung suspended. Then they tilted, and we plunged earthward.

My stomach lurched as though it would burst; I screamed, clutching the backpack straps with all my strength. Cold air slammed into my face, whipping my hair and stealing my breath, sliding beneath my skirt and t-shirt. The roof of a house swam into view. I squeezed my

eyes shut and threw my arms over my face, able to think of nothing but not overshooting the roof.

After skimming another few metres, I dropped, striking the ground on my knees and then scraping along on the rest of my body. Everything inside me jolted—yet how blissful it was to feel solid earth beneath me! I rolled onto my side, gulped air through my mouth, and broke into coughing. My skin burned and stung so fiercely that tears streamed down my cheeks. It was as if I'd been dragged across a grater. My mouth filled with bloody saliva; I pushed myself up onto all fours and spat. My body had gone limp, trembling faintly, and a wave of nausea washed over me.

Behind me came a thud and the scrape of something dragging. I turned around.

An eyt almost identical to the one I'd left downstairs landed on the roof. It had grey plumage, a dark blue sleeveless jacket, and classically cut shorts of the same color. Dark aviators hid half its face.

The feathered freak advanced on me, and I scrambled to my feet, retreating and crunching over cement dust and dry leaves. My knees were buckling, but I refused to let myself collapse onto the roof. I'm strong. I can handle this. Probably.

I slammed back into the railing at the edge and stopped. The eyt had nearly reached me.

It stood even a little taller than Kyle—probably a good two meters—with broad shoulders and a broad chest. In place of hair, long grey feathers grew from its head, and its short neck was perfectly smooth. Its long, powerful wings were pressed slightly against its sides, and its feet were clad in leather gloves with holes for the claws. I noticed that the outer toe of its left foot was bound to the one beside it, and that the creature walked with a slight limp on that leg.

It came right up to me, looming over, and in its glasses I caught my full-length reflection—a rather pitiful sight, I must admit.

“Stay back! I cried in a trembling voice.” Don’t touch me!

It froze, but stayed where it was beside me, tense and apparently poised to strike. Being trapped alone on a rooftop with a bloodthirsty eyt—well, that was just what my college years had been missing! I had no idea what to do. I didn’t even know if it understood me.

When the eyt stirred, I repeated hysterically, pressing my back against the railing:

“Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me!”

The bird-man fell silent for a moment, then stepped back, crunching over the debris. I could feel his gaze pinned on me through the lenses of his glasses.

“Easy now,” he said in a low, chest-deep voice. — I won’t hurt you.

«You already have, freak!»

“Does it hurt?” he went on.

I looked down, remembering my landing. My skirt clung to my scraped knees, my sneakers were scuffed, and my T-shirt had torn in a small place. My palms, chest, and legs still burned with a hot sting, though fear had numbed the pain somewhat. What if I had broken something? Nausea surged up my throat again, and I swallowed with difficulty.

«Yes, just a teensy bit painful! Can’t you tell?»

“I’m sorry, the eit tilted his head slightly, and I caught the reflection of the stars in his glasses.” I didn’t think you’d… land like that. I’ll be more careful next time.

«Next time?!»

The bird-man walked to the edge of the roof and leaned over the railing, gazing down at the street. I had an almost overwhelming urge to shove him off, planting a kick on his backside as I did — but I knew

he could simply take to the air, and then who could say whether he'd be any "more careful" with me.

"Where is T23?" he suddenly shouted, and I flinched. — Anum!

Even raised, his voice remained smooth and guttural. Soon an enraged howl reached us from the white eit — hysterical, trembling, shrill, and brimming with fury. Well, at least he was alive.

"Where's that little piece of trash?! Where is she?! I'll gut her like a…"

I didn't look down — I kept my eyes fixed on the eit beside me. In the days that followed, I would return to that moment again and again, for it was the first time I had felt anything toward the eits beyond fear and loathing. It was then, for the very first time, that interest and curiosity about their nature awoke in me.

I studied the large, smooth feathers of the grey eit. I couldn't tear my gaze away. I even longed to touch them, but restrained myself. Along the side of his clothing I noticed neat fastenings, designed so he could slip his jacket on and off without dragging it over his wings and head. On the left breast was a black badge, though I couldn't make out what it bore.

Who had sent these eits after us? The Council itself? Why under cover of night? How had they known we would be in the city?

From the street below, the second bird-man's curses kept drifting upward, though I couldn't distinguish a single word. As if hypnotized, I examined the eitalit's plumage, the horny scales on his legs, his bare neck. So... intricate! Not one of the defective ones, which usually look wretched, bearing only a feature or two of a true eit. The creature before me was whole, complete — and the sight nearly filled me with awe.

"Shut up!" the grey eit snapped at his companion, glancing warily down the street. "Where's T23?"

“Right here, you freak.”

I couldn’t say where Hal had come from — it was as though he, too, had taken wing and alighted on the rooftop. He came toward us with his arms spread wide, palms turned forward. The skin of his hands glowed green, pulsing rapidly in time with his heartbeat, the light spilling from his palms into his fingers and up along his wrists. He looked familiar and unfamiliar all at once. It unsettled me, truth be told.

“T23,” the grey eit said with satisfaction, studying him. “So it really is you.”

“Let her go!”

“You’ll come with us, T23, and no one will lay a finger on your friends.”

Hal’s hands blazed ever brighter, the light pulsing faster and faster. Even the eit seemed shaken by it.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” he said quietly.

His composure surprised me—not every man could keep his cool like that. Most of the ones I knew would have been cursing, throwing punches, and blowing apart anything in their path by now.

“Stop it,” the eit went on. “We can settle this peacefully. Just hear me out…”

“You don’t get to give me orders!” Hal’s temper snapped, and his palms flared so fiercely that I had to look away. “I could kill you! Let her go and get out of here!”

Grey stepped forward, his massive frame nearly blotting out my view of the night sky.

“Calm down,” was all he said.

Two seconds of silence.

Then a loud crack, and a green flash lit up the whole rooftop. A sharp, violent wall of air knocked me off my feet; I fell onto my stomach, curled into a ball, and shielded my head with my arms. I felt

no pain—though perhaps that was only shock. In a minute or two, I would discover that everything inside me had been torn apart.

When I opened my eyes and raised my head, I saw that the eighth was calmly beating his wings, shaking off the green tongues of flame, all the while watching me. His glasses had cracked in the blast, and his jacket collar was singed. Hal stood in the same spot, hands trembling, the glow gone from them. Across the roof stretched a black, scorched trail in the shape of a loop, running all the way to me.

“Are you all right?” Hal asked, his voice breaking.

I struggled to answer, but I couldn’t even open my mouth. How had that flash of light affected me? Why was I feeling no pain? The shockwave had certainly reached me. And why hadn’t the eighth burned to death? Had he managed to leap clear in time?

Strangely enough, Hal hadn’t blacked out from this side effect, and he had even made it over to me. Perhaps lugging those “barriers” around had built up a resistance to magic in him — or perhaps he had already swallowed a pill.

“Where does it hurt?” he asked, frightened, not daring to touch me. — How are you feeling? Was it me who did this to you?

He probably meant my scratches and my utterly wrecked knees. I tried to tell him it wasn’t his fault, but my jaw was clenched shut against my will. Even my chin was trembling.

“Get up. We need to get out of here.”

Hal held out his hand, and I — against my usual habits — took it, hauling myself up with difficulty. His palm was hot, his fingertips cold. My knees shook a little, and altogether I felt exactly like a fragile little crystal vase. I leaned on my friend, fighting the urge to collapse against him entirely and let my aching muscles relax, if only for a moment.

Sharp, noisy wingbeats sounded, and a white ait landed on the roof. His bad eye had swollen shut completely, with only a pinkish white

showing, and he smiled predatorily as he looked us over. Compared to his companion, he looked exactly like a savage from some tribe.

“Igig, are we pulling out?” he bellowed, turning to his buddy. — Let’s take the second boy with us — he’s got real mano teeth!

“Then the girl comes with us too, the other replied.”

The white one turned his bald head and looked me straight in the eye. His unpleasant, birdlike face resembled a clumsily made plaster mask — and was just as white. Hal squeezed my hand tighter, staring at him defiantly.

“And what do we need her for? the white one asked arrogantly.” What did she bewitch you with?

“The girl comes with us. It’s not up for discussion.”

And without any warning, the grey ait launched off the roof, swooped down on me like a hurricane, and grabbed my backpack. I barely had time to let go of Hal, heard him shout, and then I was screaming myself and after that I heard nothing more. The sky, the high-rise, the street — everything spun head over heels, and I nearly threw up.

Within mere seconds I found myself set gently down on the pavement — not hurled, as last time. I staggered, but Kyle, who happened to be close by, caught me this time. He was nearly as pallid as the white Eit, yet on the whole he looked decidedly more presentable. Hal landed beside us, and he was handled far less courteously. Both Eit birds touched down in front of us: a dishevelled white one wearing a bloodthirsty grin, and a calm, severe grey one. We huddled together, glaring at them with a mixture of hatred and terror. There was no outrunning creatures like these, and clearly frightening them off was out of the question too.

“You’re coming with us,” the grey one began, folding his wings behind his back. “The council of Eitalits wishes to see you at once.”

“And don’t even think about trying anything clever!” the white one added menacingly. “We’re under orders to bring T23 back alive, but nobody said anything about his condition. The council won’t object if the prisoner arrives missing an arm or a leg — understood? The same goes for your little friends; we’re under no obligation to handle them with care.”

I ought to have been enraged by his insolent tone, yet all I felt was fear. Kyle seemed to sense it and squeezed my hand tighter, even though his own palm was clammy and cold.

“It would be in your best interest not to resist,” the grey Eit concluded. “Come along.”

They didn’t let us get a single word in. The “birds” flanked Hal and me on either side, leaving Kyle squeezed between us, and seized us by the arms. I drew a white Eit, whose grip on my feathers was rough, unpleasant, and painful. They marched us briskly down the street, and all we could do was scramble to keep our legs moving. Wounded as I was, with Kyle scared out of his wits — what chance did we possibly stand against them? As for Hal, one glance at his face told me he was cooking up some madcap and, without a doubt, doomed escape scheme.

Passersby stepped out of our path at the sight of us, but nobody screamed in terror, nobody called the police — a single Eit outweighed the strength of ten ordinary people. How wretched it was to feel so helpless! Not a soul even tried to come to our aid — everyone was far too preoccupied with their own safety, too frightened to so much as meet an Eit’s eyes.

Then again, had I glimpsed such a terrifying pair in the city, I’d have hurried across to the other side of the road myself. And I wouldn’t have cared where or why they were hauling off their prisoners. So I couldn’t really fault the people. It just stung a little.

Suddenly the white Eit clicked its tongue and turned its head toward Hal.

“Hey, listen! Do your shoes always squeak that loud? It’s enough to drive a person mad!”

I heard Hal chuckle with satisfaction and nearly lost my temper. Just look at him! We’ve been discovered and taken prisoner by Eits, and this idiot is thrilled they’ve noticed his beloved sneakers!

“Anum, the grey bird replied quietly,” be quiet, I’m asking you.

To this, Anum muttered something inaudible under his breath, his mouth twisting. I stole a sideways glance, studying him. The feathers gripping my forearm bent like fingers, stiff and brittle as dried leaves. His feet were bare of gloves, but I could make out a knotted cord slung around his scrawny neck. His thick claws clicked against the pavement in time with the clicking of the second “bird.” The strange rhythm of the march churned my stomach. Hal’s squeaking sneakers were far easier on the ears by comparison.

“The Director gave you a month’s deadline, so why turn up so early?” I said, hoping the Eits would relax their guard a little and Hal would manage to save us.

“The Council decided it couldn’t wait that long, the grey one replied.”

“The Council doesn’t get to decide everything in the world!” I tried to argue.

“You’re wrong. The Council holds sway over both worlds.”

That was hard to rebut, however desperately I wanted to. And while I was still racking my brain for some nasty remark to hurl at that wretched council, Kyle spoke up:

“How did you find us?”

“Luck. We were heading to the college when we spotted you. We followed and made sure it really was T23. With unexpected company.”

So the flapping of wings hadn't been my imagination after all — the birds had been trailing us through the air. And if we'd taken a taxi, we'd be safely tucked away at Hal's aunt's place by now!

"Where are we going now?"

"You'll see. And that's quite enough talking."

We arrived at the administrative building of the central district. The gates swung open without a hitch for the eits, and we made straight for the front steps. Who were they planning to see first—the mayor, or someone else? I tried to catch Kyle's eye—he was supposed to know more about this than the rest of us—but the big fellow trudged along with his head down, looking at no one.

A guardsman stood by the entrance, apparently guarding nothing more than a painting on the wall, right beside the staircase. The eits led us directly toward him, and one last hope flickered in me: that the soldier would realize we were being taken hostage and try to stop the birds. He had a weapon, after all!

But that hope evaporated without a trace. The man paid us no attention whatsoever, motionless beside the wall. And as we drew near, I could finally make out what was painted there.

The picture was like a window into another world, where the sea roared below while you gazed out from a hillock, standing beside a tree. Pale wisps of dandelion seeds drifted up into the sky, and two moons glowed where the sun should have been. A sweet little scene, just right for the wall of a government building—which was presumably why a guard stood next to it. What on earth was going on here?

I glanced at Hal, hoping that this time he would finally seize the moment and attempt our escape, but the kugalung was staring at the graffiti, entranced, as if he had suddenly discovered a love of art.

"Try touching the picture, T23," the grey eit said to him.

Hal studied it, then slowly—almost warily—reached out and touched the painted sky with his fingertips. My anger flared even hotter. And this was what he called resistance? He should have cursed the guard, blasted him with lightning, and gotten us out of here!

“It won’t work, the white one snorted. Yet in that very instant, the picture stirred.”

A ripple plainly ran across its surface, and it began to glow from within with blue light. Hal stared at his own hand in astonishment, unable to grasp how he had done it, while the white one was already herding us forward, straight toward the wall.

“Let go of me, I’m going to smash right into it!” I cried out, digging in my heels.

Eit answered with an idiotic giggle, but one silent look from his companion shut him up at once.

“No one is going to crash. Follow me.”

Grey cast the guard one last glance—the guard remained indifferent to it all—then stepped forward and vanished behind the wall, which seemed to swallow him, absorb him into itself. Kyle flinched in fright, but before he could gather his wits, the white eit unceremoniously shoved him from behind. Our friend flew into the picture and disappeared into it, as if plunging into water.

“Your turn now! the bird barked at Hal and me.”

My friend took my hand and squeezed it tight. His eyebrows arched in regret that things had come to this, yet his lips curved into a smile he couldn’t suppress, and I easily caught the glimmer of curiosity in his bright green eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered, and stepped forward, drawing me along with him.

Before tumbling into another world, I managed to remember that Hal’s eyes had been pale gray all his life.

Numbers

Number T23. Hal

I had hoped with everything in me that we would end up on the Land of Blue Dandelions. After all, that was the very place in the painting on the wall! The same tree, the two moons, and the dandelions themselves with their blue fuzz. I could have picked that one place out of a million others!

I longed so desperately to get there — even with Jem, with Kyle, even with those two stinking eights. All I wanted was to behold its silent beauty, and nothing else would have mattered.

But it was not to be. We found ourselves in a dark, frozen world where the wind howled and fine beads of rain stung our faces. A stone fence rose beside us, and nothing else could be seen. Then one of the eights touched something on the wall, and suddenly it blazed with hundreds of tiny blue lights — like fireflies sheltering in the crevices of the stone, or candle flames thrusting straight out of it. I couldn't say what they were or why they glowed, but they made a pretty sight.

And then I noticed that the entire wall was covered in graffiti, just like the one near city hall. And every single image depicted the same thing — the Land of Blue Dandelions!

The Land of Blue Dandelions, which belonged to me and the mute girl alone! The revelation that my secret corner was known to the entire world of eights nearly finished me off on the spot.

"Let's move," rumbled the grey freak.

He was almost indistinguishable in the dim light, melting into the shadows. A creature like that could have crept up on you and you'd never notice. Beside him stood the second eight, whose white feathers, by contrast, glowed brilliantly against the blue lights. And him I would have trusted far more than his friend.

But before we set off, Jem decided to ask:

“Why didn’t the guard stop you? Did you cast a spell on him or something?”

The white ate grunted in reply. It seemed he would never forgive Jem for the way she had greeted him, nor his companion for bringing her along. So it was the grey “bird” who spoke up:

“Aetalites may pass freely through the gates of the human world. Curiously, that privilege doesn’t extend to humans themselves — those with side powers.”

Naturally — those freaks hadn’t contented themselves with reshaping their own world to suit their fancy; they had tried to remodel ours as well, so that only they would feel at home in it. Why? Because some of them happen to have wings, or an extra pair of eyes, and can wield magic? That hardly seems fair.

We didn’t have far to go — the birds simply walked up to another image of the Land of Blue Dandelions, twinkling with little lights. As far as I could tell, it was no different from the one we’d seen in the city, or from any of the others along the wall. But the mighty aetalites knew best, of course.

Yet before the grey ate could touch it, the second “bird” stopped him:

“Or let them try,” he suggested with a nasty smirk, glancing our way. “Kyuruk only knows what might be lurking in those two.”

Grey lowered his wing and turned to us. Could he even see anything through those cool, cracked glasses of his? The least he could do was thank me for the fact that he was still alive!

“Not a bad idea,” he agreed thoughtfully, straightening up, squaring his shoulders and lifting his head. — And one more thing. Let’s finally introduce ourselves to each other. It really unnerves me to call you two “Rosie” and “Froggy” in my head.

It was such an unexpected but such a spot-on comparison that I couldn't hold back and burst out laughing. I'm going to remember that!

The grey ayt, it seemed, did too. Before he could even blink, Jem was next to him, stepping right on his tied-together fingers. Cruel — very much her style. The ayt nearly doubled over from the pain.

"My name is K44," she announced, keeping him pinned. — And for you, nothing else.

"Got it, my bad, the ayt wheezed, and only then did Jem step away from him."

I barely held back my laughter as I watched the bird-guy straighten up and breathe heavily. Let him know what it's like to mess with Ukol! He gave a smack to his laughing companion and turned to Kyle. He kept his injured leg tucked in, just in case.

"And you, young man..."

"L5."

Kyle still looked frightened and confused. Was I the only one feeling great despite everything going on around us?

"Just lovely, the white ayt grimaced." T23, K44 and L5. Kata Almighty, what is happening to this human tribe?

Grey sighed. He seemed to be gradually losing his patience, and he hadn't even spent an hour with us yet.

"My name is Igig, and this is my brother Kalanu," he introduced himself.

None of us could bring ourselves to say "nice to meet you." Only Jem boldly remarked:

"But you called him Anum."

Kalanu clicked his tongue but held his silence, so Igig answered in his stead:

"You were called something other than K44 yourself, yet I'll address you however you wished to be addressed."

Jem flinched and shot a glance at Kyle, who still hadn't grasped what they were discussing. Our bigmouth had just bellowed Jem's true name across all of Rosedale! It was chilling to imagine what the eitalites might do with that information. Well, I supposed things couldn't get any worse.

Kalanu let out a loud grunt.

"Enough chatter! At this rate we'll never reach the residence. Hey, you, Number Five" try touching the drawing.

Even then it took Kyle a moment to realize he was the one being addressed, and when it finally dawned on him, he edged cautiously toward the wall, brushed the drawing with his fingertips, and snatched his hand right back. He had all but convinced himself he was a mighty eit whose mere touch could bring walls crashing down. Naturally, nothing happened, and I nearly began to seethe at how we were squandering time. I was aching to see this world the brothers were leading us to, and instead we stood stranded at the edge of nowhere, growing more soaked and frozen by the minute.

"Now Jem... or rather, number K44." Kalanu smiled with feigned innocence as Jem practically smoldered with fury.

She punched the picture in anger, her annihilating, signature glare never leaving the white-faced insolent. Nothing happened — though had she carried even a single drop of defective blood, I'm certain the entire wall would have collapsed on the spot.

"Just as I suspected," Kalanu concluded smugly. — Two useless ones. Number Twenty-Three, what do you even want with them?

"Shut your beak!" Igig snapped at him. "And be so kind as to activate the gate yourself, since you're the most useful one here."

I relished how neatly he'd silenced him — no doubt a skill he'd perfected by now. Kalanu shot his brother a dark look, traced the drawing lightly with a feather, and it burst at once into scarlet flame.

Remarkable — faster and brighter than mine had been. I wondered whether that depended on purity of blood or sheer magical power. I hoped it was the former; that would be the less insulting explanation.

As before, we had to step straight into the wall, fighting the urge to recoil. Kyle and Jem squeezed their eyes shut, but I kept mine wide open, clinging to the hope of catching even a fleeting glimpse of the mute girl.

Nothing. Barely an instant passed before we were carried elsewhere, as though we had simply walked through the wall and emerged on the other side — just like crossing the fence that divided UKOG from Rosedale. One world. Two different places.

Before us rose something that might have been a genuine castle or merely an enormous house; it was impossible to tell in all that darkness. The building looked grim, lifeless, like some colossal tombstone. Slender, sharp-tipped towers crowned it, stabbing into the belly of the sky. Not a single window glowed, and no streetlights pierced the gloom outside.

We were standing on a driveway. Through the soles of my sneakers I could feel the rounded pebbles, and the cold air was thick with the scents of grass, damp clay, and wood. A few trees and bushes clustered near the castle, and in the darkness they seemed like eyt-monsters lying in wait.

Lest we stumble, we mounted the broad stone staircase slowly, clutching the towering balustrades. It felt as though everything here had been built for giants — and if the birds in the Eits' world were as large as our escorts, it was frightening to imagine what other creatures might dwell there.

With every step my unease deepened, as though my brain had at last grasped that the beautiful girl from another dimension would not be appearing today, while the council of the Eits was all but counting

the minutes until my arrival. I glanced back several times, casting about for some avenue of escape, but each time I concluded there was nothing to hope for. We stood within the domain of the Eits — trapped already, with no way out.

No guards flanked the door; whether this was a prison or the council's residence, its defenses were curiously thin. Or were the Eits so assured of their own powers that they required nothing more? I could see the massive door bore no keyhole at all. Only a strange flat stone — something like a slab of marble — hung on the wall beside it.

"The council never expected us to settle things this quickly," Igig began, approaching the door and pressing one wing against the strange stone, "so no one is expecting us now. We'll send word, but until then... you'll have to wait here."

A faint purple glimmer flickered beneath the Eit's flight feathers, and Igig gave a slight shudder. Then he took hold of the door handles with both wings and pushed the doors inward with all his strength. While he labored to open the heavy panels, I decided to ask:

"What is that place painted on the wall? You know — the one we passed through?"

"You mean the gates?" Kalanu fixed me with a level stare. — That's the Transition Garden. Don't you get it? How shall I put this... Look, when we cross from one place to another through the gates, we're not merely leaping over distance. We pass through a sort of corridor — a threshold, even. Like walking from one room into another. That's what they call the Transition Garden.

I had never heard of any such thing. Kyle and Jem, too, were listening with keen interest.

"And does it look like this place?" I could barely breathe for excitement. — With the sea, and the dandelions, and...

“Oh, what an innocent!” Kalanu was greatly amused. — It looks however people say it looks, but no one lingers there longer than a heartbeat. So who can say for certain?

“And a girl lives there?”

Now even Igig turned to stare at me, while my friends gaped as though I’d taken leave of my senses. But if this was a chance to learn something about the beautiful mute girl, I would never let it slip away! Let them think whatever they liked and say whatever they pleased.

“A girl?” Kalanu dissolved into cackles again. — A girl! What next, kid — a hammock and freshly squeezed juice? You’ve certainly got an imagination.

“What made you think there was a girl there?” Jem cut in, but I was no longer listening to anyone.

They know nothing about her. Though... perhaps that’s just as well. She belongs to me alone — maybe she’s nothing but my own invention, and as for the blackouts... Enough. That’s quite enough for today.

“Come on, let’s move,” Igig urged us. — Enough loitering outside chattering about girls.

“What’s the matter, feeling lonely?” his brother needled him at once, then burst out laughing again as he was the first to step into the castle.

Igig shut the door behind us, and somewhere ahead, in the dark corridor, something let out a deep, guttural growl.

“Easy now, no need to panic.”

I had known this fellow for less than an hour, yet I could already tell that this time Kalanu meant business. A lamp kindled above us — a hovering blue sphere — its scattered glow barely reaching us, unable to stretch as far as the monster lurking in the depths of the hall.

But he was there — snorting, growling low, and watching us. A sharp smell reached my nose, though for a moment I couldn't recall whose it was meant to be.

Igig stepped forward, taking his place beside his brother.

"Enrir, easy," he commanded, and the growling ceased.

Clumsy claws clicking against the stone floor, a massive body brushing the wall, deep breathing like a steam engine… something about it all painfully reminded me of someone…

The faint, faintly flickering light traced out the giant silhouette of a beast standing no less than five meters tall. He stood before us, barring the way. Another lamp flared, and out of the darkness emerged an enormous wolf's face. Amber eyes flashed, black lips curled higher, baring teeth as large as my palm. Time and again he drew back the tips of his ears and lowered his head slightly, studying us while refusing to abandon his intent to attack. All he needed was the slightest signal, and he would play his part as guardian to the fullest.

Yet despite his ferocious appearance, I felt my anxiety melt away. It was only Yo-Yo, all grown up and grizzled — what was there to fear? I even smiled, as if greeting an old friend, and my hands itched to scratch him behind the ear.

"Enrir, these are our guests," Igig explained to him. — Everything's fine.

The wolf snorted with displeasure, sending cold droplets flying at us. While our mascot had merely wanted to play with the students, Enrira seemed seized by an urge to crush someone and bite them in half.

Only then did I notice a ghostly, almost invisible chain stretching from his neck across the floor. It looked woven of smoke, yet I was certain that, beneath the illusion, it was stronger than steel—the thing

that kept the monster in check. I wondered whether Yo-Yo would ever need something like that.

At last Enrira ceased boring into us with his gaze, let the fur along his neck settle, and even gave his tail a small wag. He lowered his head toward Kalanu and nudged him in a friendly way with his nose. To my surprise, the sarcastic eit suddenly began cooing tenderly at the giant and scratching the bridge of the beast's nose. Enrira flopped onto the floor with a resounding thump, forgot all about us, and rumbled with contentment. Igig flapped a wing at us, beckoning us to follow.

We filed past the wolf and set off along the wide corridor, which resembled the grotto of a cave, dimly lit by scattered blue orbs. The click of Igig's claws and our synchronized footsteps on the stone floor echoed through the level, and I listened desperately, straining to catch any sound that didn't belong. I couldn't believe we were alone down here—and even if we were, the whole thing might be a trap. They would lock us in a cell under Enrira's watch. They would slap "barriers" on me. After the recent business with the eits, that was the easiest thing to believe.

"When will the council come?" I asked our taciturn guide.

He hesitated slightly, as if weighing which of the two answers would suit us better.

"In the morning. Kalanu will send them word, and it will be in their own interest to get here as quickly as they can."

"Word?" echoed Kyle, our resident expert on all things newfangled. — You mean, like a pager?

"Something of the sort."

Igig shut his mouth once more, and we began the climb up the spiral staircase — stone, naturally — gripping the railing for dear life in the darkness, terrified of taking a wrong step. It struck me more and more that we were being led to a dungeon at the top of some tower, and

just to be safe, I readied myself to pounce on the treacherous bird and haul us out of there. I chose not to dwell on how we would get out of the residence, or what we would do afterward. All I wanted was to vanish from this place.

“No one expected you to bring back three instead of one,” Igig warned us as we reached the second floor and came upon the first closed door, — so there’s only one room for you. Don’t hold it against us. — And before Jem could howl at such an affront, he hurriedly asked: — Who’s hungry?

To be honest, we eyed him with faint hope, for we had never managed to get our hands on those sandwiches, and at dinner in the cafeteria we had barely touched our plates, what with fretting over the coming escape.

“I’ll expect you in the dining room in half an hour,” Igig took our silence for consent. — Myukli will show you the way.

We should have asked, “What on earth is a myukli?” but truthfully, we had grown weary of questions like that, so we merely nodded as though we knew precisely what he meant. Myukli, fine, myukli — we could cope with that.

“Such marvelous hospitality,” Jem grumbled, plopping down right onto the stone floor of our room.

I couldn’t help but agree. Whatever notions of hospitality the Eits might cherish, they had lodged us in a small, chilly room. There was a single mattress with three pillows, no windows, a squat cabinet on crooked legs, and a narrow shelf nailed nearly up to the ceiling, where a bowl of incense sticks stood. One more corner held a large empty vessel of pink glass. At least there was a bathroom next door, complete with cold water and no towels. True, when I tried to wash up there, I nearly blinded myself — seawater came gushing from the tap. But then, perhaps I really was in no position to grumble about such things?

And yet, honestly, I'd want comfort even on the last day of my life. I'm no criminal, to be treated like this. That scuffle with the Twin wasn't my doing — it was the secondary power's. I can't be punished for it.

"What myukli is he going on about?" Kyle grumbled from his corner.

The thought had been gnawing at him, and I could well guess that the big fellow was wondering whether the things were edible, and if so, in what form? Just then he sat perched on his backpack, wearily slumped, staring at the floor. The mattress was all mine — it had been meant for me in the first place, really.

"Just another of the Eits' little games. Time you got used to it," I replied indulgently, watching the blue glowing sphere bob gently near the ceiling.

Its cold, pallid light fell across the plain gray walls, and the room reminded me more and more of Mrs. Doctor's ward. Hmm, I wonder — has anyone at the college noticed yet that we're gone?

"Why did they take the two of us?" Jem asked quietly, rubbing her hands beneath the long sleeves of her sweater. "They didn't mean to… Certainly not out of the kindness of their hearts."

I was growing weary of my friends hurling questions into the void that I couldn't answer. Why were they so wary, yet at the same time so indifferent toward the eyts? I had no idea where this sudden wave of fondness for those freaks had sprung from, but the attitude of my loved ones left a sour taste in my mouth. After all, I was a bit of an eyt myself, even if only a tiny, tiny bit.

Then again, so was Kyle. Something stirred in my memory, and I turned to him.

"They called you what? Teeth of the mor?"

"The Mano," Jem corrected me.

Kyle nodded sheepishly and began fidgeting with the strap of his backpack.

“While you two were up on the roof, Kalanu got a closer acquaintance with my teeth. He even came away with a bit of respect for me. I’ve no idea what mano he was talking about, but I’d like… I’d like to find out.”

I was just on the point of rejoicing that I wasn’t the only one so curious about the eyts and their world, when a scratching and rustling arose on the other side of the door. It sounded like hedgehogs scurrying about — like the ones that lived in every ordinary grove of UKOG. Jem sprang to her feet, and I sat up from the mattress. Kyle reached the door first and, without a moment’s hesitation, flung it open. In that same instant, someone’s shadow darted away.

“Hey, who’s there?” I called, stepping up to the doorway as well. I felt my palms grow warm, and confidence washed over me completely. I could stand up for myself and my friends, even if a whole army of hedgehogs came at us!

“We’re not afraid of you!” Kyle added threateningly, as though he’d been reading my mind.

Then Jem pushed past us, shouldering us aside without ceremony.

“You clumsy oafs! You’ve frightened them off!”

The sensible thing would have been to ask, “Frightened whom?” but Jem prudently hushed us before we could speak, then crouched down and cautiously stretched out her hand.

“Come here. Don’t be afraid,” she murmured in the gentlest voice I had ever heard from her.

Out of the darkness of the corridor crawled two small, strange, and utterly hideous creatures — some ghastly cross between a piglet, a rat, and a mongrel. The little monstrosities barely reached my knees; they were hairless, with black, wrinkled skin and long, curved claws. They

walked upright on two legs, while their two tiny forepaws they pressed to their bellies or rubbed together. Their elongated snouts, like miniature trunks, twitched along with their long ears, and thin tufted tails swished across the floor.

“Hello there,” Jem sang out, extending her hand to them without a trace of fear. — What are your names? You may call me Ukole, or K44.

The creatures made no answer, blinking their moist, jet-black eyes and wriggling the snouts at the tips of their little trunks. There were about five of them huddled together, all silently watching us, waiting for something.

“Apparently, these are the mukli,” Kyle ventured, studying the little beasts with curiosity.

“And apparently they’re going to show us the way to the kitchen,” Jem finished for him, straightening up. — Then let’s not waste any time.

True to its word, the myukli led us onward, waddling from one broad paw to the next. We descended a flight of stairs, again clinging warily to the railing and groping for each step. The same blue orb still hovered above us, casting its faint glow on the way — though only Katu knew whose magic sustained it, or how it sensed where we were.

Our journey was brief; scarcely five minutes later, the myukli ushered us into an enormous stone hall. Massive bowls of fire blazed in the corners, lending the place no warmth — only a vague disquiet. The arched windows opposite the door fared no better: bare of curtains, their glass shielded by ornate metal grilles.

In the center of the hall, as expected, stood a huge wooden table, though chairs lined only half of it — five, by my count. Igig and Kalanu sprawled across two of them; the rest, apparently, were meant for us. Whether they had been brought in for our sake alone, or whether

the household typically entertained more guests, I couldn't say. And what did it matter? I was famished, and Kyle's stomach was rumbling suspiciously as well. Upon the table sat dishes arranged on copper trays, empty goblets of dark blue ribbed glass, and a large pitcher brimming with a purple liquid. Among the trays I made out strange fruits and berries, while chunks of some unknown meat released a mouthwatering aroma that tormented my already empty stomach. We hurried to our seats, hands reaching for forks and knives — but then modesty prevailed, and as one we turned toward the masters of the castle.

The brothers, it seemed, had already eaten their fill. They lounged back in their seats, surveying us with an air of a job well done. Igig held a glass of some unidentifiable drink tucked under his arm, while Kalanu listlessly chewed on something peculiar—boiled fish, perhaps, or a white root.

"Make yourselves at home, Igig urged us, taking a sip from his glass." I hope our food is to your liking.

I noticed they had changed clothes: both now wore loose, sleeveless tops with high collars. Their glasses were off, and we could at last admire Igig's brown eyes, no longer veiled behind glass. What interested me far more, however, was the green bandage wound around his left forearm. Could I actually have wounded him after all? I couldn't remember—when the flash erupted from my hands, my belated thought had been of Jem, and everything else had instantly vanished from my mind. But if I did singe him, it would only serve him right—next time he'd think twice before standing in my way.

"This is takikanu meat. A delicacy. Why won't you try it? Kalanu asked suddenly, sounding wounded."

It wasn't hard to guess whom he meant—Kyle and I were bolting down everything on our plates, discriminating not at all. The food

seemed blander than what we were used to, but with our stomachs growling, we hardly cared. Jem, meanwhile, was cutting some strange fruit into little pieces and, like a proper lady, sending them one by one into her mouth. She had pushed the plate of boiled meat well out of her way.

“I don’t eat meat, she replied calmly, without so much as a glance at the aits.”

As sometimes happened, this conclusion earned nothing but mockery. Kalanu bit into his chunk of meat with relish and muttered:

“No wonder the human race is headed for extinction.”

“Anyone’s free to eat what they like,” growled Kyle, already swallowing his third helping.

“I’m not arguing. Everyone chooses their own way to die,” Kalanu shot back.

“You’re wrong there,” Jem cut in unexpectedly. “I could do it for you. Mind?”

A glass came down on the table with a clatter, and everyone fell silent at once. Igig glared furiously around at us and said, low and quiet:

“Would you all please shut up.”

He looked utterly drained and would clearly have preferred to be asleep already rather than sit with us, patiently waiting for dinner to end. I wondered — was that part of his duties too? Or had he merely been ordered to grab me and bring me to the residence? What would that even look like? The Council decided to deal with me as quickly as possible, so they dispatched a couple of thugs to snatch me, hauling me straight out of the UKOG dorm room? Had they gone completely mad over there?

Though everyone knew of the council of eytalites, no one could say who actually sat on it. What did its members look like? What were

their names? On the one hand, I'd heard that the council's composition changed often, so there was no point in memorizing faces. On the other hand, they were said to be touchy creatures who disliked revealing themselves.

Well, one way or another, we would soon make their acquaintance. And if we got out of here alive, we'd be living legends.

I realized quite suddenly that I was full, and set down my fork, a piece of meat still impaled upon it. The vast hall seemed more alien and sinister than ever, and I caught myself longing to wake tomorrow morning in my cramped college room, right next door to Skeleton and Lace.

"When will the council arrive?" I asked.

Igig ruffled the feathers along his head and stifled a yawn. In the flickering firelight, dark shadows showed beneath his eyes, and fine wrinkles already creased his forehead. How old was he? The Aites lived far longer than humans, didn't they? Perhaps he was already a hundred, if not more? I felt even more uneasy in his presence. Who was he, really?

"Before lunch, without a doubt," Igig replied. — But not before nine in the morning. Kalanu will come fetch you when they arrive.

"And then what?.."

My voice trailed off at the end of the question, and a heavy, frightening silence settled over the dining hall for several long seconds. It was dreadful to hear the answer — and unbearable to hear nothing while awaiting it.

"First of all, the council will learn that we brought back more than just you," Kalanu observed with a smirk. — Though I can't promise they'll be pleased about that. And secondly…

"Nobody knows," Igig cut him off, rising hastily from the table. — No one knows for certain. They may destroy you on the spot. They

may invite you to join our ranks. They may simply send you home. There's no telling.

He gave his brother one last look, silently commanding him to hold his tongue, and strode toward the doors, dispensing final instructions as he went:

"The Myukli will show you to your room. My apologies once more that the three of you must squeeze into it together. Breakfast will be served at nine. And don't even think about sneaking off" the moment you poke your nose out that door, you'll be spotted. Good night.

He really did seem to relish giving orders.

Suddenly Igig stopped, turned back to us, and studied us thoughtfully, as though about to say or do something more. Just in case, I tensed, braced for anything. But all he did was murmur in a low, quiet voice:

"Number K44, come here a moment. It concerns your breakfast menu."

Ignoring Kalanu's snickers, Jem walked up to the grey bird without a trace of fear, even though beside her it looked especially clumsy and enormous. It stooped down to her ear and began whispering something. Involuntarily, I clenched my fist, ready to hurl myself at the Ait if it came to that. Igig had every reason to hold Jem's rudeness against her, and who knew how vindictive the Aitalites might be. What was he hissing at her in there? Jem gave a small nod and, without a backward glance, returned to us, her gaze calm and indifferent, fixed straight ahead. With a limp, Igig shuffled out of the dining room.

We lingered a little longer with Kalanu, who had a fine laugh over his brother and Jem's vegetarianism, and then followed the little grunting Myukli back to the bedroom. And of course, the moment we were inside, Kyle and I turned on our friend.

"So, what did that grey freak whisper to you?"

“Was it really about breakfast, or what?”

Jem turned away and spent what felt like an eternity studying the flying balloon drifting nearby. Without a word, she wandered over to her backpack and began rummaging through it. We kept staring at her, almost offended that she had chosen to ignore us. What was that about, anyway?

“Yes, of course about breakfast — what did you take us for, kugalungs?” she muttered, hastily scribbling something in her notebook. “Igig at least has some brains, unlike his brother.”

Kyle closed his eyes, bored.

“Well, I thought it was just an excuse to…”

I elbowed him to shut him up. Standing with her back to the blue balloon, Jem held up her open notebook for us to see.

“He said the Eits must not see my tattoos. The blue balloons are Eits too.”

Cell T23. Hal.

My eyes opened, and I knew at once where I was. The cold floor beneath my back and the glowing orb overhead reminded me immediately that we were in the eit cell. Calling this place a room would have been generous. I sat up, every muscle aching. Kyle and I, being true gentlemen, had surrendered the mattress to Jem—and she hadn't even said thank you. Meanwhile, the two of us lay crammed on bare floorboards, making do with beds improvised from our jackets. Yet the real wonder of this place was that I had slept like a log, not stirring once all night. I couldn't speak for the others, but I suspected they'd shared the same fate. Perhaps something had been slipped into our food, or the blue orb had cast a spell over us? If the council had descended on us in force during the night, they could have caught us utterly off guard, as helpless as infants. But apparently, even the eits weren't immune to the temptation of a lie-in.

Scratching and squinting, I took stock of the room. Kyle asleep beside me, the hovering orb, bare walls, an unoccupied mattress, and... Jem?

She was down on all fours, her backside thrust into the air, forehead nearly touching the floor. It looked like a gesture of profound reverence toward the nightstand before her.

"Hey," I said through a yawn. "What's with the acrobatics?"

Jem turned her head toward me, but her hair curtained her face, and frankly, I doubt she saw me at all.

"Ingela — ever heard of it?" she muttered.

Ah, so that explained it. My mistake—I'd never actually watched Jem performing her beloved ingela before. While the girls twisted themselves into knots on their mats in the early mornings, I'd always preferred to sleep in.

Kyle rose from the floor as well, cracking his back, yawning and groaning so hard his mouth nearly turned inside out. His hair, which habitually stuck up anyway, now bristled on end as though he'd taken an electric shock. A crease from the arm he'd used as a pillow was printed across his cheek. He greeted us, edged carefully past Jem, and vanished into the bathroom. I drummed my fingers against the floor, unsure where to rest my gaze so as not to stare at Jem. I feared that if she caught me looking at her for more than three seconds, she'd slap me.

"Haven't those two... what are their names... turned up yet?"

"Nobody's come by, Jem muttered through her hair, then abruptly lifted her left leg, flinging it almost behind her head." But that doesn't mean they won't barge in here any minute and haul us off to the council.

So she had resolved to spend her final moments of life twisting herself into peculiar poses. Only then did I suddenly notice that Jem's palms and knees were wrapped in strips of cloth. Belatedly, I recalled yesterday's encounter with the "birds."

"Are you... all right? I asked cautiously." Did you get scraped up badly?

"It'll heal, she answered curtly, not looking at me, and finally returned to an upright position. She drew a deep breath, raising and lowering her arms, and changed the subject:" I don't think the council has arrived yet — we'd have heard them. And they'd have shoved us out of the way quick enough, too.

"When did you even get up?"

"At seven. It's nearly nine now, sleepyhead."

Kyle reappeared in the room, rubbing his damp neck.

"The water's freezing," he rasped. "Don't gulp it down, or when they come to kill us, we won't even manage a proper scream."

On my way to the bathroom, I stopped and turned to him.

“Wait—you drank water from there?”

“My throat was so parched, I just…”

“It’s salt water!”

Now it was Kyle’s turn to stare at me blankly. He swallowed and gave a slight shrug.

“Was it? I didn’t notice.”

I realized he’d simply gotten lucky and swallowed the only fresh water in the place! Because when I turned the taps, the same icy seawater came gushing out. It stung my eyes and lips, but it also chased away the last traces of sleep entirely. I returned to the room ready for absolutely anything. The world, however, was in no hurry to toss feats of heroism my way.

We waited for the myuklei, who once again escorted us to the dining room. Who knows what they were kept as here—servants, house pets, or perhaps lunch for Enrira. The dining room was in exactly the same state as the night before. The only difference was that the leftovers and bowls had been cleared from the table and fresh dishes laid out. Grey light barely filtered through the grate; the world outside was completely invisible, and I kept my distance anyway—Igig stood guard by the windows. Kalanu sat at the table, chewing on something.

Seeing us, Igig gave a restrained nod and gestured toward the chairs.

“The council will arrive shortly. Eat quickly, if you don’t want to appear before it hungry.”

Not a particularly useful wish, given that after this meeting you might be destroyed — but in a way he had a point: at least the last minutes of your life ought to be pleasant and filling. We hastily settled ourselves at the table and reached for our plates. Boiled taikan meat yet

again, scattered among unfamiliar leaves and chunks of vegetables. One plate held no meat at all, just a larger portion of salad strewn with seeds and nuts. Jem drew it toward herself and glanced over at Igig.

“Thank you,” she said.

The grey eit barely spared her a look before turning back to the window. A strange feeling crept into my stomach, and it wasn’t hunger. Why had this gloomy fellow treated Jem that way? Why had he told her to cover up her tattoos? She sat with her sweater sleeves tugged down over her fingers, but luckily the castle was cool, so it didn’t look odd — if anything, quite the opposite. Still, I understood nothing, could not fathom what Igig was scheming, and none of it sat well with me. I would need to keep my guard up around him.

“How did you sleep?” Kalanu drawled sweetly, finishing his chewing.

His left eye squinted slightly, so he always seemed to be smirking. Paired with his sly smile and cheeky tone, it actually suited him. Tak was hardly the type to spin an elaborate web of lies, entangling everyone around him with his ill-timed remarks.

“Marvelous,” Kyle snorted, poking at his salad. — Naked, cold floor. Luxury accommodations, what can I say.

He turned to Jem, expecting her support, but she was thoughtfully crunching through her breakfast, paying no attention to anything around her.

“Oh, come now, you had an entire mattress to share,” Kalanu brushed it off with a wave. — Or are people too squeamish to sleep side by side? I know I would be.

Kyle blinked in bewilderment, a forkful of meat suspended halfway to his parted lips. What he might have said remained a mystery, for Igig suddenly barked from his corner:

“The Council has arrived!”

It was as though icy water had been poured over me all over again. The sensation was deeply unpleasant, almost painful; every hair on my arms stood on end, and a cold weight settled in my stomach. I could nearly see the front door swinging open, the procession of hideous creatures filing past the subdued Enrira — how they mounted the spiral staircase without a glance at the myukles crouched out of sight, how they debated aloud the various ways of doing away with us. In less than a day we had made this place feel almost cozy, almost like home, and now these monsters were about to wreck it all — and, in the process, perhaps finish us off as well.

“Come along, come along, move, quickly now!”

Igig fussed about us exactly like a kindergarten teacher preparing to hand her charges over to their parents. Kyle kept chewing his breakfast on the go, I stumbled over a chair leg, and Jem stood wearing the most impassive expression I had ever seen on her face. Kalanu waved us farewell with a wing, beaming happily.

As we spilled out into the corridor, I heard scratching and the low, eager growl of a giant wolf. One of the myukles darted out from somewhere and vanished again, skidding clumsily across the floor. And all through the castle a bell began to ring its melodious peal.

“Impatient as children,” Igig grumbled furiously.

For some reason he wasn’t pleased about it — though what did he have to worry about? He’d done his job, and now he would be rewarded for it. Probably handsomely, too. Everything was going perfectly, and here he was, grumbling and fuming. No doubt he was one of those insufferable perfectionists who simply can’t help themselves — they have to go hunting for mistakes. In others, and in themselves.

On the third floor a broad landing opened up before us, framed by enormous double doors set with stained-glass panels. The floor was laid in turquoise mosaic, the walls in brown. Gilded vases stood in

shallow niches, and a cloying whiff of incense drifted in from somewhere. Several blue spheres darted beneath the high ceiling, and I could practically feel the presence of magic prickling on my skin. Voices reached us from behind the doors, but they made no sense at all.

That was the council of the eitalites. The most powerful beings of two worlds were gathered there. And they were waiting for me alone. Anxiety clamped my stomach so hard I very nearly needed a bathroom.

“Try not to open your mouth unless it’s absolutely necessary,” Igig warned us in a low voice, ushering us toward the entrance of the hall. “And I beg you — none of those human tricks.”

Who knows what he meant by that. He flung the doors wide without knocking, pushed us through, and then strode in after us.

The first thing to catch my eye was a spacious hall, its entire wall taken up by a stained-glass window. Enrir could easily have fit inside, with room to spare for Yo-Yo. The glass portrayed an intricate coat of arms, wreathed in flowers and grasses. The strange symbols within the crest—vaguely suggestive of animals and birds—seemed faintly familiar; I had probably come across them in some document at college, or in a textbook. Shafts of sunlight sifted softly through the colored panes, and a bluish glow shimmered off the orbs.

The hall’s furnishings were lavish and careless all at once. Exquisite plant-patterned tilework covered the floor, the walls, and the ceiling. One wall was hung with an enormous ancient tapestry, a medieval scene of figures and strange creatures gathered around a blue tent. Yet there in the corner lay a plain little rug with a couple of cushions, tossed down as if someone had carried them in from another room and forgotten to remove them. A narrow, crudely made table stood before the stained-glass window, and behind it five chairs, in which sat two Eits and two humans.

We froze on the threshold, at a loss—unsure what to do, where to look, what to say. Bow to them? Shout, “Ah, so it’s you, disgusting Eits? Drop dead!”? Or beg for mercy? For the moment I simply studied them—it proved the more interesting choice.

An empty chair, an old man, an enormous purple eit, another man, a giant dragonfly. The old man wore strange, oversized glasses, but otherwise looked entirely ordinary — an old-fashioned suit, a white mustache, a bald head. The man in the gray jacket resembled a typical businessman from the human world: slicked-back hair, a weary, indifferent expression, colorless eyes, and a hooked nose. But could he really be an ordinary person from our world, playing the part of a spy here? Could he?

The two eits stood out starkly against such a drab backdrop. The first was a giant nearly three meters tall, with dark purple skin and black fur on his head, around his short neck, and along his wrists. He was watching us, never once lifting that heavy gaze.

The second looked like an enormous dragonfly dressed in a tunic. His compound eyes consumed nearly his whole head, giving the impression that he saw everything around him — every minute detail, catching every breath and the faintest movement. Four wings, each two meters long, hung motionless behind his back, their delicate veins catching the blue light in a faint shimmer.

The council seemed utterly strange and absurd, more like a circus troupe than anything else. I swept my eyes over them once more, and a chill crept across my skin when I met the purple giant’s stare. Only then did I notice how strange his eyes were — the whites black, the irises white. His face was somewhat elongated, with a broad nose and full, blue lips. He was naked, at least from the waist up, and bulging muscles stood out plainly across his body.

It was he who spoke first.

“T23! Is that T23?” His accent was strange, from some tongue I couldn’t place, and his voice thundered across the hall like a landslide. — You mean to tell me he’s in three bodies at once?

A shiver ran through me, for he was not joking in the slightest. He truly believed it.

Igig stepped out from behind us, and the thought flashed through my mind that it would have been better if he’d stayed hidden — I had felt safer with him there.

“Specimen T23 stands at the center,” he began, calm and quiet, advancing slowly toward the table. His claws scraped and clicked against the bare floor, and he folded his wings behind his back, interlacing the flight feathers. — I warned you about them. These two, the unplanned ones, are his friends. It became necessary to bring them as well. There is no magic in them — only a secondary appearance in the boy.

He hadn’t called Jem and Kyle useless, and I was grateful to him for that. But then the purple one flat-out lost his temper.

“What are we now, a shelter for every downcast wretch? Couldn’t you have sent them packing? Why drag them here?! Don’t we have enough on our hands already?” Overcome with indignation, he even sprang to his feet and planted his thick hands on the table, glaring straight at Igig. — What is this insubordination? You were ordered to bring T23, not half the college!

The other council members kept silent, observing the quarrel from the sidelines. Yet I could feel it in my bones that they were stealing glances at us too. And how could they not?

Igig advanced right up to the table, coming face to face with the purple one. Nothing rattles him at all, I realize now — not Jem, not me with my power, not even this giant.

“No one gave me any orders,” he said evenly, “least of all you. I was politely requested to find number T23 and, if possible, bring him here — which I did in less than a day. And now you have the audacity to reproach me for bringing along two harmless witnesses? Shame on you.”

This bold speech had its effect: the purple one flushed with fury. A breath more, and not a single feather would have remained of Igig — he would have incinerated him on the spot. But then something darted forward, and there before us stood the oversized dragonfly. Only now did I get a proper look at him.

Yes, he bore dragonfly wings, which he beat without pause, hovering half a meter above the floor with a melodic whir. He had no legs — or perhaps they were concealed beneath the drape of a long brown tunic. Two little hands reached toward us, so slender, tipped with three tiny claws in place of fingers. His compound eyes seemed to glow with an inner white light, and his neat jaws parted slightly.

“We simply have two new heroes,” the dragonfly announced in a melodious, gentle woman’s voice. “Mr. Gugalan, please show our guests some hospitality!”

She looked at us once more and spread her jaws into a smile. Was it ugly? Frightening? Not in the least.

“Your hair is the color of dawn, my dear,” she sang, extending a hand toward Jem. “A name of mine would suit you — Aurora — the color of the sunrise. And what shall I call you?”

For a moment I feared she had bewitched our friend — Jem was watching her so intently. Fortunately, though, she did not reveal her true name; she merely murmured a number.

“What a lovely pairing!” Aurora declared with genuine warmth, turning to Kyle. “And what about you, smile of the Mano?”

The hulking fellow parted his lips to reply, then flushed scarlet and, utterly flustered, mumbled his number so softly it was barely audible.

“Splendid—simply splendid.” Aurora turned toward me, pressing her little hands to her chest. I could have sworn she caught her breath.

“And our main hero,” she said, almost reverent. “Number T23, the marvelous T23. My, how you’ve rattled these little worlds, my dear! Come, let me have a proper look at you.”

A rather peculiar specimen, wouldn’t you say, for the merciless council of the Eitalites…

I stood rooted to the spot—flattered on one hand by the unexpected delight of this charming Eit, yet still bewildered on the other by everything swirling around me. This was no game of basketball; one couldn’t shift gears that quickly.

“Simply exquisite,” Aurora breathed, circling me with careful grace, taking pains not to brush me with her wings.

One moment she traced her own jaws with her fingertips, the next she reached toward me—only to draw back. True, I’d had my admirers back in college, but I never imagined the Eits would be joining their ranks quite so soon.

“I’m so very glad to finally meet you,” Aurora added, joy shining through, and gave me a graceful bow. Then she hastened to face the council.

“Someone might have thought to offer our guests something, she scolded them.” We so rarely receive visitors. Especially visitors as distinguished as these. Mr. Telem, there’s no need to sit there — you can see to the wine in a moment or two! — she sang out.

Telem, that old man with the peculiar spectacles, stirred grumpily in his armchair, showing no intention whatsoever of lifting himself from it.

“My dear, watch your familiarity with them, he rasped in a querulous, elderly voice.” What use is plying them with wine? It would only be wasted.

Aurora folded her arms across her chest in a huff and turned back to us.

“Forgive that nasty old man, she whispered.” Certain people here could stand to remember their manners. — She waved a hand through the air, summoning someone, and faced us once more: — But here’s a word of advice for the future: don’t get too close to him.

Helpful myukli scurried about the hall bearing trays of wine and refreshments. How had they prepared everything so swiftly? How had they understood Aurora when she hadn’t uttered a single word to them? Magic? Undoubtedly.

Jem, watching them with indifference, asked for clarification:

“Too close? Does he smell?”

Aurora gave a shrill giggle, but quickly grew serious again:

“He slows down time. For his own benefit.” Without elaborating, she continued introducing us to everyone: — This is Mr. Gugalan — you already know him — and the purple giant snorted loudly, regarding us with hatred. — Mr. Telem. Mr. Arey — she gestured toward a man in a suit, who favored us with the faintest of nods. — And you have already had the honor of meeting Mr. Igig.

We all turned as one to stare at Igig, who had already claimed the empty chair and was now doing his best to avoid our eyes. I can’t speak for the others, but I felt betrayed. He might at least have warned us he was taking a seat on the council — then we wouldn’t have made such fools of ourselves in front of him. Or was this some sly manoeuvre on his part? Consider what we’d done: nearly killed his brother, trampled Igig’s own foot, set his wing ablaze, and generally treated the pair of them with open rudeness. Had I been that feathered

creature, I'd have ordered all three of us done away with on the spot long before now.

Instead, they had simply poured us glasses of something — wine, or whatever it was — and not one of us could manage a swallow, so tightly wound were our nerves. We lingered by the door, still trying to work out what on earth was happening.

"And now that we've all been properly introduced, like the civilised, well-mannered eytalites we are… humans included, of course," Aurora went on cheerfully, "I propose we give our guests a little tour…"

"Stop!" Gugalan roared, springing to his feet again. The poor myukles froze where they stood in terror. "What tour? They're prisoners! They're under arrest! They ought to be interrogated, and she wants to parade them about on a pleasant little stroll!" He wheeled on Telem and Arey. "This is what comes of admitting a woman to the council. She makes a laughingstock of the entire eytalite world!"

"Nothing of the sort happened in the old days," Telem muttered. His voice had fallen into an odd rhythm, as though marking out its own private seconds. "In Gasfar's time, defective and worthless creatures like these were dispatched quickly — on the very threshold, before they could so much as say hello."

"What a wonderful time it was, Gugalan chimed in." A safe time.

Meanwhile, my fingertips were tingling like mad. If any one of them uttered a single word more, I couldn't answer for myself. When Igig rose from his seat, intent on wedging in his supremely important opinion, I was already primed to tear the place apart.

"The days of Gasfar ended nearly a hundred years ago, he reminded the council," and thank Kat for that, by the way. Guests are treated far more decently these days, and I'm ashamed to see you behaving like

savages. No wonder people recoil from the Eitalites and despise us so thoroughly.

Gugalan crossed his mighty arms over his bare chest and snorted. He was plainly determined to spoil everyone's mood today.

"This is what comes of letting youngsters into the council" they openly sass and squabble with anyone who doesn't suit them. Your father would never have tolerated this, Master Igig.

"Yes, my father would have died of shame because of you, Igig shot back, the feathers on his head bristling with indignation and betraying his every feeling."

While the Eits were busy quarreling, Aurora sat quietly, watching them, and I turned to Kyle and Jem. Everything was unfolding exactly as I'd anticipated: one half of the council wanted rid of us at once, the other wanted the same thing, but insisted on observing all the proprieties first. Am I wrong, or is it time we clawed our way out of here?

"What a madhouse, Jem whispered, barely audible, catching my eye."

Kyle, meanwhile, was shifting nervously from foot to foot, clenching his hands into fists and pressing his lips together harder than ever.

"Did you look into T23's friends?" Arey spoke up abruptly, and the room fell silent at once as every head turned toward him. "They have nothing to offer?"

Igig hesitated a moment before replying, and by then I had already decided he was about to reveal whatever Jem's tattoos meant. Yet not a word of them passed his lips, which only deepened my puzzlement.

"Number L5 bears the Mano's teeth, and number K44 is pure human. I guarantee it."

Aurora turned to Gugalan in triumph—only the hem of her long tunic stirred about her.

"You see? And still you mean to cast them out? Lord Gugalan, are you afraid of them? I can find no other explanation for your conduct."

Every gaze now swung toward his towering frame. I marveled inwardly at Aurora's force of will. I had known this Eitu for barely ten minutes, and already I liked her.

"Afraid? I—afraid?" the giant thundered, his eyes blazing red. "It is you who ought to be afraid, Lady Aurora—of your own tongue!"

"Just as I expected," she replied with a calm nod. "In that case, will you permit our guests to explore our world, or will you insist on branding them dangerous?"

"They are not dangerous—they are merely powerle—""

"Did everyone hear Lord Gugalan? Our guests pose no threat whatsoever and are free to roam our marvelous world at their pleasure!"

I stifled a snort as I watched Telem clutch his head in horror while Gugalan rolled his eyes heavenward, throwing his arms toward the ceiling as if appealing to the blue spheres. Then Arey's glance swept our way, and gooseflesh prickled instantly across my skin. Whoever he was, it would be wise to keep my distance from him.

Igig clicked his tongue, a brief smile crossing his face. Aurora clapped her hands in delight and turned back to us. She was smiling, and her eyes glowed with warmth from within.

"You'll like it here," she murmured tenderly.

All things considered, our introduction to the fearsome and austere council of eytalites had gone rather well.

Room L5. Kyle

It was that very giant. The very purple giant who used to meet with my father. Gugalan. I thought he recognized me too, though most of his attention was fixed on Hal.

“I’m ready to show our guests around,” offered Aurora, who seemed eager to get out of here as quickly as possible. She turned toward us, and my nerves flared again — I couldn’t decide whether it was safe to meet those strange eyes of hers, or better to look away. — Do you agree?

“Stop!” Gugalan was still struggling to gather the reins of authority as they slipped through his fingers. — These are not tourists. They are under the council’s supervision, and they are forbidden to leave the residence.

“I happen to be a council member myself, in case you’ve forgotten.”

Gugalan gave a condescending tilt of his head, and I tensed inwardly, bracing for another cutting remark aimed at poor Aurora. But just then Igig circled the table, drawing every eye to himself.

“As am I.”

Gugalan folded his arms across his chest in evident displeasure, straining to conceal the anger and irritation boiling over toward everyone around him. If the decision had been his alone, he would surely have expelled the pair from the council long ago.

“Was their company not enough for you, Mr. Igig? Why this attachment to them?”

Igig sauntered unhurriedly to our side of the table, took his place beside Aurora, and only then favored Gugalan with a glance. Even the rocks might have envied the man’s composure.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t waste a moment. I’d start preparing the paperwork for UKOG right away. Certificates, permits, explanations, written statements…” Gugalan’s face grew longer with every word. — My part in case T23 is finished, and one never entrusts such duties to Lady Aurora, so you, Lord Arey, and Lord Telem will have little time to spare for quarreling with us. And as for our guests — don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on them.

Gugalan swelled up, red with fury, and cast about for a worthy retort, but Arey got there first.

“In that case, you’ll answer for everything those three do, Lord Igig.”

I caught a barbed note in his voice — perhaps even a threat — but Igig merely inclined his head with perfect calm.

“Of course, Lord Arey.”

He turned and, gazing straight over our heads, made for the doors. He flung them open abruptly and hurried out, as though the hall were suffocating him. Aurora favored us with a smile from her small triangular mouth and extended a slender hand, inviting us to follow Igig. We did not refuse.

The two eits hustled us outside, as if fearing that any delay on our part would bury them under awkward questions or barbed remarks. And indeed, my long tongue was loaded with plenty I was aching to say aloud — I simply didn’t know where to begin.

“So you sit on the council now?” Hal ventured carefully, addressing Igig. — That’s quite a turn of events. You might at least have warned us.

“Why?” Igig asked without turning around. — So you’d hate me even more? Well, you’re welcome to start hating me right now. Go ahead.

Strangely enough, I felt no urge to hate him at all. He was as noble as a prince and as fearless as a knight. For my part, I would never have dared stand up to someone like Gugalan so openly. And Aurora was hardly a coward either, despite her fragile, delicate appearance. They were nothing like those other three eets, nor like Kalanu himself. They seemed more human — as though they had taken on the very finest of human qualities.

“So,” Jem piped up, — you pretended to be an ordinary soldier just so you’d get your fingers broken and be cursed? What other hobbies do you have?

Igig turned to look at her, frowning, and for a few seconds I was genuinely afraid for my friend. Now that we knew who he really was, we had to mind our words. He had certainly not joined our walk out of the goodness of his heart, that much was clear.

I expected him to simply give Jem a stern look and say nothing, but the eet suddenly chose to answer:

“Apparently, giving tours to humans. I learn something new about myself every day.”

And he turned away again, as if nothing were more familiar to him than absorbing jabs from a college girl.

I glanced at Jem and raised my eyebrows to show how astonished I was, but she didn’t notice. She walked with her head bowed, smiling at Igig’s retort.

On the ground floor we ran into Kalanu again. He was fussing over Enrir, but upon spotting us he left the wolf in peace and came toward us. Igig tried to quicken his pace, but his brother caught up with us anyway.

“And where are you two headed?” he asked. — What did the council say?

He cast a suspicious glance at Aurora, but she wisely pretended he didn't exist.

"The Council granted permission to take the guests on a walk," Igig replied evasively, but Kalanu laughed so loudly and so suddenly that Enrira shot up from his seat, grumbling.

"Granted permission? The Council? Only after you promised to surrender your seat, I'd wager. I was certain there wasn't a trace of our dear friends left."

"You're mistaken, as usual," Igig observed mildly.

"What do you mean, 'as usual'?"

Aurora darted impatiently ahead, her wings nearly brushing the brothers.

"If you gentlemen intend to stand here chatting," she said with cool courtesy, "I'll hurry on and leave you to it."

Igig shot Kalanu a displeased glance.

"Go find something useful to do," he muttered.

Kalanu snapped off a salute, but I saw him glare after us with fury as we passed. I hunched my shoulders, bracing for a blow at any moment. There was something menacing about this eite — like the high schoolers who loiter by the gazebo in the evenings, smoking and staring down anyone who dares walk past. Only Kata knows what goes on in their heads.

"Is Kalanu still angry with you?" Aurora asked Igig sympathetically.

He glanced back over his shoulder and dropped his gaze.

"You could put it that way," he answered reluctantly, clearly unwilling to continue.

And Aurora asked nothing more.

The moment we stepped outside, it truly felt as though we had just walked free of a prison — even though beyond the castle walls it was

still cold and dreary: blustering winds, damp air, and dark grey clouds dragging themselves across the sky. No denying it, though — the weather in the world of humans was far more agreeable.

I glanced around, but there were no other buildings near the council residence, nor any roads. Only a small stretch of wall directly opposite the doors, trimmed in metal, evidently so it wouldn't look quite so out of place.

On it hung three pictures of the Transit Garden, the very place Kalanu had told us about. Right — it was something like a bus stop in the world of the eits.

"So," said Aurora, darting in front of us and hovering in the air, rising a little higher, "I suggest we explore the city center, and then we can visit one — or even two — kingdoms." She didn't ask for our opinion, but turned straight to Igig: "Will you be joining us?"

I noticed how hard she was trying to mask her distaste for his company. Probably all the council members disliked one another to some degree — much as they did in the world of humans. And perhaps she was hoping that once he learned the full itinerary, the suspicious eit would relax and let us go on our way. But she was mistaken.

"Of course," Igig replied curtly, the feathers on his head bristling slightly. "I bear full responsibility for them."

Aurora turned her head the other way, studying something off in the distance.

"You are a true gentleman."

"I hope so."

"Then let's not waste time."

"Of course."

It was as if they were playing catch with a ball, each trying to leave it in the other's hands. And watching them, I couldn't have said whose side I would have taken, had it ever come to that.

Through a drawn picture that glowed emerald beneath Aurora's thin claws, we passed into the city. A remarkable place, this world of the Eits—everything here looked familiar, and yet utterly different.

The city resembled an ordinary human city… the kind that had existed around the sixteenth century. Aurora declared that we had arrived at its center, but I would have called that a considerable stretch.

Nearly all the houses were single-story, with annexes tacked on; only a handful could boast a second floor. Cobblestone streets. A wrought-iron fence, and old-fashioned signs swinging from rings. A cart rumbled past, drawn by some sort of beast. Bay windows of shops and open-air stalls. Trees and flower beds.

And, of course, the Eits themselves.

They walked and stood about, in groups and alone. And against that eruption of the abnormal—ugliness, if I may put it so—against the strangeness of those tiny crumbs of secondary appearance that people carried, here they revealed themselves in full. I nearly grew dizzy, and chose to watch my feet rather than torment my eyes and brain with the illogical reality surrounding me. Even Igig and Aurora began to seem, by comparison, the most normal of the normal.

"This is the center of the city of Kutta! Aurora proclaimed joyfully, admiring the houses and passersby." The center of trade and of the most interesting life. Come along!

She shot ahead, all but shoving—perhaps all but slicing—the pedestrians aside with her wings, while we struggled in her wake, squeezing past the Eits and dodging carts. People turned to look at us, sometimes pointed (with feathers, tentacles, claws), said something. The air thrummed with inhuman clamor, the creak of wooden wheels, and distant music. Strange smells reached me—some pleasant, some less so; some mouth-watering, others sickening. Terrified of falling

behind and losing my way in this place, I could barely resist the urge to seize Jem and Hal by the hands.

There were human faces in the crowd too, and half-human ones, and entirely animal ones, and… I tried not to gawk too openly, but my gaze kept snagging on one creature after another.

How did they all manage to live side by side? So different, so unlike one another, so strange. To them, we must have seemed painfully ordinary and primitive—me, Hal, and Jem. Even me, with my jaw.

Following Aurora, we emerged onto a square, where the crush was, unsurprisingly, greater still. Stalls heaped with food and toys, colorful flags strung between the houses, smiles lighting the faces (muzzles, beaks) of the crowd. Evidently some festival was underway today.

A few of the Eits noticed Aurora and Igig, bowed to them, and pointedly kept their distance. Others nodded timidly, to my friends and me as well. I listened, but between the din, the music, and all the other noise of the city, I couldn't make out what language the residents were speaking. It wouldn't have surprised me in the least if I hadn't been able to understand a single word of it.

And then something happened that I couldn't explain to myself, even years later. Only Hal could have unraveled that mystery for me, but he… chose not to.

I noticed that perhaps a hundred eyts were watching a girl dance — a girl who (thank Kat!) looked like an ordinary human. Onlookers had gathered around a small, plain wooden stage on which the dancer performed barefoot. Instrumental music played as the girl spun and leapt. Ribbons were tied to her arms, and her only garment was a short dress, yet despite the foul weather, she didn't appear to feel the cold. It was as if light itself radiated from her.

The next moment, the sharp, spicy aroma of something delicious caught my attention, and I whipped my head around, trying to work out where it was coming from. Breakfast had long since become a distant memory, and my stomach was cramping.

That's precisely why I missed what happened there; when I turned back, I realized that Hal was shoving everyone aside, trying to reach the dancer.

"Stop! Where do you think you're going?" Igig bellowed, stamping in place.

Hal had already pushed his way into the front row of spectators. Never would I have suspected him of such a passionate love of art. He doesn't even much care for concerts — I tried several times to drag him and Jem along to performances by the wildly popular "Real People," but they were always so indifferent about it that it honestly hurt my feelings. And now some unknown amateur dancer had captured Hal's attention at first sight!

"Sometimes he embarrasses me so much in front of people… even in front of the eits," Jem hissed beside me, watching Aurora rise into the air above the crowd, hurrying to intercept our friend.

Hal had nearly made it onto the stage when Aurora swooped down on him like a hawk, caught him under the arms, and lifted him skyward. Only then did the dancing girl notice them; she stopped mid-spin, faltering. The music fell silent, and the audience began to lift their heads. Dangling from Aurora's slender arms, Hal shouted up at the girl:

"Hey, it's me! Don't you recognize me?"

Igig turned toward us with interest, and Jem buried her face in her hand with a sigh. Aurora, cradling Hal carefully, flew over the crowd of eits and began to descend, leaning forward to set him down. The moment his feet touched the ground, Jem unceremoniously boxed his ears.

“Can’t I take my eyes off you for a single second?” she cried. “What on earth has gotten into you?”

Hal was rubbing the lump with one hand, clutching his shoulder with the other, his gaze fixed past us—straight ahead, at that strange dancer. I turned to look for her myself. Had she bewitched him or something?

“Do you know her?” Jem pressed on with her interrogation. “Where in the world could you have seen her before?”

Aurora and Igig stood modestly to one side, listening to our one-sided conversation. After all, Hal really might have known the girl—or perhaps he’d simply mistaken her for someone else. What if she was a real human being, working here? Or was that simply impossible? I don’t know.

Then Hal began to moan, waved a hand, and suddenly pitched forward. Jem barely caught his shoulder, yet he still nearly knocked her off her feet.

“I have to talk to her!”

“Not until you explain something, you’re not going any—“””

Jem fell silent as Hal staggered backward and trod on her foot. Through the parting crowd of eits, a dancer was making her way toward us.

Her bare feet moved lightly, soundlessly, but I could see how worn they were—the bruises and calluses had healed only recently, and fresh ones would soon take their place. Her dress was soaked with sweat in several spots. The ribbons hung limp, and I noticed the sun had bleached them pale.

The girl studied us intently, neither blinking nor glancing away, and the strain seemed to sharpen her coarse features all the more. Her fair hair, tinged with red, was swept to the left, several strands spilling over her right shoulder.

When she reached us, she offered a formal curtsy, clenching her fingers into fists and dropping her gaze for a moment.

“Good day, Lady Aurora, Lord Igig,” she whispered, barely audible.

Our escorts answered her with nods, all the while watching her with curiosity. Hal was practically trembling with excitement, and I genuinely feared for his state. Jem, by contrast, wrinkled her nose at the stranger.

“Did you enjoy my performance?” the girl asked, looking Hal straight in the eye.

Uh-oh—apparently the performance had nothing to do with it at all…

“Y-yes, you move beautifully… And you do recognize me, don’t you? Come on! It’s me!”

Why don’t you go ahead and tell her your name too! The girl shook her head, studying him. Hal was close to tears with despair.

“Can you visit other people’s dreams? Or not dreams… but something like that? Can you? Huh?”

I couldn’t make sense of any of it, and Jem and I merely exchanged bewildered glances. What on earth was he rambling about? The poor dancer was utterly lost. She stepped back and murmured:

“No, I can’t do that.”

I watched the light fade in Hal’s eyes. His shoulders slumped, yet he kept gazing at the girl stubbornly, as if to say: “Stop pretending. Admit it’s you. I know it is.” But she would not admit it.

The Aits around us buzzed, watching the scene with curiosity. The musicians kept scraping away at their instruments in vain — no one was paying them the slightest attention anymore.

The dancer stood before us, toying with the ribbon on her arm. Hal bit his lip, breathing fast, casting about for something more to say to her.

Aurora coughed tactfully.

“Shall we continue our walk? T23, are you certain you’ve met this girl before?”

“No, of course not!” he suddenly snapped loudly, with irritation, and turned away. — Where could I possibly have seen her before? I simply mistook her for someone else.

It was logical, yet we couldn’t bring ourselves to believe it. Aurora apologized to the dancer and hurried to lead us away. Hal kept glancing back furtively, even after the girl had disappeared from view.

We stayed silent, and that was a mistake. If everyone could see that something strange was happening, why should we pretend otherwise? Why should I look away when I desperately wanted answers? Even Jem had gone completely quiet. Well, I couldn’t bear it. Afterwards, I both regretted and didn’t regret my words.

“That was seriously weird, dude! The way you looked at her” I’ve never seen you look at anyone like that! What girl did you mistake her for? What aren’t you telling us?

Hal, who was walking up ahead, lost his composure. He stopped, spun around to face me, and clenched his hands into fists.

“That’s none of your business! he shouted angrily.”

His eyes flashed green, like a cat’s. And something invisible yet incredibly powerful slammed into my chest, knocking me backward.

I fell, scraping my back. My chest was burning, and I slapped at it frantically, convinced I was actually on fire. My lungs seized up, and I forgot how to breathe.

Someone was screaming, someone was swearing. I kept trying to gasp for air, to get up, but I could barely feel my body. A weight pressed down on my chest, as though my lungs had been packed with clay. Those cursed shark teeth clamped down hard on my lip, and what was either drool or blood trickled down my chin.

Jem’s pink hair flashed before my eyes, then Aurora’s violet wings — and then everything faded away somewhere.

Number L5. Kyle.

The braces get in the way, forever reminding me of their presence. Again and again I run my tongue over the thin wires, trying to convince myself they have become part of my body.

“They make my mouth hurt,” I complain, but a look from my mother silences me.

The dentist pulls down his mask, surveys me with a smile, and delivers his verdict:

“The finest model! Just released onto the market. One year of wear and you won’t recognize yourself!”

I squirm awkwardly in the dentist’s chair. I would rather go on recognizing myself, thank you very much — otherwise what would there be left to believe in?

“Will he have a normal, human jaw?” my mother asks hopefully, hovering nearby.

Behind her hang posters showing how to brush your teeth properly.

The doctor’s eyebrows rise into an inverted V. He lowers his voice, evidently convinced that this way I won’t hear him.

“Of course not, ma’am. It’s a secondary appearance. It cannot be corrected.”

I suspected as much. Oh well, no great loss. But Mother lets her emotions off the leash:

“But you said!.. But you promised!.. But it’s the latest model!..” she wailed, wringing her hands.

Her mouth bends into an upside-down letter D. Behind her, the children on the poster laugh and flash their tiny, even teeth.

The dentist raises his hands as if to shield himself.

“Ma’am, I’m afraid not even surgery would help here! And why would it? The boy is healthy” his breathing, eating, and speech are all perfectly fine. You have nothing to worry about!

But Mom is trembling, pressing her hand to her impeccably proper mouth. Looking at her makes me a little sad, too. My teeth trouble me far less than they trouble her. So what if they’re a bit different from everyone else’s? They’ve never stood in my way. Walt’s hands stood in his way plenty, but no amount of braces is going to fix that.

We say goodbye to the dentist and make our way out of the hospital. Outside it’s warm and dry, even for late fall. The sun is shining, the puddles are evaporating, and I’m getting hot bundled up in my thick jacket, hat, gloves and everything else. Still, Mom says, “Pull your scarf up higher,” so I have no choice but to obey.

Again and again I run my tongue over the braces, imagining they’ve become part of me now. If only they’d let me take them off before my first day of school.

My head had turned into a pillow. An old, heavy pillow stuffed with goose feathers. I tried to lift it, but I couldn’t even open my eyes. My whole body felt like one solid lump of something enormous and heavy, something no amount of effort could budge.

Little by little, I began to make out the sounds forcing their way to my ears through the thick pillow my head was resting on. I listened desperately, but the words refused to make sense.

“The fiwwing ish all dooone, shwee hagn!”

“Whad did you shay?”

“I shaid id’s all dooone!”

The voices fell silent. A prickling sensation tickled my arm, and suddenly goosebumps came racing across it — thousands of tiny, invisible feet bristling beneath my skin, then pressing onward — to my neck, my chest, my face, my other arm… My mouth flooded with salty

saliva, and my throat tightened of its own accord. Tears slid from my eyes, and at last I managed, with an effort, to raise my eyelids. Everything around me swam in a haze, blurred as if behind fog. But the instant my gaze settled on the face before me, I snapped back to my senses.

Bending over me was a head shaped like an ear of corn, its skin entirely blanketed with small growths that formed a bumpy brown crust. Between them, one could barely discern a pair of tiny eyes and a sunken little mouth. Perched on top was a withered tuft of dark-brown hair.

In every other respect, the creature looked exactly like an ordinary human, and it was preening in a light blue medical smock.

“I told you, Lady Aurora, he’d come around quickly after my little bit of help,” it croaked happily.

Its voice was muffled, but that did nothing to diminish the warmth and kindness in it. And sure enough, a beautiful aita had appeared beside us, and I was utterly at a loss. What on earth had happened?

“There was a risk. Admit it,” Aurora replied curtly, leaning down to peer into my face. — L5, sweetie, how are you feeling?

I watched her nervously fold her thin little arms across her chest, and it reminded me of my mother. Just as in my memory. Strange, how all these familiar details kept piling up, like layers of a cake. Or perhaps I still wasn’t thinking clearly.

“I’m fine. Perfectly fine. Perhaps I should go,” I muttered, glancing from one face to the next as I pushed the sheet aside and tried to sit up in bed.

Only then did I realize I was wearing nothing but my underwear. The discovery was mortifying. Lady Aurora stood beside me, along with that strange creature who might, after all, turn out to be a gentle girl. I hastily dragged the sheet back over myself, at the same moment

registering that the room was rather cold and generally uncomfortable. The corn-faced one handed me my clothes and began to explain:

“I mended your knee, and your teeth while I was at it. On the whole you were in decent shape, but even the smallest cracks can split a person in two.”

As she spoke, I ran my hands over my chest. My skin was coated in a rough film, like dried mud, and I couldn’t resist the urge to scrape it off.

“What is this stuff on me?”

“A special protection. It will come away on its own once your body has fully healed,” the eita replied with pride. “It will take some time. You were badly burned...”

At that, Aurora’s glance seemed to silence the healer, who said nothing more on the subject. She bowed her head and turned away. Meanwhile I dressed hurriedly, noting with pleasant surprise that someone had washed and ironed my clothes. I am hardly the most pampered soul in the world, but I would rather feel clean and comfortable than wear the smell of a three-day-old shirt.

I felt as though I weighed a full ton! My legs kept tangling and buckling beneath me. I giggled, clutching at the bed, and did my best not to do myself an injury on perfectly flat ground. Aurora and Mrs. Corn Face watched me the way fond parents watch their little one.

“It’s as if I’m drunk, I managed at last, more or less steady on my feet. Simply getting up from the bed had been an achievement in itself.”

Aurora tilted her head slightly.

“Does this happen to you often?”

“Only once, at one of my father’s parties. In college I stuck to soda instead of beer.”

I fell silent, staring at the floor. There I went again, babbling nonsense just to dodge the things that truly mattered.

“Where is T23’s room?”

“With Mr. Igig and K44, at the residence. It would be highly undesirable for the Council to learn what happened, so we told them I was taking you to see the kingdom of the mano.”

Those mysterious mano again, bound to me in some unfathomable way! I genuinely did want to see them, to learn about them. My heart even quickened at their mere mention.

“And are we really going to them?”

“I don’t think so, dear L5. We’ve already lost about two hours.”

Right — after all this, I probably had no hope of ever meeting those creatures.

“Is T23 all right? I asked timidly, following Aurora out of the little house where Mrs. Corn Face lived. She said nothing to me in parting” whether offended by Aurora, or perhaps even frightened of her.

We found ourselves somewhere deep in the countryside. Hills rolled away in every direction, a dirt road winding between them, and fields of some crop or other spreading everywhere the eye could reach. Directly before the little house rose an old stone wall, marked with two painted gateways. How on earth had they hauled my heavy carcass all the way out here — magic, presumably?

The weather had turned still fouler. The wind tousled grass, leaves, and my hair alike, making no distinction among them. Aurora’s wings crackled loudly, and her long tunic streamed far out to one side, yet she seemed not the least bit troubled by any of it.

“Better than what you got,” she sighed, drifting up toward one of the pale painted gates. — But he’s terribly sorry for what he did. Does this happen to him often? — she asked anxiously.

I picked at the moss in a crack in the wall, waiting for Aurora to open the portal. I had no desire to talk about it.

“It happens. Especially when he’s worked up. But it’s really no great matter,” I attempted to defend my friend. — I mean, everyone has their flaws. I’ve got shark teeth, and I could just as easily bite someone’s arm clean off!

Aurora watched me, her graceful hand hovering above the drawing. Her faceted eyes seemed to brim with sympathy.

“I’m afraid the Council may see it differently, should they learn of all this,” she said at last, and swiftly touched her fingertips to the wall.

I had no chance to answer.

I found Hal and Jem not in our shared sleeping quarters, but in a perfectly respectable sitting room. There was a sofa, a bookcase, and even an enormous globe. No doubt the rest of the place was equally well furnished, but I had no time to take in anything else. Jem caught sight of me and came sweeping over like an ominous whirlwind. There was nowhere to retreat.

“Slava Katu!” she cried irritably, then abruptly flung her arms around me, squeezing painfully hard with those thin, strong hands. — I thought you’d already kicked the bucket!

I was glad to see her too, but I didn’t dare embrace her in return — the outcome was far too unpredictable. Jem released me and lifted her head to look me in the face.

“We’re even now, you and I,” she added crossly.

I tried to look away from her, to glance at the third person in the room, but I simply couldn’t. Probably more out of fear and uncertainty than because of Jem’s breathtaking beauty.

“Really? Why?”

“I said your name.”

“Oh…”

“But maybe Igig and Aurora didn’t notice?”

“Maybe.”

“By the way, where were you? What did she do to you?”

But at last I worked up the nerve to look past her head, and I stopped hearing whatever she was saying.

Hal stood in the middle of the room, staring at me tensely. It wasn’t often I saw him so grave. His hands were tucked into the pockets of his gym shorts, as if he feared he might accidentally blow something else up. Only one question showed in his pale eyes.

I swallowed, opened my mouth… and found I couldn’t say a word to him. My throat had tightened. All I could think about now was what my words might cost me.

“Kyle…” Hal began hurriedly, not waiting for me, but then the door suddenly swung open and he fell silent at once. I nearly breathed a sigh of relief.

Kalanu stood in the doorway. And I knew at once we were in for bad news.

“The Council has reached its decision,” he announced with pomp, his face spreading into an unkind smile.

Number T23. Hal

Right away, what put me on my guard was how pleased the Eits' commission looked. Gugalan was practically rubbing his paws together, watching me with bloodthirsty eyes. Even that odd man Arey wore a faint smile as he leafed through the documents spread across the table. Aurora was too worked up to stay in one place — the crackle of her wings filled the entire hall; she would fly over to the window, then back to the table, tug at her tunic, fold her arms, and then dart back to the stained glass again. I couldn't tell whether she was frightened for us or actually delighted — not a single readable emotion crossed her face.

Telem dozed, his strange glasses removed. Papers lay before him as well, along with an inkwell and a quill, and I gathered they really had been buried in paperwork while we were out walking. Served them right — they had cooked up this mess; let them clean it up!

Only Igig sat sulking, but we already knew he never smiles.

"The Council has reached a decision," Gugalan boomed, "to conduct an inspection of number T23. His further fate will be decided on that basis." His white pupils darted swiftly from side to side, over his minions. "The Council has reached a unanimous decision."

Or rather, he'd been strong-armed into unanimity, right? How many times had these Eits, each so different from the others, argued and tried to talk one another around to their own way of thinking? And which of them had insisted on summoning me without delay after the Director's complaint?

"What kind of inspection?" I asked, though I already understood it would be something unpleasant and painful.

Or perhaps, on the contrary, something tedious and grueling, like a mathematics exam.

“A test of your magical ability. It’s quite simple. We need to know what you can do.”

Ugh, that tone! I can do plenty, and if Gugalan wants to test that personally, then I…

“And what will you do with him afterward?” Jem cut in.

Gugalan gave her a haughty once-over and folded his arms across his chest, in no hurry to reply. I thought he might never speak again, but at last the giant turned his gaze back to me and deigned to answer:

“That depends on the results. Perhaps he’s good for nothing, in which case we’ll send you both back. Or perhaps…” a smirk spread across his mug — or perhaps he’s more powerful than the rest of us combined, and then it would be an honor to welcome him to the council of eitalites.

I could hardly believe my ears. What? Did he even understand what he was saying?

“We’ll begin the test as soon as we have your guardians’ consent,” Gugalan went on, and I, still reeling from his previous words, sank into dismay all over again.

Was he serious? Everyone knew how casually the Eits treated humans — all they needed was a snap of their fingers and their wish came true. Why would they ever trouble themselves to ask anyone’s permission?

“I’ve already sent our representatives to them, the purple hulk continued.” And to the college as well. I doubt we’ll meet much resistance.

There, what did I tell you? Consent was a mere formality, a box to tick. Nobody intended to take humans seriously, whatever they claimed.

“And what about us?” Jem cried sharply. — You’re holding me and L5 here as prisoners. Shouldn’t our guardians be informed as well?

Gugalan barely spared her a glance.

“Is that really so important?”

“My father is the mayor of this city,” Kyle replied quietly.

For a few seconds, dead silence hung in the air. Gugalan’s eyes bulged as he stared at him, while our friend modestly dropped his gaze, glancing at Jem and silently urging him to go on.

“Is that true?” Gugalan barked, whirling around sharply in search of a council member to blame. — And why did you keep silent about this, Mister Igig? — Without waiting for an answer, he closed the distance to Kyle in a single leap and planted himself beside him, his belly nearly pressing into the boy. — I met the mayor of Rosedale several years ago. I had no idea he had a son. The mayor doesn’t have the Mano’s secondary form.

He delivered that last remark almost accusingly. Kyle pressed down his lower lip, and his mouth twisted into a pitiful, wavy line.

“Not everyone is so fortunate.”

Snorting with anger, Gugalan swung around to Jem.

“And who are your parents? Some rulers of your little world as well?”

Listening to him, my fingers curled into fists against my will. How I longed to unleash my full secondary power on him, even if nothing but a wet spot of me remained afterward.

“I don’t have parents!” Jem snapped, squaring up and fixing Gugalan with a withering glare. — But my guardians are the entire UKOG. You can’t simply brush that aside, can you?

He threw up his enormous hands, nearly knocking Kyle off his feet.

“Of course not! What a crowd has gathered here, Great Kata!” he exclaimed, half in jest, half in earnest. — You must have labored long and hard to rally such a rabble!

The last remark, it seemed, was aimed once more at poor Igig, but once again he showed no sign of involvement with us.

“Very well, splendid!” Gugalan barked. — In that case, I… — He caught himself and turned to the others. — And if the remaining members of the council raise no objection, I propose we postpone the inspections until we receive reports from the guardians of all three humans. Who ought, in the meantime, to be given other quarters — wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Igig?

Had I been that feathered creature, I would have strangled Gugalan long ago.

“In that case, our guests will have ample opportunity to explore our world,” observed the ever-optimistic Aurora. — We may wait more than a single day for an answer. Surely you don’t intend to keep them locked in their rooms all that while?

“That is precisely what we…” Gugalan began, but then, to everyone’s astonishment, Arey rose from his seat.

All present respectfully fell silent, turning their eyes to him, and it was clear his word carried no small weight here. And yet, who exactly was he? A human? An Ait? A Defective? Straightening to his full height, the man said dryly:

“I propose we hold a welcome party tomorrow, since yesterday we had no chance to. What do you say, Numbers T23, K44, and L5?”

Strictly speaking, he had not even asked the other council members’ opinions, but none were needed — no one was about to object to him. Aurora, for her part, even clapped her hands.

“Well done, Mr. Arey! What an excellent idea!”

He paid her applause no heed, surveying the three of us with slow deliberation. And little by little, I came to suspect he was scheming something against us. Why else would he throw a banquet in our honor? He was plainly laying a trap. I narrowed my eyes and fixed him

with a stare meant to convey that I was no gullible fool and saw perfectly well what he was after. But Arey brushed off my suspicious look without a flicker.

“Then we still have time to prepare. I believe Lady Aurora will be able to select suitable attire for you for the evening. And we already have a few guests in mind who will keep us company.”

It was all just a touch too perfect! I screwed my eyes up tighter still, as if my lids and lashes might weave some kind of sieve through which no lie could slip. Had I possessed a secondary gift of a different sort, I would have reduced Arey to ash on the spot; he was fortunate that all I can do is hurl my friends away from me.

Strangest and most suspicious of all, even Gugalan took it all in stride, merely bowing his half-bald head in silence when Arey addressed him. Yes, definitely not good…

“Besides, as Lady Aurora so rightly observed, it is high time the guests were given proper rooms of their own. If we set our minds to it, we can surely find some in the residence,” Arey went on. — And if no one objects, I recommend everyone attend to their duties. Might I suggest that Number T23 and his companions go and have lunch.

And that is precisely what happened.

I genuinely tried to speak with Kyle and apologize to him properly, but the chance never came. First they marched us off to the dining hall, where we found ourselves in the company of Gugalan, Aurora, a pair of myukl, and Kalanu. Igig wasn’t with us, and I felt an odd pang of regret at that — after all, he was the one we’d grown most accustomed to here, though that hardly made him the best of those assembled.

Lunch passed in silence, broken only by Kalanu’s silly jokes and Aurora’s timid chatter as she attempted to lift the mood. Kyle wouldn’t meet my eyes, while Jem kept darting accusing glances my way. She had already nearly devoured me alive while we waited for Kyle to

return. And really — as if I were the only one at fault! For that matter, it had been Kyle who brushed against a forbidden subject he was never meant to know anything about.

That dancer from the square looked exactly like the mute girl from the Planet of Blue Dandelions.

I can't begin to imagine how that could be.

Yes, when I saw her, it utterly shattered me. I couldn't believe she was here — real, in the flesh. But this was the world of the Aytai, where anything seemed possible. And how could I simply walk away from her? Not try to speak with her? Not remind her of who I was? I'm not the sort of person who lets a chance slip through her fingers, however small it may be.

"I'll make sure your outfits are ready for tomorrow's celebration," Aurora promised, turning her head toward us.

Her thin, claw-tipped fingers were pinching a large orange fruit shaped like a pear. In all the time we had been sitting there, she hadn't touched a single bite—she merely gutted fruits and berries, slicing them into tiny pieces and stacking the remains beside her plate. She seemed terribly on edge, but about what? Could it truly be because of that ridiculous evening?

"Nothing complicated. Lilac suits for the men, yellow dresses for the girls."

I noticed Jem stiffen at the mention of the latter, momentarily forgetting all about me. She acknowledged only dresses from her alma mater and nothing else. If it came to that, she eyed any garment lacking the college emblem with open suspicion. The trouble was, I rather doubted her old tracksuit paired with a short pink skirt would pass muster at an evening among the elite of the eights.

Gugalan wiped his chin with a sweeping flourish of his napkin, planted both hands on the table, and fixed his gaze upon us.

“I’d wager it will be the grandest event of your dreary little human lives! You’ve never witnessed anything like it, and you never will again. You’ll relish it. Or it will horrify you. One never knows how people will comport themselves in such a situation.”

“Which of the invited guests will be attending?” Kyle cut in abruptly, interrupting Gugalan’s proud, pompous monologue. — Anyone from the Mano kingdom, for instance?

“Oh, so you took a liking to them?” Kalanu said with a broad grin. — Found a common shark language, did you?

I reminded myself that, officially, Kyle had visited the Mano kingdom together with Aurora, and I genuinely feared for the big fellow. How would he manage, with all his natural tact, to avoid arousing the suspicions of the cunning Kalanu and that odious Gugalan?

Aurora turned her head toward our friend as well, but as usual it was impossible to tell what she was thinking: compound eyes, you know, are a very convenient thing. Kyle calmly set about picking a tiny bone from his teeth and replied, as though in passing:

“Yes, they did strike me as interesting. That’s why I’m asking.”

Not bad at all…

“Did they try to test how well you can swim?” Kalanu continued his interrogation with a chuckle. “That’s their favorite way of saying hello, after all.”

“And do you see my hair wet, or anything of the sort?” Kyle replied, uncharacteristically sharp. “What foolish questions! We simply talked — there wasn’t much time for swimming or anything else.”

Only that confident, irritated retort succeeded in shutting Kalanu up; he did not raise the subject again.

But our trials were far from over. The moment we left the dining hall, two grunting myukl appeared, split apart, and briskly marched us

off in different directions. So, girls to the left, boys to the right? Jem and I barely had time to exchange a glance before she rounded the corner of the corridor and vanished from sight. I doubt she was terribly sorry to be parted from us.

And so Kyle and I were left alone — if you don't count the silent, inscrutable creature escorting us.

All the way to our new room, I didn't dare look up at the big guy, having suddenly realized all over again that I'd nearly killed him. Or rather, my secondary power had nearly killed him. Just like back then with Room B19/2, the Twin — the whole mess, really, started because of him. It's hardly convenient when your power makes no distinction between friends, acquaintances, strangers, and enemies, but simply hurls everyone about and breaks their bones without exception.

Blue spheres kept pace with us along the ceiling of the corridor the whole way, and I kept stealing glances at them from the corner of my eye. So those were the Eits too? And was illumination their only function? Had these people, I wondered, never heard of electricity? The Eits never tire of declaring that without them humanity would still be riding mammoths and cowering at thunderstorms, yet they themselves have strayed little from their primitive nature. Take, for instance, the way they exploit their silent brethren, treating them like furniture! Is that supposed to be normal?

"Eh?"

I stopped short when I realized I'd nearly walked nose-first into a closed door. Myuklya was peering up at me with sad little eyes, wrinkling her snout. I smiled at her, not knowing for certain whether she'd understand, and raised my head again. We were standing before the shut door, and even it looked better than the one we'd spent the night behind.

“After you,” I winked at Kyle and made an inviting gesture, waving him ahead.

But he either didn’t catch my meaning or decided to play along.

“Oh no-no, only after you!”

And he stepped back, raising his hands with palms forward.

Of course, we could have launched into a whole pantomime — “No, after you, I insist!” “Allow me the honor, please, go first!” and ended it with shoving, laughter, and both of us hopelessly wedged in the doorway. But this was no time for that, so I simply went first.

I understood: Kyle was simply too afraid to turn his back on me.

Room L5. Kyle.

Something about being near him set my nerves on edge.

I'll be honest: nothing like that had ever happened to me before. All I knew came secondhand — others warning me to keep well clear of Hal and the equally volatile defectives like him. I had grown used to the idea that far more destructive behavior might be expected of me than of Hal.

And never once did I imagine that one day I would be the one to suffer at his hands.

So when we were assigned to the same room, I drifted as far from Hal as the space allowed, striving to appear perfectly at ease while exclaiming loudly, like an idiot:

"Well, would you look at that — two mattresses! Haven't they invented beds yet in this place? Not that I'm complaining — my ribs are still black and blue from last night. No sheets or blankets, mind you, but there are pillows. A room fit for royalty. There's even a bookshelf in here…"

I stared at the books as though deliberating which one to take down and read, though the squiggles on their spines resembled no alphabet I knew. Probably some peculiar Eytian script.

Maybe even Hal could make sense of it.

"Kyle."

I flinched inwardly. It felt exactly like sitting in class when the professor calls your number and you haven't prepared. I turned toward my friend.

Hal stood right at the threshold, his weight settled on one leg, his fingers twisting the sleeves of his hoodie. To look at him, you would never guess he'd been ready to kill.

“I… I’m sorry it turned out that way,” he admitted awkwardly, unable to meet my eyes. “I shouldn’t have taken my anger out on you. I’m sorry.”

For all the troubles and injustices I had to endure, I rarely heard an apology—somehow it was always me saying sorry to everyone around me. So I felt awkward, yet at the same time immensely relieved.

“Relax, man, it’s fine, I rumbled good-naturedly, as though it really had been some trivial little thing.” I shouldn’t have…

I tried to recall what all the fuss had even been about, and when I realized it concerned some street dancer, I nearly burst out laughing. Hal finally smiled too and left the sweater alone.

“One day I’ll learn to handle this thing, he said, staring at his hands as if they alone bore the blame for everything.” And then there’ll be fewer problems.

He abruptly turned toward the door he was standing beside and stepped aside. A moment later came a knock.

Could Jem have decided to drop by?

But when the door opened, it was Aurora standing on the threshold.

“How do you like the room? she asked in a friendly way, gliding cautiously through the doorway.” I still can’t believe Mr. Igig stuck you in some closet. What an impression you must have formed of our world and its inhabitants! She shook her head, then quickly returned to her warm tone: — Room L5… how are you settling in?

I was certain she had glanced at Hal as well, but there was no way to be sure.

“Wonderful, I answered cheerfully, and this time Hal definitely did look at me.” Excellent.

“Very well.” Aurora clasped her hands together, then asked quickly, as though afraid she might change her mind: — I was thinking… If

you’re willing, I could show you the realm of the Mano. The way it was always meant to be.

Those words sent a true current through me. I forgot all about Hal and everything that had passed between us. The Mano! Was I really, at last, going to see them? Would I finally understand what bound me to them?

“There’s nothing I’d love more!” I answered at once, unable to contain my excitement.

“Am I to go alone, L5?” Hal asked.

Aurora nodded and pressed her palms together in apology.

“The Council is watching you closely, T23. And if they discover that both of your friends have vanished, they’ll inevitably grow suspicious. Gugalan is deeply distrustful and expects an attack from every quarter.”

Just like my father. I suppose that trait comes with being human—or an Ait—in a position of power. Perhaps they simply cannot do without it.

“I understand,” Hal muttered, and I could tell he was a little wounded.

Truth be told, he had wanted to come along and see the Mano with me himself.

“Thank you,” Aurora bowed her head, then extended to me a hand thin as a twig. — Shall we go?

It seemed that even before we had fully passed through the gates and that very Transitional Garden which no one had ever seen, I caught the scent of the sea. Perhaps I was only imagining it, but the next moment we stepped out onto the ocean’s shore, and nothing else mattered anymore.

I love music, I love good food, I love my friends and my family. I enjoy basketball and all sorts of games, and I adore animals. But nothing in this world do I love as dearly as the sea.

The Gate had been painted directly onto the rocky cliff that ran along one side of the shore. Below it stretched a strip of greyish-yellow sand, and just beyond it the water was already lapping.

There was no one on the beach, and no one out on the water either. The wind troubled the waves, which hurried up the sand only to break and crawl back again. Their soothing rustle sounded exactly like the voice of someone dear whom you haven't seen in far too long. The sun still hid behind the clouds, and by the water it was cold and dreary.

But I couldn't have cared less. I bolted and ran skipping toward the waves, my feet sinking clumsily into the sand, which packed itself into my sneakers—yet I barely noticed. I even forgot about Aurora, who had stayed behind among the rocks.

The sea drew me toward it like the most powerful magnet in the world. The waves whispered my true name: "Kaaayl... Kaaaayl..." as if rejoicing to see me too.

I stopped only at the water's edge. A wave crept up to my feet like an obedient puppy and gently wrapped itself around my sneakers. Then it slid back, only for another to take its place at once. Within the lace of foam a strange pattern showed through, washed away by the water over and over.

I stared ahead, my mouth falling unconsciously open as I breathed in the scent of salt, wet sand, and seaweed. A few meters from the shore, black diamond-shaped rocks jutted out of the water. But neither there, nor in the sea itself, nor anywhere along the beach was there a single soul. So where were the inhabitants of that mysterious kingdom of the Mano?

But even if no one wanted to meet me, I wouldn't be upset. Great Kata, it had been so long since I'd last seen the sea that the joy of it was almost painful. This place was wonderful. Neither the beautiful Lake of Dreams nor even the grandest pool at the college could hold a candle to it. I had missed the sea. I had needed it so badly.

"Hi," I said, stepping forward.

I was still in trousers and sneakers, but that didn't trouble me in the slightest. The waves splashed up to my waist, the wet fabric clung to my skin, and goosebumps rippled across my whole body — half from pleasure, half from the cold. Should I dive in? I was wearing my college uniform — trousers and a shirt — which was, of course, nothing like a swimsuit. And yet… I wanted to try. Here, beside the sea, with no one watching. When would such a chance come again? And when, above all, would I ever get to swim in an eyt sea?

I had just begun unbuttoning my shirt when I suddenly remembered Aurora and whipped around.

"My lady…"

My voice cracked.

I was alone on the beach.

"Lady Aurora!" I called, scanning my surroundings.

Perhaps she had merely flown off somewhere? But where, and why? Perhaps she had returned to the residence and would come back for me soon? I couldn't believe she would simply abandon me here — there had to be some explanation. And still, an uneasiness crept over me. The kyuruki knew where the realm of the Mano lay, and how far it stretched from the council residence.

I moved closer to the gate drawn upon the rock and dared to touch it with my hand. Nothing happened. My fingertips met only cool, rough stone—and that was all. I possessed none of the Ayt power that

Hal had, none that could awaken the gate. All I carried was a useless shark maw.

“Lady Aurora!” I called again, pressing my face close to the carving, hoping that somehow she might hear me. — Lady Aurora!

No one answered, and no one came. I stood alone on the empty shore. True, I could still hear the waves splashing behind me, so I was not entirely alone. It was the sea, in fact, that kept me from panicking.

Someone would come back for me. Aurora, Igig, Hal—or even Gugalan himself. They could not simply forget me. And in the meantime, I would enjoy the sea to my heart’s content.

I stripped down to my underwear, left my clothes heaped on the sand, and strode briskly back toward the water. The cold air pinched painfully at my bare skin, and I shivered. With luck I would not catch a chill come morning—though even that fate would not have kept me from the water.

The sea soothed me, whispering that everything would be well, that I had not been abandoned, that someone loved me and would always be waiting. At the very least, the sea had always waited for me, and it had always loved me.

I waded in, dipping my hands beneath the surface with delight. The salt stung my scrapes a little, but even that pain was pleasant. The water lapped at my chest, still coated in its rough film, and I felt nothing at all.

In the water, everything was always as it should be—nothing superfluous, nothing amiss. It always knew what it was doing and never caused harm without reason. You could trust it, and that was exactly what I did. Drawing a deep breath into my chest, I slipped beneath the surface.

I love this state, when water envelops you on every side and you feel yourself becoming part of it. Your body grows calm and settles of

its own accord into just the right position, merging with the water, completing it—and your heart tightens with joy at being accepted.

I opened my eyes, and they stung a little. The sea had never done me any real harm, unlike the land. I glanced around and struck out forward.

The murky blue grew clearer and clearer—or perhaps my eyes were simply adjusting, learning to pick out shapes. The seabed was clean, scattered here and there with the odd pebble or shell. No fish, no starfish, no other creatures anywhere in sight. And certainly no mano, whatever they might look like. I swam farther and farther out, gazing about with interest, feeling only a faint pang of regret that my friends would never understand me, nor ever see any of this beauty for themselves.

A dark figure appeared several meters ahead. I squinted, wondering who it could be, and swam faster. It wasn't exactly easy without flippers, or even webbing between my toes, but I tried my best. The figure hovered in place a moment longer, then suddenly dissolved into the water. I even stopped, disappointed. However much I liked to believe I belonged to the water—what chance did I truly have against creatures of the sea?

I surfaced for a breath and rubbed my eyes. Glancing back, I was surprised to find the shore far behind me; I had already drawn level with the rocks out in the water. I hadn't even noticed I'd swum that far. Perhaps it was simply shallow here? Goose bumps prickled across my skin in the open air, and I hurried to draw a deep breath before diving under again.

For a few seconds shimmering bubbles enveloped me—dancing, swirling, blotting out everything around. I smiled, and my lips stretched of their own accord into a grin wider than any I'd ever

allowed myself in college, or anywhere on dry land. But in the sea my mouth had found its true calling, and it knew it.

Once all the bubbles had floated away to the surface, I peered hard and once more made out a silhouette a few meters away. The creature was either toying with me, watching from a distance—or else these were other denizens of the deep. It was impossible to judge the distance; underwater everything looked different than above, and you could trust neither your eyes nor even your own mind. I resolved to press on.

My body, so clumsy on land, revealed itself in all its glory in the water—suddenly I was strong, nimble, almost graceful. I marveled at how it moved on instinct, settling into the most advantageous position for swimming, at how my arms and legs drove me forward. If only I'd had a fraction of that agility in my college gym…

The creature ahead waited once again, then shot off and vanished from sight a second time. It's just playing with me!

I came up for air again, though I didn't yet feel any need to. The air was cold, and the wind scraped harshly against my bare skin. Without even opening my eyes, I drew a deep breath and slipped back beneath the surface.

I sank all the way down to the bottom, gathering shells and stones. Everything here seemed a genuine treasure, and I was tempted to carry something off as a keepsake—but the thought vanished as quickly as it came. Taking things from the sea would be like barging into a stranger's house and walking away with a vase or a potted flower.

Light filtered down through the water, tracing thin squares on the sand like the pattern of a turtle's shell. And if you looked up, you could see pale, faint rays seeping through the depths—like threads, like little sticks. I swam on, hugging the bottom.

The pressure on my ears and temples eased, and I stopped noticing it. My eyes no longer stung; all in all, I felt perfectly at ease down there. A marvelous sensation.

Then suddenly the dark figure appeared ahead of me again. This time it was coming toward me, and fast. I had just enough time to feel pleased that one of the local residents had finally decided to pay me a visit—before I realized it was moving far too fast. Straight at me. Like a Yo-Yo bounding toward you across a park. I tried to dart aside, but my body suddenly went limp and heavy, five times heavier—as if I had forgotten how to swim in an instant.

Fear took hold of me, and the sea understood at once. It took offense.

My chest clenched, and everything dissolved into a blue haze before my eyes. I tried to swim upward, paddling with weakening arms, but then the creature slammed into me at full speed and seized me by the shoulders.

Gripped firmly beneath the arms, I was towed along at breakneck pace with hardly any effort. Not that I appreciated it. My head was spinning violently; my temples felt squeezed, as though someone had clamped my skull between their knees. I tried to scream — opened my mouth wide, and hundreds of white bubbles came rushing upward, tickling as they streamed across my face. Fine, so maybe my teeth could pass for a shark’s, but my lungs certainly couldn’t! I began to struggle, and a moment later the grip tightened and I was shoved toward the surface.

I tumbled ashore, coughing and spluttering. The cold upper world — the Upperworld — received me coldly, almost with hostility. I froze on the spot. The harsh, prickly sand, the vicious wind, even the air itself — all of it too sharp, scraping at my throat and cheeks. I was not welcome here.

By the time I had rubbed my eyes half-clear and remembered how to breathe, I could finally make out the one who had dragged me from the water.

A figure stood before me, watching, hands tucked behind their back. I blinked several times, trying to work out whether this was really happening or whether I was still seeing things from beneath the waves.

It was a girl, perhaps only a shade younger than me. Slim and short, with dark olive skin and loose dark-brown hair. Her only garment was a blue outfit, something like a cotton jumpsuit with shorts.

She looked like a genuine, real human being. But no… she was not human.

I didn't dare lift my gaze any higher, too embarrassed to stare at her face. Yet from the couple of seconds I had managed to look, I knew something was wrong with it.

So about a minute slipped by. Me, on all fours in the sand, and this strange stranger — an eetalite — crouched before me.

She was the first to tire of the silent tableau. Lowering herself, bracing her fists against the sand, she spoke:

"Hello, half-Mano. What brings you to our kingdom?"

Only then did I finally meet her eyes.

The first thing that struck me was the stranger's gaze — unnaturally luminous, a soft blue flecked with small round pupils. There was likely nothing remarkable in that; a creature who lived in the sea, seeing light mostly as it filtered down through the water, was bound to have eyes like these. Entrancing, like the ocean itself.

Only afterward did I notice her mouth. The thin, colorless lips stretching into a smile that reached from ear to ear — in the most literal sense.

“You don’t understand me?” the girl said again, and sharp triangular teeth flashed in her mouth.

Her lips closed in one place and opened in another, stretching and curling as she talked. Did I really look like that from the outside when I spoke?

I swallowed, seawater still on my tongue, and at last my voice came:

“I... I understand you. Lady Aurora brought me here. And then she left. Sorry,” I added hurriedly, searching for anywhere to look that wasn’t the girl’s face. “I didn’t mean to trouble you.”

The girl laughed — a sound like water burbling over stones — though her teeth barely showed. I could never manage that; when I laugh, I laugh with my whole mouth wide open.

“You’re funny, half-mano. Lady Aurora left you behind? Strange. Well, she must have had her reasons. And you weren’t any bother to us — not the slightest. I thought you might need help. After all, your teeth come only from us — no gills, right?”

All at once she crawled up close, and I nearly toppled over backward in surprise.

“I won’t hurt you,” the girl said — more warning than promise — and took my face in her hands, pressing her fingertips to my temples while her palms cradled my chin.

Fine, delicate webbing stretched between her fingers. Her skin was lovely to the touch — cool, but not cold, nor wet and clammy the way it might have looked from the outside. She herself smelled of seawater, with just a hint of algae. My favorite smells in all the world.

“Wonderful,” she whispered, and then her thumbs drifted over my lips, tracing their corners, feeling the teeth beneath the skin. It tickled a little, felt a little awkward — and was utterly delightful. “Such wholeness, such precision. Until now I’d only seen three half-manos.

One had an enormous mouth, but human teeth inside it. Another had wretched skin and a mouth riddled with holes — his new teeth never came in. And the third had gills, but an ordinary mouth."

I could scarcely hear her, hypnotized by those sea-colored eyes. Her voice flowed on, even and soothing — like the murmur of waves.

But then her gaze dropped to my chest, and I belatedly recalled the bad burn I'd taken that day—without the Eit doctor's care, I'd have ended up in a hospital bed. I looked down, inspecting myself.

The magical film was still in place, a transparent shield stretched over the crimson mark in the middle of my chest. It wasn't a pretty sight, but the main thing was that it didn't hurt at all. I hadn't even given the burn a thought in the salt water.

"Rough day? the girl asked with a faint smile, then abruptly lowered her hands from my face." So, who are you, and where do you come from, half-Mano? You don't look like anyone from around here.

I had no idea whether I was allowed to spill the details—that I was essentially a prisoner of the council, along with the hopelessly defective Hal and Jem with her strange tattoos. But I didn't want to lie or hide things. I hate that.

"My friends and I were brought here from the human world yesterday. The council wants to test my buddy's secondary power after… after it went out of control. And Lady Aurora decided to show me the Mano realm. But then she went off somewhere."

I fell silent, feeling my usual slight unease at talking so much, at making my listeners stare at my mouth. Even now, when my companion had exactly the same sort of mouth.

"Show you our realm? the girl repeated." You've never seen any of us before? What about your family?

Honestly, not only had I never laid eyes on any of the Mano—I'd never met anyone who looked like me, either. That's exactly what I told her.

"Because it's a rare second manifestation, the girl replied with a smile, not without a touch of pride." Most people end up with something far more useless. Scaly patches, a hump where a fin should be, fingers fused together. Teeth are the best draw you could have made.

Yes, some get teeth, some get fused fingers. I used to think there wasn't much difference between those two afflictions.

But Walt had understood the difference long ago.

I couldn't decide whether to tell her about my brother; in the end, I chose to keep quiet. Walt wouldn't have liked it. Besides, I had no wish to speak of him, no wish to face the questions that would inevitably follow. I simply didn't.

"I should probably head back to the residence, I said, my eyes on the sky."

The blasted sun had already begun its descent into the sea, flashing now one edge, now the other, from behind the clouds. The wind had risen, and the sea grew restless in its wake. In the distance it looked utterly black, black as the clouds above it, and nothing about it seemed friendly any longer. I was cold, I was hungry, and I longed to be home. In my own home.

"Do you have enough power to open the gates? the mano girl asked."

I glanced back at the rocks. On my own, I would never have found my way out of here, even if I spent the rest of my life standing before that drawing.

"No, I admitted quietly." But perhaps, Lady Aurora…

The girl was already on her feet, striding confidently toward the gate. I scrambled up after her, hastily brushing the sand from my skin. Only then did it dawn on me that I had stood before the Mano representative practically naked—yet she betrayed not a trace of embarrassment. I glanced around for my clothes and soon found them: sand had worked its way inside, and they were damp, crumpled, and cold. Still, I pulled on my shirt without bothering with the buttons, dragged up my trousers, grabbed my sand-filled sneakers, and hurried after the girl toward the gate.

"I can send you back," the Mano announced. "Are you ready to go now?"

Now that was what I called direct and practical. No beating around the bush, no sly hints—the way humans so love to communicate.

"Yes, probably. I don't want anyone out looking for me."

A shudder ran through me at the thought of Gugalan and his gang discovering my absence right now, and of Aurora doing everything in her power to cover for me. Most likely, that was precisely why she hadn't been there. I swallowed hard at the thought of what awaited me on my return.

"Did you like it here?" asked the Mano girl, her hand already hovering above the drawing. "Perhaps someday we'll have more time, and you can look around properly. I'd love to introduce you to the others of my realm. They would like you."

Warmth spread through my chest and rose to my cheeks at her words. No girl had ever invited me to her home before—certainly never to meet her people. And I didn't even know her name. Or her nickname. Not even a number!

"That would be wonderful! And what's your—""

"Then until we meet again, other half of the Mano," she said with a closed-lipped smile, then touched the drawing of the gate.

Before I could even finish my question, something powerful, invisible, and unmistakably magical yanked me inside, and the girl vanished.

Room K44. Jem

“Thank you,” I turned and smiled at the myukla who had shown me to my new quarters. — It’s lovely.

And I wasn’t exaggerating. Compared to the hole the boys and I had crammed into last night, this place seemed like a luxury suite. A double bed beneath a heavy canopy, a private bathroom, a table, a dresser, even a shelf stocked with books. Sweet incense lingered in the air, and candelabra flickered along the walls — without a single blue balloon in sight. The bedroom itself was generous, with a high ceiling and tall windows. Whoever had chosen this room for me, I silently thanked them.

Before the little creature could slip away, I hurried back to it and knelt down beside it. Gently, slowly, I reached out and brushed the thin, trembling ears with my fingertips, and the small, jet-black eyes glistened with moisture as they gazed up at me. Bending so near that I caught the myukla’s light, spicy scent — something like ginger — I heard its quick, husky breathing. I closed my eyes and whispered, as softly as breath itself, into one of the delicate ears:

“Bring Igig to me.”

My room even had its own balcony — a tiny one, admittedly, with a cold stone floor and an unlovely balustrade. It overlooked the orange groves stretching beyond the residence, and far off on the horizon the sharp spires of houses pricked the sky. But I had never before possessed a balcony of my own, not even for a single evening, and I was as giddy as a child. I stood there, leaning on the railing with my chest pressed against it, gazing into the distance like a princess in her castle. A cold, cutting wind that smelled of bitter dried herbs, together with the slate-gray clouds, completed the whole “damsel in distress — where is my handsome prince?” tableau. As a girl I had never cared for

that sort of fairy tale, and yet here I was, living one. So much for paradoxes.

“What happened?”

I had all but forgotten about him, and now I spun around, pointlessly tugging down my skirt, which fluttered a little in the wind. Behind me, in the room, loomed a mighty, broad-shouldered figure. But it wasn’t Kyle.

I stepped back inside and shut the balcony door firmly behind me. Then I made certain the front door was locked tight. Just to be safe, I glanced around, confirming that not a single one of those ever-present blue orbs was anywhere in sight. Only then did I turn to the feathered eit.

“You heard them. Some stupid holiday tomorrow.”

Igig tilted his head, his eyes never leaving me. Like all birds of prey, his stare was sharp, disquieting, and far too direct. I suspect that if the gargoyles of the college had ever come alive, they would have looked exactly the same.

“And?”

“What do you mean, “and”? I’m going to have to squeeze myself into a dress!”

“I’m powerless against that.”

“Kugalung! But what about my…”

I clamped my mouth shut, not even sure what scared me more: that I’d called such a huge creature a kugalung, or that we really could be overheard. Without giving it much thought, I pulled up the left sleeve of my sweater a little.

“I doubt it’ll be an evening gown with long, thick sleeves,” I muttered.

The first pink-violet swirl of the tattoo peeked out coquettishly from under my sleeve, stretching toward my wrist. What was so

shameful about them that I had to hide them from the whole world of eits?

Igig scowled, looking at my arms. But for a big guy, he caught on pretty fast.

“I’ll find you gloves. If anyone asks, say they’re scars. People hide those, don’t they?”

“Yeah, some do. Though I don’t know. Are you going to explain to me or not what’s so bad about them?”

Again I avoided saying the word, just waving my hand pointedly. I kept feeling like I was being pranked. Or that it was improper in eit society to show up with tattoos. Well, was that my fault? My parents hadn’t exactly asked my permission, after all.

“I’ll explain,” Igig answered coldly, — but after the holiday. We don’t have much time left. Once permission comes from your guardians, they’ll try to get rid of those of you with the L5 number as fast as possible. That’s how it seems to me, — he added quickly, not meaning to frighten me. — And you really don’t know what they mean? You’ve never even heard of such a thing?

By now my curiosity was genuine, but I still didn’t dare roll up my sleeves for a proper look at the tattoos, the way I had that first time. Maybe later, in the bathroom. What if they carried some hidden message that, in all my seventeen years, I’d never managed to decipher?

“I don’t know, I snapped.” Why should I have to know?

“You don’t even know who made them for you, or when? Were you born with them?”

Actually, on that last point — I’d wondered the same thing myself once, until my third biology professor informed me that neither magic nor technology had advanced that far yet. But how could she be certain? She’s only human, after all.

“Of course not, kugalung. My parents had them done for me.”

Beyond that “official” version, I had no others. My life is full of things far more deserving of brainpower, you know. Strange tattoos don’t make the list.

“You told me you don’t have parents.”

Ugh, this feathered simpleton and his narrow-minded questions were grating on my nerves more and more! Still, I performed a minor miracle of patience — thanks to my ingela and my meditation practice.

“How very observant of you! What, did you think I hatched from an egg?”

That came out rather rudely, apparently, considering I haven’t the faintest idea how beings like Igig and his brother come into the world. Kyuruk, my head was already spinning from it all!

“I can’t imagine anyone but my parents doing that,” I said slowly, keeping my eyes away from the Eit. — Though of course I can’t be certain. No one ever told me anything. — I hesitated, reluctant to go on, but the confession came out anyway: — I was found on the doorstep of a college when I was a few months old. My hands were already like this. There was no one with me, nothing. I was simply abandoned.

A strange sensation tightened the skin inside my nose, and the air seemed colder than it should have been. I always steer clear of talking about my family, because… it’s just absurd. Why speak of a family that doesn’t exist? And how do you mourn something that was never there? Absurd. My throat closed up. Utterly. Absurd.

“I’m sorry.”

I nodded, still looking off in the other direction. Sympathy from a soulless creature of the Eits’ ruling council was exactly what this moment called for. I’d sooner have squared off against a mukli.

“Would you like a hug?”

I beg your pardon? Just to be safe, I took a step back, fist at the ready in case it came to that. Had I heard him correctly?

“What?”

“Would you like a hug, in a situation like this?” Igig’s bare, featherless cheeks suddenly flushed crimson. — That’s what people do…

He looked so embarrassed he was nearly apologizing. But I held my defensive stance, prepared to strike back if it came to that. Believe me, hulking brutes with wings where arms should be were a novelty even to me.

“Don’t the Eits do that?”

“Well… yes, of course… I mean…” Igig scratched the top of his head, ruffling his long grey feathers. — I read that with humans it’s simpler. All down to emotions. And honestly, I was only trying to be polite!

Now he attempted to mount a defence of his own: what did I mean by that? He’d offered me his prickly, feathered embrace, and I still had the nerve to turn my nose up at it! I smirked, unable to think of any other way to voice my indignation.

“What are we to you, primitive guinea pigs? Do you imagine everything we do runs on the level of raw emotion?”

Igig sulked, looking guilty and ashamed. That would teach him. I had a reputation to uphold — not only within the walls of the college, but even in the world of the eights.

“Where did you read that?” I asked, a touch more gently, for in truth my curiosity had been piqued.

“Um… in a book… about human psychology.”

“Written by an eight?”

“Naturally.”

I could no longer muster any anger. Honestly, the only thing left to do was weep. The great and wise eightalites, without whom the miserable human tribe would still be languishing in its caves! I waved a hand, incapable of putting even half my thoughts into words. A complete madhouse. I was, in fact, at a loss.

“Fine, clever clogs. What can I say. Would you yourself object to a hug?”

“Um…”

His transformation from a glowering, menacing bird-man into an embarrassed, awkward teenager was hilarious. A shame Kyle’s camera hadn’t been at hand right then.

“That depends on who you ask.” Igig gave me a guilty smile, glancing down at me. — Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. Aytalites don’t really know all that much about humans. Just as you know little about us. Tell me if I get something wrong.

I wanted to snap that at this rate I’d lose my voice entirely, but the time for idle chatter was over. I’d never been fond of discussing my feelings, and certainly not with a strange creature sent by the government. Time to remind him why he’d come.

“So, will you have the gloves by evening?”

In a heartbeat, the embarrassed teenager transformed into a serious bird-man with a face of stone. Far too abruptly.

“I will,” he nodded. — You mustn’t show your hands to anyone. And afterward I’ll explain everything — you have a right to know. If not from your parents, then from someone.

Apparently there were serious gaps in the balcony door, because all at once I was freezing and crossed my arms tightly over my chest, curling up into a tight little ball. Anything rather than let him offer that warm embrace of his again.

“Can I see my friends? Where did they take them?”

“I wouldn’t advise leaving this room. You’re being watched,” Igig lowered his voice. — Just wait here. There’s less time left than you think.

He turned to go. So I couldn’t take a single step out of here! And this, apparently, was what they called “more humane treatment of our guests”! Anger flared in me quickly — it was the most familiar, most comprehensible emotion in the whole tangle of feelings this ayt stirred up in me.

“Just wait”? I have a right to know what’s happening to the boys! And I refuse to sit here twiddling my thumbs while you plot kyuruk knows what against us!

Igig paused, his hand already resting on the edge of the door. Without turning to me, he remarked offhandedly:

“The eitalites never make mistakes, after all. You’re governed by nothing but your emotions.”

Then he was gone, the door banging shut behind him.

I recoiled and sank onto the cold bed. With only me inside it, the bedroom seemed larger somehow, and brighter — no one else was casting a dark shadow across it anymore. And the sudden silence struck my ears like a slap.

Had I truly once longed for a room of my own in UKOG, free of roommates?

I thought of Melodiya and Darya, of all the girls I had shared quarters with over the years. They had always struck me as interchangeable, dull creatures — yet every one of them had fulfilled her essential purpose: she had simply been there. Because of them, I had never felt as small, as isolated, as utterly alone as I did now. I could snap at them, grow irritated, be rude and sharp-tongued, tune them out entirely — but I had needed them. And I needed them still. I ached for

college, for my old room, for my roommates. And even — a little — for my parents.

I cast a glance around, just to be safe, then blew out nearly all the candles and sat with my back to the balcony, carefully rolling up the left sleeve of my sweater. In the half-darkness I could see almost nothing, but I knew the marks were there, and from memory I traced the zigzag that wound its way around my entire arm, from wrist to shoulder. As a child, I had taken them for mere pigmentation—or perhaps a secondary trait; UKOG had plenty of people with quirks. I never attached much significance to my tattoos, no more than one does to birthmarks or anything else nature simply gave you. So it struck me as strange to learn that some kind of secret lay hidden in them—or something of the sort—something that meant they could never be shown to any ait.

It was unsettling to think there might still be something about myself I didn’t know. But I had no desire to find out. Not now—perhaps in a few years, when I would be truly ready. And never from anyone but an ait—creatures who understand nothing about people, no matter how many clever books on psychology they may have read.

Number T23. Hal

Kyle returned late in the evening—frozen, soaked, sand clinging to his hands and legs. And utterly silent.

Aurora came flying in with him, her chatter making up perfectly for her friend's silence. I barely listened to her babbling, my attention fixed on Kyle. The moment she left us, the silence seemed to press in on me.

Kyle sank onto the bed and ran a hand through his damp hair, looking bewildered. His eyes were fixed on a single spot, though his face was slack, his lips slightly parted. In short, he seemed completely dazed.

I stood across from him, unsure how to begin the conversation (for the second time that day!), and wondering whether I ought to trouble the big guy at all. Perhaps something had happened?

"How was the walk?" I asked cautiously. "How did the Mano receive you? Or did you not see them at all?"

Could that be the whole reason? Perhaps the mysterious Mano, whoever they were, had taken a dislike to Kyle? I was already preparing to comfort my friend, even picking out the words, when he finally found his voice:

"There was the sea. A real sea, and no one around. Aurora went back to the residence to cover for me, but she didn't know I wouldn't be able to open the gates. She thought I could. She apologized so much…"

I frowned. I understood nothing. The sea, Aurora, gates… What on earth had happened?

"And what about the Mano? Did you see them?"

Kyle swallowed and shook his head without meeting my eyes.

"But I did see the sea," he muttered. "I even managed a short swim."

I patted him on the shoulder in encouragement and felt how damp and chilly his shirt was. A pity — I would have loved to discover for myself what the Mano actually are. But since he wasn't too broken up about it, fine. The sea is always a good thing.

"There's a bathroom in here with hot, fresh water," I remarked. "Positively royal accommodations. I wonder whether they found Jem something more modest? After all, she has no secondary power whatsoever."

"You haven't seen her?" Kyle finally lifted his head and rose slowly, groping for his clothes.

"No. I haven't left the room. I'd rather not run into anyone from the council. Anyone but Aurora, perhaps."

"Right, of course. She's very sweet." Kyle grimaced and started unbuttoning his shirt. "I really ought to take a shower. Wash off the salt."

He flashed me a quick smile and disappeared into the bathroom. Once again I was left alone, trying to pin down what was still nagging at me. What had happened to Kyle — something so elusive at first glance, and yet something my inner instinct had caught? What?

I'd assumed I was utterly exhausted, but in truth I lay awake for a very long time. Kyle slept like the dead, and his snoring could probably be heard clear down the corridor. On the whole, though, the residence was quiet. Nothing like the guys' house, which buzzed like a beehive around the clock, curfew or no curfew.

I wondered what would have become of us had we stayed at the college, in the human world. If the reply from the eits hadn't arrived so soon but, say, a couple of months later — or even half a year. If there had never been that fight with the Twin. What would have become of us?

Why, we would simply have finished our studies at the college in peace. My power would have remained just as wild and unpredictable, and I would have been the very last to suspect that only the Eits themselves knew what was wrong with it. It would never have crossed Jem's mind to hide her tattoos from anyone. And Kyle would never have learned that somewhere far away an entire kingdom of the Mano flourished — beings whose teeth were just like his.

In a way, Gugalan is right. Meeting the Eitalites turned our lives upside down. It was the most unforgettable, most precious lesson we could ever have been given. Their world defies the imagination, and their way of thinking proved far less predictable than we had assumed. The Eitalites themselves were not freaks or monsters, whatever people said about them. They were simply Eitalites. And a part of them lived on inside me.

My parents always told me I was special — and that there was nothing wrong with that. So what if no other "defectives" had ever appeared in the family? I had no reason to be ashamed of my power, no reason to see myself as broken. And I held to that conviction, no matter what anyone else said.

I raised my hand. The memory of striking Kyle today rose up, and I did my best to push the image from my mind. I hadn't blacked out after the flash, yet I felt dreadful all the same — and the fact that my friend had been caught in the crossfire made it doubly so. Jem could attest to that.

I tensed, concentrating on the hurt and on my fury at how everything had turned out. And there in the darkness, my palm glowed faintly green. The light rose from beneath the skin, spilling a little across my wrist and tracing along my veins. The power of the Eitalites was with me — it lived inside me. And it needed only the slightest pretext to reveal itself.

“You look like you’ve been dragged out of a dumpster.”

Jem smiled the way only she could — with mockery, yet without malice, and almost with tenderness. To my mind she looked just as she always did; the only difference was that her clothes were no longer stained with blood and grime.

“A good morning to you too, Kyle muttered, reaching for his knife and fork.”

We were shown into the dining room, where Jem was already waiting, though none of the eights had arrived yet. The dishes stood in their appointed places — a bowl of salad dotted with something resembling green pomegranates, and two plates of semi-liquid porridge crowned with dark purple berries. At first I was dismayed that we had been placed on a vegetarian diet as well, but I quickly discovered that the porridge was delicious and satisfying, rather like meat pâté.

“Sleep well? I asked, making conversation.” It must have been frightening, all alone. Or did someone keep you company?

Kyle and I exchanged a swift glance and decided that our revenge was complete. Jem lowered her eyes and… said nothing. Good luck to anyone trying to work out how she had spent the night after that!

Someone entered the dining room, and when we turned, an uneasy feeling crept over us.

It was Telem and Arey, and they lost no time in shutting the door behind them. I tensed, tucking my hands beneath the table. One could never guess what notions might take root in those two heads.

“Good morning, everyone, and bon appétit, Arey said quietly, without so much as a glance at us, and went straight to the table.”

Telem shuffled after him with an old man’s gait, wearing, as always, his peculiar glasses. We set down our forks and watched them warily. Igig and Aurora had been sympathetic toward us, and Gugalan outright rude — but what to expect from these two, we had no idea.

“The festivities begin tonight at nine o’clock, after dinner,” Arey announced as he took his seat. His eyes stared blankly straight ahead, and his slicked-back black hair caught a faint gleam from the firelight of the bowls. — Lady Aurora and Mr. Igig will assist you with your costumes.

No one doubted it.

“We shall be inviting representatives from various kingdoms and from every sphere of the country’s administration. The guests will be drawn exclusively from the world of the eytalites, though we trust that will cause you no difficulty.”

He delivered it all flatly, as though reading out a report at some meeting. In spite of the intriguing subject, I felt drowsiness creeping over me at once.

“Furthermore, we expect word from your guardians this afternoon regarding the inspection. Naturally, this concerns room T23 in particular.”

Once again, all eyes turned to me. It was growing a little wearisome, if I’m honest. I barely managed to stifle a yawn.

“And what if the guardians refuse?” Jem asked suddenly, with uncharacteristic boldness.

Telem, already well into his breakfast, set down his fork and smacked his lips in indignation. But Arey remained as cold-blooded as ever — and therefore, as dangerous.

“In that case, you will be sent home at once. The eytalites never keep anyone captive against their will.”

And yet here we were, held captive by them at this very moment. I mused over the paradox, prodding at my porridge with my fork. What did Gugalan — and, truthfully, the rest of them — actually want from us? Did they simply mean to destroy us? To harness my power for their own ends? Or perhaps we hadn’t arrived without a purpose, and they

were merely dealing with the Director's complaint, intent on following every rule to the letter? No — however hard I tried, I couldn't bring myself to believe the latter. Why else would they have dragged Jem and Kyle along? Why turn up ahead of schedule? Nothing here was quite that simple.

"Hmm, you've scarcely any time left at all," remarked Telem, wolfing down his breakfast. — You've only just arrived, and already it's time to be off. Barely here, and already there. — His eyes were hidden behind his glasses, yet I felt his gaze upon me, and a shiver ran across my skin. — One tick-tock, and life is over. Time won't wait for you. Tick-tock, and that's that. The end. Tick-tock.

His strange voice, wedded to those strange words, was almost hypnotic. The rhythmic tapping of a fork against a plate. The barely audible crack, like an old clock. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock… I froze, fork in hand. The lulling rhythm, like a metronome, began tuning my heartbeat to itself — even my breathing. I tried to shake myself free, to escape the trap, but my body seemed almost glad to fall into another's rhythm, to surrender to another's power. I sat staring blankly at a single point, and my body liked that too. No need to do anything, to expend energy. No need to think or feel.

Even my thoughts now sounded measured. Precise. Obedient. Correct.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

"You'll remember this day, if you live. For the rest of your life, you won't be able to forget it…"

Now Telem's voice had grown more drawn out, the ticking slower, and my eyelids began to sink. I could not resist; I could not so much as move a muscle. And that was all my body wanted. Stay, relax, re-sistance is futi-le...

Tiiick. Taaack.

T. I. C. K. T. O. C. K.

A sharp crash shattered my composure and broke my rhythm. I flinched, dropped my fork, and nearly tumbled from my chair. Nausea surged up my throat, and I clapped a hand over my mouth. Kyle shot up from the table.

My heart was hammering wildly, the blood throbbing at my temples. My hands trembled, my skin cold and clammy. Once I had steadied myself, I turned and saw Gugalan.

He stood by the door, fists clenched, surveying us all in silence.

“What’s the matter with you?”

I rubbed my eyes and glanced at Jem. She looked far better than I did—she hadn’t even gone pale. Could she truly have noticed nothing? I wiped my forehead again and looked down to the far end of the table.

Arey had vanished. Telem calmly continued his breakfast, sparing us not so much as a glance.

“Great Kata, what was that?” I whispered, stretching my stiff, numb limbs.

“One must not invoke His name in vain,” Telem rasped from his place. — You fell asleep, young man—that’s what it was. Utterly disrespectful and tactless. And did we perhaps err in inviting you to the feast? The shame will never wash off…

I paid him no heed, trying to recall what had happened and slowly regaining my calm. Kyle returned, ashen, and slumped into his seat. It was plain at a glance that he had no idea what had just happened either. I looked at Jem, and she shrugged, watching me anxiously.

What, in the name of Kata, had that been?

Number T23. Hal

None of us ever came up with a decent explanation for what happened at breakfast. Kyle couldn't have said what went on, I certainly couldn't, and Jem least of all. And nobody felt like asking Arey or Telem themselves, who were plainly tangled up in the whole affair.

So we simply retreated to our rooms. But peace didn't last long. Aurora materialized out of nowhere, arms full of two absurd party costumes. Just picture it — eggplant-colored trousers with a tailcoat, a snow-white shirt with long sleeves, and shoes with a little heel! Oh kyu-ruki, they've all gone mad in this place! I flatly refused to squeeze into that clown getup, but Aurora merely observed that in that case I wouldn't be attending the party — etiquette, and all that. I still can't believe I caved.

Then again, as it turned out, it was worth it.

In my entire life I've read five books at most, though I can boast a respectable library of comics. Honestly, the way I see it, books are only good for throwing something heavy at someone.

And yet even I have some notion of beautiful stories. Fairy tales. Legends. Our literature teacher back at middle school number ten was forever running all manner of film adaptations through the projector. Plenty of teachers could learn a thing or two from her — stories sink in far more easily through a screen, and you don't have to strain your brain. Besides, I'd never have managed to conjure vivid images of those colorful characters in my mind from tiny black letters on yellowed pages.

What was the point of all this? Only after Aurora had handed out costumes to Kyle and me — even helping us wrestle with the fiddly details, like the bow tie and the tiny cuff buttons — did the Myukli lead

us into the main hall on the third floor. That was when all those films came flooding back: kings and balls, Cinderellas and musketeers. Because this looked exactly like one.

Golden light from a hundred candles — hung, set, arranged everywhere, yet never in anyone's way. Floors, walls, and ceiling perfectly smooth and polished to a gleam, all wrought from the same snow-white substance, like pearl. Silver and blue reliefs adorned the walls, weaving fanciful pictures, scenes flowing into one another like the fantasies of a winter dream.

And that was merely the modest frame. The painting itself was a bouquet of rich violet and delicate yellow: full-skirted gowns, long jacket tails, hats, and canes. Like living flowers, the guests drifted slowly and gracefully about the hall, chatting, laughing, lifting their glasses. Not one of them looked outlandish or strange now; no tongue would have dared brand any of them a "monster." This was the high society of the eitalites.

My head was spinning — I had never beheld anything so magnificent. College parties and proms seemed like children's matinees beside this royal ball.

"Whoa, this place is cool!" Kyle mumbled beside me.

His mouth was already crammed full of tiny sandwiches with some unidentifiable filling, and he was glancing about with keen interest. In his dark purple suit he looked rather comical, but that was still better than the standard college uniform, in which he would undoubtedly have been conspicuous here.

"And where's J... K44?" he asked me in a whisper, having finished his survey of the hall.

Thank goodness he had the sense not to say her name aloud. And sure enough, our friend was nowhere to be seen. Though honestly, in a ball gown, I wouldn't have recognized her straight away either.

I had only seen Jem at college formal occasions a couple of times. Each time she wore the same thing — a short black dress with bare shoulders and a silver UKOG badge. In it, Jem seemed especially petite and older than her years. But furnishing a hundred-dress wardrobe for every student in the college would have been asking too much, even from an institution as prestigious as ours.

“Tables T23 and L5!”

Kalanu was approaching us, a glass of something white held in his wing.

“How are you finding the evening?”

He was wearing a purple ensemble as well: spats, tight breeches, a short-sleeved shirt, a waistcoat, a bow tie. With his bald head, his half-blind eye, and the ruffled feathers on his wings, even this attire looked faintly terrifying. Still, I took some comfort in the thought that even a bully like Kalanu had been obliged to don a suit. That there were things in this world that held power over him.

“Boring,” I answered, before Kyle could swallow what was in his mouth and reply, — so it’s strange to see you here.

If the bird man had been hoping I’d melt into coos of delight before his eyes, he gave no sign of it. He took a sip of his milk and merely replied:

“Oh, I never miss the local festivities. When a council member extends an invitation, refusal isn’t really an option. And as you may recall, my brother sits on the council — he’s convinced I’d drop dead without these carnivals.”

He said it none too loudly, his gaze flicking between me and Kyle, his eyes hard with anger. Does all this genuinely get under his skin, or is he putting on a performance? And if the latter, how much buried resentment toward Igig is he still hauling around in that bird chest of his?

“So it’s basically a family service?” Kyle interjected. “He manages your entertainment? My father was the same — kept hauling me to one soirée and function after another, until I fled to college just to escape him.”

He smiled, then promptly pressed his lips together again. Kalanu favored him with only a fleeting glance, making it abundantly clear that his commentary interested him not in the slightest, and continued:

“He’s not the only one looking after me. Our cousin is here as well. You haven’t met her? Perfect — I’ll introduce you right this moment. You’ll see for yourselves that a fellow like me is really a sweet little dandelion in this rotten little bouquet.”

We trailed after him in search of the mysterious cousin, threading our way between the guests, the servants with their laden trays, and the great floor vases of flowers. Bowls of spiced incense hung from the ceiling, and before long the mingled scents had my head spinning. The glitter on every side, the low murmur of voices, the outlandish figures from the eythalite kingdoms — all of it seemed to sweep me off into a dream. Just a dream, far too beautiful and strange for real life. Even if I live to be a hundred, I’ll remember every detail of this evening.

I kept glancing around, worry for Jem beginning to gnaw at me. What if the Eits had done something to her after separating her from me and Kyle? They might even have taken her hostage, or tortured something about me out of her. I had to find out where she was — preferably from someone on the council, but not Gugalan, Telem, or Arey.

Toward the center of the hall the air grew warmer and more stifling, golden light dazzling as it glanced off silver trays, goblets, and jewelry. It filtered through veils and gauzy layers of skirts, through the glass of chalices and the shimmer of feathers. I still couldn’t quite believe it was really me — that I was the one strolling past all these Eitalites,

nodding and smiling at them like an old friend. Far from feeling bored or out of place, I had settled in as naturally as a piece fitted into a mosaic.

“Fury!” Kalanu called.

An Eit in a yellow dress turned majestically toward us, and I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes. Another bird-person! How many more of them would I have to endure? Not that I’d claim the entire tribe of Eits were freaks — Igig had even helped us once — but they were beginning to wear on my last nerve.

Though one might still append the word “human” when speaking of an Igig or a Kalanu, with this creature I could do so only by a generous stretch. She looked almost like a genuine bird — nearly a meter and a half tall, cloaked from head to foot in long reddish-orange plumage, with only her face retaining anything of a woman’s features. As I had already observed, she wore a yellow gown reaching to the floor, its short sleeves sheer, its corset tightly laced. Tiny transparent stones glittered across the bodice, and a high collar clasped her neck. Broad wings, stiff with quills, held a glass of “milk” and an open book. Her face, too, was feathered, but in short, fine down like little needles, framing large golden eyes and a sharp, straight beak. Above her forehead these rose into long red plumes standing erect.

She put me faintly in mind of a girl from college — I can no longer recall her dorm number or her nickname. Her distinguishing feature had been feathers: she’d grown them in place of hair. Picture it, if you can: where a head of hair should have been, a few pitiful, short, pigeon-like plumes; in place of the hairs on her arms and legs, wisps of chick down. Bluntly put, the girl was ugly, yet she was so effortlessly cool that fellows were forever buzzing about her. I had wanted to make her acquaintance myself, but the opportunity never arose.

Kalanu's cousin recalled her to me — recalling her, that is, in her unsettling looks, though coupled with burning eyes, squared shoulders, and a proudly lifted chin. She gazed up at us from below, yet managed to convey the impression of standing among equals.

"Enjoying the evening?" Kalanu smirked. "I can't say you look particularly thrilled."

The bird-girl rolled her eyes and drained her glass in a single swallow. Then came a hiccup, and at last she answered:

"Does Igig still believe we're having a good time here?"

Her voice was low and husky, with a faintly sharp edge beneath it. She no longer spared her cousin a glance, openly studying Kyle and me instead. Then she snapped the book shut.

"Our distinguished guests, Kalanu announced with a flourish." Numbers T23 and L5. I daresay you've already heard of them.

"Naturally, she replied curtly, her gaze still fixed on us." Strange names you carry, I must say. Oh well. Fury Purpurion. Am I expected to say "charmed," after that?

"Hardly required, Kalanu chuckled."

For an instant Fury smiled, eyes narrowing, then her face slipped back into its customary indifference. Kyle pensively adjusted his cuffs and turned to Kalanu.

"Is your middle name also Purpurion, then, since you're one family?"

Fury's eyes widened in astonishment, but she said nothing. Kalanu frowned.

"Er... what? No" Igig and I belong to the Medullin family. Hold on, you two have never heard of surnames?

The word rang vaguely familiar, yet I still couldn't place it. Kyle shook his head as well, eyeing Kalanu with curiosity.

“Well, well, Fury snorted, plucking a second glass from the waiter’s tray.” You’re more intriguing than I took you for. How, then, do you tell which family someone belongs to?

Kyle and I traded glances. We couldn’t quite make sense of them, and they of us — and that left both sides uneasy and fascinated in equal measure.

“By numbers.”

“By numbers.”

This time it was the cousins who traded glances. Kalanu bit his lower lip—which was barely visible to begin with—while Furya took a sip from her glass.

“Everything about you makes sense now.”

Her answer left me feeling slightly inadequate. What was wrong with numbers? What could possibly be strange or baffling about them? This tidy system had served us for centuries, and no one had ever died of it or lost their mind over it. At college I carried one number, at school another, and the census had assigned me a third, similar to my parents’. It was all perfectly simple and clear—and at least we don’t broadcast our names to the entire world.

By the way, aren’t the Eits afraid of revealing their names, or are those merely nicknames?

“So how are you finding it here, you two?” Furya took a slow sip, eyeing me and Kyle over the rim of her glass. — I suppose you think we’re a gathering of freaks?

She had read my mind almost word for word, but admitting it was, of course, out of the question.

“Perish the thought, gorgeous! This place is fantastic! Besides, our world has plenty of unusual people too. Right, buddy?” I pinched Kyle’s cheek, tugging his lips back a little to expose his sharp teeth. True, he waved me off irritably and dropped his gaze.

“Yes, however hard our worlds strive for purity, it will never come to pass,” Furya picked up cheerfully, now studying Kyle. — You’re acquainted with Master Arey, aren’t you? A marvelous specimen of pure human appearance and perfect eitalite power.

“Furya!” Kalanu hissed at her sharply, quickly glancing around with his good eye.

“A perfect match, wouldn’t you say, magic boy?” she continued, ignoring him entirely and fixing her gaze openly on me. “Especially for life in your world. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I couldn’t quite fathom what she was driving at, and the flustered Kalanu had unnerved me. Not that the Fury was waiting on my answer.

“I’m off to the smoking room,” she declared, tossing her empty glass to a passing waiter. “It was... fun meeting you. Truly. You’re all so bizarre, and I mean that as a compliment. Otherwise this evening would have been a complete waste.” By way of farewell, she fluttered a wing at Kalanu. “And you never saw me. I’d rather not cross paths with Igig.”

She turned and strolled off with unhurried poise, and I could hear the scrape of her long claws against the floor.

“Where’s she off to?” Kyle frowned.

“To smoke,” Kalanu replied, his eyes trailing after her. “Whenever the Fury finds herself in respectable company, she strips it of everything she can — drinking the cellar dry and pocketing the cigars.”

“But she loves to read?”

“Everyone has their flaws. She was once what you’d call a book inquisitor — she tracked down forbidden volumes and burned them. That’s how she fell in love with reading. Honestly, the Fury is quite remarkable,” he added gravely, gazing in the direction his cousin had vanished. “She can find anything — or anyone. A true treasure.”

We wove our way past the guests and waiters, and frankly I'd have been tempted to seize one of those white drinks for myself. Besides, Kalanu no longer seemed to have any clear destination, drifting about the hall like a bored teenager. I was just opening my mouth to ask what the Fury had meant when Kyle got there first:

"Why don't you like Igig?"

Kalanu spun around to face us so sharply that he nearly bowled over an ait with his shoulder. His face went rigid for a couple of seconds, but then he forced himself to relax and strode over.

"How could anyone possibly like him?" he shot back with a snort, his gaze cold as stone. "Do you even know who we're talking about?"

"Igig," Kyle said plainly, meeting his eyes without a flicker of hesitation. "Are you and Furia jealous that he holds a seat on the council?"

He tried to keep his voice down, but this was Kyle we were talking about — with a mouth that size, everything came out far too loud. Kalanu's brow darkened; he gripped us by the arms and hustled us toward the wall. His stiff feathers pricked against our skin, and beneath them you could feel the hard muscle underneath — and frankly, I could barely keep pace, my legs scrambling to match his stride.

By the wall stood a small but exquisitely dainty pink settee, trimmed with cushions, curling flourishes along the backrest and armrests, and gold embroidery across the upholstery. A plump little lady in spectacles sat there, sipping a blue cocktail through a straw. Without so much as a by-your-leave, Kalanu deposited us onto that toylike, feminine piece of furniture, then leaned down over the lady.

"Good evening, madam — would you mind giving us a moment alone?" he asked, with all the subtlety of a brick.

I prayed desperately that the dame would refuse—that way this repellent specimen would never get the chance to tell us whatever he

intended. But she sprang up from her seat and—rose into the air! She had no wings, yet she drifted effortlessly above the floor, her stubby little legs paddling furiously. Blowing us a parting kiss, she fluttered the yellow hem of her dress and melted into the crowd. Kalanu dropped down beside us and leaned in close, so that we could hear him clearly. Ugh, curse Kyle and his shark mouth!..

“So, kids, I’m about to tell you something you don’t know and never will learn from anyone but me,” he whispered in a hurried rush. “And once you’ve heard it, you’ll stop asking kugalung and dangerous questions. Though what am I even hoping for?..”

He jerked his head toward the silent waiter, who had noticed us and was drifting closer. Taking the hint, the waiter promptly turned and walked away. Kalanu continued, never lifting his unpleasant gaze from us, his small mouth working as though he were rapidly chewing something:

“I was the one meant to take the seat on the council of eitalites after… our father’s unexpected death. In such tragic circumstances, power traditionally passes by inheritance, and I was his eldest son.”

He fell silent for exactly a couple of seconds, giving Kyle and me time to digest this revelation, and then his beak-mouth began moving again:

“I refused because taking part in meetings and conferences, keeping appointments, accepting invitations, untangling affairs… even merely joining the chatter—none of it is me. Fury might have claimed that seat for herself, but she never even thought to try, since she loathes it all just as much. Only our proud little brother scrambled for the newly vacant chair—after all, it was the one way he could keep anyone from looking down on him. We don’t hate him, we don’t scorn him, we’re not envious of him, yet we can’t bring ourselves to love him either.” His voice sank to a hiss, and his left eye rolled upward beneath his

brow. — Keep your distance from him—he loves worming his way into people's confidence. But everyone knows he'd sell his soul to that cherished council of his, if only they would grant him the same respect as everyone else. And Kata can see that will never happen. Gugalan, for one, is simply biding his time, waiting for him to slip so he can cast him out for good.

For added effect, Kalanu went on staring at us in silence a while longer, unblinking, then sprang to his feet, behaving as though he had said nothing at all and had merely drifted here by chance.

"I'd love to linger with you a while longer, kids," he drawled mockingly, sweeping the crowd for someone, — but duty calls. See you around.

He scraped a clawed paw and was gone.

Kyle and I traded glances, each of us reading the bewilderment on the other's face. I spoke first, before my friend could open his mouth:

"I guessed as much."

What it was, exactly, troubled me less than the fact that I now had an official reason for my dislike of the sullen Aite. With Igig, it was plain at a glance: he hungered to seize more than his hands could hold, to be first in everything, privy to everything, watching everyone at once. Such a nature could hardly fail to grate on the nerves. All at once, I found myself siding with Kalanu rather than with him.

"The way I see it, Kalanu is actually a little jealous of his brother, Kyle murmured, voicing the thought aloud." Somehow… he makes me uneasy.

"Feeling uneasy around someone doesn't mean they're in the wrong, I observed, idly watching one of the guests making his way toward us." And I hardly think there's anything worth being jealous of there.

Kyle opened his mouth to argue, but at the sight of that very guest, his jaw dropped in undisguised astonishment. My own eyes widened, and my throat went strangely dry.

Jem had come up to us. But what a Jem!

A long, airy skirt, nearly touching the floor, draped over her sturdy —if not perfectly straight—legs, while a golden corset cinched her slender waist and lifted her chest. Her pink hair, threaded with violet, had been curled into elegant ringlets, and for the first time in my memory, she wore makeup. In dark brown gloves that reached almost to her shoulders, her arms looked thin and delicate as porcelain.

She came over to us, heels clicking in her golden shoes, and halted a little way off, nervously intertwining the fingers of both hands. A strand of hair — whether by accident or design — tumbled across her face, veiling one eye, while the other gazed at us with something almost like flirtation. A faint, pleasant, honeyed scent reached me, and I felt an overwhelming urge to step closer to her.

Oh yes, Kyle and I could not tear our eyes away. Jem looked so familiar and yet — so grown-up, so lovely, so dazzling. I even felt a flicker of shame at the thought that she had always been like this, and only now had I managed to see it.

Kyle swallowed audibly, drew a breath, and was on the verge of speaking when Jem cut him off abruptly:

“You look lame in those costumes.”

Some things never change, no matter how you dress them up.

“Thanks!” Kyle boomed, quite pleased with himself, then flushed as the meaning of her words sank in. — Um… you don’t look so bad yourself.

Jem snorted and tugged her gloves higher, afraid they might slide down.

“This is the most embarrassing evening of my life. I feel wretched! At least I managed to find you guys.”

I smirked, realizing that all the enchantment around her was dissolving, and that standing before me once more was simply my old friend. To break free of her spell for good, I allowed myself an ungraceful stretch, a yawn, and announced in the most insolent tone I could muster:

“You could stand to get used to it. This look suits you far better. Without makeup and a decent hairstyle, you barely pass for a girl.” A face suddenly popped into my memory, and I went on: “Remember Mimosa from college? A real style icon, that one. Maybe she’ll give you a few pointers when we get back. Take you under her wing. Who knows—if you’d dressed like this more often, you might have landed yourself a boyfriend by now.”

Kyle glanced back at me and bared his teeth—annoyance, mostly. Almost sympathy. Almost, almost fear.

Jem straightened abruptly, staring at me with wide eyes. The mysterious, charming girl from those first minutes was gone. What stood there was just a girl who, for the first time in her life, had someone do her makeup and curl her hair. Bewildered, awkward, out of place at this party. Just Jem.

Then, all at once, she strode swiftly up to us and, without a word of warning, slapped me across the face—a blow the velvet glove did nothing to soften. Her eyes blazed with fury, her cheeks burning red without a trace of rouge. She seemed about to say something, thought better of it, and simply whirled around and strode off. Kyle seized my arm.

“Why did you have to say all that to her?” he demanded, whining as he watched her go. “Now she’s upset!”

I rubbed my cheek, half wondering why that fabled secondary power of mine hadn't seen fit to shield me from it.

"She's offended! All I did was offer her a little advice!" I retorted. — If she can't open her eyes to these things on her own, then someone had to do it for her. Of course, I understand — she grew up without a mother or sisters — but she really ought to know something about matters of this sort. And Mimosa could easily teach her — you know Mimosa, don't you?

"I do," Kyle said curtly, still glaring straight ahead. — But comparing them is absurd. They're nothing alike. Kyuruk, Hal, what have you done? I'm going to go bring her back.

And without waiting for my reply, he sped off and hurried ahead. Well, who would have thought? Why chase after Jem when what she needs right now is a moment alone to take stock of the obvious facts? She'll thank me later. Besides, talking to her now was pointless — if she'd flown into a fight, someone must have truly pushed her too far, and words would accomplish little.

And no, I felt no guilt. Not a shred.

I spotted Aurora hemmed in by two eites, and the instant she noticed me, she made straight for me, weaving carefully around the guests. The skirt of her dress billowed into a dome about the lower half of her body, and her slender sleeves kept swaying with the beat of her wings. Her escorts drifted toward me as well, watching with curiosity.

One of them was shaped like a ball perched on stubby legs, with tiny hands and a toothy maw much like Kyle's. Its single round eye blinked above a sunken nose, studying me. Its skin was bare, a deep burgundy that caught the candlelight.

At first glance, the second eit looked like an ordinary man — merely unusually tall, and remarkably upright in his bearing. It was only when he drew nearer that I noticed the lizard's tail trailing behind

him. His eyes were slanted, utterly black and motionless, like a reptile's. His thin lips hung slightly parted, and I kept expecting a forked tongue to flicker out between them.

"Good evening" Aurora stretched her jaws into a smile. — Feeling bored? Where are your friends?

"They stepped away for a moment."

I rose from my seat and politely took the tiny hand Aurora extended to me. Like every other woman and girl in the hall, she wore no gloves. Jem alone stood apart, no doubt on Igig's orders. And what, after all, was so shameful about her tattoos? They were the one thing that distinguished her from everyone else.

I shook hands with the unfamiliar eits, but the moment Aurora introduced them, their names slipped from my mind. Nicknames came far more easily to me; I had always struggled terribly with names — especially such convoluted ones as the eits bore.

"I hope you enjoy the party. And the world of the eitalites as well" Aurora said softly, sinking gracefully onto the small sofa.

Her beautiful wings went still, and I could make out every line, every vein upon them. She did not repulse me, though in essence she was nothing more than a giant insect. Beside her, I never thought of that. But the What's-Their-Name brothers, the instant I laid eyes on them, reminded me at every turn that they were of the bird kind.

"I truly adore this celebration," I confessed. — I've never seen its like. Is this something you have often?

"Far less often than I'd like." Aurora smoothed the folds of her gown, which had settled now, tracing the lines of her slender, oval figure. — I'm so pleased we were permitted this evening. Guests such as you and your friends rarely come to us. I do hope you'll stay with us a while longer. And you, T23? Would you like to come to know our world better?

Her compound eyes glowed with excitement from within, and the feeling kindled in me as well. I was drawn to the eites — yes, I wanted to know them, to become acquainted with their world. It was as though I were…

“You are connected to us,” Aurora confirmed my half-formed thought, her gaze never leaving me. — I can feel that there were powerful eitalites in your lineage, — she went on, no longer heeding anything or anyone around her. — You have a strong magical aura, T23. You are capable of much; you can accomplish much. I see it in you, in your powers — I sense that greater abilities lie hidden within you than you realize.

She fell silent, catching her breath after this ardent speech. Her eyes glowed white from within, never losing sight of me for an instant. I found myself all but hypnotized, and her words poured into me like a draught of fresh magic. Wow. That was beautifully said. Very powerful. And very strange.

“I… I… uhh…” was all I could stammer in reply, utterly shattering the image of the strong human-eite that Aurora had just painted of me.

At that moment our escorts—that is, Sharik and the Lizard—turned toward someone and inclined their heads in a slight bow. I tensed, bracing myself for the sight of Igig or another member of the council, but instead Kyle appeared before me, quite unexpectedly. And alone.

Cachalot always turns up at the worst possible moment! I glared at him, willing him to take the hint and make himself scarce. But when had he ever taken a hint! Kyle frowned at me, heedless of Aurora and her new companions. Suddenly a weight settled on my own heart.

“What is it?” I asked, for some reason in a whisper.

“I found her,” Kyle said flatly, fortunately realizing we were not alone and withholding our friend’s true name, — but I was too late.

My heart plummeted into my boots. What had Jem done? Could my remark have cut her that deeply? Could she have done something to herself because of it?

No, no, no!

My palms went cold—not merely from sweat, but from the magic itself seemingly draining away, powerless to change anything. I forgot where I stood, who stood beside me, and heard only the frantic hammering of blood in my temples.

I never wanted this!

“Igig found her before I did,” Kyle finished.

Room K44. Jem

How could he—how *could* he?! How did something like that even pass his rotten lips? Hal's been quite the hero lately, hasn't he? He can spend the rest of his days basking in his own glory. First he nearly kills Kyle, and now he's trampled me into the dirt without a shred of mercy!

And what did I ever do to him? What? Call him a clown? He knows perfectly well that when I say that, I mean it with the deepest affection—in my personal dictionary it might as well be a synonym for "darling."

And perhaps I could even have forgiven him if he'd only dragged *me*. But no, he had to drag Mimosa into it too, out of absolutely nowhere—she's still back in another reality, for heaven's sake! What was the point? He knows exactly how much I can't stand her! Why say it deliberately? Why any of this at all?

I can't even remember striking him—and was it even a strike? Only weak girls answer a man's insults that way; the strong ones simply turn their backs and walk away. Occasionally breaking a rib or two on the way out.

But what did I do—a slap across the face? How humiliating. It was as though I'd stooped to his level, announcing to everyone, "Oh, look at me, such a delicate lady—how dare you say such things in my presence? Take that tiny slap on the cheek!" I should have answered in my signature style—driven the knife straight into where it hurts most, so that *he'd* be the one feeling this wretched right now, not me!

Hugging the wall as I walked, trying to attract as few glances and collide with as few people as possible, I had no idea where I was even heading. Leave the party right after showing up? What if the council members grew suspicious? I was already a thorn in their side — Hal

had real magic in his hands, Kyle had sharp teeth, and they knew nothing about my tattoos. They were probably already scheming how to be rid of me. And if they tried to pick a fight now… well, let them do whatever they liked — that would be Hal's problem to deal with. I just wanted to go home. If anyone from the council spotted me right now, I'd ask them point-blank to send me back to UKOG. I'm an ordinary person — why am I even here?..

"K44!"

It was so strange to hear my number like that — not at college, not from the professors, or at the very least from students who didn't know me. And from his mouth, of all people.

I stopped, listening to the hurried clicking of claws behind me, accompanied by a scraping against the floor. Wonderful — I was already starting to recognize his footsteps…

"K44, is everything all right?"

A shadow fell over me, as though a mountain had risen up at my side. By sheer willpower I kept from lifting my head, lowering my eyes even further. How wretched it felt to be seen like this, in the state I was in. Yet his appearance seemed like an answer from Kata himself. You wanted to go home, Jem? Well then, go ahead!

"K…"

"I need your help," I cut in, and raised my head.

Igig wore the same purple suit as every other man in the hall—Hal and Luke included. A neat waistcoat with a tidy little pocket for a handkerchief, a crisp white collar rising high. His long head-feathers were swept back, only a few short ones at his forehead sticking out stubbornly. Against that bright fabric, the Ait's pale skin looked grey, almost corpse-like; yet his eyes gleamed, and once again I felt he could see straight through me.

"What help?"

I remembered that today he had promised to tell me about tattoos. Could he still do it? I didn't want to leave, to bury forever the only secret of my life. It seemed that no one but this strange Ait from the government could ever explain what was wrong with my tattoos. And who knew what might happen if I showed them to anyone else?

I drew a deep breath and looked Igig straight in the eyes, unafraid.

"What am I doing here? Why am I at this celebration? Why am I in your world at all? There's nothing magical about me, nothing defective —nothing at all. I'm not needed here. Can you send me home?"

I whispered the last question, barely. For some reason tears welled up in my eyes again. I hadn't realized how pitiful I looked here until I said it aloud—to the face of an Ait of the council, no less.

Suicide.

A broad, long wing settled over my shoulders, wrapping round me like a cloak.

"I'm not sending you anywhere until you tell me what happened. Come."

I no longer had the strength to struggle, to cry out, to stamp my feet. I stumbled blindly along wherever I was led, taking care not to look around. Twice, three times, I tripped, and with every step it grew more certain in my mind that I should never have come to this party at all. The boys would have managed perfectly well without me. And indeed, that was exactly what they were doing right now.

A wing pressed gently down on my shoulders, easing me onto a little sofa — the very sofa where Hal and Kyle had been sprawled when I found them. No doubt they were still there at this moment, chattering their silly boyish nonsense and ogling every girl who walked past…

"Better. Now talk."

Igig shifted closer, clearly expecting an intimate conversation. I scooted to the far end of the sofa in reply. I had no wish to humiliate myself further before him by whining about how stupid and rude everyone around me was.

“I see…” he muttered, drawing back a little and settling against the back of the sofa.

He stretched out his legs. He wore narrow violet breeches, which had ridden up even higher when he sat down. His feet were clad in odd-looking spats fastened with little silver clasps at the sides. His long fingers, tipped with thick claws, went still, splayed slightly apart. On his left foot, only the fourth toe remained joined to the middle one, and to my eye it looked more crooked than the rest.

I swallowed.

“What’s wrong with your foot?”

“What?” Igig turned toward me and took a few seconds to process. “Oh, that?” He wiggled his left leg, curling and uncurling the toes, but the injured one wouldn’t budge. “Our bones are light. They break easily and knit easily. I landed rather hard a couple of days before flying after you. It’s nothing. It’ll heal soon.”

Doesn’t it hurt to walk?

Not that I’d suddenly grown concerned for the health of a feathered grouch — I simply knew firsthand what it meant to break something. I was five when our college’s former mascot decided to play with me, and it ended in a broken arm. Mine.

Shame washed over me as I recalled that I had stepped on that foot. I’d been frightened, furious, disoriented, yet my duty was to keep my composure and prove worthy of my friends — and I had behaved no better than a child. I hoped Igig didn’t hold it against me.

“Not at all. The Aitalites brew a healing salve that cures every manner of ailment. They rubbed it into L5’s burn, and he hasn’t uttered a single complaint, has he?”

“No,” I said, straining to remember how Kyle had been acting lately, but Hal’s words drowned out every memory of my friends.

How I despise that kugalung.

“But enough about me,” Igig said, drawing in his legs and sitting up straight. “What happened at the celebration? Did someone hurt you?”

I shook my head. Hal’s loud laughter echoed in my ears. Why is he doing this to me?

“K44, I can’t help you if you refuse to tell me anything,” Igig said, once again slipping into his mentor’s role. “I’m not asking you to lay bare your whole soul. Just tell me why you need to get home—and spare me that nonsense about being an ordinary human.”

While I was still hunting for the right words, he flagged down a passing waiter and pressed into my hand a glass of some pale drink that nearly every guest seemed to be holding. Not orange juice, of course—but never mind. I took the fragile glass from him and swallowed a big, burning gulp.

Fire shot through my mouth, sharp and astringent, and my tongue began to tingle. I choked, doubled over coughing, and nearly dropped the glass with what remained of the drink. Igig caught it just in time and offered me a snow-white handkerchief. Mouth open, tongue lolling in a vain attempt to cool it, I dabbed at the stained bodice of my dress and felt like a complete fool.

The longer I stay at this party, the more thoroughly I ruin my own life.

I sighed and lifted my eyes to Igig. I couldn’t even work up the energy to be angry with him.

“Sorry. It’s just—today has been dreadful. First that strange morning, when the boys nearly lost their minds. And now, at your elegant party, I’m hopelessly out of place.” I handed back the handkerchief and dropped my gaze. “And it seems I’ve gone and ruined my dress. I’ve never known how to take care of them.”

“What happened this morning?”

I hesitated, remembering breakfast. The others and I were supposed to pretend nothing had happened—neither Aurora nor anyone else had wanted to speak of it. But Igig… was it worth telling him?

“I don’t know how to put it into words. It was as though we’d been hypnotized. And the boys fell terribly ill, while somehow I escaped lightly…”

I fell silent, aware that the feather-light gaze of the aita was fixed squarely on me. Igig was staring at me point-blank, grave and stern as ever.

“You came under the influence of magic. Who could have worked it? Who was with you?”

“Arey and Telem,” I said, swallowing, and only belatedly remembered to add “sir,” as everyone here addressed them. “Then Gugalan arrived.”

Igig frowned and tapped his quill-finger against the thin glass of the goblet.

“Telem. It was him. He very nearly certainly tried to slow time itself, to catch you off your guard.”

“What?” I had entirely forgotten what Aurora had said at our very first meeting. “He slows down time? How does that even work?”

“He wields a great power: he can hasten or retard the clock of life. He is old now, and every attempt to adjust those gears costs him a measure of his own time.” He winced and handed the goblet to a servant before he could shatter it. “I know that doesn’t sound very

clear. Imagine time as pages in a book, being flipped through rapidly. Telem can make those pages turn more slowly. Only for himself. Only to his own advantage. Before a page turns, he has time to read it. Do you see what I mean?"

"Simply put, it's like playing a record at a slower speed, or switching the playback speed on a VCR while watching a film," I said, understanding at last.

Igig clicked irritably.

"Aitalites manage perfectly well without any technical contraptions."

"But what did Telem want?" I tried to steer him back to the matter at hand. "Why would he need to slow us down?"

The thought that the old man might have put me "on pause" made me sick with dread—that in the meantime he could have walked straight up to me without a hint of resistance, touched me… seen my little tattoos…

"I'd say he wanted to disarm you and your friends. To take a close look at you. Perhaps he was simply testing how susceptible you were to his magic. You said it barely touched you?"

"Yes, I think so. I hardly noticed a thing. But it flattened the boys—they nearly passed out." I nervously tugged my gloves higher and glanced around at the eights encircling us. — So what could Telem have learned from that? And what will he do with it?

Igig glanced down at me, then quickly looked away.

"You should be extremely careful anyway. The Council is watching you closely."

"Should I be wary of you, too?"

Igig gave a fleeting smile without meeting my eyes. I noticed the marks glasses had pressed into the bridge of his nose. Did he fly somewhere often? Did he have work of some kind, beyond his post at

the residence? Here I was, chatting away so freely with him, and I knew nothing about his life. Nothing about him.

“That’s for you to decide,” he said. — It makes no difference to me. I could leave right now.

I didn’t want to be left alone—even though only a couple of minutes earlier I hadn’t minded the idea. But grave, steady Igig was nothing like my silly friends. He was grown-up and level-headed, and he didn’t think it beneath him to offer me comfort. That was exactly what I so often missed in my boys. They were just gawky teenagers.

And only now did the music reach me. Or rather, I felt it.

I couldn’t tell who was playing, or on what instruments — only that it was strange. So fluid, so harmonious: not music at all, but one solid mass of some vast, beautiful substance — of space itself — which rose and fell in slow waves, folding around me, cocooning me. No single instrument could be distinguished in it, nor any one melody. It sounded perfectly smooth and seamless, every separate note dissolving into one unbroken current. It was more than music: a gathering of feelings, a fragment of a soul, a surge of kind thoughts. They slipped through my chest, confined by the corset, gently carried my heart along in their flow, then coursed through my veins and flooded my whole body.

I felt warm, calm, at ease — as if I were home, surrounded by dear friends. Having done its work, the music seemed to grow quieter, receding into the background of chatter, the click of heels, the clink of glasses. I lifted my head toward Igig, about to ask what it had been, but I couldn’t even part my lips.

Eyt was gazing down at me, and his dark brown eyes glowed from within, lending his look an extraordinary softness, a strange aliveness — nothing like what a stern council member’s stare ought to be. As though that unearthly music had wiped away dust and weariness, making everything around us brighter, more real. His face, not quite

human, suddenly seemed right, even beautiful — despite the receding jaw and sharp nose, the pallid skin, the feathers atop his head, the thin lips. He was perfect.

“You’re very beautiful… right now, Igig murmured.”

And all the magic vanished in an instant.

I shoved him hard in his firm side with all my strength, caring not one whit whether he was an eyt, a council member, or defective altogether.

“Men are all alike!” I burst out, unable to contain myself. “Slip on a dress, and suddenly you’re a beauty! How primitive can you get? I hate you!”

I slapped away the wing Igig had been about to settle over my shoulders.

“Calm down…”

“Don’t touch me! You make me sick!”

“K44, calm down,” the Ait repeated, stubbornly refusing to budge an inch. “I never meant to hurt you. You’re beautiful without that dress… I mean, in any other clothes!” he corrected himself in a hurry. “I only wanted to cheer you up.”

“Well, that compliment missed the mark,” I snapped, all the while wondering how to get out of this place. “Didn’t you ask me to set you straight whenever you said something foolish? Well, this is precisely one of those moments.”

Why was I still lingering here? Since nobody appeared inclined to see me home, I might just as well hole up in my new room. Nothing—not the music, and certainly not Igig—was going to keep me here a moment longer. I sprang to my feet and glanced around, trying to locate the exit.

“You know, it’s only humans who care so much about appearances,” Igig pressed on, apparently having resolved to sing the praises

of his entire species in one breath. “Aitalits generally don’t bother, because we’re all so very different.” I turned to face him again. “It’s hard to hold on to an ideal image in your head when so many shapes and species surround you. With humans it’s simpler. You’re all cast in a single mold, so you’ve grown used to judging others by your own tastes. And whoever doesn’t fit them, you simply avoid.”

“Did you pick that up from some clever psychology book as well?” I asked acidly, casting a wistful glance at the crowd of Aits around me.

The anger ebbed away once more, like a wave withdrawing from the shore, leaving only rocks and salt behind. They pricked and stung my wounds without mercy, but the rage against the whole world had drained away. I sank back onto the little couch, weak and hollow. I no longer had the strength to be angry, to seethe at the unfairness and foolishness of everyone around me. There was even a grain of sense in Igig’s words, though I was too weary to weigh it. All I wanted was to go home, to the College of the Lake of Dreams.

“No, I worked that out on my own,” the eit replied, without a trace of pride. “It’s easy enough to notice. So, are you feeling better? You don’t think I’m trying to bury you in compliments anymore?”

I couldn’t fathom why he was sitting with me instead of keeping company with the coolest and most important eits of all the worlds. It ought to have been Hal and Kyle in his place. At worst, I should have been left in peace.

“A little,” I echoed in his tone, and abruptly pressed back against the little couch, nearly crushing his wing. “And you haven’t grown bored of my gloomy company yet?”

“Your company is a great deal better than my brother’s or my cousin’s — and both of them are here right now.”

“You have a cousin…”

It wasn't a question, so much as a thought escaping aloud. I shot him a sideways glance, but Igig was watching the guests and missed it entirely. Fine — what else didn't I know about him? I decided to press straight on.

"Does your cousin look like you and Kalanu?"

"Yes. But she's less human, and her feathers are red."

"Why?"

"Red?"

"No — I mean! Why is she less human? How can that even be?"

"On her side of the family, there were more Eitalites than humans."

"So nearly all the Eits carry human blood in one way or another?"

I had finally succeeded in fully capturing his attention. Igig turned to me, frowning slightly, and at once I was reminded of my first impression of him: a stern, detached insect, weary of everything and everyone.

"Do they teach you no history at all?" he droned. — Humans and Eitalites once lived side by side, and marriage between them was officially permitted. That holiday lasted a good few millennia. But then Gasfar appeared, and the Eitalites broke away from mankind. And that was over a century ago — assuming you even know as much. And do you truly believe that, after all that, there could still be pureblooded humans or Eitalites? It's impossible.

In the human world, we tried to devote as little time as possible to the Eitalites — there were already too many of them in our lives. We studied none of this. Our history teachers merely mentioned that order had been established in the worlds a mere hundred and thirteen years ago, and that before then, Eitalites and humans had existed in utter chaos, forever waging war and plotting against one another.

There was logic in Igig's words, and I could see the proof of it all around me, every day. And yet why were some humans called defect-

ive, others useless, if in essence we had all turned out defective? The Eits included.

I put this question to Igig, and he could not answer right away. I assumed he simply didn't know, but it turned out he was carefully weighing his words.

"This unjust division into "pure" and "flawed" was invented by those people and eytalits who stand to gain from it. It's far easier to slap on the label "wrong, a side branch" than to make the effort to understand someone and adapt to their peculiarities. It has always been that way, and it always will be. Some try to carve out a special caste of "elites" and dismiss everyone else as unworthy or something of the sort. I'll go further: in certain circles of both your world and mine, there are those who believe that humans are merely one of the kingdoms of eytalits. And while that defies logic and common sense, there's a grain of truth in it. For my part, I don't believe that over time we'll all manage to purge ourselves completely of the admixture. So there is something human in me, and something eytalit in you, and we cannot be entirely alien to one another."

"But where is my "eytalitness"?" I asked quietly, and without thinking ran my hands along their full length, through my gloves. — In... in my tattoos?

"Of course not. It's something else... I'll explain later."

I shuddered, no longer looking at him. On the one hand, I ached to discover what my tattoos were guilty of. Perhaps secrets from the past would surface, or a new road into the future would open before me. I had a duty to know.

But on the other hand — that unpleasant hand — I wanted to learn nothing of consequence, nothing that would cleave my life in two: into "before" and "after." I wanted to go home and never set foot in the college again. All of this had been set in motion for Hal's sake — he

was the one who needed to work out who he was. What did any of it have to do with me? In principle, I shouldn't have been there at all, among them. If Igig hadn't decided to bring me along, I would have remained in the world of humans.

But why had he decided to take me? Because of the tattoo?

"Can you tell me about it now? I worked up the courage to ask." And then take me home? I really have nothing to do here.

Igig's wing settled gently about my shoulders, as though he feared I might leap up and bolt at any moment.

"Not now. The Council has not yet given its word to the guests. And I could not send you back even if I wished to. No word has come from your guardians yet. For the time being, the three of you are the Council's sole responsibility. Do you understand?"

I felt trapped, as if in a cage. If even the all-powerful Council of the eytalites could not return me to college, then what power on earth could? I gave a feeble nod.

"Then it's settled? Shall I walk you back to your friends?"

I suddenly recalled what had happened less than an hour before, and winced. It all seemed so trivial, so petty now, measured against the secret I was to learn this very night — against the notion that humans and eytalites were one and the same. Hal was still just a foolish teenager who shrank from thinking about such weighty matters, though it was long past time he began.

"Not right now."

Once more came that strange music, seeping through the skin into blood and nerve, as palpable as a physical touch. Goosebumps crawled along my spine, and I wrapped my arms around myself, willing myself not to shiver. Every other sound, every voice, sank into the background, all but vanishing — dissolving into the air, gone forever. I might as well have gone deaf.

Besides, none of the other guests was paying the music the slightest attention. True, a few had begun to move awkwardly—swaying, shuffling in place, or even taking a partner by the hand and rocking back and forth in time with them. You would need a considerable stretch of the imagination to call that dancing, and mine fell short, so my face betrayed no small measure of skepticism. Nor could my companion miss it. Igig was watching me, eyes half-closed.

“You don’t understand what they’re doing, do you?”

I wanted to smack him, too. He knew perfectly well how much of what went on here escaped me, so why keep pointing it out and laughing at me for it?

“Dancing?” I asked, frowning.

“Not exactly. It’s far more serious than that. Right now, they are with one another. Together.”

“That much is obvious, kugalung,” I whispered.

Igig shook his head, feathers rising.

“You’ve misunderstood me. They are together at this very moment, in the literal sense. Merging into each other. Through the music of the kaatu-n. Their hearts begin to beat in unison, their breathing falls into rhythm, and for a while they become, as it were, a single whole. Many of them share the same thoughts in that moment. Doesn’t that ring any bells for you? Do you never do that?”

I fell silent, watching the “dancers” more closely now. To an outsider they looked clumsy—barely acquainted with one another, swaying in unison. But what if it was something else entirely? What would it be like to feel another person as part of yourself? To give yourself over to someone else? I wondered whether people could even manage such a thing—or whether it was granted only to those who were more eit.

“And why do they do it?” I asked quietly, still watching the guests. “Isn’t it meant for the closest lu… eits? Why would I want to get close to a stranger?”

“So that you can get to know him. It’s a common thing here — you just need kaatu-n music, divine music. Without it, nothing works. Don’t you want to try?”

I tried to edge as far away from Igig as I could, but there was no room left on the couch.

“With you? No-no, thank you — I’ll manage just fine without.”

Igig smiled, not offended in the slightest.

“Actually, I meant your friends. It might help you make up with them.”

Unfortunately, he knew me too well — an hour on, I still hadn’t managed to forgive the insult I’d suffered, let alone go back to Hal myself. With the help of music or without it, I had no intention of going anywhere, or to anyone, just then.

I was searching for the right words to explain this without looking like a typical sulking girl, stubborn as a goat, convinced that every man in the world had wronged her. But then Gugalan’s voice rang out, and all need for explanations vanished on its own.

The eit from the council was already standing on a small stage at the end of the hall, and the guests were hurriedly gathering around him. Igig and I rose from our seats as well — but only because everyone around us was streaming that way, not because we were eager to hear Gugalan. I noticed my companion had turned serious and gloomy again, as he always did whenever the other eits of the council appeared anywhere nearby.

What might he have become had he never held a seat in government? A doctor of the human mind? A professor of history? A guide for souls meant to uncover some secret truth about themselves?

And what if he had been enough of a man to live in my world?..

“Dear guests!” Gugalan boomed, his voice thundering through the entire residence. “I am most grateful that you have come to visit us! What a great honor! Let us offer special thanks to Mr. Arey, whose idea it was that brought us all together today!”

Flushed and perspiring, Gugalan turned and waved his enormous arms in welcome as Arey rose modestly to the stage beside him. While those around us applauded respectfully and bowed their heads, I turned to Igig and remarked in a low voice:

“Gugalan isn’t accustomed to speaking on stage?”

“It’s a little too obvious, isn’t it?” he answered, just as quietly, leaning toward me. “Only in the council chamber can he shout with confidence and pound his fists on the table. In public he can barely string two words together, and…”

“…and also Mr. Igig, who is also present among us here!..”

Caught off guard, Igig hastily straightened up, drawing away from me, and gave a restrained nod to the eits, who all turned toward us as one. From the stage, the other council members, already assembled there, were watching us. Gugalan’s gaze fixed tensely on Igig, who began hurrying toward the stage without once glancing back at me.

At that moment, the Eits showed no great hurry to turn away from me either, continuing to study me with curious eyes. Perhaps my gloves had slipped? I froze on the spot with a strained smile, not even daring to glance down at my hands. All I wanted, right then, was to vanish.

“And now, allow me to introduce the main guests of this evening,” Gugalan announced, solemnly extending his left hand. “Would numbers T23, K5, and L44 please step forward!”

He had muddled our numbers—Kyle’s and mine—so in truth, no one was calling me to the stage at all. Yet the guests went on staring

and staring, and I felt almost relieved at the excuse to escape their gaze. Gathering the hem of my skirt lightly between my fingers, I moved forward with my chin lifted, taking care not to let my eyes linger on any of those strange, uncanny, or utterly ordinary-looking Eits. A thought flashed through my mind: every one of them carried a small fragment of an ordinary human within. Somehow, that comforted me. In no time I had reached the stage, and a moment later I stood upon it, facing the audience.

Hal and Kyle rose at my sides, and Kyle planted himself in the middle, cutting off my view of the evening's chief offender. The big fellow kept darting anxious glances my way every few seconds, his thin lips twitching. One more minute and he'd lose his nerve's grip—he'd come over and speak to me right then and there, in front of everyone. Did he imagine I'd spent all this time sitting alone, choking back tears and drowning in self-pity? He was sorely mistaken. I turned away from him and fixed my gaze on the middle of the hall. A crowd of dolled-up onlookers, most of them here against their will. Why, they might as well have been ordinary UKOG students at any run-of-the-mill function! I nearly smiled.

"What an honor to welcome such rare guests!" Gugalan's voice vibrated in my ears from behind. — I sincerely hope they will remain with us and come to fully appreciate our beautiful world of the eital-ites!

The hall burst into applause, and Gugalan let out a noisy breath. Something gurgled in his chest; his breathing was quick and loud. Suddenly I caught sight of Kalanu in the crowd, standing beside an eit who looked strikingly like him—save for red feathers. So that was his cousin?..

"Let's keep the festivities going, friends" Gugalan managed to steady his breathing a little. — We have an entire night ahead of us!

And should you have questions for our guests, you may speak with them right now! — Then he caught himself and hastily added: — Or rather, with number T23. The boy possesses astonishing magical gifts. He is practically a full member of our great family. Unfortunately, his friends were less fortunate… or rather, not fortunate at all.

I had no wish to take offense at his words either — I was too busy realizing that my presence here was no longer wanted and that I could go. Which I promptly did. Kyle, catching himself, hurried after me but got tangled in the crowd, which had begun drifting toward the stage, eager to catch a better glimpse of Hal and speak with him. Glancing back, I saw him surveying the guests with a look caught between delight and panic. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes were bright, and his hands kept tugging his jacket into place. Perfect — let him savor his moment in the spotlight to the fullest.

I withdrew almost to the wall, where no one stood, and hastily pulled my gloves up higher. The last thing I needed was for someone to catch sight of my tattoos from up on that stage!

“Scared?”

I gasped in surprise. Igig had materialized beside me as if by magic. I couldn’t help myself — I jabbed him in the ribs, council member or not!

“Stop trailing after me, kugalung! I can manage perfectly well on my own!”

The truth was, I wasn’t the least bit sorry to see him. I simply don’t like being caught off guard.

“And tell yourself what your tattoos mean? Igig wasn’t smiling anymore; he was watching me with grave intent.”

My throat tightened, and I feared I might be sick. No, no, not now, not here — I’m not ready at all!

“Follow me. He was already striding toward the balcony door.” I doubt we’ll get another chance.

I hesitated, then glanced back at Kyle—he still hadn’t given up on forcing his way through the crowd. If he reached me, he’d never let it go. Turning from him, I hurried after the eit. Behind me came Hal’s high, anxious voice, Gugalan’s grunting, Aurora’s chirping, and the murmur of the guests. My heels clattered deafeningly against the stone floor, betraying my position, and I prayed no one would follow.

Igig had already flung open the double doors, and cold, damp air washed over me, ruffling my hair and dress. The balcony was dark, deserted, and bleak. Even the warm golden light from the hall seemed afraid to venture beyond the threshold.

Igig glanced back, waiting. His grey feathers and pale skin stood out stark against the ink-black sky, rippling in the wind. Cold air crept along the floor, and at any moment someone might notice the open doors. The Council. Kyle and Hal.

I gave a brief nod and stepped boldly out of the warmth into the frozen night. Igig shut the doors, and the two of us were left alone in a blind and silent world.

Number L5. Kyle

Jem has vanished. As I made my way through the crowd of guests, she slipped off somewhere, leaving me spinning helplessly in place with no notion of where she might have gone. And why would she run off at all? She saw I was coming toward her, didn't she? She's been acting strange today—and Hal is barely any better.

I glanced back at him. The Eits had gathered round, and our distinguished guest was talking with them, fielding their questions, his eyes bright with delight. Among them he seemed entirely at ease—no embarrassment, no confusion, no trace of fear. He was in his element.

"L5, is everything all right?" Aurora came fluttering up to me, breaking away from the other guests. — Are you looking for someone?

I had already parted my lips to tell her that Jem had disappeared, when I suddenly thought better of it. What if she suspected something and passed it along to the others? Yes, she had been very kind to us, helping us, shielding us from the attacks of the other council members… And yet… I can't say why I felt that way, why I couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth. Perhaps it was because Jem had to conceal her tattoos, and none of us knew why. Or perhaps because Aurora was, after all, one of the council—and that… well… it made me uneasy.

"No, I'm just drifting about," I muttered, striving to look utterly at my ease.

"And where is number K44? She was here just a moment ago, wasn't she?"

She'd noticed everything with those enormous dragonfly eyes! I swallowed and blurted out hastily, staring hard in the opposite direction:

"She's gone to the ladies' room!"

Jem, forgive me for everything!

Aurora nodded, and I turned away so she couldn't see my face, glancing instead at Hal. He was still chatting with the guests, while the rest of the council lingered close by, going nowhere. Then it struck me: Igig was not among them. He had been standing there just moments ago, behind Arey! I scanned the room for that tall, broad-shouldered figure and quickly realized he was gone. The guests had begun drifting away from the stage, and nearly all who remained now clustered around Hal alone. It wasn't hard to see that Igig had vanished—only his brother and cousin stood apart from everyone.

I remembered seeing him with Jem. They had been sitting on the couch, talking like old friends. That was wrong. Hal and I should have been at her side—not some sullen ayt, and a council member at that. And now neither he nor she was anywhere in sight; quite possibly the two of them had simply slipped off together, just like that.

A heaviness settled in my chest, a kind of tightening. The air in the hall had grown stiflingly hot, as though it were scorching my throat and the inside of my nose. A strange sensation—I couldn't recall ever feeling anything like it before. With effort, I unclenched my jaw and ran my tongue over the sharp points. Why was I working myself into such a state over Jem? She had never once spared me a thought in her life the way I had thought about her in a single night. And whatever came her way, she would manage—she was strong like that. Even without shark teeth and a secondary power.

"He's holding up well, Aurora said quietly, turning toward the stage as well." He even seems to be enjoying himself. So perfectly at ease among… the other aytalites.

The remark unsettled me a little, though not enough to drive thoughts of Jem and Igig from my mind.

"Among the other eytalites? But he, T23, isn't an eytalite."

“The verification will settle everything, Aurora said quietly and gravely, without turning to me—though perhaps she was watching all the same with those dragonfly eyes of hers.” It already seems to me that there’s more eytalite in him than human.

Such a bold claim left me stunned, and Aurora swung around to face me fully, ready to argue or to defend her opinion—I couldn’t tell which. The next instant, a strange gurgling broke out, as though someone were choking. While I was twisting my head about, Aurora shot past me like lightning, darting toward the stage. Her wings cleaved the air like a hundred tiny, razor-sharp scissors snapping shut all at once. I hurried after her, trying to make sense of what was happening.

Gugalan stood by the wall, bracing himself against it with one hand, strangled by his coughing. His mighty frame shuddered with the spasms. The people around him fidgeted anxiously, warily, but none dared come near. Hal cut short his speech and was now also gazing toward the eyt with a trace of distaste. I approached him.

“Mr. Gugalan, what happened?”

Aurora was the only one who flew up to the giant without fear and laid her tiny paw on his powerful back. Gugalan flinched, caught his breath, and turned around. His face was contorted with pain, his great yellow teeth bared. He was still breathing heavily, with a rattling in his chest, but he no longer looked like a dying man.

He glared at Hal and me with undisguised loathing, then bent to murmur something to Aurora. The lovely eita shrank away from him, pressing her hands to her face in horror. Gugalan strode briskly past her and slipped out of the hall through the back door.

None of this boded well. Gooseflesh crawled up my arms; I could feel a storm gathering over us. It was as though we had stumbled into a snare—sealed in among the eitas, in their residence, in their world.

“We need to talk,” I whispered into Hal’s ear, all the while keeping one eye on the other council members. Igig still hadn’t shown himself, and perhaps he was the only one who could untangle all of this for us.

Hal and I edged as far away from the stage and the throng of guests as we could, pressing ourselves back against the wall. Arey, Telem, and Aurora had formed a tight circle, speaking in low voices; Gugalan had still not returned; and the servants were circulating with fresh drinks and delicacies, everyone striving to keep the guests distracted from what was unfolding.

“Something is happening, right now,” I hissed. — Jem and Igig have vanished, there’s something seriously wrong with Gugalan, Aurora is spouting some kind of nonsense, and we’re being held here like fish in a tank! Tell me—if it came to it, could you blow this whole place sky-high and get us back to the human world?

In college, Hal and I had always understood each other with ease, almost without words. But things had changed since then—and, as it turned out, a great deal.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Hal protested, edging away from me. — This place is fun! The eitalites adore me! And all right, maybe Gugalan choked on something, but you know how it is…

One of the guests drifted close to us, and Hal fell silent. I seethed, certain he was merely hunting for an excuse to postpone the conversation—or abandon it altogether—since everything here suited him perfectly! All it took was for the eights to show him the smallest bit of attention, to flash him a smile, and they became his dearest friends on the spot! I turned to the guest in irritation, ready to ask her to leave, but my jaw dropped of its own accord, and my mind went utterly blank in an instant.

“Hello there, mano-half.”

It was the very girl from the beach, standing beside us, wearing the same smile she always had here. At first I couldn't trust my eyes—how had she gotten in? Why had the council invited her, of all people? Could they have known something about our meeting? But this was no moment for rhetorical questions.

In place of a short, practical jumpsuit, she wore a puffy dress like every other girl today. It sat oddly on her—something foreign, ridiculous, superfluous. She probably didn't feel entirely at ease in it either.

I let out a sharp breath, aware that I absolutely had to say something, yet my head stayed empty. She's here. She found me, she recognized me. She's talking to me. She's here.

Then Hal's voice cut in:

"Hey, hi? What a coincidence!" he whistled, looking her up and down.

"I d-didn't expect to see you here," I mumbled, nearly biting through my tongue with nerves.

I clawed frantically at the stiff collar of my shirt. The hall was unbearably stuffy, my cheeks burned, and the suit suddenly felt far too tight. A moment longer and I'd suffocate right where I stood.

"Surprise, the girl wrinkled her flat nose a little as she smiled." How do you like the party?

Hal sighed heavily and glanced around. He had lost interest in the beautiful mano and was already growing bored. Feeling somewhat awkward, I hurried to introduce him.

"The party is simply splendid. By the way, this is my friend, number T23. Have you heard of him?"

Hal perked up at once, flashed the girl a dazzling smile, and gave her a wink.

“The very numbered mage everyone’s talking about? the mano offered him a slight bow, lowering her gaze.” A pleasure to meet you.

“Numbered?” Hal smirked. — As you can see. A lovely combination, wouldn’t you say?

“My name is Mavi, the girl said clearly, looking at him.” I’ve never met an eithalite before… or anyone with a number in place of a name.

“Really? Then here’s another one for you,” Hal pulled me by the hand closer to her. — His number is L5. Not bad either, eh?

The shove sent me nearly crashing into Mavi, and even without it I stood so close to her that I caught the scent of salt and seaweed once again. But this time we weren’t alone on the beach — we were at a gathering of eiths, and Hal was standing right beside me. My face grew so hot it felt as though all the blood in my body had rushed to my head. I clumsily stepped back, nearly losing my balance. A clumsy, sweaty giant — that was what I must have looked like next to her.

“A number too?” Mavi asked, her eyes never leaving me. — Remarkable. — She turned her gaze to Hal. — Honestly, I pictured you differently. Older and… rather more ordinary.

What did she mean? To be on the safe side, I stole a glance at Hal to make sure he looked exactly as he always did. Thick chestnut hair, sunken gray eyes, spindly arms and legs. I’m no judge of such things, but to my eye his face is thoroughly unremarkable. Not especially handsome, no scars or birthmarks. No tattoos like Jem’s, no secondary form like mine. Just an ordinary-looking fellow — so why couldn’t she take her eyes off him?

“And did reality live up to all your dreams?” Hal asked with a faint smile. “I pictured the two of you differently as well, fish folk. I expected gills, scales, something of the sort.”

Afraid the girl might take offense, I hurried to step in — while also hoping to steer attention back to my humble self:

“Are you the only one here, or is there anyone else of your family… your people… your species?..”

But it was as though I had turned into a wall. No one so much as glanced at me.

“Almost all of these fish have teeth,” Mavi said, her smile now making her meaning unmistakable. “And what can you boast of, Mr. Mediocre?”

“I can blow things up,” Hal said, wearing his usual smile, though his gaze drifted somewhere far away. “And set them on fire… usually by accident.”

He wasn’t looking at me, but my own memory supplied what had happened yesterday, and at once I felt the film on my chest beneath my shirt, tight against my skin. The burn didn’t trouble me in the least, thanks to that doctor. But that changed nothing about what had occurred. About what he had done to me.

“You and I are fire and water,” Mavi said with a quiet laugh. “I’d love to see your talents at work—I’m certain they’d be mesmerizing. And you seem more intriguing than anyone I’ve met lately. But…” She paused, glancing away for a moment, the corners of her wide mouth curving downward. “You’ll be leaving here soon, won’t you? Back to your world of humans?”

Hal stiffened and studied her intently. Mavi merely blinked back, the picture of innocence. Did he suspect her of probing him? Of working for the Council?

I had long since grown dizzy—from weariness, from the candlelight, from the mingled scents—and I hadn’t touched a drop. My thoughts would not arrange themselves. Not that it mattered; no one was sparing me a glance anyway. I could do as I pleased and say as I pleased, and no one would care.

“I don’t know,” Hal admitted after only the briefest hesitation. “I don’t know when I’ll leave your world.”

“But you’ve enjoyed it here, at least a little?”

Mavi watched his reaction to the question. Her pale eyes, with their tiny pupils, were motionless yet shimmering, like the surface of still water.

“Yes,” Hal replied without a shadow of doubt. “It’s extraordinary. The human world pales beside it.”

Mavi nodded, and I knew for certain it was time to go. I didn’t belong here—not even now, meeting this remarkable girl again. Only yesterday I had truly believed some bond had formed between us. That we had things to say to one another.Igig only talks to Jem, Hal can strike up a rapport with a rock, and me? Why do I feel like an outsider everywhere I go? And with my own unmistakable sidekick looks, no less! The looks that — kuryuk take it — are the very reason they dragged me here in the first place!

I turned and walked off. I glanced back over my shoulder once, but neither Hal nor Mavi so much as looked my way. Fine, whatever. I’d try to find Jem again — maybe she’d come back by now. And if I didn’t… well, then I’d just head to my room. There was nothing left for me here.

A waiter materialized at my side, and out of sheer reflex I accepted a glass of wine from him. So that’s what would keep me company tonight — booze. I’ve already mentioned I don’t drink; I tried it exactly once, at my father’s party, and hated it. But now, honestly, what else was there to do? I swirled the strange liquid around in the glass. Matte, thick, white as milk.

“Hey, you, useless!”

I raised my head — not out of habit at being addressed that way, but simply because someone had spoken near me. Telem stood before

me, and a shiver crawled down my arms. He'd be haunting my nightmares from now on. What happened at breakfast today — that was his doing, wasn't it? He'd bewitched us, or hypnotized us, or something of the sort. I nearly came apart inside.

Yet right now he didn't look the least bit dangerous — just silly, if anything, in that garish purple suit and those enormous, ridiculous glasses…

Wait. Glasses?

I leaned in closer, forgetting every rule of politeness. Telem wasn't wearing glasses — those were his eyes! Enormous, perfectly round, filling half his face. White, the way the whites of eyes should be, and inside each circle sat a clock face! Complete with hands and numbers all around. Right now both eyes read half past eleven, and I was certain they were running slow. It had long since gone past midnight.

I marveled that I hadn't noticed before — how strangely the old man looked. There was something mechanical about him, nothing like other eyts or humans. Or perhaps they really were some kind of spectacles after all? But the moment the thought crossed my mind, Telem blinked, and I understood that they truly were his eyes. How unsettling.

"What are you staring at, useless?" Telem rasped in his nasty old-man voice, and his clock hands fixed squarely on me. — Never seen eyes like these in your stinking world? Ahh, thought so. As it happens, I need to talk to your gang. Where are they, by the way?

"Ah... um..." I mumbled, at a loss for an answer.

"Where are they? Where are your pals? the old man pressed, craning his neck closer and closer."

"T23 is talking with a mano girl, and K44... I saw her with Igi... with Mister Igig..."

My big mouth kept swallowing the ends of words, my teeth clumsily biting lip and tongue. Whenever I'm unsure or caught off guard, my secondary appearance does everything it can to make my life even more difficult.

"What are you muttering about!" Telem nearly shrieked at me. "With Mr. Igig? What does she want with him? Fine then, you useless creature — tell your little friends that the council expects you tomorrow, right after breakfast, in the reception hall. Don't be late! We have received the answers from your guardians, and we no longer intend to waste time. Time moves quickly enough as it is."

I had completely forgotten about that! My breath caught, and the hand holding my glass went slack. All at once I was genuinely afraid.

"What? Yes? And what did they say? Are they demanding we come back? Are they worried about..."

"Tomorrow we'll explain everything to you!" Telem cut me off, shrilling. "Enough chatter! After breakfast — remember, don't be late! And tell the girl to leave Mr. Igig alone. He is not your friend, nor your protector — understood? Send him to me. And what's this?" he noticed the glass in my hand and snatched it away with startling swiftness. "Hand it over — you're far too young to be drinking that!"

Unbelievable — they had taken even my drink! They truly don't care about me at all here, do they?

"Don't be late," he boomed again, craning his neck forward and fixing me — or was he fixing me? — with those unsettling eyes. "Tell them! Don't forget!"

I tried to slip away from him. He reminded me of several particularly ancient and nasty professors from college — and of my own uncle, too. I loathe being around that sort of person: they belittle you for your age, never let you get a word in, and lecture you with lessons

you never asked for. Besides, I was afraid of falling under his spell again.

I hurried back, scanning the crowd for my friends. At least the old man had made one sensible point. Igig wasn't some bosom buddy we should trust without reservation and confide everything to. Why couldn't our cautious Jem see that? Or had the bird-boy cast some spell over her too?

What a mad world! Can you truly be certain of anyone here?

I found neither Jem nor Igig, but before long I spotted the pair I'd just left.

They were still rooted to the same spot, and Hal was still droning on. No longer caring whether Mavi or anyone else was watching, I marched straight up and leaned toward my friend.

"T23, can I have a word in private?" I hissed, doing my best not to glance at the beautiful eita. She stood right there, and her gorgeous eyes shamelessly hijacked all my attention.

Hal wasn't pleased at being interrupted and thrown off his stride, but all the same he stepped aside with me.

"Well?"

"The Council got answers from our guardians."

"What? Can you be more specific?"

"I don't know. We've been told to see them after breakfast."

Hal took a step back and shook out his arms, like a man limbering up before a bout, loosening himself. His eyes had gone dark and wide.

"Sneaky devils, aren't they!" he exclaimed—and then it suddenly struck him: "What if we ask Igig? I reckon we could get him talking if we pushed hard enough."

There you go. Turns out everyone here is mad about this Igig. Everyone but me.

“I already told you,” I felt my irritation mounting, “he’s vanished somewhere. So has Jem.”

“You don’t honestly believe the two of them left together, do you?” Hal smirked. “Fine, we’ll wait as long as they like. For now, let them think they have everything under control.”

It was that last remark which worried me more than it intrigued me.

“Huh? What do you mean?..”

“Never mind,” my friend cut me off and briskly changed the subject. “I say we stay until the very end of the party and watch the council. Or are you already itching to hit the hay?”

As it happened, I was. But leaving Hal alone, all worked up, at the mercy of the eytes who were sharpening their teeth on him? What if Jem came back, or Igig turned up again? I sighed, hoping it hadn’t sounded too loud, too weary.

“I can stay a little longer.”

“That’s the spirit, old chap! We’ll have plenty more fun yet. By the way,” he remembered, “that distant relative of yours turned out to be rather decent. Not such a slippery fish as I’d first taken her for.”

I had forgotten about Mavi, standing off to the side, but at the mention of her a hot wave of excitement and embarrassment washed over me again. Perhaps I’d still get a chance to speak with her? Even just for a moment. I turned around, searching for her with my eyes. Nowhere was there any sign of the beautiful girl from the realm of the Mano. She had probably grown tired of waiting and gone. And I had missed my second chance.

“Guys.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin and spun around sharply. There she was, standing right beside Hal. Had she heard his last words? I smiled at her nervously, unable to tear my gaze away from those extraordinary

eyes. Why did I have to be cursed with stupid teeth instead of gorgeous eyes?..

“I have to go,” Mavi announced bluntly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m glad I met you. I hope the water brings us together again.”

She looked at me, and my mouth went dry. She said it as though there could be no other way—and I would have given a great deal to see her again.

“I hope so too,” I answered quietly.

“Consider it a done deal,” Hal yawned.

The corners of Mavi’s lips twitched faintly, but before leaving, she suddenly stepped forward and, without a word of warning, cupped my face in her hands—just as she had back then on the beach. Her face was inches from mine, and I forgot where I was.

“I will find you,” she said quietly, firmly, never taking her eyes from mine. “The sea will bring us together again.”

Her beautiful eyes were shyly veiled by short lashes. She released me, bowed quickly, and left. In the blink of an eye she was gone, and everything that had happened felt like a mirage, an enchantment. I stood there, oblivious to the world around me, touching my cheeks and remembering her gaze. “The sea will bring us together again.” Even if we end up in different worlds once more, I will do whatever it takes for the sea to find us again.

“What, did you like her, huh?” Hal laughed nervously. “She’s hypnotized you, dude. You were staring at her like a sleepwalker!”

Little by little I came back down to earth, but my friend’s teasing flew right past me. He simply understood nothing. I shook my head, finally snapping out of my trance, and turned to him. Hal had fallen silent, watching me.

He was studying me with a hint of understanding. Almost with sympathy, even.

“Hal.” I drew a deep breath, let it out, and breathed again. The next words felt heavy on my tongue: — If the Eits gave you the chance to stay here… would you stay?

The smile had vanished from Hal’s face. His gray eyes had turned a perfect green — was it the lighting, or was I beginning to hallucinate? After deliberating for precisely three seconds, he countered with a question of his own:

“And what about you?”

Number K44. Jem

The balcony was cold, clammy, and thoroughly unpleasant. Yet I consoled myself with the thought that it would all be worth it: ten minutes of fresh air in exchange for information I should have learned a decade ago. A fair price.

The grey eit stood opposite me, at the far end of the platform. The wind ruffled his feathers and plucked at his vest and breeches, as though eager to sweep him off somewhere, and it seemed to me that Igig's whole figure was losing its edges, about to crumble apart like a mosaic. My hands already twitched with nerves, but even now I dared not touch my gloves again, fearing they would slip off entirely.

Voices drifted over from the direction of the doors, though so faintly that we might have belonged to another reality altogether.

Igig began to circle the balcony along its perimeter, peering down over the edge. What could he possibly be looking for down there? I decided he was probably hunting for the right words for an important conversation, and I waited patiently.

But two minutes of this waiting passed, and I heard nothing at all.

"Are you going to explain, or not?" I couldn't bear it any longer.

"Keep your voice down!" Igig rushed over to me, glancing back at the glass door through which golden light was seeping. "The last thing we need is to be caught. Either of us could be missed at any moment — we're both far too conspicuous."

"Then maybe we shouldn't waste time, you dope? Tell me about the tatushki and let's go back inside. I'm freezing."

But no, of course nothing could go smoothly! Igig stared at the door a while longer, watching the guests, and then said quickly:

“No, I’m not going to tell you anything. But I know someone who will.” He turned his back to me abruptly and nodded over his shoulder. — Climb on.

I hadn’t expected anything of the sort, and I simply stood there, staring foolishly at the purple vest stretched across his back. It really wasn’t as broad as I had imagined. Even Kyle looked sturdier than he did.

“What’s the matter with you? Why?..”

“Climb on, I said. We need to get down below.”

Boys! All they ever want is to show off. They won’t take the stairs like normal people or the Eits — oh no, they’ll simply leap off the balcony!

“And how exactly am I supposed to climb onto you? What are you, a mountain?”

“Skip the insults. If you want to know about your tattoos, climb up.”

What else could I do? I had already come so far in pursuit of learning about myself that turning back now would have been sheer folly. If I balked at this, I’d spend the rest of my days kicking myself for letting the chance slip away. Because I seriously doubted that, once we were sent home, I’d ever have the opportunity to see Igig every weekend. And apart from him — kyuruk take it — no one else could help me!

I ran my eyes over his body once more, not knowing where to begin. How did he even picture this working? Had he ever carried anyone on his back before? I stepped right up to him, rose onto my tiptoes, and tried to reach his shoulders with my hands, swinging one leg over him at the same time. Briefly it occurred to me that if anyone saw us through the balcony door, the scandal would shake the whole world of the Eits to its foundations.

“Ow! Right on my heels!”

“Sorry about that.”

I stepped away from him, and a couple of seconds were all I needed to collect my thoughts. Then I confidently kicked off my tight shoes and stood barefoot on the icy stone floor. My toes went numb with cold instantly. Without wasting a moment, I walked back over to Igig, who was waiting for me like a patient horse, and climbed onto him with more assurance this time. I immediately wound my arms around his neck, gripped his body with my legs, and pressed my heels into his flanks.

“Is this better?” I puffed, my face pressed against his back.

The body beneath me shifted, and the eit straightened up. I clung to him more tightly, thinking how ridiculous I must look. I’d never joined the riding club at college, and I didn’t feel particularly secure in the saddle. If I’d known in advance, I would have practiced before clambering onto a two-meter-tall bird!

Igig took a step forward, spread his wings, and gave them a testing flap without leaving the balcony. I could feel his shoulder blades and muscles moving beneath my arms and chest. Would he be able to carry me? And what if he couldn’t manage it and fell? No, that was definitely not something I needed to be dwelling on right now. Thoughts take shape as it is, and in the world of eits they interact with reality in precisely that way and no other.

“Holding on tight?”

Now his voice vibrated right against my chest, sounding muffled, and I couldn’t see his face, couldn’t read his expression to tell exactly how he meant it. All of that made the awkward situation unbearably awkward.

“Yeah, I suppose.” I squeezed him harder with my legs so I wouldn’t dangle off him like a towel. My arms, trained by ingela,

hadn’t stiffened or begun to ache yet. — But, you know, I’ve never actually ridden an oversized pigeon before, so go easy on me.

“A dove! Igig shuddered, nearly throwing me off.” A dove! His voice brimmed with indignation. — For your information, the members of my kingdom are called gadaby.

What a name! It would better suit a snake or some other repulsive thing that slithers along the ground.

“Well, you should have told me that when we first met, not now, taking offense because I didn’t know,” I remarked.

The body beneath me shifted and pressed forward, and I clung to it more tightly, flattening myself against its back. How were we supposed to fly together? I would simply tumble off!

And then, without warning, Igig sprang upward.

I bit my tongue in terror, but it turned out he had merely landed on the balustrade. Glancing down, I saw thick darkness swallowing the ground below. Nothing could be made out — neither the height nor what lay beneath. It seemed as though that darkness were rising like fog from the very bowels of the earth.

“Ready?”

Igig spread his wings wide, and only then did I grasp how long they were, how powerful they must be. But could I trust myself to them? Looking down once more, I felt hundreds of thin, sharp, icy needles pierce my stomach, bringing on a wave of nausea.

Thank goodness I hadn’t managed to eat or drink anything at the party.

“I… I…”

Without a moment’s warning, Igig abruptly leaned forward, drew his wings back, and released his grip on the balustrade.

I was gasping from screaming, my face pressed against the ait’s back, my eyes screwed tightly shut. My stomach felt crushed as though

beneath a press, and my heart rattled in my chest like some loose, broken mechanism. I could feel us falling — feel the earth dragging us down toward it like a colossal magnet pulling two tiny screws. The icy air kept trying to hurl me from the bird's back, and I clung to Igig's chest with arms squeezed so tight they went numb. I no longer had even the strength to shout at him to climb.

Every passing moment was surely meant to be my last. And when I was abruptly flung upward, my body leveling out into a horizontal position, I decided that moment had finally arrived. Then I understood: Igig — and I with him — was soaring. His wings seemed to beat against the thick darkness itself, pushing off it as though it were solid. He carried us higher and higher, leaving the ground far below. Risking a slight lift from the bird's back, I glanced quickly behind me and saw the council residence. The windows on its topmost floor glowed golden, like a lighthouse. Somewhere inside, Hal and Kyle had been left alone with the strongest aits in this world. Yet I felt not the slightest twinge of guilt toward my friends.

The same darkness stretched out ahead, so dense that neither starlight nor moonlight could pierce it. Gadab had worked up a respectable speed, and the whistle of wind in my ears was deafening. The full skirt of my dress streamed out behind me like a comic-book hero's cape. My stomach lurched each time Igig began to descend. That ticklish, exhilarating sensation scarcely left me, and I prayed the flight would end as quickly as possible. But within a couple of minutes I managed to relax a little and turn my attention to other feelings.

Igig's body now felt almost like an extension of my own, and I could even make out his heartbeat, his breathing; I could sense his muscles working with every beat of his wings. I eased my grip a little so as not to squeeze him too tightly, and glanced down from the corner

of my eye. We were flying through darkness, and it seemed there was nothing left in the world but darkness itself.

“Where are we?..” I began, but the frigid wind scoured my throat, and I broke into coughing.

“You’ll see,” Igig answered curtly, and for a moment I felt the vibration of his voice beneath my chest once more.

He flew on, driving his wings hard to hold his altitude. I was afraid to move any more than I had to, for fear of losing my balance. The Residence was now far behind us.

Apart from that one time when I had been seized by my backpack and dangled above the apartment blocks, I had never been this high up. I felt so exposed, so infinitesimally weak, that all I could do was lie still. Never before had my life belonged entirely to someone else, and never had I felt death so near.

Yet it did not frighten me. I knew they would not surrender me to it.

Igig was beating his wings faster and harder, and his flight was growing ever more erratic—if one could call it flight at all. He would begin to sink, then abruptly surge upward, and I could hear how fast and ragged his breathing had become. I longed to ask what was wrong, but held my tongue, knowing he would tell me himself if he thought it necessary. Nor did I have to wait long.

“We’re going to... land soon,” he warned me tersely, gasping for breath, barely managing to force the words in between exhales.

I made no reply, only gave his shoulder a light pat. As Igig began his descent, gusts of wind washed over me, and everything within me knotted up all over again. The eit had stopped beating his wings; instead he spread them wide, giving only the faintest flick of his flight feathers. I strained to peer ahead, trying to make out what lay below. The wind threatened, time and again, to rip my dress clean off me, and

for the umpteenth time I cursed myself for not wearing something more comfortable—something better suited to flying.

I couldn't say exactly how long it took us to reach the ground. To land, Igig beat his wings a few times, leveling out his body, and I very nearly tumbled head over heels from his back. Only once he stood firmly on the earth did I dare let go of him, struggling to coax movement back into my frozen, stiff limbs. The instant I stepped away from the eit, the cold found me at once, wrapping around me now from every side without hindrance.

Igig stretched, rolled his neck, and rubbed his shoulders. His chest rose and fell rapidly, his wings hanging limp along his flanks. His breathing was loud and slightly ragged—he was panting through his half-open mouth. To avoid watching him, I turned away, and at last I was able to work out where we had landed.

It was apparently the outskirts of the city. In the distance loomed a landfill—one you could have guessed was there without ever laying eyes on it, from the stench alone. Behind us rose a half-ruined structure, one that had never even been finished. And all of it was ringed by a tall fence.

Unlike the human world, where teenagers practically stalk clean, ideally abandoned, fences and buildings as canvases for their spray-can art, here no vandal's hand had ever touched the walls. In the blue glow of the stars and moon, they shone with stern cleanliness — the ones I could see, anyway.

"Let's go."

Igig's voice was hoarse, but in the dead silence it carried easily. I moved closer to him, flinching as the cold ground bit into my feet. Tiny pebbles, twigs, and other debris littered the way, and I found myself walking on the very tips of my toes, stretched up like a ballerina.

Following Igig, I slipped past the fence and circled around the building. Tilting my head back, I tried to guess what it was meant to become someday, but in such darkness there was no telling for sure. A sharp sliver of moonlight peeked through the bare beams, as if spying on me through a crack.

Something sharp sliced across my foot, and I nearly lost my balance. Gulping a mouthful of air, I seized the fence and froze for a few seconds. One spot on my foot throbbed with pain, and warm blood was trickling between my toes. I lifted my foot and ran my hand over it carefully, feeling out the cut. I must have stepped on a shard of glass or iron along the way — the wound was long, the skin jutting up raggedly at the edges.

“Where are you?” Igig had come back for me, rubbing his neck. — What happened? We need to hurry.

I gingerly put weight on my injured leg, then rocked back onto my toes, lifting my heel from the ground. The pain was worsening, and my foot had gone completely sticky. I pushed off from the wall I’d been leaning against and turned to the eit.

“Everything’s fine,” I answered evenly. — Let’s go — no sense wasting time.

The darkness concealed my limp, and Igig, darting on ahead, noticed nothing. Sometimes I curse my pride and my strength. How much easier life would be as a weak little fool — they have it easier, too. I clenched my teeth against the pain and strained to keep pace with the eit.

We didn’t have far to go — we rounded the building and stopped at the only stretch of wall daubed with someone’s artwork. I could scarcely see anything at all, had no idea where Igig was heading or what lay in store for me. I’d been worn down lately — frozen, hungry, and my leg ached.

“The drawing has all but faded, so the crossing won’t be as quick and simple as you’re used to,” Igig warned me, and only then did I realize the wall bore that very Transition Garden Kalanu had spoken of.

“Are you ready?”

I nodded silently, straining to make out in the darkness the drawing I already knew, but nothing would resolve — just a large dark smudge. It could be ordinary grime — why was Igig so certain it was that particular drawing? What if it belonged to some other “transition garden” entirely, one that would carry us off who-knows-where?

But in the next instant, all my doubts dissolved. The eit touched its pen to the wall, and the surface flared scarlet, uncovering its picture. Faded and marred — as though the walls had been kicked, long and savagely — yet unmistakably the same image we had already passed through a couple of times on our travels. The shore, the dandelions, the tree. No one needed to tell me what to do next.

I stepped toward it first, and at once something seized me and hauled me forward. A scatter of red flashes flickered before my eyes; something brushed against my bare legs. A fresh cut sent a brief, sharp stab of pain through me. The darkness around me churned and coiled, like one enormous creature — something resembling a serpent. Then a slit opened: a white, ragged triangle stretched far out to one side. Something flashed within it, and everything around me dissolved, sinking into white mist.

I let out a breath, only then realizing I had been holding it. We had made it through. No more walls, no more darkness — only white mist on every side and black stones strewn across the ground. Cold, wet grass pressed under my feet, and I caught the scent of freshly turned earth and moss. Where were we? I breathed the damp air in deeply, thinking of the groves near the college, and almost with pleasure felt how soothingly the grass cooled my wound.

“You know,” Igig began thoughtfully, and I glanced around, having lost sight of him.

The grey eit nearly melted into the mist surrounding it; only its purple suit betrayed its presence. Without meaning to, I stepped closer, afraid of losing my way here.

“The first time we passed through the gates,” he went on, — T23 asked about a girl in the Transition Garden. Remember?

What girl? Does that smug kugalung seriously imagine I recall every girl he mentions?.. Oh, wait — I do remember his babbling about some girl from the Garden. And?

“And what?” I echoed aloud.

Igig beat his wings, striving to scatter the fog around him, if only a little, but its billows closed in again, swirling about him and, if anything, ensnaring him more tightly than before.

“I don’t know how he learned of her, but the girl truly is there,” he said at last, abandoning his struggle with the fog. — Sometimes, if you pass through a damaged gate like this one, you may even catch a glimpse of her. She’s among the very first of the forgotten. All the others began arriving here later. And one of them is what we must find.

Number K44. Jem

I had no idea what that place was, yet a cemetery sprang to mind at once.

The truth is, I'd never set foot in one. There were none on UKOG territory, and making a special journey into the city for something like that — what would be the point? But from the scraps of knowledge I possessed, I could guess that we had stumbled upon some strange cemetery of eights.

For one thing, there was fog here, and in plenty of books fog and cemeteries go hand in hand. For another, not a soul was around — exactly as it should be in places like this. And finally, great black stones rose everywhere. Gravestones, most likely.

I didn't dare ask questions about the place, knowing I'd see everything for myself soon enough — and knowing, too, that it was far too quiet for conversation. It was as if I'd gone deaf; only the soft rustle of grass beneath my feet proved I hadn't. Igig and I walked pressed close together, afraid of losing each other in the murk. I kept glancing back at him to reassure myself: I wasn't alone here, I had nothing to fear.

Beside this eight, I felt different than I did with the other boys, with Hal or Kyle. Igig was grown-up and serious. He wouldn't tease without reason, or seize every chance — and every non-chance — to show off. Confidence and dependability radiated from him in waves — the very qualities my friends so often lacked.

What if Igig were human? I tried to picture running into him at college: an ordinary guy, no wings, no jutting lower jaw, ordinary eyes, no chicken feet. And then what? It turned out to be unsettling to think about. Awkward, even.

Something stirred and flashed through the fog ahead of us. We halted in surprise—and suddenly Igig bolted, vanishing a moment later into the white haze.

“Stop!” I cried, seized by sudden fear. — Wait!

Some help he was! Gathering up the hem of my dress, I hurried forward, straining my eyes against the fog. Igig had melted into thin air, as though he had never been there at all. Why would he do that? What had he spotted up ahead? Kata the Great—what if someone had attacked us here, in this place that was eerie enough already, brimming with fog, ghosts, and black stones?

“Igig!” I shouted, but the thick white curtain all around swallowed my voice. — Igig!

I would never grow accustomed to calling people or eits by name, even when they had given me their names themselves.

“Igig!” I called again, walking faster and faster. — Where are you?

I gasped and nearly stumbled backward when something big and dark swept past me through the mist. Dull thuds, grunts, and blows rang out. Hitching my dress up higher, I plunged straight into the thick of the fray, ready to unleash every one of my hand-to-hand combat skills.

“Igig!”

The fog swayed and parted slightly, revealing two eits grappling on the ground. It was not hard to recognize one of them as Igig, but his opponent eluded me at first—he moved so fast, so unpredictably. And he never granted the gadab a moment’s respite—knocking him down and pinning him to the earth the instant he tried to rise, striking his stomach and head, yanking at his wings. Torn gray feathers drifted across the ground around them, and the grass lay trampled.

It struck me as strange that the grim eit—someone who could openly stand his ground against Gugalan and thought nothing of

closing to within a meter of me—never laid so much as a finger on his opponent, doing nothing but trying to put as much distance between them as possible. Whether it was mercy or some cunning scheme, I couldn't say, but I did what seemed right: I rushed at the strange eit and drove my boot into his side with all my strength.

He went tumbling away from me and nearly melted back into the fog—a rock stopped him. He collided with it and lay sprawled there, a pitiful heap. Igig scrambled to his feet, muttering curses under his breath:

"Kyruki! Please tell me you haven't knocked him out!"

He hurried over and knelt beside his recent adversary, turning him carefully onto his back. Only then, as I drew closer, did I get a proper look at him.

The eit looked like a human figure woven from black smoke. That strange shell clung to a real human skeleton like a burial shroud. Each hand bore three long, slender fingers, thin as a spider's legs; he wore a tattered brown cloak, and atop his head sat a tuft of vivid red hair.

"Hey! Can you hear me?" Igig shook him gently by the shoulders, his quill-like fingers sinking into the smoke that composed the man's body. — We mean you no harm.

Right, I'm sure he'll believe that, coming right after a solid kick to the ribs.

The eit groaned, stirred, and tried to push himself upright. He had no face—only a yellowish skull glimmering through the dark veil—and I couldn't tell whether he could see us at all. But when, a heartbeat later, he suddenly let out a shriek, the answer was clear: he could see us—and he recognized us, too.

"You spawn of Hundun! Drop dead! What ill wind blew you here? Allapo take you" what more do you want from me?!

I was certainly no delicate lady, but even my ears rang at that volley of vile curses, most of which I had never heard before. I could only guess why this strange creature, haunting the cemetery, so despised a member of the council.

“Quiet,” Igig said to him calmly, showing no reaction whatsoever to the stream of abuse hurled at him. — Do you hear me? I am not Sharkalisharri. My name is Igig. Sharkalisharri is dead.

These strange words worked like a magic spell. The eit skeleton fell silent at once and simply stared at Igig from his empty eye sockets. Then he began to rise to his feet, never taking his eyes off him. He did not seem to have noticed me at all.

“Not Sharkalisharri?” he repeated suspiciously. — But you look just like him. Or is my memory failing me?..

He uttered that last part with more agitation than anything that had come before. Igig nodded patiently.

“Yes, I look like him. But he is no more. And we have come to you because we need your help.”

The skeleton perked up slightly.

“Help? My help, specifically? What kind?”

“K44, show him your tattoos,” Igig asked me without warning.

In these few days among the eits I had grown so accustomed to hiding my tattoos, even when I was alone, that his request nearly startled me now. Just to be sure, I glanced at him, and the eit gave me a slight nod. Fine, then. I couldn’t make a kuruk’s worth of sense of any of this anyway.

Cautiously—still wary, but trying all the same—I began pulling off my gloves, while the skeleton watched with an almost bloodthirsty fascination. I was sorely tempted to smash my fist into his face and knock every tooth from his skull, but I restrained myself; his day seemed to have gone badly enough already.

Once my hands were bare, I slowly extended them toward the strange eit and, despite myself, found my gaze dropping to the patterns. I had all but forgotten what they looked like, and now I was even a little startled by how vividly my hands were painted. Did they really stand out that much, all the time?

Thin, spidery fingers brushed lightly across my skin, and I flinched involuntarily, shuddering with revulsion. My shoulder brushed against Igig beside me.

“Don’t be afraid,” he murmured encouragingly.

Me, afraid? Yeah, right! I snorted softly and offered my hands to the skeleton with more confidence. When his fingers began exploring my skin again, I stayed calm and perfectly still, the way Kyle does when he eats.

“Do you recognize these designs?” Igig pressed him. — Did you make them?

I turned to the eit with the spidery hands in surprise, but he had heard nothing: he was studying the zigzags intently, trailing his fingertips gently along their lines.

This went on for a good three minutes. By the time my hands had nearly gone numb and Igig looked ready to seize the eit by the shoulders and shake him, the creature suddenly exhaled and straightened. He lowered his hands. He looked at me, and a chill of unease ran through me as I felt his gaze upon me—those empty, black eye sockets.

“Yes, I made them.”

It was as though only the wind had whispered them — so hushed and weightless were the words. Igig and I stood rooted to the spot, but the skeleton went on, just as softly, as quietly, as though speaking to himself:

“That was long ago, so very long ago, when I still lived there, when I had a name, when I had work. This is one of the last drawings I was ever able to make. No one has permitted me such a thing since...”

He broke off abruptly, then clutched his head with a sudden jerk and roared in agony, as though tormented by a vicious migraine. I was unprepared for so violent a swing of mood, but Igig was at his side in an instant, gently prying his hands away.

“I know it hurts to think about it,” he said, “but please, try to recall who commissioned these tattoos from you. What sort of people came to you. Do you remember them?”

Only then — yes, yes, only then — did it dawn on me that he was speaking of my parents. My true parents, who had given me life and then abandoned me on UKOG’s doorstep! And if I had always regarded them with nothing but bitterness, wondering what had kept them from simply killing me — or, for that matter, why they had bothered to conceive me at all — now entirely different thoughts began to stir. They had done something more, something beyond bearing me and leaving me at the college’s gates. They had brought me to this eit so that he might cover me in tattoos.

The notion seemed so absurd that I could not shake it off, and I might well have turned it over endlessly, this way and that, in search of some conclusion — but then the skeleton spoke again, and I strained to listen with every fiber of my being.

“Yes, it was people. Ordinary people, worthless people. How they found me, I cannot recall. Oh, how much I no longer remember!..”

He began howling again, but Igig laid a wing on his shoulder, and the skeleton fell silent.

“What kind of people were they?” he asked. — What did they look like? What did they say? Tell me everything you remember about them. It matters a great deal. Even here, you can still help that girl.

The skeleton turned his gaze back to me, then shook his head and pulled away from Igig.

“You look like Sharkalisharri; don’t get in the way,” he snapped, though without any real malice. — I can tell you what’s still rattling around in my head, but not this instant! Let’s see, that would have been about ten years ago?

“Seventeen.”

My throat had gone so dry from nerves that my voice came out flat and hoarse. Uttering the number aloud, I found myself recalling my last Finding Day at college. It felt as though that date had been only yesterday, yet so much had happened since then that I seemed to have aged another five years.

“Seventeen...” his jaw moved soundlessly, his spider-like limbs reached for my hands again, and I offered them to him.

The moment the eit touched the tattoos, it was as though he saw that distant scene right before his nonexistent eyes — so vividly did he begin to describe it.

“We need the wards. Right now.”

Father was frightened, but bearing up well — serious and calculating, fully aware of what it might cost him, yet already resolved not to back down. He was tall and gangly as a teenager, though a small goatee and mustache lent his face an almost elderly air. A walking bundle of contradictions, in short.

“They say you’re the only ones who can make those.”

The mother barely reached her husband’s shoulder — small and round-faced, yet she was not one of those spineless mommies who melt into their family as a single whole, losing their own identity. No, this lady was a strong personality. And a strong one.

And finally, the culprit of the crime itself: a girl barely six months old. A little baby with a fuzz of hair around her head. She didn’t cry,

didn’t squirm — she just lay there quietly, as if she understood the full seriousness of the situation she was in. What was she? What was she hiding inside?

I looked away from her. I don’t do them that young anyway.

“She’s not defective, the mother explains,” not the mayor’s daughter. She’s our daughter. And we want her to be well protected from all the crap she’s going to face in the future.

She knows what she’s talking about. Everyone has known for a long time now. I couldn’t deny the parents’ good sense, but they wouldn’t be able to save themselves. I looked at the child again. Held out one hand to her. The girl didn’t cry out, didn’t flinch, didn’t turn away from my fingers. She just watched them, attentive and fearless. And really, what would grow out of her with the kind of protection I could offer? Would my consent change the course of history?

But I drifted off into thought. I drew my fingers back and looked at the parents again.

“Make sure she ends up in good hands.”

Afterwards I reached for the child again and gave her the first injection...

I wrapped my arms around myself, pressing tight, and was startled by how cold they felt — almost as though they belonged to someone else. A soft wind stirred the tall grass between the stones, the way a parent runs a hand through a child’s hair.

The way mine might have.

I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, the way yoga and meditation had taught me. Again. But the familiar calm refused to come, and something in my chest kept tightening, tighter and tighter.

In five minutes I had learned more — and learned things that mattered — than in all my years at the college. I had never liked dwelling on my parents; the brief, invented story I had spun about them

had always been enough. But now the ate's tale had restored that distant image in full, vivid color, as though I were witnessing it all over again — like drawing a forgotten photograph from the depths of an album. It never once occurred to me to doubt the skeleton's words; he seemed merely to have confirmed what I had known all along.

My parents died for me.

They had wanted a happier, safer life for me. They had given me the protection they could never provide themselves. They had sent me away to be raised in a place where I grew up as their own daughter. And all this time, the proof of their love had been with me — in my arms, in the serial number the college had assigned me. And no one else, ever, would love me as they had.

Breathing grew harder and harder. My head felt as though it would split under the flood of such overwhelming thoughts, and emotions seized me that I had never known before.

Just as I had suspected, my life was cleaving in two. Right now.

It didn't take long for everything to dissolve into tears.

I couldn't recall the last time I had wept like this—or whether I ever had. For the first time I was mourning my parents, and everything within me was caving in. It was as though I were being born anew, with a fresh understanding of who I was.

The air, the fog, the cold, the stones, and the sky echoed with my sobs, perhaps hearing such sounds here for the very first time. My tears cooled quickly, chilling my face, my neck, my chest. I couldn't stop—I had no command over myself at all—and my hands trembled so violently I couldn't even bring them to my face. An invisible grip squeezed my throat, and every breath came with effort and pain. All strength left me in an instant; I wanted to lie down, cover myself with earth, and stay there until the pain dulled, until these memories blurred once more and I could go on living.

Suddenly the cold vanished, and in its place came stiff, prickly, deeply unpleasant feathers. I was drawn gently against a keel-shaped chest covered by a vest, and at once I felt another's heartbeat. Someone else's warmth and breath. It was soothing—a reminder that I wasn't alone just now—but it wasn't enough to fill the chasm that had torn open in my soul.

"I'm so sorry," Igig whispered. — But you had to hear it.

I should have heard it long ago—not now, not in the world of the eits, in this strange cemetery, and from that horrifying...

"Where is he?" I sobbed, suddenly realizing he was nowhere to be seen.

Igig sighed, and I felt his chest rise and fall.

"He was forgotten. An eytalit who broke the law, and so he was sent to the place of oblivion. My father did it, back when he still sat on the council... No one will ever remember his name or who he was. But I tried. He was strong... I thought... perhaps he could help... He loses himself, and... his own life with it. When the last memory fades, it... she?.. it simply ceases. Dissolves into nothingness. Into something that will never be... and never was. That is how liquidation happens."

He was speaking with increasing difficulty, and I had long since lost track of what he meant. When Igig fell silent, we both strained to recall what the strange conversation had even been about.

But neither of us could remember.

"So you've never had the chance to test your defenses? Nothing of the sort ever came to your notice? You didn't even have any ideas about it?"

Igig was all but shouting so that I could hear him. We were flying back, slicing through the cold air with a piercing whistle. Ahead, the first rays of sunlight were breaking through the clouds, and a strip of pink glowed along the horizon. I could almost feel my hair deepening

into a richer shade — one no dye had ever managed to give me. Aurora. That was surely why the eytalit bore that name — she herself was as tender, joyful, and beautiful as the dawn.

“Never!” I shouted back, pressing close against Igig’s back, though my grip was far surer now. — I can’t even imagine how it works.

“You’ll understand soon enough.”

I didn’t care for that tone — it told me Igig was smiling, and he rarely smiled, only on special occasions. What was he planning?

Suddenly I noticed something strange ahead of us, low to the ground. At first I took it for a forest fire—though an odd one. Or perhaps something like a sea? No, decidedly not. I peered forward, nearly rising onto my knees, holding my balance without the slightest effort. My dress and Igig’s feathers fluttered in unison beneath the streams of air.

Before us stretched a mass of multicolored lights—shifting, gleaming, colliding with one another, merging and breaking apart. Flares blazed that seared the eye, darkness thickened, then the hues changed and it all began anew. One could watch this spectacle endlessly, the way one watches flames, or the glitter of sun on water, or the drifting of clouds. But the essence of this substance was magic itself, which made it all the more mesmerizing.

“This place is called Gehenna, Igig shouted to me.” It’s magical energy that arrives here in its pure form when an eytalite dies. Someday it will pass on to the next eytalite to be born, but until then it lingers here. There’s a terrible imbalance in our world. Eytalites are often born without magic. Like me, for instance. And the problem has grown to such a scale that it was worth fighting my way onto the council. Only there can I push the eytalites to actually do something about it, instead of uselessly wringing their hands.

“You can tell me your heroic biography later, I cut him off.” Igig had suddenly reminded me of Hal, and with Hal you have to silence him at once or you’ll get nothing out of him. — What is this place?

“It’s lethally dangerous. It instantly burns up anyone who falls into it. Do you hear that roar? Do you feel that powerful vibration?”

Just to be sure, I listened for it myself, but just as back in the Lunar Grove, when even Hal and Kyle had nearly lost their minds, I was utterly deaf and blind to magic.

“No. So that’s how the protection works?”

I felt a little deflated, honestly. If that was all it could do, it hardly seemed a big deal. I couldn’t say what I’d been hoping for, exactly, but I’d expected something grander.

“Oh, it isn’t that. It’s because you’re human. Nothing special about you at all.”

“Useless, then?”

“I never said that. It’s actually a blessing that you can’t sense such things” the sensations are far from pleasant.

“Then let’s get out of here.”

“But I haven’t shown you the most important part yet.”

Igig had already flown almost to Gehenna itself, and I eyed it warily. I could feel no fire-like heat, though perhaps that too was simply because I was merely a human “with nothing special” about me. I had no idea what else Igig wanted to show me, but I trusted his word — and I truly did not wish to discover what this magical energy was capable of.

“Hold on tight! the eytalit shouted to me.”

I had barely tightened my grip on his shoulders when he suddenly folded his wings and dropped like a stone.

“IGIIIIG!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, frozen with terror, eyes wide open as the multicolored tongues of magic reached toward us, dazzling in their brilliance.

Just before we plunged headfirst into that deadly sea, I pressed my face against the eyta’s back, squeezed my eyes shut, and clung to him so hard my arms ached.

I felt nothing, yet my body was rigid with terror, and I couldn’t breathe. One more second, and I’d ignite faster than a feather dropped into a bonfire. Or perhaps I was already dead?..

Or perhaps that kyuruk kugalung had swooped upward at the very last instant — just like back then, near the residence?

That last thought infuriated me so thoroughly that I lifted my head.

Multicolored flashes of magic streaked all around us. They blazed brighter and more beautiful than any string of lights, and it was as though I had stumbled into an endless fireworks display. Some flares gave way to others, then to others still — sparkling, burning, bursting apart right before my nose. They were everywhere — on every side, above and below.

Only with great effort did I tear my gaze from the spectacle surrounding us, and then I noticed my purple-and-pink tattoos glowing. Seriously, they can glow? A faint radiance from them wrapped Igig and me in a sphere — the very sphere we were flying in. And the bursts of energy simply couldn’t break through it.

“So that’s how they work!” I exclaimed, choking with sudden joy. — That’s why we didn’t burn up! My tattoos are shielding us from the magic!

“Thought you’d never notice!” Igig replied with delight, and shot sharply upward.

But he didn’t leave the bounds of Gehenna — he was merely showing off that whichever way we turned, my protective bubble

would keep guarding us. Gadab twisted sideways and backward, and still we remained under its protection. Even when an entire stream of energy, scarlet as lava and surely not a degree cooler, came rushing at us, it slid off where it struck the barrier, coating the shell as though liquid, unable to pierce it.

“Not many people realize this, but simply being in Gehenna floods you with an incredible surge of power, Igig told me.” Where else could you soak up magic and energy the way you can here? I don’t feel the least bit tired — carrying you is nothing, and I could go another hundred nights like this, back to back! Yeeee-haaaaw!!!

He twisted through the air almost like a corkscrew, whirling magical energy around himself. I clung to his back, and laughter spilled out of me. Was it Gehenna working this effect on me? Or that tiny spark of eytalite I’d carried all along, answering the magic all around us? I couldn’t say — but it was enchanting.

When Igig leveled out his flight, I rose up, holding on with my legs alone, threw my arms skyward, and shouted with joy too. My chest felt ready to burst with strength, with happiness, with freedom. I wasn’t useless! I wasn’t weak! I had magic inside me, same as everyone else, and it was wonderful!

No matter how high I stretched my hands, my shield kept the dangerous energy from ever touching me. And no matter how loudly I whooped, no one would tell me to quiet down, no one would look at me like a fool — they’d simply whoop right along with me.

That was the greatest happiness of all. Magic.

“Why does my shield stretch over you too? I asked drowsily, barely able to keep my eyes open.”

We were making our way back to the residence, and the air felt cold and hollow. It struck me suddenly that I hadn’t slept in a full day, and I nearly passed out right there on Igig’s back. I had to grip him tighter

and keep talking just to stay awake. My throat already burned from the chill, but I scarcely noticed. The eytalit was flying with obvious effort, panting heavily. I felt every rasping breath of his as though it were my own, and it was almost painful to be so helpless, unable to do a single thing for him.

“Why?” Igig paused, either weighing his answer or gathering his strength. — Because you wanted it. On a subconscious, eytalit level.

“You mean…” I tried to grasp it, and fear flooded over me — You would have burned up? If I hadn’t trusted you enough? Right?

“Yes.”

Sleep retreated under the barrage of questions, and my eyes suddenly stung sharply. I couldn’t put into words the emotions that were twisting me into a knot and driving me toward tears. Once is enough.

“That’s all.”

I straightened up just in time and leapt down to the floor, nearly stumbling. We had landed on the tiny balcony of the room assigned to me. Yes, of course—there were no guests left in the hall. I glanced at my wrinkled dress, almost surprised I’d been wearing it all this while. Like a real princess who had fled a ball in search of adventure.

“Try to get some sleep. There’s little time left.”

Igig hopped onto the balustrade and stretched out his injured leg, flexing his toes. His feathers trembled, his beak hanging slightly ajar. I went to him, gripped the stone railing, and gazed at the sun, only now fully breaking over the horizon.

An endless, astonishing, magical night. It hardly seemed possible that it had truly happened—just now, and to me. Too surreal even for the world of the eitalites.

“Thank you.” I squeezed my eyes shut, for tears were ready to spill again. “Thank you for trusting me, Igig. And for everything else as well.”

His voice sounded very close—a rolling, unhurried rumble. Nothing like that boyish squawk in Gehenna.

“You’re welcome, K44.”

I managed to open my eyes again, though my lashes were matted with tears. The sun was shining somewhere far, far away—perhaps in an entirely different dimension—while we went on standing on the balcony, clinging to the shreds of the magic we had just lived through, a magic already fading in the rays of the new day.

“My name is Jem,” I corrected Igig before he could fly away.

Number T23. Hal

I could barely pry my eyes open that morning. I'd managed, at most, three hours of sleep — probably less. Granted, I'd built up a certain immunity to such ordeals over the years, thanks to the college parties after which I'd dragged myself to lectures like a good little soldier. Still, I felt wretched.

Kyle was still dead to the world, and it took real effort to shake him awake. The Mues were already scratching frantically at our door, summoning us to breakfast. My throat was parched, and after washing up and changing in a hurry, I hurried after the little freaks, hauling my half-asleep friend along behind me.

From the residence's lower floor drifted noise, murmured voices, even the growling of Enrira. What would the council do to us after breakfast? They had secured their approval and could now do as they pleased, while those responsible for our lives had proved too terror-stricken to offer even the faintest resistance. The Eythalites hadn't been the least bit surprised when consent arrived.

Jem was alone in the dining room, already picking at her vegetables. She was wearing her old college gym clothes again, along with the same ever-present long-sleeved top. To look at her, you'd never guess that only last night she had appeared before us in a gorgeous gown, like something out of a fairy tale. Now she was once more simply the battle comrade you've known for a hundred years.

At the sight of her, Kyle perked up a little and stumbled toward the table on his unsteady legs.

"J… K… Where have you been, Jem?" he finally blurted out, dropping into the chair beside her.

I sat down next to them and drew one of the plates toward me. I was curious too about where she'd been hiding half the night — and, of course, she still had no idea about the important news we'd received.

"Good morning," she murmured, barely glancing at us as she poked at her salad. — Where I was is none of your business.

What—what? It was like being slapped in the face all over again. None of our business? Of course it's our business! We're the only people she has here, and if she spent the entire night sitting in the bathroom, then we have every right to know about it!

"Why is it none of our business?" Kyle was offended too — so offended he hadn't even touched the food in front of him. — What happened? Is it because of Kh... Skrip?

There it was again — everyone blaming me, as always. Jem jabbed her fork angrily at her plate. I noticed the dark shadows under her eyes — whether from tears or a sleepless night, I couldn't tell.

"I don't have to answer to you," she said bitterly, and shot a glance toward some corner of the ceiling.

Reluctantly, I followed her gaze and spotted a pair of blue orbs. I see. So not only had she been off somewhere all night — she'd been sneaking into places she had no business being! It stung. Jem had always been scrupulous in that respect — at college she'd hardly ever been cited for breaking the rules, rarely punished for anything, because she always kept a clear head and never crossed the line. So what had happened last night? What sort of trouble had she gotten herself into?

"We could have kept you company," I said reproachfully, slicing off a piece of takikanu meat.

"I had company, every bit as good as yours," Jem brushed me off.

"Who, then?" Kyle perked up at once. — Igig?

Real fury seized me then. This had gone too far! She'd been off enjoying herself without a word to us, and now she was calmly trading

us in for some type like that eytalit from the council! Had she entirely lost her mind?

“I don’t want to discuss anything right now!” Jem replied firmly, wiping her fingers on a napkin and setting her cutlery aside. — We can talk later.

“Oh no, we’re settling this here and now!” I snapped back. — Later may never come. Do you have any idea the council has already approved our inspection? Only Kat knows what they’ll do to us now!

“What they’ll do to *you*, my friend corrected me, glancing up from beneath her brows.” It’s only because of you that we landed here in the first place, and you’re the only one they care about. Precisely as you wanted.

Her calm yet cutting tone inflamed me further — her indifference toward us, her secrecy, her refusal to talk. For a moment I felt my palms grow warm, and a second later the napkin beside Jem’s plate erupted in green flame.

Kyle proved the quickest of us, instantly dousing the fire with juice from his glass. We caught our breath, and I clenched my hands into fists, as though that could cage the magic.

“Kugalung,” Jem scoffed, eyeing the little heap of ash. — You never change.

I was already more than a little irritated, and it felt as though one more word would set me off again — only this time, instead of a napkin, it would be her cardigan that went up in flames. Fortunately for everyone, another scratch came at the door, and the little mews’ faces appeared, grunting and squealing as they once more beckoned us to follow. The Council was impatient to see us. They’d probably barely slept off the previous night either, but such diligent creatures that they hurried to begin their workday as early as possible. Someone really ought to pin a medal on them.

Jem was the first to leap up, shoving back her chair. Oh, of course — she'd found a convenient excuse to dodge the conversation yet again. But let her be certain of one thing: the moment we were alone, with no spying eits about, I would wring the whole truth out of her. I had to know, whether she liked it or not.

Kyle and I were doubly exasperated — not only by our friend's silence, but because we'd become so engrossed in the argument that we'd never eaten breakfast. Meanwhile Jem had wolfed down her entire salad. And when would we get another chance at a proper meal? What awaited us after the inspection, anyway?

What awaited me?

The council chamber was in an uproar. All five eitalits were talking over one another, pacing restlessly from spot to spot, wound up to the breaking point. Where was that languid grace, those unhurried conversations I'd observed only the night before at the celebration? The eitalits were anxious, and they made no effort to hide it.

The moment we stepped into the hall and caught their eye, every conversation died at once, and the whole council froze, staring. Gugalan stood at the center of the room, his massive frame commanding every gaze. Telem was at his left hand—the only one still talking after everyone else had gone quiet—though he soon broke off as well. Arey stood with his back braced against the table, leaning on it with both hands. His shirt was rumpled, his hair disheveled, his eyes blazing. Honestly, at first I hardly recognized him.

Aurora rose into the air higher than usual, presumably to draw attention to herself—or at least trying to. Igig stood a little apart from the others, and the mere sight of him irritated me, as if I'd genuinely entertained the hope he wouldn't show up.

"Ah, there they are!" Aurora exclaimed, drifting lower—but Gugalan rudely shoved her aside and strode toward us.

“T23, you’re going to the testing right now,” he snapped without a shred of preamble. “We’re on a tight schedule and need to wrap this up as quickly as possible.”

The look in his strange eyes was heavier, more unpleasant, than ever—yet I suddenly recalled how sheepish he’d been up on that stage last night. God, had that really been only last night?..

“What’s the rush?” Jem asked, but Gugalan ignored her completely.

Someone else, however, was quick to answer.

“Your guardians gave us no more than a day,” Igig obliged readily. “After that, we have to send you back to your world.” He glanced away. “We have more than enough problems here as it is.”

Gugalan snorted in displeasure and finished for him:

“Someone tried to poison me at the celebration.”

All thought of Jem and Igig vanished from my mind in an instant. Poison? So that explained the coughing? But who would—surely he didn’t suspect it was us? We would never dream of such a thing! Suddenly I felt stifled and sick at heart, as though I truly were guilty of the crime.

“No one suspects you, Igig said at once, trying to reassure us, but Gugalan’s gaze was anything but friendly.” You couldn’t have had such an opportunity. Someone slipped a powder of slirium into Mr. Gugalan’s drink. In case you don’t know, it drains eytalites of their magical power.

Oh, we knew it well! I knew from bitter experience how merciless those crystals were, yet I had never heard of slirium being used as a poison. It was repulsive, both in sensation and in the very act itself. Bile rose in my throat as I tried to imagine what it would be like to swallow a magic blocker.

“But who would have wanted to? Kyle exclaimed in bewilderment.” I mean, you’re not the only one on the council. If anyone wanted it, it could only be another council member.

Kyle often blurts out something unnecessary at the worst possible moment, but this time he outdid even himself. Such an accusation—audacious enough among humans, let alone eytalites—hung in the silence, and all four of the other council members fixed their stares on our friend: Telem, Arey, Aurora, and Igig. I was honestly terrified for our fool.

But what if it really was one of them, and he was about to attack Kyle and... Truthfully, I couldn’t rule out any of those four — though the first two seemed especially unlikely. Aurora would hardly involve herself in schemes like that; as if she needed the aggravation. As for Igig, I remembered what Kalanu had said — that upstart would never take such a risk.

If anything, I’d have suspected Gugalan of slipping the powder to himself, just to cast suspicion on his colleagues. But of course I kept that thought to myself — my number isn’t L5.

“We’ll deal with this, but not now and not here,” Gugalan himself broke the silence. “Let’s not waste time!” he commanded, striding briskly toward me. “The check requires a special machine, which we keep at our residence.” He paused, then reluctantly turned to the other eights. “Who will stand as witness to the check?”

Oh, how it must sting for him — to look at them and wonder whether one of them wanted him dead. If only Kyle had kept that gaping mouth of his shut!

Igig eagerly stepped forward, but Gugalan waved him off with a laugh.

“Mr. Igig, calm yourself. Do you imagine that merely because you found these children, you’ve become their personal keeper? Or is it just me, or do you need a vacation?”

Igig scowled, glaring at him resentfully, his pale cheeks flushing. I smirked, hoping he noticed. He’d do better to keep an eye on Jem — I had no use for his help. And while every gaze was fixed on him, Aurora darted forward.

“I’ll be the witness.”

Gugalan pressed his lips together in displeasure, but to my surprise, he agreed.

“You’ll find this instructive, Lady Aurora. Women rarely have any notion of how the world really works.”

With that cheerful conclusion, he ushered us out of the hall. Our friends’ bewildered eyes flashed past, and the massive doors boomed shut behind us.

The aitalites had no fondness for machinery or electricity — I had noticed that long ago. So it came as no surprise that we had to descend on foot, without elevators or escalators. On an empty stomach, that was quite the entertainment, and I scarcely dared contemplate the climb back up.

I had long since lost count of the floors we passed. It seemed the residence had more levels below ground than above. And it was far colder down here, too — I tugged my sweater sleeves down over my hands, pulled up my collar, and cursed myself for wearing shorts. How had half-naked Gugalan and Aurora in her flimsy wrap not frozen solid?

They kept silent the entire way. Neither looking at me, nor at each other. Only Gugalan’s loud snorting and the soft rustle of Aurora’s wings betrayed them.

When we crossed the stairwell for the tenth time, I noticed an enormous spectral chain stretched along the floor, its links half a meter tall, winding down the corridor like the spine of some ancient serpent.

“That’s for Enrira, Gugalan explained, catching my glance.” The only thing that can hold the whelp. If it weren’t for that chain…

He let the words trail off ominously, leaving me to imagine for myself the horrors that freedom for the “whelp” might unleash.

Aurora swept quickly past without sparing the chain a glance.

Passing through that floor as well, we found ourselves in a small, damp, dark room, and only then did it dawn on me how easy it would be for someone to do away with me down here. Or, come to think of it, with Aurora too.

Or perhaps with Gugalan instead?

Our eternal companions—the blue orbs—flared to life. In their unsteady, flickering glow, the outlines of a strange contraption emerged, something like the invention of a dentist who had once worked in a tattoo parlor and, before that, tortured people for a living. There was a chair, clamps for the hands, wires, and even a glass ball perched on a stand.

“This is the invention of the incomparable Dedar, one of the greatest eitalites!” Gugalan declared proudly. — Dedar was not the first to dream of harnessing magic as an energy source, but he was the first to actually pull it off. That brilliant discovery turned the whole world of the eitalites upside down!

“Wouldn’t it be simpler to use electricity?” I tried to bring him back down to earth. — Or do you, apparently, still not know what that is?

Gugalan shook his heavy head and regarded me with something perilously close to pity.

“You poor creature! If you’re seriously trying to compare magic and electricity, you know nothing about the world! But we’re not here

to discuss your ignorance. We're here to find out what force truly lies hidden inside you."

After the last incident with Kyle, and everything that happened at breakfast today, I was hardly eager to become better acquainted with my hidden power. Who knew whom else it might hurt.

"It's completely painless," Gugalan assured me, drawing closer to the contraption. — In fact, allow me to demonstrate.

He lowered himself into the chair, rested his powerful arms on the armrests, and gave Aurora a nod, though his eyes never ceased tracking her every movement. Aitalita fluttered up to him and brushed the manacles fixed to the armrests with a light touch — they clamped shut at once, binding Gugalan fast. Though only his arms were secured, it struck me that he was now utterly at their mercy.

Aurora was not done yet. Approaching the invention's control panel, she threw her full weight against the protruding levers of the ancient apparatus. Evidently she meant to bind Gugalan even further, and I was tempted to lend a hand to so worthy a task. The mechanism groaned, and sparks raced along the wires trailing from the chair. Gugalan's eyes shone white.

Then, all at once, light bloomed within the glass sphere. It was a strange sight — a round, hovering orb, like the blue globes of the ait lamps, yet a pure white radiance poured from its core while its edges darkened to the hue of smoke. The luminous sphere swelled to fill nearly the whole space beneath the glass dome, and I began to fear the fragile shell would shatter at any moment. But it showed no such intention, holding the glow safely within.

Gugalan looked perfectly composed, even at ease. I studied him — not a flicker of discomfort or pain crossed his face. Seated there in his restraints, channeling his magic into the glass sphere, he seemed to feel

nothing amiss at all. Unless I am mistaken in believing the sensation should resemble having your blood drained from you by the liter?

“See? It’s all quite simple,” he said, turning to me again as Aurora pulled the levers back and released the handcuffs. — Only by means of this mechanism can we discover what you’re truly made of. How much of one of us you really are.

“Less than you think, freak.”

He rose and stepped aside to make room for me. After a moment’s hesitation, I stepped forward anyway and sank into the chair. It felt awkward and still rather frightening — the seat hard, tall, and cold. I had barely laid my hands on the armrests when Gugalan clamped my wrists. The metal burned my skin like ice, and the cuffs adjusted themselves to the size of my arms, gripping them fast. Without a moment’s delay, Gugalan had already moved to the control panel and raised his enormous hands above it. I tensed, watching him warily. Aurora managed to give me an encouraging smile.

It’s just a test. Like listening to your heart or checking your ears…

Pain hurled me upward. My insides were seared, and the fire began to spread — crushing, squeezing, burning me alive from within. I was thrown back against the seat, but my hands were firmly locked in the cuffs, which had already grown red-hot.

Trapped!

I tried to wrench my hands free of the vise, but my body grew weaker with every passing moment. The pain left me unable to think. My heart hammered. My mouth filled with blood, and tears streamed from my eyes.

I couldn’t scream. The pain was breaking my bones.

I was dying.

My body began jerking in the chair as though from electric shocks. The back of my head thudded against the headrest, and still I senselessly yanked at my arms, trying to tear free.

I couldn’t breathe.

White sparks burst and glittered before my eyes. At some point my mouth flew open and I screamed.

But no sound came out.

Then, all at once, it stopped. The handcuffs fell away from my wrists, and I pitched forward. My body was still shaking violently, yet it felt paralyzed — I could neither feel it nor move it. Blood streamed from my mouth and nose. All I could hear was a ringing in my ears, and soon even that began to fade. The cold, the hard chair — gone.

Then everything else faded too.

Number T23. Hal

“I’m dead, aren’t I? I whispered, standing with my eyes closed, feeling the water lap softly at my feet.”

Strength had flooded back into me; I felt calm, safe. I didn’t even want to think about where my poor, broken body lay now, or what they were doing with it, and the thought that this time I might stay here forever filled me with a strange contentment. Kyuruk was back there with Kyle and Jem — they’d find their own way home. And to hell with all the eitalites combined — I wanted nothing more to do with them, couldn’t trust them for a single moment. They had killed me.

I opened my eyes and turned around. Behind me stood my beautiful companion, looking like a woman of about forty, yet every bit as lovely as she’d been as a girl. I walked over to her unhurriedly, my feet sinking into the loose sand, and embraced her without hesitation, pressing her tightly to me. She was a little shorter than I, with soft arms and black hair falling to her waist. She wore a simple white dress, bare-shouldered and almost floor-length. It was the one she always appeared in, whatever age she took on.

“I hope this time I don’t come back, I added fervently, but the woman gently drew away from me and took me by the shoulders. Her green eyes were like the crowns of trees, or something else just as beautiful. She shook her head as she looked at me, and I stubbornly nodded.”

“I don’t want to go back. Do you have any idea what they did to me? Strapped me to a chair and ran currents through my body” they nearly killed me! Or perhaps they already did. I’m a thorn in the Council’s side, so they decided to be rid of me — swiftly and cleanly. Then they’ll spin my friends some tale about how I failed their test. They’re perfectly capable of it.

The woman shook her head once more, then took my hands in both of hers and pressed them to her lips. How sweet she was! I had never met anyone like her in my own world.

“I want to stay here forever, with you,” I whispered passionately. — To hell with the real world. Here, with you, everything is so much better.

Then a violent wave of nausea surged through me, along with a dull ache in my stomach, as though I’d been kicked. Oh no! I doubled over and crumpled onto the sand. Weakness and pain flooded back into my body, and the world around me was slowly fading to black.

I growled and squeezed my eyes shut against the rage and agony, while the woman knelt beside me, gripping my shoulders and pressing her forehead to my cheek. I tried to reach for her, but in the darkness I could see nothing — I only raked my fingers through the sand. Cold. Coarse sand.

I choked and broke into coughing, trembling with weakness and pain. Hands seized my shoulders again, but they bore no resemblance to those of the mute girl.

“Oh, T23! You’re awake! Praise Katu! Praise Katu, you’re alive!”

I couldn’t catch my breath, couldn’t even lift myself — I simply lay there on the stone floor, in a puddle of my own blood. Aurora bent over me, her wings chattering right beside my ear. Eitalita was breathing fast and anxiously, repeatedly trying to help me sit up, but she lacked the strength. She truly is terribly frail.

At last, with some effort, I managed to lower myself to the ground and lean against the stone wall. My forehead throbbed and bled — I must have struck it when I fell. Blood smeared nearly my whole face, and soaked my college hoodie as well. I must have looked like a lunatic, or some walking corpse.

My body still trembled faintly, yet I was burning hot, sweat trickling down my face. The fire inside me was gradually cooling, but the pain lingered, though duller now. My nose was blocked, so I breathed through my mouth, my lungs still seizing with every gasp. Aurora dabbed at my face with a handkerchief, murmuring ever so softly, like a lullaby.

Little by little I returned to myself, and the more the weakness receded, the more fury and frustration swelled within me. I could have stayed in the Land of Blue Dandelions with that silent girl! Why had they dragged me back? They had meant to kill me! I glanced at my scorched wrists, then looked across the room to where Gugalan stood.

“You knew!” I cried with hatred, flecks of blood scattering from my lips with every word. “You knew this would happen! You nearly killed me — so go on, finish it now, before anyone comes down here! I hate you, cursed Eits!”

Another fit of coughing seized me, and I pressed my fist to my mouth. I had felt wretched plenty of times before — after fights, after blackouts — but never this bad. My head kept spinning, nausea rising in me. My chilled hands shook, and nothing I did could still them.

“We didn’t… didn’t want to,” came a voice from the corner where Gugalan stood.

I couldn’t see his face, but his voice was so stunned, so bewildered, that I almost believed him. He hadn’t wanted it, of course he hadn’t! All the Eits are scoundrels and liars, and the ones on the council more than any of them.

“T23, dear,” Aurora said, and I suddenly remembered that she had been there with me all this time, — we never meant for it to turn out this way. The machine was supposed to measure the strength of your magic. That’s harmless for eitalits and defectives. But you turned out to be neither.

The revelation stunned me so completely that I even forgot my pain for a moment, staring blankly into Aurora's grey eyes. What was she saying? If I wasn't human, wasn't an eitalit, wasn't even a defective—then what on earth could I be?

"You are exactly half human, and exactly half eitalit," she went on, and sighed softly.

A profound silence fell. I wanted to laugh at such an absurdity, but all I could manage was to part my lips slightly. What had she said? I couldn't have misheard, could I? But then—how? My parents...

"We should have discovered this ages ago!" Gugalan burst out from his corner. — Why was the truth buried? Who are his parents? Where are they now? And did his adoptive parents know all along?..

He carried on like that, hurling questions into the void, but I couldn't hear a word of it anymore. I looked at Aurora with pleading eyes, and she met my gaze with perfect calm. Please, let her say it isn't true! I have a family—a real family!

"I know who his parents are," Aurora said unexpectedly, then added at once: — I recognized that energy signature.

"You picked up his energy signature?.." Gugalan echoed, while Aurora pressed on, her eyes never leaving me:

"Your father's name was Teylok, and he was an eytalit. Powerful, hot-tempered… extraordinary. He could set an entire forest ablaze with a snap of his fingers. A seat on the council was all but his. And then he met your mother. A human. Utterly ordinary in every way. As far as I know, she died shortly after you were born, and Teylok disappeared, hiding himself away in one of the worlds. I never heard of him again."

If I could have, I would have clamped my hands over my ears rather than listen to this nonsense, and gone on believing that I had a real, normal family. They were waiting for me at home, in the human world — people with neither a secondary power nor a secondary form.

Father worked at a pharmacy; mother looked after children. They were my parents, not…

Yet the more I dwelled on my family, the more vividly it came back to me how I had always sensed my difference from them. I didn't even resemble them; my very temperament set me apart — a cuckoo in their nest, plainly so — but never, not until this very moment, had I attached any importance to it.

And now the blindfold had fallen away, and everything fell into place.

"That's impossible!" I cried out, foolishly, like a child. — I'm not… How could that happen? How?

Gugalan came slowly over to us, regarding me with a mingling of pity and remorse. Never would I have guessed him capable of such a look.

"Lady Aurora, are you certain this is truly his son?"

"Of course!" she answered at once. — I knew Teylok well. We were friends. I could have picked out his energy signature from a hundred others.

I looked at her with something close to hope. She had known my father—my real father? Would she tell me more about him?

"Perhaps you'll return and share what you find?" Aurora asked Gugalan. "I think T23 needs a little time to take it all in. I'll stay with him."

Gugalan said nothing; he only studied me, and there was no hostility left in his eyes, no suspicion, nothing unpleasant at all. If anything, it was only now that he seemed, all at once, to regard me as nearly his equal.

"Yes, of course. Thank you, Lady Aurora. T23… please, forgive me."

Without another word he walked slowly away, and his clumsy shadow lingered in the room for a long while.

When his footsteps had faded down the stairs, Aurora sighed and drew her hand gently over my hair, the way a true mother might. The rustle of her wings was the only sound left in the darkened room.

“You have her look about you,” she said suddenly, softly, “and yet you are the very image of Teylok. He was a friend of the council, and my… my dearest friend. He had the same emerald eyes, and when he summoned his fire magic, sparks seemed to crackle within them.” She smiled sadly and laced her fingers together. “Your mother was an ordinary human—I had never before met so simple and pure a creature. We never understood why he chose her for his wife. Teylok turned his back on the world of the eytalites, and on all of us.”

I tried to take in her words, yet I still couldn’t accept that she was speaking about my parents. Impossible! My eyes stung, my body throbbed with pain, my lungs burned. Had I possessed the strength, I would have argued with her—I would have screamed, laughed, refused to believe it until the very last moment. But I was helpless, shattered.

Aurora reached toward me once more, then stopped. Her thin claws hung frozen inches from my face.

“When I first saw the Director’s application and your photograph, I knew almost at once it was you,” she said softly, in a coaxing tone, as though confiding a secret. “I sensed a familiar energy, recognized familiar eyes… After so many years, I have finally found my Teylok’s son—and you fell straight into my hands. It was I who asked that you be sent here as quickly as possible. The Medullin boys didn’t let me down, as usual.”

I listened to her, falling under the spell of her melodic voice, losing myself in those enormous eyes. Aurora’s hand lay motionless in my hair, the tips of her claws barely grazing my skin. For a minute or two

she fell silent, studying my face as though seeing it for the first time. I tried to picture Teylok and his wife. My real parents. Nothing came.

“I searched for you,” Aurora’s voice seemed to freeze, its gentle spring-drip hardening into jagged icicles. “All seventeen years. Teylok lost your mother, but that isn’t enough. For trading me away for an ordinary, worthless human, I will take his son from him as well.”

Names

Hal

Before I could work out what she meant, a luminous blue sphere came hurtling down at me from the ceiling.

It showed no sign of slowing, and I didn’t even try to defend myself. There was no time. All I managed was to blink.

The sphere slammed into me, nearly tearing straight through, and pinned me against the wall. Darkness flooded my eyes; my breath caught. When the sphere exploded, the world vanished entirely.

Again.

Aurora probably believed she’d killed me, because when I forced my eyes open, the basement was already empty.

I tried to move, but couldn’t. A burn stung and throbbed somewhere in my stomach, my clothes smoldered and stank, and countless small, deep gashes from the sphere’s shards bled so fiercely it felt as though I were being torn apart alive. I didn’t even have the strength to groan.

My body was shutting down. Switching off. Every kind of pain merged into one vast, all-consuming wave that paralyzed me and drained the life from me. Little by little, I was losing my connection to my own flesh, as if I were drifting free of it. Weakness washed over me and my vision dimmed, but with the last of my strength I clung to my broken body.

I don’t want to die in a dark basement.

Not after learning that I didn’t have a single soul who cared about me, in any of the worlds.

Not after learning that I was a half-breed—a mistake of nature that should never have existed.

Not after learning that innocent people had suffered because of me.

A dreadfully inconvenient time to die.

I tried to move a hand. Any hand. I won't claim that every bone in my body was broken, but…

A searing pain tore through my body, and I coughed up blood. There lay my arm—my left one, at least, still twitching. I dragged it across the floor toward me and, not on the first try, nor even the second, finally managed to work my fingers into the pocket of my hoodie. Please, let them have survived the explosion…

Something rustled as it tumbled to the floor, and I turned my head just enough to see what it was. Tablets of nikho-oxylaxicillin—the ones I always carried with me.

Back in my old life, in another world, Kyle had stolen them for me from the Lady Doctor's office at the cost of his own teeth. Ever since, I'd kept them close, in case I ever had to face the eites. Or recover from one of their attacks. Well, that moment had come, and I still couldn't believe it.

Using my teeth, I pried a tablet free and swallowed it whole. It caught halfway down my parched throat—painful, awkward—but I had little choice in the matter. All right, then: how long before it took effect and turned me from a half-dead wreck into some mighty hero?

Or would the pills prove powerless against this?

I prayed not. I still had so much left to do.

I had to get up.

I had to make my way to the hall and tell the council what had happened. I had to stop Aurora before she killed anyone else.

Aurora—kill. How absurd it sounded. She would have been the very last person I'd ever suspect. And not just of coming after me—it was probably she who had slipped the powder into Gugalan's glass as well.

So this was who had triggered "yet another of the eyts' breakdowns." This was why they had been "searching" for someone. Behind

every calamity to befall the eytalites stood Aurora. Could it all truly stem from my real father? Was this lunatic genuinely prepared to torment all of humanity simply because some man had cast her aside?!

The thoughts made my head ache all the more. My body longed to let its eyes fall shut, to sink into sleep—or perhaps into oblivion, or death. Truthfully, that wouldn't have been so terrible, but I couldn't shake the knowledge that this dangerous maniac had returned to the council hall, where Kyle and Jem and everyone else still were. I couldn't die and abandon them to her.

Bit by bit, movement crept back into my limbs. The pain no longer slayed me outright, yet it reverberated through my bones at the slightest motion, and I honestly feared my body might give way and shatter. Gingerly I braced against my hands and pushed myself up a little. There—good. My left eye had swollen shut and stung, struck by a shard of the sphere. The other one opened, though I could scarcely make out anything—the eytalites' spheres had vanished, and the room glowed dimly with a few candles on the tables. I rose to my feet, paused to steady myself, and managed at last to straighten.

Just look what a champion I am! I can move—I can even stand!

And I could barely breathe. My legs trembled and buckled beneath me, but I pressed on, clinging to the walls. There was no other way. Who else would open the council's eyes to Aurora and her deeds? I wondered what she had told them, why I still hadn't appeared. That predator had surely concocted some convincing tale. And they had believed her, as they always did.

With every step, my legs grew steadier. Behind me stretched a bloody trail, and I could see what a dreadful state my clothes were in. Yet the pain had all but faded, and strength was flooding back into my battered body faster than I could have hoped.

Then I caught sight of something achingly familiar glowing on Dedar's vehicle. I drew closer. Sure enough — a slirium orb, no bigger than a large grape. I had no idea what part it played here, but it came loose from its metal socket without resistance. Merely touching the crystal was unpleasant, almost painful, but it might prove useful.

I swept the room for anything else that might aid me, then turned and left. A long climb lay ahead, and the only thing I could pray for was that Aurora wouldn't murder anyone else in the meantime.

Enrira's howl echoed through every floor of the tower. His chains clanged here and there, punctuated by his roars. I had already climbed five flights of stairs, hurrying toward the council hall, but the little wolf was nowhere to be seen. My confidence grew with every step. The pain and weakness were ebbing away, replaced by warmth and vigor coursing through my veins. Bloody footprints still marked the stairs behind me, and it unsettled me that the bleeding hadn't stopped, even though I scarcely felt any pain.

By the time I raced up the final staircase, I was brimming with magic and power, ready to face an entire army of blue orbs under Aurora's command. Enrira's howl rang clearly even here, and an uneasiness crept over me at the thought that he might, after all, have broken free of his chains.

Without slowing, I stormed into the council hall at full speed, nearly tearing the doors from their hinges.

Everything here was so serene, so idyllic, that I felt as though I had stepped into another reality. The entire council was assembled—all except Gugalan, though Aurora was present. And seated at the same table with them were Kyle and Jem.

When I burst into the hall, they had been quietly discussing something, like friends chatting over a picnic in a park. But the instant

they saw me, they fell abruptly silent, then began leaping from their seats.

“T23!”

“T23, what happened?!”

Jem vaulted over the table and rushed to me, seizing my shoulders in horror. Her eyes had gone enormous, like a five-year-old’s—I had never seen her like that. She was frightened for me—genuinely frightened. I looked at her face and found I couldn’t utter a single word about what had happened in the basement. Nothing about what I had learned about myself. Not now. And not here.

I had only just pulled away from Jem and turned toward the table when Aurora beat me to it by a couple of seconds.

She shot up into the air and, in the same fluid motion, flung her hand to the side. A silver bolt of lightning burst from her fingers with an electric crackle and struck Arey.

The Aeytalite, who had seemed so unremarkable, so ordinary and familiar in appearance, had only enough time to raise a hand in response. For a heartbeat, a golden, fiery chain whipped up around him, materializing straight out of thin air. Whether it managed to shield him or to strike back, I couldn’t say for certain. But in that brief moment it transformed him, making him look like a true warrior. Yes—that was precisely what I managed to think in those few instants. Arey looked magnificent, and I was glad I had never had to face him in battle.

He died where he stood, his body toppling from the chair. No one had time to recover, or even to grasp what had happened — Jem didn’t so much as turn around, going on studying me. And that was only the beginning.

Blue orbs — the Eits — swooped down from the ceiling, just like the one that had nearly killed me. They hurled themselves at the

council members, sparing only Aurora. Telem dove under the table and hastily barricaded himself with chairs. Igig took to the air, his wings nearly demolishing everything around him. He tried to snatch Aurora, but the giant dragonfly was far nimbler than the overgrown eagle and slipped past him with ease. And her round minions were already converging on Igig.

Kyle bounded toward us in leaps, head ducked, clutching his jaw with both hands for some reason. I stepped in front of Jem to shield her from everything around, but she abruptly shoved me aside, irritated.

“You’d better hide behind me!” she cried, her eyes tracking Igig’s efforts to dodge the orbs.

She must have lost her mind with terror. I turned around and instantly took a bolt of lightning full in the chest.

I fell right on top of Jem, and for a few seconds saw nothing around me — as though I had gone blind. I couldn’t feel her beneath me. Amid the howls of Enrira, which kept darting all over the residence, the beating of Igig’s wings, and the rest of the din, I distinctly heard Aurora’s voice — angry, furious, shrill:

“This time you’ll die once and for all! And everyone else with you! I…”

Her voice dissolved into one continuous shriek. My ears popped, I clenched my teeth, and when I opened my eyes, I nearly turned inside out again.

Aurora shot upward, dark crimson drops streaming from her like heavy rain. Kyle, meanwhile, was spitting, and beside his boots I caught sight of a thin, bloodied appendage lying on the floor—a twig with three little twigs branching off it…

All those jokes about how Kyle could bite someone’s arm off if you weren’t careful…

“You all right?” Jem asked me curtly.

She was holding me upright, one arm locked around my waist, the other pressed flat against my chest. I noted in passing that her fingers were slick with blood—most likely mine. I nodded, my eyes on Aurora. Perhaps thanks to the pills I hadn't blacked out and could barely feel any pain, but that dose wouldn't hold for long. Without wasting a moment, I pulled out the strip and, hardly looking, swallowed a second tablet whole. One remained, plus a small half of a fourth. Would it be enough?

"What are you kissing?" Kyle hissed.

His whole mouth was smeared with the dark blood of the eitalite; it ran down his chin and spattered his shirt entirely. But those round, frightened eyes belonged to the good old Kyle, and no one else. I paid him no attention, thinking only of how to reach Aurora. True, she was weak now—her magical power just spent, an arm lost on top of it. We had to strike this very instant.

Igig, thank Kat, was thinking the same thing. Seeing Aurora weakened, he streaked toward her at full wingbeat, claws spread wide. We had done all the work for him; all that remained was to seize her with his bare hands, without the slightest effort…

Jem and I both flinched at its birdlike screech. Igig tumbled through the air, slammed into the wall, and beat his wings furiously to keep from falling. Gray feathers and droplets of blood scattered around him. He hadn't managed to dodge the blue orb.

He landed clumsily on the table and wobbled there. I could see a large dark stain spreading across his vest, a charred hole burned into the fabric. The Eit's legs trembled, and he held his wings spread wide for balance, refusing to fold them. His face had gone paler than ever, yet he kept his eyes lifted toward Aurora. Would he be any use at all now?

Standing beside me, Jem let out a breath, and I could almost physically feel how desperately she wanted to go to him.

Fortunately, I was back in the fight. The pain had all but faded, and I straightened up with renewed confidence.

“Give me a boost, would you?” I asked Kyle — but no one heard me.

Glass shattered with a deafening crash, showering the whole floor with shards. I saw the orb-Eits scatter in panic while Igig darted sharply aside to keep anything from falling on him. Beneath the table, Telem shrieked, unable to make sense of what was happening. Arey’s body vanished under a heap of multicolored fragments.

Against the pale blue sky, a disheveled figure appeared — Kalanu. He let loose a war cry and came charging at us, legs pumping as he ran. The daggers strapped to his gloves gleamed on his claws, catching the blue glow of the orbs.

“Oh, Kata,” flashed through my mind.

I still had no idea whether reinforcements had arrived, or whether Aurora had simply been waiting for backup — and the uncertainty left me uneasy.