

„Existence is perhaps the secret of the entire Universe, which we may never be able to decipher. What kind of miracle does it take for billions of molecules to come together in such a way in which that mass can breathe, feel, create, and love? We can perhaps call it the soul, which provides the starting engine for the whole, but a question arises. What kind of soul is it that arbitrarily imprisons another set of molecules, uses it for its own amusement, or just kills it, because it believes that it will make it more?“

The author

Chapter 1

Vultures rode the dry sky, circling above an acacia tree providing some relief for those lying underneath from the fervid afternoon of the savanna. The acacia tree's fern-like leaves cast a large shadow umbrella for two men seeking shelter from the savanna's intense afternoon heat which caused every drop of water to boil to their very core. However, they did not choose this tree by chance, as it also offered a sturdy support for a shoddy birdwatching rack, even though the two men were not carrying cameras.

One of them was holding a double barrelled rifle, cleaning it with a tiny brush, going through every little slot and hatch because the African sand could get into everywhere. From his chin straight onto the barrel a small drop of sweat rolled down, turning to steam almost immediately. The man also pulled in and out the .600 ammo in the barrel several times ensuring it wouldn't get stuck when the time called for death. The whole land was almost dead silent, only the wind made some noise as it softly pierced through the leaves of the acacia.

"I really don't get it, why are you cleaning it? We're not going to use them." The younger man broke the silence.

"Are you serious?" Andrew turned his gaze towards his young partner, who could have been his son had he

been in Ghana twenty-two years ago. “I’ve said it already, Ababio, we have to prepare for everything. Just, just go through the plan again.” Swapping his hands towards his partner as if he were a bothersome fly.

“Alrighty, Mr. Andy.”

“And please stop calling me that. My name is Andrew, not Andy.” Wiping several drops of sweat from his grey hair with his fingers clogging into his ear, missing an almost two-centimeter piece from the tip. That wound caused by a small mongoose always reminded him never underestimate the prey, never get fooled by its size. Not to mention the ones with tons of weight walking the endless savanna in herds.

Andrew put aside the rifle then reached to the holster on his right, he pulled out a revolver, took out the .50 ammo from the cylinder and cleaned the entire gun with the brush, just like he did with the rifle. After the process, he kissed the gun behind the hammer and put the ammunition back, which was so large that only five could fit into the cylinder. Andrew always went through this almost a ritual-like cleaning session, since this M500 revolver saved his life more than once.

“Sorry Mr. Andrew, I still don’t get it. I think we should have hired more people for this job” Andrew remained silent. “The herd isn’t small and the heat is overwhelming and the animals are more on the edge in these conditions. I think I’ll call Kojo to come here and...

“Look through the binoculars!” With a raised right hand, fingers clutching into fist, Andrew looked at Ababio swallowing a fistful and following his superior without question. “Look at north-east direction. What can you see?”

“I, I can see two men installing the transformer to the steel cages”

“Not quite. You can see James and Massimiliano. We’ve been working together for years now, and they have never ever let me down. Look at south-west direction!”

“Y-yes sir.”

“You see not just two men, you see Emeric and Carlos laying down the charges. Carlos saved me from the claws of a tiger in Sumatra, and from a cayman in South-America. Do you understand now?” More drops of sweat were falling down from Ababio’s forehead making clear he had no idea what Andrew was trying to say with all this. “We are not colleagues, having a nice cup of coffee at our ten minutes break at the office. We are brothers-in-arms who help each other in every situation.”

“I, I see”

“And now you are one of us.” Taking a deep breath Ababio looked at his boss and smiled but Andrew’s mouth stayed in a straight line just asking for the binoculars and the plans instead.

“Is everything all right?” Ababio asked.

“Let’s go over the plan once more.” Andrew took out a large paper from a plastic roller and spread the A1 sized paper on the rack’s floor cracking under the hunter as he made himself comfortable. “So, these are the cages” Pointed at two black rectangles on the paper. “Two, 200x200 steel boxes, underneath them there is an eight-inch-thick insulation. At the side of the boxes there are several transformers individually capable of generating several kV voltages. So, why do we need this?” Andrew was looking at the boy.

“Well, so well...” It really seemed he had hard time finding the right words. “Because the customer doesn’t want to have any bullet marks on the products since the customer wants everything: meat, skin, bones. So, we’re executing them with electricity like the white man does with pigs.”

“Good. Massimiliano, how you’re doing with the cabling?” Raising a walkie-talkie to his mouth the hunter spoke to his partner.

“Everything is going according to the plan, Andrew.”

“Thanks. Now, back to the plan. What are these?” Andrew was now pointing at the points located around the cages which were arranged in several concentric circles of increasing diameter.

“These are satchel charges, which are...”

“Which are, despite of their names...”

“Despite of their names they are not real satchel charges, more like large firecrackers and they emit strong light and sound as they detonate to scare off the herd.”

“Nicely done. Go on.”

“The charges are activated at a specific time and sequence to drive the basically scattered herd further and further in, straight towards the cages.”

“I’m impressed. What’s this?” Andy put his finger on two larger rectangles.

“That’s plan B. Those two stations would detonate the charges at once, if something went wrong”

“No mistakes so far. What else?”

“What else?” Scratching his head and looking at the floor Ababio said nothing. Andrew was staring at him and his watch waiting for the answer, then he gave up.

“No cubs in the herd!” Shouted so loud even Ababio’s eyebrows froze for a moment. “This is why we’ve come here because we’ve finally found a herd, where there is no specimen younger than three years old. A cub can be frightened easily, inexperienced and doesn’t follow the herd and the mother will do anything just to protect her baby.”

“I don’t understand, really. Why would a mother-cub pair be so dangerous?”

“Ababio,” Clutching his teeth and wrinkling his eyebrows Andrew turned his whole face looking deep into his inferior’s eyes. “You live here, in Africa, and you don’t even know that much? The probability is damn high

that the mother is also the matriarch. If she goes after her cub, the rest will follow her and the whole plan could go to waste because of one mother-cub pair. Carlos, what's the situation with the charges?"

"We're almost finished. Emeric has covered them all with sand, they won't notice a thing."

"Great, thank you. Splendid job!"

With his binoculars in his hands Andrew examined the terrain once more. The cages were set, the charges were under the sand covered and waited only for the signal. Carlos and Emeric were already up in their hunting lodge, facing the opposite direction of his, and there was a third lodge with James and Massimiliano, facing Carlos' lodge forming a large triangle to observe the entire operational area.

Andrew put down his binoculars and with a small smile on his face looked at the plan once more feeling some kind of satisfaction, though he would rather call this pride. A mother could feel such way when her baby stands on two legs making the first steps on this bumpy way called life. Andrew let out a long breath since no one has ever done even a similar thing and he was only in the middle of his life.

"I still think we should have hired more people"

"Damn it, Ababio. Believe me, those four are worth twenty men, and besides, there's one more thing."

"What?"

“If the herd went on a rampage and we would be here with, I don’t know, with a hundred men, well, the chance would be higher for the action to have fatal casualties. If something went wrong.”

“Come on, what would go wrong?”

“Anything! And then forty enraged animal would be running around, trampling everything and everyone in their way. And the bigger the number of people...

“The more human casualties would be.” Ababio slapped on his forehead.

“Then the rangers would be here and shoot all the animals for killing people to stop further deaths. And after that, and point out my words we simply cannot come back to finish the job since there would be no more quantity.”

“Gee, boss, I haven’t even thought about that.”

“No sweat, kid.” He sighed gently. “At least you’re asking, which is some kind of intelligence.” Andrew saw Ababio’s mouth bending to an upward curve, not if the boy’s feeling mattered to him much. The team almost finished the preparation, and Andrew looked around the endless savanna once more, hopefully for the last time before the action. No rangers were in sight, only vultures flying in circle up in the blue sky as if they knew what was coming, though they’ll get nothing from this hunt if everything goes well.

“Andrew, I think they’re coming.”

“I hear you, James. Let’s see.” Taking out his monocular from his pocket Andrew lift it to his eye and moved to a certain place. “You’re right, the moneybags are closing in.”

An army of giants appeared in the distance breaking the monotony of the undulating horizon. The matriarch walked proudly in front, fanned herself with her huge, napkin ears and scratched her deep-seated, bulging eyes with her snout. She was followed by thirty-nine African elephants, with an aunt, a brother-in-law, and also a young bull in the herd. Through the lens of the monocular Andrew could clearly see the bouncing of the small pebbles as the giants trembled with their steps even from this distance. He could hear the rumbling of their stomachs, this strange savannah symphony that could be heard from miles away, not only by the other elephants, but also by all the other animals, signalling that they were approaching, so that they would not stand in their way. This multitude of more than one hundred and sixty tons would trample everything in their path.

Andrew only named the matriarch MBP, which stood for MoneyBagPrime. The grey-haired hunter licked the corner of his mouth, seeing the herd approaching and already feeling the millions of dollars in his rough grasp.

Then the forty-year-old matriarch stopped for a moment looking towards the cages with her large, black eyes, raising her snout and sniffed the air. Andrew's fingers tightened on his monocular. He swallowed. After

a few minutes of sniffing, MBP finally lowered her nose and continued on. Andrew sighed, fortunately his men covered the cages well with various tree branches and leaves, making the traps look like the wind had blown the dead plant parts into a pile. MBP went further but progressed more slowly.

Andrew almost crushed the monocular in his hand, palms dripping with sweat. It just wasn't certain if the leader of the elephants slowed down because she sensed something or because she was simply tired. He put down the monocular and picked up the double-barrelled cracked to open it and insert the two .600 Nitro ammunition. *If he has to, he'll kill them all one by one by himself, even though the customer would pay significantly less.*

"Listen up! Load your guns. I give permission to plan C". The veteran Carlos, even Ababio knew what this was meant. Andrew's heart nearly crawled out of his chest and for a moment wondered if the others were following the herd's footsteps as intently as he was.

Ten minutes. Everybody got ten minutes of stress. According to Andrew's prior calculation that's how long it took for the army of giants to reach the edge of the system of the charges, the so-called zero point. Andrew put away the monocular for good since he could see it with his own eyes the herd had reached the point. Taking a joystick into his hands Andrew pushed the button on it, unleashing the chain reaction.

Explosion of light and dust covered the savanna breaking the land's equanimous silence. Despite the blinding dust curtain Andrew could see MBP raising her nose and shaking head, merely impossible for her to see even a lion in this flying fleck of dust. Her two daughters on her right and left ran away in the other directions with raised snouts. The family stirred up like a beehive, panic spreading like a virus confusing the elephants clearly not knowing what could have hit them. Andrew was smiling and the second section detonated.

The explosion stopped the members of the group moving to the right, the third part's explosion stopped those moving to the left from escaping. Then came the fourth section placed five meters before the very first section, and then the fifth, which was in front of the second, also five meters away. There was no stopping for the chain reaction.

The deafening noise and the blinding dust cloud really did their effect as the herd was getting closer and closer to the two metal cups of death. Andrew was watching, not making any sound, not picking up the walkie talkie and asking the others what they were seeing, how the cages were holding up. He just sat and watched as if he was in some kind of bizarre theatre. The specimens were bouncing to each other like billiard balls on this dry, dusty pool table and Andrew was the white ball. The hunter rested his hands on the rifle, though he could feel his own heartbeat at the tip of his fingers. *Just*

a few meters, just few more sections and the animals are theirs. But then something happened.

A small, grey figure burst out of the thick cloud of dust not following the family's movements. Andrew recognized it: it was a cub, a baby elephant barely a few months old. Despite of the burning sun, sweat froze on Andrew's skin. *How could they screw this up so much?* He specifically asked Carlos to find a family where there is no baby, but maybe Carlos had passed this very exciting task to the new boy Ababio.

In the flashing storm of his thoughts Andrew jumped down from the lodge holding the .600 rifle in his hands. *That damned cub was running towards the two control stations, to plan B, which would detonate the charges all at once.* But so far everything was going according to the plan which this blasted baby was putting in danger. The hunter ran. Andrew couldn't aim at the rushing elephant because of the flying dust. He had to get closer. Heart hammering on his chest, muscles stretched in his legs. His stomach was convulsed by that convulsive yet exhilarating feeling.

The thrill of the hunt. He was even grateful for this cub for reliving this feeling.

As the distance decreased, Andrew kept blowing out the air. Sniper technique. Making sure every muscle in his body is prepared for the aiming, saving precious seconds. The hunter was fifty meters away. Eyes on the target. Andrew put down his left knee on the ground.

Finger strained on the trigger when the ground disappeared under him.

Andrew opened his eyes. Just for a second he lost his consciousness though his heart was still pumping like a loose machine gun. Andrew didn't know where he was and what happened all he remembered was the baby elephant when he looked down on his leg. Blood was spilling out and a thirty-centimetre-long spike was hanging out from his own flesh. He did not realize what happened. His hand moved slowly along his torso and stopped at something below slightly to the right. Moving his gaze down, he trembled as a bloody spike was sticking out of his body. Still he didn't realize what happened. He looked around, twisting his head side to side like an owl seeing only a short sand wall, though looking on his right he could see spikes, lots of spikes, dug deep into the ground, so nothing could come out.

Finally, he realized: he was in an animal trap who knows when it got here and what kind of animal the poachers prepared it for. Then the pain kicked in, the overwhelming, grim pain. Andrew tried to call for help, but he couldn't. His breathing began to slow, the explosions and the trumpeting of the elephants were just noises in his ears, looking up at the sky the flying vultures, the Sun were just blurring spots before his eyes. The last breath was just a silent scream. Finally, everything went dark in front of him.

Chapter 2

“What an awful nightmare!” The thought pierced through his mind. Andrew stretched himself feeling like when he and his roommates found the janitor's hidden stash of brandy in the dormitory. He sat up and shook his head feeling like it was made of tons of steel. He rubbed his eyes slowly accepting the stimuli of the outside world, then looked down in front of him. This was not his bed he was laying on, but a bench, a worn, threadbare bench. It crossed his mind that maybe he should go back to sleep but he couldn't.

The bench stood in a narrow corridor, painted grey. He didn't want to scream, really wanted to, but as always he kept to himself since, during hundreds of hunts, he learned that no matter how painful a spider bite or a badger bite is, he mustn't make a sound about it, otherwise, the chosen game would run away. However, this was different. *Where the hell could he have been?*

Andrew got up from the bench trying to map the terrain, but could barely walk, feeling dizzy as the air was as heavy as if he had breathed in lead and as stuffy as if he had been in the Amazon rainforest in the hottest summer. He walked steadily forward down the long corridor bumping into the wall every now and then, though the end was not in sight. All he saw were benches and doors that he couldn't open. His last memory was

that he was lying in a trap, and now he was wandering aimlessly in this endless corridor. Door, bench, door, bench. It repeated like broken musical notes on a crumpled score, but not making any sound as the dead silence was even more disturbing than the worn off furniture. Andrew clutched his heart. He was wrong. *This was the nightmare.* Then out of the blue a voice interrupted his confused search.

“Come in” One of the doors opened making an unsettling, creaking noise. A deep, almost unearthly voice called to him from the door. Andrew just blinked, sweat frozen on his fingers as nothing could be seen on the other side of the door, for there was nothing but pitch-black darkness. “Come in” The voice reiterated.

“N-no...no!” Words came hardly onto Andrew’s lips.

“Come on in!”

“No! Who are you?” His jaw almost snapped as he clenched his teeth.

“Come on in!”

“No! Where am I?” Asked as his voice trembled.

“Oh, you are coming in!” Andrew's shirt began to ruffle as did his grey hair as if the wind was blowing. The quiet breeze suddenly picked up and the hunter came dangerously close to the dark void, as if it wanted to suck him in. Hanging to the door jamb, all the muscles in his arms and shoulders were tensed with splinters piercing

his fingers, but he couldn't hold on for long, the darkness was stronger and engulfed him.

It was dark. Andrew took a big, deep breath though the air was hard just like in the hallway, but at least he could breathe. He lived, at least he realized that somehow, somewhere, he was still alive. He could only open his eyes slowly, turning his gaze and looking around and to his surprise he was no longer in the narrow corridor, but in a spacious, tall hall. At the very top of the wall he noticed some rays of sunlight just about to enter through the tiny windows, lighting up the room as if it was just a candle in a cold cemetery.

In the hall, benches were lined up in two columns one behind the other, and the wall on the other side gave place to a platform and a pulpit. On the right side of the pulpit, two long pews lined up one behind the other, and it reminded Andrew mostly of a courtroom.

He looked around the room once more. The emptiness and speechless silence like the air was suffocatingly terrifying. Then he heard a noise, a squeak not so far away, like a grandmother is taking a seat in her old armchair after a busy day. The noise came from the two rows of benches on the right. Andrew turned his head that way but couldn't believe what he was seeing, rubbing his eyes several times.

Out of nowhere animals began to occupy the two rows of benches. Andrew froze, still staring at the bizarre event as a gazelle and salmon slowly sat down, a

dragonfly flew in, followed by a leopard, platypus and a lobster. The hunter puzzled how the salmon could breathe in this room without water, however the salmon just leaned on its two fins and looked at him with its gelatinous, puffy eyes. The scene did not end there.

An elephant, zebra, okapi, a rhinoceros, a wolf, and finally an orangutan occupied the second row of benches. After the animals had taken their seats a figure entered the huge room, a being that Andrew had never seen before.

“Fine. Now, that everyone is here, we can begin the trial.”

Andrew got a good look at the figure for himself, as its voice sounded oddly familiar to him. It was the one, this being, who called him through the door, that was almost sure since such a voice is not easily forgotten. He couldn't see the being's face well because it was covered by some sort of hood-like mask, only its eyes were visible, those deep-seated, sky-blue eyes. He couldn't see the being's body well either because its whole being was shrouded in a kind of vague, purple, constantly vibrating fog, and from that mist, however, he could make out both arms, and the shape of those hands, which were human, but as dark as the flashing wings of a bat in the moon light. The whole figure looked human, yet foreign. Andrew took a deep breath again, but the air glided to his lungs like ice shards.

“Who-who are you?” Lips tightened like jaws of a vise, Andrew asked.

“I’ve almost forgotten you. Please, have a seat.”

“Not until you, until...”

“I said sit!” The figure beckoned with his left hand, and the hunter found himself in the front row facing the pulpit. He tried to stand up, but he couldn't as if there was a magnet in the bench, and several fonts of steel beer in his bottom. “So, we can start by listening to the jurors” The figure turned to the animals who began their monologues.

The leopard spoke first growling and roaring with violent paw gesticulations as if it was telling the story of its life. The figure, like the other animals, nodded, giving Andrew a few stray glances. After the leopard came the zebra nickering so loudly that the whole hall echoed.

“I see, I see and that is horrible.” The creature, the being spoke as the zebra sprang to its feet and slammed down on the bench causing the entire room to shake. “I fully understand” Then came the lobster snapping its scissors and spinning around itself several times and between-times pointing its claws towards the hunter. Andrew blinked. *It really seemed that these beasts were telling something to each other but what. Stories, accusations?*

The elephant shook its head, the orangutan buried its face in its hands, the wolf snarled at Andrew. The figure sitting on the pulpit, who might have been a kind of

judge according to the hunter's explanation, just nodded. All the while Andrew pinched himself because he didn't want to believe that this could be a slice of any reality. It could only be a dream. It really seemed all the animals understood each other, even though they belonged to a completely different class and this strange figure understood them, too. Only he, the only human did not understand anyone or anything, what was going on here, why he was sitting here and no one else. Water was running down his forehead in drops, breathing harder and harder, heart pounded like a mustang. The whole room was spinning with the hunter.

“Enough!” Shouted as hard as he could, interrupting the dragonfly’s tale. “What is this whole circus? Why am I here? Why? Why do I have to listen to all these beasts?”

The two predators, the leopard and the wolf growled at Andrew at the same time.

“No need to be upset.” Spoke the figure.

“How can you say that? But whose king do you think you are playing the boss here?”

“I thought you would have figured out this riddle by now, because your intelligence is above the average.” Rising from the platform the figure headed towards Andrew, eyelids flapping like a hummingbird’s wing as the approaching creature was simply floating, having no legs. Andrew was beginning to regret speaking.

“Who are you?”

“I am called by many names: God, Allah, Odin, Brahma. Let it be enough that I am the Creator of the worlds.”

“N-no.” The only human could just moan.

“Those present are accusing you, dear Andrew, of extremely serious things.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“You did not treat the animals kindly and I put it mildly.” The figure, the Creator, was floating up and down speaking to him.

“No...” All muscles tensed in his body feeling like a deer being hunted by a pack of wolves.

“What happened? Why can't you speak? What happened to that arrogant tone?” Andrew could only swallow. “I tell you, the jurors know a lot about your adventures, although this word wraps your actions in a kind of literary illusion. Sure, we know what you did to the orangutans in Sumatra. We know about your ocean and sea works; we know how many stuffed heads are hanging in your ballroom. We know what you've been up to with the elephants in Ghana.”

“I-I don’t, I cannot believe you.”

“Maybe the last one is the most serious.”

“This cannot be the reality.”

“You believe and think what you like.” The Creator suddenly grabbed Andrew's shoulder, who felt an unprecedented, almost unearthly burning pain.

“No! Not! Please let me go!” Tried to push the squeezing hand off him but as soon as he touched it, it burned him right away.

“No? How many animals could have begged you for the same mercy? But you were too indifferent to even think about it.” Andrew shook his head with tears in his eyes, he did not have the strength to speak. “You didn't even have a spark of thought that animals could feel, cry, live, just like you. A whole generation in Ghana will perish because of you.” The being looked back at the jury's members who nodded in agreement at the same time.

“So be it. Andrew” The Creator's other hand reached out to the hunter and went from black to a kind of white glow. “I condemn you to live through the fate of the animals that you caused them.” The Creator placed its shining white hand on Andrew's forehead and the room, the benches, the animals blurred as if a white tsunami swept through the room, seeing nothing but a white glow.

Chapter 3

“Man, that felt good!” Andy thought to himself stretching out his limbs and shaking his head, then yawned to get some air, but that didn't help either. Dream was still hanging on his eyelids, although he had already dozed off when the sun was barely visible through the clouds. He stretched his whole body again, from his feet to the top of his head, though this attempt also failed, so instead, he curled up and rested his head on his arms. His eyes were closing, but for a fleeting moment, he opened them just a crack, seeing paws instead of arms, however, this did not scare him.

It felt good to lay his head on his arm covered with soft, silky, grey and white hairs, as if this had always been normal, as if it had to be this way from the beginning. He looked around the room, staring at the objects around him, which were somewhat familiar to him.

At the strange, brown thing on the wall from which a small, yellow bird walked in and out from time to time so quickly that Andy didn't even have time to run to it, the bird had already disappeared. The owner called this thing a cuckoo clock. The blue curtain - yes, that's what the owner called it - on which scratches were visible in places thanks to him among other things. The old sofa a few meters in front of him on which he used to take his

afternoon naps, and the small bowl on the right so close he could reach it, magically filled with food. Andy's half-asleep exploration tour was interrupted by a rattle.

He couldn't see anyone but could hear the creaking of the floors so clearly as if someone or something had stepped on it just in front of him. Raising his head and moving his ears back and forth, the noise came from the kitchen next door. Kitchen. Yes, that's what the other room was called, that's what she named it, where the nose-caressing scents and gourmet morsels used to come from. Sometimes when she wasn't paying attention Andy used to sneak in there and jump up on the counter so that the caressing scents wouldn't remain just scents. Of course, he had to be careful at that time because if get caught, well then, he'd get a big one on his little head.

“Good morning, Andy!” The footsteps finally reached here, and the owner reached out to Andy. With wrinkled fingers, she reached under the hunter's chin and began to caress. Andy's whole body tingled by the slow, soft movements, the skin beneath his hairs trembled slightly, then relaxed again, then trembled again. He would have preferred to go back to sleep again. “Come on, it's time for your breakfast”

She, i.e. the owner - that's how Andy had named the tall, pink-skinned creature with long white hair on her head - reached towards the table and opened a package.

Andy immediately jumped up from the soft bed and rubbed himself against the grey owner's leg while

looking at his hand, licking his mouth and pawing up and down towards the table, already feeling the mixture of salty and sweet flavours on the tip of his tongue. After a few moments, the food was in his bowl and finally didn't have to wait any longer. It didn't take much, just a few bites and not a trace of the food was left.

“Very good, my kitty, I see the meal was delicious” The air winged the voice toward Andy who just nodded.

“Yes, owner, it was very good! Let's say next time I would be happier with fish and beef.” Andy shook his head then snuggled up to the woman's feet. “Anyway, it was really good, thanks.” The owner stroked the head of Andy who tolerated the care pleasantly.

“Would you like to play?” The owner took out a piece of string, and began to drag across the floor. The hair on Andy's back stood up and flattened as if he was outside somewhere, there was nothing but green trees, wind full of scents and mysteries and the clear, fat sky. His whole body tensed, claws half released.

“What is this? What is this again? You're here again!” The grey cat pounced on its victim in a fraction of a second, but it fled. “Where are you? Where are you going?” Andy jerked his head, sometimes to the left, sometimes back. “There you are!” The string was finally around, and he threw himself at it with the same fervour as at the beginning, but it escaped. Again. The owner, called as old woman by other owner-looking specimen,

laughed, though Andy did not mind this one a bit, all he wanted was the string.

After a quarter of an hour play, the grey woman got up and walked to the front door. Andy followed and started scratching at the door, which the owner already knew what it meant. She opened the door, Andy was about to go out, when he turned his head back. An unpleasant, unfamiliar scent hit his nose, making him almost suffocate as if the air was made out of pure dust. Andy twisted his ears, swallowed back a little puke then set off, and was already roaming the outside world.

One by one, his little feet bounced on the cold sidewalk, however, that did not bother Andy even a bit, being busy discovering the world, looking into every little corner-from smelly alleys full of garbage cans to the luxury villas with fences that reached almost to the sky-was not a challenge for the young cat. With a big jump, he was on top of one of the concrete fences.

“Howdy, Andy.”

“Howdy, Fluffy.” He greeted his old friend, the eight-year-old, well-built Persian cat, lying in the grass roasting his belly in the wide yard.

“What’s up?”

“Just taking a walk.” Andy stretched again on the wide fence. “What’s that smell?” He asked his friend, taking a deep breath.

“The owners burnt the meat again. I managed to steal some without being noticed.”

“Where’s that cat?” The two friends heard a man's voice. “He stole some grilled meat again!”

“I think the man is looking for you.” Andy said to Fluffy.

“Who?”

“I think it's your owner. I think he knows you've snooped some meat.”

“That's impossible. I was as cunning as ever.” Boasted the chubby Persian, stretching himself, his wide, hairy thorax was straining in the air, almost making Andy look away. “Anyway, why are you saying this?”

“I heard him saying.”

“You heard him?”

“Yes, but why are you looking at me like that? You didn't understand what he was shouting?”

“I only heard human noise, nothing else.”

“Now I'm going to beat that bastard with my slipper!”

“Fluffy, hurry! Hide!”

“Why should I?” He looked at his friend with wide pupils.

“He'll be here soon and he's bringing the slipper.”

“I've already said he couldn't have seen me.”

“Fluffy, don't argue, just hide.” The Persian stopped at Andy's tone, but did not ask back, just quickly hid in a nearby bush. The owner soon appeared there, holding a half-chewed, worn-out leather slipper, and looked around the yard with a frown but saw no other cat except Andy.

After a few minutes he stopped searching in vain and blew a retreat. Soon after Fluffy came out of the bush.

“Dude, you were right. He really had the slipper in his hand.”

“Anytime.”

“However, I still don't get it how you can understand the owner's language.”

“Honestly, neither do I.” Andy shook his head. “I think I'll go and clear my head some more.”

“Sure, go ahead. We'll grumble some more.”

“Bye now!” Andy jumped off the fence and went on. Wandering aimlessly through the streets the fresh, spring breeze caught in his fur sometimes making him cringe, while thinking about how he could understand the speech of Fluffy's owner. As he was chewing on this, he came to a tiny house with a tiny yard. It wasn't nearly as big as Fluffy's garden, but it was well kept: there was not a single branch or island of overgrown grass anywhere, the little garden was like the bedroom of a pedantic butler. Andy entered the garden and stared at the house in the middle for a long time, because in a small corner of his mind something was triggered, as if he had always been here, as if this house was his real home.

Andy made a move sniffing every little corner of the lot, from the overhanging edges to the dotted ball left outside. He didn't feel the need to mark the yard with his urine because, strangely, the feeling inside got even stronger that he belonged here, too. Suddenly, he heard

footsteps and put his ear towards the door of the small house. A man, a smaller man, stepped out. Andy didn't run away, just stared at the smaller man. It was like looking in a mirror. The little man also looked back at him.

“Here again?” With an irritated voice the small man asked the cat. Andy shook his head twice. “Shit in grandma's yard, not in ours!” Andy shook his head again. “Now what? You just don't understand me?”

“Of course I understand you.” Another head shake.

The little man, probably called a child by the other owners according to Andy's years of observations, apparently understood nothing of the cat's words.

“Get out of here before you shit in here!” The small man was approaching Andy with quick steps. Recognizing the threatening posture, Andy immediately took his tiny legs out of the lot, leaving torn grass pieces in the air.

Andy continued to cross the streets of the village with his heart beating ever slower. Slowly, he began to forget the excitement of meeting the child. The sun had already left its bloody mark on the fat clouds, giving an unmistakable sign for the cat that it was time to return home. Fortunately, scent marks hid on the road showed him the way home. After a few turns and mazes of trash-cans, he finally reached his destination, though when he arrived the silky hairs on his back stood up.

He didn't know what could have happened, but he didn't expect it at all because the house, his home had completely changed. He couldn't find the front door, instead a black, sooty, burnt wood and pile of bricks awaited him, mixture of the suffocating smell of burnt plastic and wood almost made Andy dizzy. And that unpleasant, dust-like smell from the morning. It surrounded the whole place. People were walking around the house dressed in white and black, some also wore elongated red hats. Vehicles flashing red and blue were parking nearby.

“Owner! Owner! Where are you?” Nobody answered as if she wasn't even there. Andy tried to somehow go inside the house, but the burnt pieces were still too hot. “Where can you be, owner?” No one responded to the bitter meow. He walked around the house, avoiding people, but the result was the same from all directions: it was simply impossible to get past the burnt remains. After several hours of aimless waiting and trying, Andy decided to leave.

He found a trash can not far away, hid behind it and made two circles around himself, then curled up and closed his eyes with a rumbling stomach. Deep inside he kind of hoped that maybe by tomorrow everything would be back to normal, that he could enjoy the company of the owner again.

To the melodious laughter of the titmice Andy woke up. It was still early but he couldn't go back to sleep

being too excited, so set off immediately. Picked up his tiny feet with a pounding heart, counting the steps to himself to get home again, though when he arrived, his last hope was gone.

Nothing had changed. All that remained was the suffocating stench, nothing else. Andy looked at the pile of burnt ruins for a while, then started walking up and down.

“What happened? Why isn't the owner here? Why is this smell here? Who knows what happened?” Of course, he didn't get any answer, since yesterday's people dressed in strange clothes were nowhere to be found. “Maybe, just maybe, that little man might know something. Yes!” Stretching out his first two paws, Andy shook himself and started running straight to the small house where he met the child. When he got there he scratched at the door, meowed at the window, but no one answered him. Then caught a scent in the air. *Yes, it could be him, almost certainly.* Andy began to follow the smell spreading in the air.

After just a few minutes of walking the cat entered an alley where the scents were the strongest but couldn't find anyone. He looked around among the bins, at the abandoned bicycle, at the overturned buckets but the small man was nowhere to be found, though Andy was pretty sure the child must have been here. Then he heard footsteps, and the smell became even stronger. He looked up, the little man was standing over him.

“So, you’re here?” Andy nodded a ‘yes’.

“Yes, I was looking for you.”

“So...you...are...here!” The small man pronounced every word clearly, emphasizing every word, then grabbed the cat by the scruff of the neck.

“Hey, what are you doing? This hurts!” Andy found himself in the air, kicking and scratching, trying to reach the small man's face or arm to somehow break free but simply could not.

“Of course you’re alive!” The small man took the cat to a stand and tied him by his hind legs. Suddenly Andy saw the world upside down.

“What are you doing? This hurts a lot!” His desperate meows fell on deaf ears. “Let go of me!” Andy tried to cut the rope wrapped around his leg with his sharp claws, but it was too thick and got more and more tired with each attempt. His tiny heart was pounding in his head, every hair on her back stood on end. *Have to get out of here, but how?* He looked at the small man who awkwardly went to the bins and returned with a long, round object.

The child held Andy's head and stared into his eyes, Andy looked back at him having the freezing feeling as if a mirror had been held in front of him, but instead of him, another animal, a real beast, greeted him back.

“Of course you’ve survived it!” He struck the cat's side with the round object. Andy's eyes widened, he could almost feel his ribs piercing through his flesh.

“You didn't have to burn inside, did you? It's okay. You can also find out what it was like with this iron pipe.” Another hit on the ribs.

“Wh-what, what...” Andy coughed and swallowed his blood back. “What is burning inside, inside?” There was no response from the child to the cat's question.

“You should have been there! You should've been there with her, you damn douchebag!” The metal rod now broke Andys' leg. “You could have smelled the gas! You could have told grandma that something was wrong, but no!” He also broke his other leg. “Instead, you were out there messing up every single yard! My grandmother was burned inside the house!”

“What, what...” Andy could barely speak, blood was flowing from his mouth like a slow waterfall. He could barely breathe and barely see with his left eye, as if the world had been cut in half. Andy reached out with his paw and felt something gelatinous, wet, and it hurt as he touched it. It was no longer a mystery. His left eye popped out of his tiny skull.

Every breath he took was like swallowing razorblades. His muscles were shivering involuntarily as he was staring at the little man. Blood made his head so heavy as if thousands of scarlet dreams were hanging on his eyelids. The child, the iron pipe, the small alley began to lose its colour with the bins, reality became a swirling mass. *However, Andy was not afraid. Not anymore.*

Everything hurt, it hurt a lot. But maybe it's almost over, and then he can meet his owner again.

“You fucking bastard! This happened because of you!” The final blow went to the cat's head. It was over. For Andy, the world slowly began to darken, however, the small man did not stop torturing him yet, beating further the soulless, lifeless body.

“Andrew, that’s enough! The cat is already a pile of meat!” Another child spoke.

“Yeah man, it’s over.”

“Alright, you’re right.” The little man dropped the bloody iron pipe.

“Let's get out of here Andrew.” Andy's departing soul could only catch this echo from his fading earthly life. Andrew.

Chapter 4

It was like waking up from a bad dream, sweating and with a heart pounding like a Chevy motor, Andrew looked around quickly, checking his entire body. He had all his limbs, but he wanted to scream. He felt as if he could not breathe, as if he wanted to sink. He moved his gaze even more downward and discovered that there was no ground under his feet. He was falling, falling constantly into the infinite space, seeing the thundering meteors, the shining stars millions of light-years away, Saturn and Uranus. He wanted to shout, but no one would have heard him anyway. Then suddenly he stopped, floating like a helpless leaf in an ever growing hurricane. In the distance he saw an object, resembling a human form, approaching.

“How do you feel?” The Creator stood before him.

“Where am I?”

“Right where you need to be.”

“What are you talking about? Why am I here?”

Andrew shouted, now there was someone to hear him.

“Why am I here?”

“I hope a hairball didn’t get stuck in your throat. Or the cat didn’t get your tongue.”

“What? W-what was that all about? What happened to me?”

“What do you think happened to you?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know? How should I know?” The Creator just shrugged his undulating shoulders. “You tell me. Tell me!” Andrew did not receive an answer. “What kind of sick game was that? I saw people as giants, ate cat food, had to sleep next to garbage cans.”

“I see. Was there anything else?”

“Anything else? Do you need more than that? What is all this?”

“Did you see anyone?”

“See? Answer the question! Why am I here?”

“Maybe you saw someone?”

“Answer my question!”

“Well, anyone?” The Creator smiled.

“I want an answer to my question!”

“Mine first.”

“No! Why, why am I floating in space?”

“Did you see, how can I say, some people?”

“If you really want to know.” Andrew gave up, this time the Creator won. “I saw two people who were somehow familiar to me. Very...

“Who did you see?”

“An old woman and a child, as if I knew them.”

“What happened to you in that little village?”

“I was just walking around.” Andrew held his head. “I saw another cat, then I went to a house that burned down, and then...

“And then?”

“After that a kid caught me and beat me to death with an iron pipe.” Andrew answered prosily, almost biting off his lips.

“How did you feel then?”

“I don’t know, maybe... I don’t know”

“Just tell me.”

“I might be, so... I was afraid, terribly afraid.”

“Why?”

“Maybe, so, maybe because I didn't understand why he was doing that to me.” Andrew’s gaze travelled down to the everlasting universe, searching for something that can provide some answers, instead stars looked back at him underneath his legs. So shiny, so tiny, so alone in the dark. “What, so what do you mean by that?”

“Too many things you can't understand yet.”

“Thanks for the riddles!” Andrew drew back his gaze to the Creator’s nails, carving into his palms.

“Riddle? Don't you remember a cat from your childhood?” Andrew scratched his head. “No? You did hang him up by its feet, but you should remember the rest by now.

“I...” The hunter looked down again. “I... it was just a stinky bag of fleas messing everything up! Do you understand? A useless piece of shit, a good-for-nothing thing!” The Creator just sighed.

“Oh, dear.”

“It was. He only ate the food, and grandma only spent the money on it.”

“You can’t seriously say that, not even you.”

“He deserved it.” The Creator turned away showing only his back. “Where are you going now?”

“Your journey will be long. You and we still need time before we can come to a decision.”

“What are you talking about? What decision?” The Creator didn't answer but didn't ask any more questions either. He disappeared before the hunter's eyes. Then the space, the universe slowly faded away, the shine of the stars and the zigzagging of the meteors were replaced by a growing, endless white light. Andrew disappeared.

The sunlight almost burned Andy’s eyes when he opened them, fortunately the dense leaves filtered most of the rays. He stretched for a long time, stretching every muscle pleasantly, then turned around, but began to fall. By good fortune he managed to hold on to a tree branch with his strong, long arm, his heart making its own, ferocious dance in his throat as he looked down, seeing the ground through a small hole from the tree branches densely covered with sap, but he still managed to realize that he had saved himself from falling down with several tree branches. Then his eyes wandered to his arm.

It was covered in long, reddish-brown hair, and its palms were greyish blue up to the fingertips. He also examined his body that was also covered with this red-brown hair. Andy sighed. Once again he was overwhelmed by the familiar, warm feeling that this is all

right, that this is the natural way. Scratched his side with his free hand then pulled himself up onto the tree branch and held onto it with his legs, on which the big toe stood like the thumb on his hand.

Andy surveyed his empire: whole army of Sumatran pines surrounded the realm, fresh drops of dew stopped on its acerous leaves, haze covering the land thicker than the skin of an elephant. The toucans' hoarse singing apparently did not let the Papuan frogmouths, also sitting on tree branches, sleep. Andy could clearly see the stinging glances of the frogmouths at the toucans even from such a distance. Finally, they shook their feathers and closed their eyes maybe to try and get some sleep even in this unwanted morning symphony. Andy drew himself out and made an O with his mouth and called out joining the toucans in annoying the Papuan frogmouths.

"Hey Bima! Hey Arif! This is my territory! Can you hear me? These are my trees!" No answer came even though the young giant's hollow voice rang throughout the valley.

"Andy, I hear you! And this is my area!" An answer finally came from the distance.

"I hear you, Arif!" He replied to his rival. Satisfied, he stroked his auburn beard and set off. The young orangutan swung from branch to branch with a skill that would put even the gibbons to shame. His stomach was already rumbling so it was time for a hearty lunch. After a few tree branches he stopped. A veritable spread of

mangoes, figs and lychees awaited him. He thoroughly chewed each bite wanting to enjoy the sweet taste of each small piece of fruit.

Then Andy stopped eating. A strange smell interrupted the lunch that came to Andy riding the fresh breeze. It didn't even taste like it, but it was sweeter than any fruit table. He climbed up and measured its source then set off, again. The trees shook by his weight as he swung from their branches further forward into the distance.

After a few swings he had to stop on the way because it started to rain. Andy tore off two thinner leafy branches and held them above his head, keeping him dry until the downpour ended. Andy gazed upon the forest. The rain cut the landscape with thousands of thin tiger claws.

When the raindrops stopped knocking on the leaves above his head, he went on not caring about anything but his goal. It was very clear to him that his time had come, that he had to seize the opportunity now. In the mad rush the young giant lost his attention and reached badly towards one of the branches, and his hand slipped and began to fall.

Bang. All he could hear was a loud crack.

Then darkness.

Andy regained his consciousness on the ground. His left arm was numb, and his ribs stung but suffered no more serious injuries. He thanked the branches for

somewhat catching him as he fell. With an aching arm he got up and shook himself.

“Now that hurt.” Stretched out his numb arm but then suddenly froze as if something had moved in the tall grass, an ominous shadow. Andy was even more focused. His heart stopped for a moment. Swallowed, not wanting to believe what he saw. When the black eyes swirling in yellow also appeared in front of him, he was already sure of it. He started running.

Not caring about the numbness, Andy fled, just wanted to get out of here. He moved his arms and legs one after the other, knowing very well that he had no chance against a tiger. Turned left. Then right. Then a high turn again but could barely lose track of his pursuer. The tiger was approaching dangerously, already feeling its breath on his neck. Then he saw a tree branch hanging low.

He could cling to it. Andy grabbed it. The tiger's claws took a couple of hairs off Andy. As soon as he jumped onto the branch immediately went up, up to the highest branch. Although the tiger can climb trees, it no longer dares to climb that high.

“Too afraid to climb up, huh?” Andy stuck out his tongue at the tiger growling loudly and disappeared into the thick of the forest. Both Andy and the tiger knew that the branches could only support the young giant.

His heart was pounding non-stop. He let out a rumbling sigh, realizing he had a fistful of luck, even

though his mother always warned him to be careful when holding onto the branches, because a fall could be fatal in several ways. He also learned from her that the best way to fight a tiger is to go up higher and higher. However, that scent, this sweet mystery was still in the air and did not let him rest. He had to move on, he had to take the opportunity.

After a while, Andy stopped counting more than a hundred and sixty trees by the time he finally got here. The young giant clung tightly to the branches. *It was enough to meet a tiger once.*

Andy looked above him, tore off a couple of leaves with his hands, pursed his lips tightly and pressed the leaves to his drooling mouth, then scattered them in front of him with a kiss. Barely a tree's distance away another was watching Andy's presentation. That another was looking at him with her round eyes for a while, then she also tore off a few leaves and blew a kiss. Andy's breath hitched, his skin began to tingle under the long fur.

He didn't want to believe it, just didn't want to believe his eyes. Andy did well not to stop, not to waver, not care about the dangers and tigers. His heart skipped a beat as he had never seen anything more beautiful. The female returned the gesture. *Returned!* It was more than an invitation.

In the height Andy just toddled on the branches, so did the female. They stopped halfway and looked into each other's eyes. The female extended her hand forward,

so did Andy and held hands. The moment they touched, Andy could feel as if his heart skipped another beat. Suddenly, the dense haze turned into strokes of the softest leaves, the rusty voice of the toucans was the sweetest symphony he ever heard, Andy could feel every little heartbeat of the female at the end of his fingertips. *She must be feeling the way as he is. She could have waited a long time, but she waited for him. Just for him.* They didn't speak to each other just stared at each other's eyes. Andy thought he should say something, but nothing came to his mind, since he did not have much time to practice, but he didn't care. Just simply wanted to enjoy all the magic of the moment. *A lifetime waiting, but finally happened. A partner, a lover, another lonely soul with the same desire. Truly, it was a doing of the forest spirits, a manifested miracle.* Unfortunately, miracles tend to turn into a tiger's bite.

First, Andy noticed the birds' desperate songs followed by their wings' rapid flapping, making sound storm as at least three hundred birds flew out of the trees at once, as if their lives were at stake. Below them, at ground level an army of paws and hooves stirred up the undergrowth. Tigers, sun bears, sambar deer, all running in one direction at the same time. Andy let go of his new love's hand and swallowed. A suffocating smell hit his nose the unmistakable stench of charred bark.

“What's going on here?” The female looked at the young giant with dilated pupils. The hellish flames already painted the bottom of the sky blood red.

“Come on, we have to go! Now!” Andy grabbed his lover's hand and pulled her along. He had already experienced this once, and knew very well that fire spares nothing and no one.

Taking big, deep breaths, his heart pounding in his head, but he had to go because he had no choice. He went from branch to branch, sometimes catching several at the same time. With each grip, the tendons were overstretched, though if he wanted to live, he had to move on as the flames were spreading quickly, burning everything they touched. Meanwhile, Andy kept looking back to see if his love was still following him but then he lost his attention. It was just a blink of an eye, though that was enough for him to miss the next branch and begin to fall inexorably. Again.

Hitting the ground didn't hurt as much as when he met the tiger. His heart was still pounding non-stop. He shook himself again, gazed his eyes to the forest then set off. The fire scorched the forest just a few leaps behind him spreading even more rapidly. Andy pushed himself on the ground with his long, strong arms. There was no point in clinging back to the trees, because he had to dodge more than one burning branch as they were falling to the ground. His head was spinning back and forth without stopping watching the flames and the escape

route at the same time. The only hope he had that his love might still be alive somewhere. Then finally he saw the light, an open clearing where there were hardly any trees. Maybe he could rest a little there and wait for his partner. He looked back one last time, but then his head hit something hard. He felt dizzy and heard a click.

Andy rubbed his eyes. His shoulders were tense, as if something was pressing on them. It was almost certain that he must have been in a narrow place, perhaps inside a rotten tree trunk. He ran his fingers along its side feeling really like wood but its surface was smoother. Only one exit was visible from the narrow gap but it was fenced off. Andy touched the long, branch-like things that was cold and hard.

“What is this? What’s this?” Shouted, but no one answered. “Where am I? Where am I?” He started tugging at the strange branches though they didn't budge staying definitely in place.

“Shut the hell up!” An unknown voice shouted, then the gap abruptly moved to the side hitting the orangutan's head against its side.

“Well sir, will it be suitable?”

“I see the cage is quite stable and the bars are going to hold.”

“Sir, I said I’m not selling some cheap knock-offs.”

“Indeed.” Something said clearly with satisfaction in its voice. “Take it. Enough?”

“That's fair enough, sir. I can buy a Mercedes here with that much money.”

“By the way, thanks for the tip.”

“Come on, that's part of the service sir.”

“What kind of service?” Andy did not know who or what could have spoken and what the word "service" could mean. All he knew for fairly certain that these creatures speaking near him called this tight, wood-like thing he was locked in a 'cage' and called these round branches 'bars'. “What is the service? What's happening? Where's my love? Where are you?” Gazed his eyes onto the forest being devoured by the flames, hoping his love is still out there somewhere protected by the forest spirits, though left alone away from him. “My dear love, where are you? I am here! I am here!” Desperately, he began yanking at the bars again.

“Shut up!” The talking thing kicked the side of the cage again. “His whining annoys the hell out of me! So, thanks for the suggestion. It's really easier to trap animals this way when they run away from the fire.”

“Please sir, thank it to my brother. He told me when they would start deforestation.”

“But this is business for you as well, because you can sell the cages this way.”

“He will have an area for palm oil cultivation, I will have a customer to whom I can sell my product, you will have a product with the help of my product.”

“What, what is palm oil?” Andy tried with all his might to pry the bars apart, but they didn’t budge, they were too strong.

“I like win-win-win situations like this.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Andrew!” The two things, creatures laughed. “One more thing, sir. Can I ask what will happen to the monkey?”

“A collector pays a lot of money for it. What he does with it, whether he wants it as a pet or just stuffs it, I don’t know and frankly I really don’t care.”

“Stuffing? Enough! I want to get out! I want to get out! I want my love!” The young giant slammed into the bars using his whole body like an elephant. The entire box shook.

“That’s enough!” Suddenly, two bare feet appeared before Andy’s eyes- unlike anything he had ever seen. *Could these belong to the things that were talking?* Then a paw appeared before the bars holding some strange insect. Andy felt a powerful stab in his neck. “This will make you calm.” It happened so fast, was just a blink of an eye. He had no idea what this strange creature had done to him but began to feel dizzy like when a wasp stung him a few monsoons ago. His lungs began to feel hard and sharp breathing more and more slowly, eyes were heavy as the orange-hued forest blurred before his eyes. He would rather vomit to make this condition gone away, break free then head to the jungle to free his love from the fires, to see her and touch her again, to feel her

heartbeat at the tip of his fingers. Then everything around him became dark.

Chapter 5

Andrew gasped for air in terror. He knew he had only minutes left to get oxygen, struggled, perhaps like never before, but there was no escape from the billowing blue. No matter where he looked, no matter where he tried to swim, the pressure on him did not ease, the liquid medium surrounded him and had only seconds left until he drowned.

But he was alive.

He couldn't believe it himself, but he was alive breathing just like he would on land, even though he was tossing and turning in the depths of the ocean. Only a few shreds of the sun's rays could dive into the blue molasses as they merged into the rippling canvas of the ocean. Andrew was floating alone in the water, not a single living thing, not even a stray shrimp was near him. From a distance, he finally saw a creature approaching. At first glance, it looked like a jellyfish and Andy breathed a sigh of relief that finally he wouldn't be alone. When it got close, the jellyfish looked at the hunter with his sky-blue eyes.

"You again?" Andrew asked disappointedly.

"Maybe you were expecting someone else?" The Creator asked.

"I don't understand this. Why am I here and how can I even breathe here?"

“Don't you understand? I thought you were more intelligent than the average. So, I'm not infallible either.” The Creator winked. “You're not alive, but you're not dead yet.”

“Pardon me? What is this mumbo jumbo stuff? What does it even mean?”

“So, more time is needed.”

“No! It's time to leave me alone.” The huge, hooded figure did not speak. “Leave me alone!” Still no answer. “Why don't you leave me alone? I, I don't understand this!”

“In time I hope you will understand. You have to understand, otherwise, we will have to decide differently.” The Creator said in a calm, measured voice, as it placed its hand on Andrew's face, who no longer saw the immaculate blue of the clear ocean, only the white darkness.

“Hey, Andy! Wake up!”

“How, what?” Andy woke up to someone poking his stomach. “Is it just you, Igor?”

“Come on, brother! Mom is waiting for us!”

“I'm coming, coming.” Andy shook his little head, taking the first few steps with a limp since dream still didn't let go of his head. Igor was already well ahead of him.

“Andy, come on!”

“I’m coming!” Andy quickly lifted his tiny hooves so that Igor would finally stop poking around. Just after a few hoof-prints, he reached his brother. Their mother stood before them with her howling, bane-like size, rough, black fur, doe-like ears, elongated muzzle, and barely visible tusks flashing beneath her round nose, presenting a majestic sight. Andy and his brother stared at her in awe, because they were still so tiny compared to her. They talked among themselves about how they couldn’t wait to grow to that size, to look ahead with pride, and to finally shed their childish, brown-striped fur coat. Of course, they already knew that, at some point, they would surely surpass their mother and that’s with their tusks because theirs would be much, much bigger.

“Okay, my little piglets, follow me.” Their mother set off and they followed her. On the way, Igor kept pushing Andy, even catching him in the leg, though Andy couldn’t let this go without saying a word. When Igor wasn’t paying attention, he bit his brother’s ear and pulled him by it, just like a howling bane dragging its prey, with Igor squealing in pain several times. Their mother non-stop growled at them to leave each other alone.

They had come a long way before they came to a rotten tree stump. Andy and Igor looked at their mother in confusion wondering why they had come such a long way, what could be so interesting in a rotting tree stump.

“Igor, Andy, please listen.” The mother moved closer to the tree trunk, on its side there were mushrooms, white-stemmed, yellowish-brown-capped and quite tasty-looking delicacies. “Smell these mushrooms.” The two brothers approached and eagerly sniffed them all, so eagerly that Igor would have eaten one, but their mother pushed him away. “Igor, stop! You mustn’t eat it!”

“Why, why not, Mom?” Igor looked with big, round eyes.

“Because these are poisonous! These are death cups, deadly to us.”

“Then why did you bring us here?”

“In order to learn, remember the smell so that you never even think about eating these mushrooms.”

“Not even when we are very hungry?” Andy asked.

“Not even then.” Their mother shook her head. “It's time to go back.” Andy and Igor nodded and followed her without a word. They had always heard this from their mother, they had to constantly listen to her saying that they were still too young, they still needed her to protect them.

On the way back, Andy and Igor explored the surroundings again as if they hadn't seen enough. Igor discovered an island of nettles, their stingers reaching up to the top of his head, soon turning his nose red, even though Andy had warned to be careful with them. Andy picked out a frog resting on a leaf. He wouldn't leave it

alone, kept running after it, even entering the trickling stream, but stopped when feeling that his nose was already covered with water. His mother taught him this little trick.

Andy – after getting tired of the frog’s jumping – went to a bush. There he found a branch with brown, ridged bark. Pressed his round nose to it, sniffing deeply in the air and the smell of the branch was really pleasant so he bit it. All of a sudden the branch moved and Andy saw a pair of black eyes spinning in yellow staring at him, then the pair of eyes disappeared and saw a pink mouth with a forked tongue and two teeth sticking out like whips. It all happened so fast that Andy’s legs froze, couldn’t even move. Then he felt a bite on the back of his neck.

“Andy, look out!” At the last moment their mother managed to pull her piglet away from the bite. She stamped her two strong legs and charged towards the attacker, pretending to attack, then stopped, kicking up the dust and sand that had been lying still until then. The snake danced back and quickly disappeared into the bush.

“Thanks, mommy.” With his legs Andy stamped, though feeling his heart beating on the palate of his mouth.

“My son, what were you thinking?” His mother scolded him.

“I...I...it smelled nice...it just...”

“It could have killed you! It was a viper and could have slew you with one bite!”

“I...I'm sorry.” Andy ran to his mother and held his little head against her leg as tightly as he had never held it before. His mother gently pressed her nose to her son's forehead, trembling Andy's skin and making his racing heart began to slow down.

“I can't lose you or Igor. It cannot happen to you, what happened to the others.”

“Yes, Mom. I'm sorry.” Andy understood what his mother meant. He and Igor were only a few full moons old when a howling bane attacked them. Their mother could only save the two of them because the monster devoured the rest of them, brothers and sisters as well, not sparing anyone.

After the long, adventurous day, the piglets went to rest with their mother, snuggling up close and falling asleep very quick.

The next morning, fog covered the forest making Andy shiver from the touch of the cold mist, but he still wanted to sleep. However, his shivering dream was soon over.

“Wake up, come on!”

“Mom, what is it?”

“We still want to sleep.” Igor said.

“Get up, immediately!” Their mother almost snapped at them. The two brothers shook themselves and got up with great difficulty. Andy sensed from their

mother's trembling voice that something was not right. "Come with me!" Igor and Andy walked closely beside their mother's feet as she was walking so slow, almost shuffling through the forest.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Igor asked.

"Hush! Please don't talk now!" Their mother twisted her ears and took big sniffs of the cold air.

"Mom, are you okay?" Now Andy asked.

"I told you to be quiet." Their mother turned her head first to the left, then to the right, then forward. She stopped sharp. Andy hit his head on his mother's leg.

He looked at his mother who was looking in one direction. He tried to look too, but he simply couldn't see anything. Also sniffed the air but simply couldn't sense anything except the scent of dewdrops. *What could their mother be feeling? What smell did she pick up? What could be out there?* Andy began to gasp for breath. He snuggled close to his mother's feet, could almost feel its trembling, like a leaf rustling in the storm.

Then her mother started to back away carefully, as if she was walking on a frozen lake.

Then a bang. As if lightning had struck.

Andy and Igor jumped into the air.

Their mother tumbled.

"Ru-run!" Their mother gasped for air. Suddenly, blood began to pour from her side. "Run! Here... here is the howling bane, the roaring fang!" Igor and Andy looked at each other then at their bleeding mother then at

each other again. Andy didn't understand what had happened what that bang was why their mother had fallen. "Move!" A shadow, a fast-moving shadow began to appear from the billowing whiteness, moving dangerously close to the two brothers who had already seen this shadow in their nightmares.

Igor and Andy started to run. Small stones bounced under their hooves. The forest was a white mass. Trees, leaves blurring into each other. The air pierced Andy's ear like ice thorns. Took deep breaths. With each breath he only grew more tired. But he had no choice. Neither he nor Igor. They had to flee if they wanted to live to see tomorrow. Andy looked back for a fleeting moment. The elongated jaws, the black and grey fur, and those black pupils spinning in yellow poison were just a head away. The howling bane was getting closer and closer already feeling its long fangs and pink tongue on his neck.

"Andy, in here!" Igor nudged Andy in the side with his head and drove him into a hollow of wood. They barely fit in, but the howling bane couldn't, yet it didn't give up. It scratched, dug, and tore the wood with its mouth to reach them. Andy hiding next to Igor watched as the snapping, sharp fangs came closer and closer splinter by splinter. Then another bolt of lightning. The beast stopped scratching eyes bulging and tongue lolling out of its mouth.

The bane's head moved again. Andy froze like dewdrop on a winter morning, though only for a flash of

an eye. The beast headed away from them but its moves were so odd as if something was dragging it. Then the den was clear, only the tip of the bane's nose was visible. Then suddenly, four unknown things appeared in front of the hollow resembling to the legs of a crane but without fingers and covered in snakeskin. These things were moving.

“Nice shot.”

“Nah, come on. It wasn't that hard.”

“Andrew, don't be humble! To hit so accurately in such fog. Nice achievement!”

“What is that noise?” Igor asked Andy with a trembling face and a panting mouth.

“I don't know. Some unknown voice is talking about some kind of shooting.”

“Shooting?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“How do you know this? I only hear some noise, a murmur.

“I really don't know. I, I just understand.”

“This will make a nice coat!” The stranger spoke again.

“And trophy.”

“You're right, Andrew.”

“This wolf head will look great next to the boar head.” These strangers dragged the howling bane away from the den. Andy wondered for a moment whether the

two strangers were calling the monster a “wild boar” or a “wolf.”

“You say it right.” Then there was silence. Andy no longer heard any speech, only the footsteps walking away. Andy and Igor remained sticking still close to each other. Andy could feel his brother shaking body. Then a frog jumped in front of the burrow, looking at Andy for a moment then moved on. Igor stuck out its nose and looked left, then right.

“I think they're gone now.”

“Are you sure?” Andy asked in a trembling voice.

“Yes, I think so. Come on, relax.”

“If you say so.” Andy stuck his nose out. The gentle wind brought no other scent than the fresh scent of pines and wilting roses not sensing any howling bane at all. That lightning strike and the two strangers probably scared everyone away from the area. Andy stepped out of the den.

They walked to the place where they had last seen their mother. She was still lying on the ground but something was wrong.

“W-what's wrong with mom?” Igor asked in a choked voice. “Somehow she’s different...”

“Y-yes.” Andy nodded stepping a little closer and looking his mother over. *Something was really wrong.* Her body was missing her ears, nose, mouth and those two pairs of brown, peaceful eyes. All that was left was a mutilated torso, reeking of blood.

“What about mom?” Igor asked again.

“Mommy?” Andy stepped even closer nudging her with his nose. Then backed away because he couldn't stand this long forgotten smell, the scent of spilled blood. However, he gathered his strength and moved closer again. “Mommy? Mom? Please, wake up!” He nudged his mother with his little nose but she didn't move. *Why could not she move?*

“Why doesn't mom wake up?” Igor asked.

“Mom? Mom! Please, please get up! We have to go! The beast is gone, it's no longer dangerous. Do you understand? Mom. Mom?” He bit the body several times with his jaw but she didn't react. “Please! Get up! Get up, get up!” He jumped back noticing that flies had begun to swarm his mother's severed neck. *“If flies swarm something, you mustn't touch it. It's already rotting.” His mother's teaching flashed through his mind.* Andy stepped back even further.

The forest stood still. Empty echoes were traveling along the wind and the scent of roses, bloody petals, were burning through Andy's nose. Strange, previously unknown liquid began to flow from his eyes to his chin engulfing his entire face like the brusque fog engulfs the trees and flowers. His ever-beating heart clashed with him, feeling as if dozens of howling banes were pressing their fangs against his tiny chest. *He wished if only that would be the case. Then he would know that mother would come and expel the beasts away and then it would*

be over, this feeling would go away. But no. Mother won't come back. Never. The flies don't lie.

He felt it, but rather he already knew it. Andy looked at his brother, though didn't say a word. *What would words help? How could they possibly help, knowing that after this their life, his life, would be different. Irreversibly different, and the worst part of it all was that he didn't know why it had to be different.*

Then he saw a blinding white light in the distance coming closer and closer expanding until it finally engulfed the entire landscape.

Chapter 6

Andy's skin was gently caressed by the ocean waves. He wasn't afraid, but why should he have been since he had always moved like this in this environment, always cutting through the depths with such speed. He looked down and luckily Dave was there, then looked to the left, Mike was there, then to the right, Kevin was there, too. And ahead of him he saw the movement of Edgar's tail fin. Andy was relieved, all five of them were there.

“I'm hungry.” Kevin said.

“Me too.” Dave answered.

“I could eat.” Mike wasn't left out either.

“You, Andy?” Edgar asked, the leader of the small group.

“I'll join the others.”

“Great! Turn left.” The gang suddenly turned left, following Edgar. Andy had known them since they were little, learning together to hunt, to jump to the surface, to avoid sharks, and to ride the waves created by strange fish called ‘motorboats’ by the pink bipeds. Andy had told the others the word ‘motorboat’ when he had overheard a conversation between two pink bipeds on the surface. Neither Andy nor the others knew how Andy was able to understand the bipeds’ speech but they didn't try to figure it out, just simply accepted that Andy was the way he was. Although Andy was born at the same

time as Edgar he never felt like a leader; Edgar had always been the more prudent of them. He would never forget the time when Edgar, risking his life, charged into a reef shark, saving him from a painful death.

Andy and the others were sailing through the currents at lightning speed searching for tasty morsels, following the leader, but anyone could have a say in the direction if there was a school of fish. Andy's stomach was already growling and just kept licking his lips, scanning the darkness of the ocean with his eyes though unfortunately found nothing.

"I see something. Over here!" Mike said to the others and took a slight right turn in the deep. The other bottlenose dolphins followed him. After a few moments they saw the school of herring swimming in a wide formation.

"Then as usual." Edgar nodded. Kevin immediately swam ahead of the shoal like a swordfish, stopping the herrings, then Dave slipped under them, scaring the members of the shoal there. Instantly after that Andy and Mike roared away simultaneously on the right and left sides. Finally, Edgar rippled the calm water behind the group. They repeated this well-rehearsed sequence of movements until the shoal of herring completely condensed into a larger bubble. Andy licked the corners of his mouth again. Finally, lunch time had come.

First their leader, Edgar, took a big bite out of the herring bubble, but then everyone else could join in. The

water was really churning in front of them as Andy tried to stick his nose in the herring, but Kevin never let him. He always wanted to come after Edgar, pushing everyone aside, but especially Andy, who wouldn't want to let this pass by. If Kevin bit him, he bit back. If he poked him in the side with his nose, he would do the same. It was getting boring, but Edgar didn't say anything about it, just leaving some smart remark like "At least this way they would stay in form". It was fortunate these little whoop-de-doo's didn't last long. Back then they had learned from their parents not to be greedy, to leave some of the shoal behind so they could bring even more herring into the world. Andy didn't quite understand at first, they were telling him about some natural cycle.

After everyone was full, they continued on their way. Andy felt his stomach burst like a bubble but he didn't care since this way he was strong enough, maybe the others too, to finally carry out their plan plotting it for a very long time as the moon had circled the ocean several times by the time they were done with it. Andy looked around at the group and could see in them that the time had come, their time.

"Edgar, I'm nervous."

"I'm nervous too, Andy."

"I'm rather excited!" Mike interrupted.

"I don't know, my heart wants to jump out of its place." Andy answered.

“Mike, let's be sensible. There aren't many opportunities like this.” Edgar as a good leader tried to calm his teammate down.

“That's what makes it so exciting.” Kevin also joined the conversation. “A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This is when my blood boils.”

“Okay, okay, I'm not going to be left out either. Let's give them a slap!”

“Yes, that's it!”

“Let's bite them!”

“This will be our day!”

“Okay. Let's dive in!” Edgar gave the order and the group sped up. Andy was on Edgar's right, slightly behind him, but moving in the same direction. He looked at the others. Everyone was cutting through the foam in their own rhythm, in their own, well-accustomed pace even Edgar, too, looking ahead with a clenched mouth and as usual his two quick fin strokes were followed by a longer, extended tail stroke. The well-accustomed routine, as always. It was hard to tell what they were feeling deep inside. *Was it only Andy whose stomach was dancing like a floating jellyfish?*

To Andy the ocean had never seemed so hot, so alive as it did then. Almost every detail, even the tiny plankton swam before him in a rainbow. Every living thing, even the infamous swordfish seemed like a dwarf seahorse as Andy and the others raced past them. Indeed,

as Kevin had said, such an opportunity did not come often in their lives. After barely three ocean trenches of swimming, they stopped. Andy and the others tensed and stared at each other.

“You again, Edgar?”

“I’m happy to see you too, Felipe.”

“Didn’t you have enough?” Felipe, the leader of the other dolphin pod swam menacingly forward leaving swirling waves behind him.

“What’s up, Edgar?” Ana greeted the leader, winking at him flirtatiously and spinning around herself playfully.

“I see Andy is here, too.” Andy looked away even though this wasn’t the first time he and Catalina had met. He was actually glad that she had taken the initiative. With gentle fin strokes Catalina moved towards him but stopped because someone blocked her path.

“Catalina, stop!” Hector, Felipe’s right-hand dolphin swam in.

“Maybe you woke up with a wrong flipper to talk to me like that, Hector?”

“Are you jealous? Is your tail fin that tiny?” Valentina got in third.

“Enough of this!” Felipe nodded and the members of the rival team formed a shark nose formation with the three naughty females behind them. Andy and the others did the same, though they had no one to protect, but

maybe that could change today, maybe today their luck could turn.

That's why they were here, working on it so hard, brainstorming for so long. That was the task, the capital Task: finally get the girls so that they wouldn't just spend the long moonlit nights in the water with each other. After so many failures and attempts, today they might actually succeed. For Mike, Kevin, Dave, Andy and Edgar. With stiff muscles and an even stiffer gaze Andy stared at Edgar who was focusing only on Felipe. It was clear that Edgar didn't care about anything else, that no other result was acceptable. *Yes, it's now or never.* Andy looked away and focused on his own target, Hector. Andy's stomach churned, feeling every little bubble burst and moving towards his heart. Edgar hadn't given the order yet.

Andy looked to the side for a fleeting moment. A few schools of fish wandering around stopped by. He wasn't surprised. The latent tension could be felt in the vibrations of the tiny bubbles in the water, and the school of fish probably didn't want to miss this. He understood them since he didn't want to miss this either. More schools of fish wandered by also stopping and just watching. Andy looked back at Edgar. The moments were already eating at Andy's heart, every time it beat. Then Edgar finally gave the whistle signal.

Edgar swam towards Felipe, Andy swimming on Edgar's right, headed towards Hector being on Felipe's

left. The distance was closing in dangerously and Andy and his companions whooshed like swordfish towards Felipe's team. A heady, warm feeling filled his head, his belly, his whole body tingling all the way to the end of his fin. Only the goal mattered, nothing else. Andy's nose was only a few clicks from Hector's but at the last moment he swerved to the left, straight towards Felipe. His nose dented as he caught Felipe in the side and knocked out Felipe. Then Edgar aimed at his other side but there was no stopping. Andy and Edgar attacked Hector who spun out just like Felipe.

Andy's head was pounding. In the heat of the battle he couldn't believe what he saw. The strategy worked. Several dolphins attacked each other at once. Sometimes, Andy together with Kevin, and in the next round with Mike, crushed a member of the other team. Then came the final round.

Edgar whistled four times. Andy, Kevin, Mike, and Dave stopped lining up in a row. The other team's dolphins didn't move toward them, didn't attack them probably couldn't. Andy looked toward Felipe as did his companions. They advanced.

They attacked Felipe all at once. First Mike went for him with his nose. Then Kevin. Third Dave caught him from the side. Andy came last. Used all his strength to headbutt Felipe from below, where he couldn't even see him. Felipe coughed up blood. Edgar whistled three times.

Andy and the others lined up behind Edgar, who nodded. That was it, it was over. Andy looked around the battlefield. Hector could barely move his fins, and the rest of the members were just floating in the water. Felipe swam in front of Edgar with slow fin strokes.

“Enough! Edgar, it's hard to admit, but you've won now. Take them, take them!” Edgar didn't say anything just nodded again and whistled twice. The girls, but everyone else knew what that meant. Mike and Andy turned around and flapped their fins, while Dave swam to the surface, all the way to the sun, probably annoying the seagulls again, splashing them down as they were resting on one of the rocks. Andy smiled to himself. *Good old Dave, he had all the reason to be cheerful.*

Andy and the others continued their journey, and the small group wasn't really that small anymore. The three females, Catalina, Ana and Valentina joined them: Ana swam next to Edgar, Valentina was behind Mike while Catalina undoubtedly chose Andy for herself. Catalina gently nudged Andy's side, biting his fin softly, who did not hesitate and returned the gesture by biting her tail fin, and rubbing his head against Catalina's. It had finally happened with Andy and the others, finally they had girls. The young dolphin's heart nearly jumped out of its seat.

“Hey, I see something.” Mike said to the others.

“What did you notice?” Andy asked.

“A strange, buzzing fish, I mean a motorboat.” He winked at Andy.

“What now?” Catalina just stared.

“Well, motorboats. The water bubbles up behind them in a strange way creating big waves. They're so much fun to ride.”

“Ride?”

“That’s right. Edgar, can you show us?”

“Just follow me.” Edgar swam to the surface and jumped up with Mike and Dave on his side. They took turns jumping in and out of the water, on the waves behind the boats. Soon Valentina and Ana joined the boys taking turns riding the ‘boat waves’.

“You come?” Andy nudged Catalina.

“I’m not so sure...”

“It's really fun. Even Ana is there.”

“Well, okay.” Andy spun around and then headed for the surface looking back, and luckily Catalina followed him closely.

Andy jumped up. The accelerated water droplets gently caressed his skin while the sunrays pleasantly warmed him. Then he dove down just under the water, but staying close to the surface, then up again, then down again and so on without stopping.

“Do you like it?”

“Wow, Andy, this is really great!” Catalina even tasted the speeding waves.

“I’m happy for you.”

“There are about eight of them.”

“That will be just enough.” Andy heard something nearby that wasn't a dolphin. He swam to the side of one of the boats and half-poked his head out. Although he couldn't see well, he was pretty sure they weren't dolphins but maybe pink bipeds. He dove down and headed towards Edgar when he hit his head on a hard object.

Andy didn't understand, because this heavy, large, bubble-shaped object hadn't been here before. Andy told the others that there was something here. His companions, including the girls swam to him and Andy swam closer to the strange object smelling and poking it. It seemed hard and thick but it didn't even resemble the bottom of the ocean or a group of coral. Edgar touched it too but his incomprehension was evident. Andy noticed something else: a long, octopus-like arm extended from the hard bubble, all the way to the boats. Then something happened.

Andy saw a flash of light, the kind he had only seen on the surface when the ocean threw waves the size of whales. Then suddenly there was silence, a deathly silence. The ever-moving, living ocean died down, the herrings did not seek the currents, the whales did not tell their pain with their humming songs. It was dark, Andy turned his head.

“Where are you?” Andy asked, but no one answered. It was pitch black dark as if someone had gouged out his

eyes. He tried to find some kind of clue, a buoy, a rock, Edgar or Catalina, anything that could give an answer to him. Andy would have done anything to at least know where he or the others might have gone.

“H-help! I'm sinking!” Kevin's desperate whistle broke the agonizing silence.

“Edgar, come on, Kevin's in trouble!” Andy shook himself and suddenly the ocean, the slapping of fish, the distant song of whales slowly began to return. *Finally, this unstable state began to ease.*

“Yes, I can hear it, too! I can hear it, too! Don't be afraid, Kevin!” Andy and Edgar approached Kevin in a zigzag fashion, barely seeing anything in the way. When they got to him, Edgar supported him by the head with his nose while Andy did the same by the tail, working together and pushing Kevin up to the surface to get some air. When they finally reached the surface, Kevin gasped for air, flailing his tail and churning up the previously calm water. Andy was holding his comrade, his muscles tensed to give him and Edgar enough time before they returned to the depths, but then something grabbed him.

Andy felt a noose around his neck. Jerking his head, thrashing the water with his fins, trying to free himself from the grip, but he couldn't handle the overwhelming force. He felt a quick tug and suddenly found himself in the air.

Andy was still flapping his fin. Something that was no longer part of the ocean pricked his skin unpleasantly.

He rolled his eyes and could clearly see and hear the seagulls, eyes stopped at two pink two-legged creatures standing in front of him, making the situation certain that he wasn't in the water anymore. Andy's heart was pounding, his mouth was open, the air felt suffocating as he had no idea what they wanted from him. Deep inside he hoped they would just pat him on the head like they always did, although he didn't understand why they had to lift him out of the water for that.

"This is a nice specimen."

"Sure, they'll pay a lot for it."

"It will bring in a lot of money."

"What kind of money?" Andy whistled but got no answer.

"Well, according to the Hungarian's instructions, we must bring the dolphin to this aquarium."

"Okay, understood."

"What Hungarian?" From the pink biped's emphasis he sensed that something was going to go wrong here so began thrashing his tail even harder.

"Give him a sedative or he'll hurt himself and my new floor!"

"Aye, aye captain!" Andy felt a stab in his neck, and the boat, the bipeds, the blue sky slowly blurred before him.

When he was able to open his eyes again, he was back in the water but the touch, the smells were different.

Looked around but all he saw was a circular barrier around him as if it had been closed in, though, that was the least of his concerns: he could not find Edgar, Kevin, Mike, Dave, Ana, Catalina, Valentina anywhere. Andy stuck his head out for air.

“Good! I see you’re awake.” Andy turned towards the sound and saw a pink biped but it was different from the ones he had seen before. “You will be in a good place here.”

“In what place?” Of course he didn't get a response.

“After a few weeks of practice you can perform in front of an audience.”

“What is an audience? Where is Edgar? Where are the others?” No answer.

“You're a fine specimen. I think you'll bring in a lot of money.”

“Money? What happened to Kevin?”

“If you do the tricks well, you might even get a partner. Then you won't be alone.

“Partner? I only need Catalina!” Andy gathered all his strength, tensed his muscles and jumped up towards the grey sky, then turned sideways and crashed into the water, creating huge waves, splashing the biped standing on the edge of the pool. He repeated this several times, constantly whistling to see where his companions could be.

“Enough! You little bastard, I see you're not resting. I'll give you some!” The two-legged one took out a long

thing having a face like a stingray but lighting running between its eyes. The biped pushed it into the water, and Andy's whole body convulsed, began to tremble, involuntarily. He had never felt anything like it before, his skin being on fire as if dozens of crabs had crawled under it and were stinging all at once. He felt like his heart and lungs were about to explode but then it stopped. The many little crabs were no longer stinging him. He got tired and closed his eyes.

“Edgar, is that you?” He saw a grey, faintly outlined creature approaching him as it slowly crossed the ocean.

Then another one appeared next to him, and then two more.

“Mike, Kevin, Dave, are you here too?” Three more figures appeared and they were shaking their heads, then began to zigzag in a circle.

They spun around so fast, Andy could barely follow them with his eyes. Then they stopped and turned to the sky and all of them started swimming towards the hot sun.

“Hey, wait for me!” But the grey creatures did not stop. Forming a rotating spiral, they moved at dizzying speed towards the surface, towards the air. Then Andy's muscles trembled again.

“You will learn from this!” The lighting something sank back into the pool. Andy couldn't move from the pain, all he could do is to close his eyes, waiting for it to end, waiting to see his friends and Catalina again.

Chapter 7

“No!” His own scream woke Andrew up. He touched his skin though he no longer could feel that all-consuming, burning pain. Then he pulled up his shirt and found no burn marks or other injuries. “Where could I be now?” Asked out loud because he could see nothing but desert sand dunes and a few rocks. Looked up at the sky and it was pitch black as if the apocalypse itself had arrived. Then suddenly the wind picked up.

The stormy wind blew away a few mounds and something horrible peeked out from under the sand: animal skeletons emerging, not one, not two, but hundreds. Andrew buried his face in his hands, for some reason, he didn't want to see this, even though he had skinned and dismembered more than one animal himself. A flash memory pierced through his mind when the poor thing was taking its last breaths when he set about stripping it of its fur.

He opened his fingers a crack, but the landscape remained the same just as disturbing and lonely. For reasons unknown, he moved closer to the remains, wanted to know, had to feel if this was just a dream or if this was reality. With his hands Andrew touched the bones being as smooth as a freshly polished marble slab.

The perfection was disturbed only by a few grains of sand that the wind could not blow away.

“Oh, God!” Whatever was in his stomach came out of his mouth at once, at great speed. He collapsed and could only support himself on the fine, sandy ground with a trembling hand. “Oh, God!” Repeated once more, then he appeared before him. The Creator stood before him with undulating outline. Once more. Again.

“How do you feel, oh great hunter?” The being asked the question with some sweet grim in its voice.

“W-What? Where am I? What’s this place again?”

“Why do you ask? Perhaps you don't like it?” With outstretched arms, slowly turning, the Creator showed the barren landscape.

“I...I...”

“Although, seeing what you left in the sand, the question might have been rhetorical.

“Why won’t you answer? Where am I?” Andrew wiped his mouth then straightened up from the ground with shaking knees.

“Please, Andrew, this is the future. The future for which you are working so diligently and diligently.”

“That's impossible. There must be at least hundreds of corpses here. Nature reproduces itself somewhat.”

“Tens of thousands is the good approximation. And as for your statement: if you take more than you can handle, after a while, you'll bend over from the burden.”

“It's that conundrum again. Nature...not me...why am I here? What is all this again and what was the rest of it? Did it happen? Did it really happen?” With tears in his eyes Andrew walked towards the Creator, attempting to grab the divine entity's clothes to emphasize he wanted answers now, but his hand passed over, the being simply gliding over him as if he wasn't there. Andrew turned around. The Creator was still there, reaching out towards him.

“I see you haven't gotten it yet.” He grabbed the hunter by the neck and lifted him off the ground with playful ease. “This was just the warm-up.” He swung his arm back and threw Andrew straight into a jutting rock. The barren, the lonely, lifeless world disappeared from his sight, and he saw darkness then right after the blinding whiteness again. Once again.

“Andy, Andy! My little son, wake up.” Andy woke up to an unearthly, soothing voice. Moved his gaze up cautiously but in the sparkling sunlight he saw only a black, oval outline, and of course a pair of eyes, those quiet, deep-set brown eyes radiating heavenly peace. “Are you okay? You screamed in your dream as if you were being chased by a leopard.”

“I dreamt that I was in a narrow space filled with water.” Andy snuggled back into his mother's arms, gripping her with his tiny paws, fingers tugging at the

long, soft hairs on her arms to make a little nest for him to hide in, to rest in as he always did.

“That must have been really terrible. Here, eat.” His mother reached up to the thick branch above his head and tore off a twig that was bursting with delicious mangoes. With one movement of her fingers, she tore the fruit in two and handed it to Andy who immediately began to nibble on the soft flesh, eating large pieces of it while his mother formed a basket with her arms. Andy snuggled even deeper inside and continued eating his lunch. He took a few more bites of the fruit when he flinched. Like a bolt of lightning, a sound made his fur stand on end.

“Hey, what are you doing there, Kimboti?” The voice came from below, from ground level.

“N-nothing, Mbazi.” Andy's mother could only answer with shivering voice.

“Nothing? Then what are you covering with your arms? What?” A constant rumbling echoed from below. Andy touched a thin branch that fell near him and was shuddering as if it was during the big storms. The little chimpanzee looked at his mother.

Her gaze was just like, empty, while her mouth was wide open, forming a mango. Andy understood. Mommy was frightened, Mbazi was mad, and was hitting the tree trunk again with his bare hand.

“What are you hiding?” A commotion rose below as the rest of the herd started to hoot. There was an even louder rumble, as if elephants were plowing through the

forest. Andy held his head, even Kimboti tensed. Mbazi was slamming a branch on the ground again. He was really nervous, again. Andy could feel his mother's fear with his whole body, every little muscle in her body was shaking.

“I really didn't do anything.” Kimboti replied in a choked voice.

“Don’t lie to me!” Andy turned his head towards the ground but immediately hid back into his mother's arms. Mbazi was there before them, the little chimpanzee could almost touch him, just had to reach out but that would have been the last thing he wanted to do. Andy saw in Mbazi’s eyes the hatred that had terrified his mother so much. “What is this here? What is this here?” Mbazi tore the mango branch from Andy's little hand.

“It’s nothing, just...”

“Nothing? I told you that in this group we share everything.”

“But Andy...he needs more.”

“I said there is no exceptions here. I said my rules apply here!” Andy looked at the leader again. Mbazi roared, baring his four fangs. Andy hugged his mother even closer to him, trying to cover his ears from the furious leader's ravings. “No exceptions!” Andy closed his eyes, burying himself completely in his mother's arms, then felt a breeze on his face and between his ears. A loud howling breeze.

He felt a blow on his side, then on the other. Jaw clenched. He saw the Sun. Then the leaves. Then the ground, then the Sun again. Head was spinning. Andy's fingers tightened on his mother's fur. Finally, he heard a snap, heart leaping up to his skull.

"Mom...mommy..." Andy could barely speak. He pressed his head even closer to his mother's body, feeling his mother's heartbeat on his face beating just as furiously as his own. "Mom, what was that?"

"E-everything will be okay." Andy opened his eyes. They were on the ground with the others, but before he closed his eyes they were still on the tree, eating the fruit.

"Mom, how did we get down here?" Kimboti pulled the little chimpanzee off her, unwrapping his fingers one by one.

"We just fell a little." Andy shook his head. The world was still spinning around him.

"Please, let's not play like this again!"

"It's all right, my son." She ran her fingers all over his head. "I promise there won't be any more fun like this." Andy looked at his mother, whose gaze was elsewhere. She looked away, looking at Mbazi, who did nothing but give them a sharp, condescending look. He didn't speak, he didn't come over to them. "I have to go now. Wait here, please." His mother disappeared in the forest.

Andy was still shaking, sashaying on the ground as if it had been made of a blanket of burning embers. A

couple of chimpanzee cubs ran up to him, they stroked him, soothed him, asked him how he was, because they just couldn't help but hear him hitting the ground. Andy remained speechless, but looked at Mbazi, trying to figure out with his own mind what happened, how they got on the ground, why his mother gazed at Mbazi like that. Then the answer pierced through his brain like a thunder struck. It was Mbazi. He threw them down from the tree just like that. Now tried to figure out why he could do this, why they deserved this, how could he remain so calm and so negligent. Unfortunately, he didn't get very far since he couldn't look at the deep, brown eyes for long. Turned his head instead and watched the other young chimpanzees as they chased each other, as they ran up and down the trees, calling him, too, but he was waiting for his mother.

Finally, she came. Andy could hardly believe his eyes that his mother had finally, at some point, returned. Kimboti dragged two thicker branches behind her, with larger and larger bunches of bananas on them. The little chimpanzee started running towards his mother at once, trying to lift his little paws one after the other. He hugged her but Kimboti did not return the gesture, gently pushed him aside. She kept going and placed the two branches in front of Mbazi, then lowered his head and extended one hand with his palm facing the sky. The leader stretched himself, spread his chest and looked at Andy's mother. He stayed like that, waiting for all the members of the

herd to fix their gaze on him, then touched Kimboti's palm, slowly running his fingers along it. Kimboti sighed. Mbazi might have forgiven her. Andy watched the scene, though, did not quite understand what had happened, but he felt that they would have to take care of each other after this, perhaps even more than before.

A few days later, Andy woke up coughing and with a burning forehead. The little chimpanzee cub could barely lift his head. Kimboti blew on his forehead, but it didn't help, Andy's forehead remained hot. He looked at his mother whose head was turning this way and that as if she was searching for something.

“What are you looking for, mom?”

“Unfortunately, something that is not here. It is no longer there.”

“What would that be?”

“Come on, honey.” Kimboti formed a basket with one arm and placed Andy in it.

“Where are we going, Mom?” Andy coughed.

“A little bit away from here.” His mother climbed down the tree carefully. Stopped at a thicker branch, grabbed it and looked left, right, and down, then she continued climbing. Andy scratched his head.

“Why are you climbing so slowly?”

“Hush my son!” Andy shook himself and put his hand to his mouth. She had never spoken to him so sternly before. When they finally got down, Kimboti started walking. Walked and walked until she reached the

edge of their territory, then crossed it without even stopping, hesitating a bit. Andy scratched his head even more.

“Mom, why did we come out here?”

“For this.” She pointed at a tree that was overflowing with fresh figs. His mother carefully climbed it up, looking for a thick branch that would comfortably support them. She sat down and tore off a few leafy twigs and arranged the twigs around them. Andy could only see the world around him through the gaps in the leaves. After that, Kimboti reached for the fruits and gave them to Andy, who could barely chew the first few bites, but as soon as he got the taste, he ate the rest with his own hands. Kimboti breathed a sigh of relief. Andy felt the burning in his forehead begin to subside, life force began to return to his whole body.

“Hey, Kimboti! Kimboti! What are you doing up there?” Andy and his mother also peeked out among the leaves. Andy looked down. The air suddenly remained inside. One of Mbazi's subjects, a young male, was below them. The little chimpanzee clenched onto Kimboti's thumb, shaking like a thin branch in a storm. “What are you doing?”

“I'm just, just looking.”

“No, you're not, I can smell the figs. You want to keep it all to yourself!”

“No, I don't...”

“This is against rules of the group! Mbazi! Mbazi!” The male's deep voice echoed throughout the forest. Andy saw enough through the leaves that the male ran away, heading towards their territory. Andy already knew what this meant: he was going to tell the others, but especially to the leader. The mother threw down the branches that served as a hiding place, took the figs from Andy and threw them to the ground as well.

“Come on son.” Kimboti put Andy on her back. “Hold on real tight!” Andy barely blinked and they were already down at ground level. From the depths of the forest, he heard something, something that he didn’t even want to hear in his nightmares.

“Kimboti! Kimboti! I told you there would be no thanks! I told you to share everything!” Like a raging lion, Mbazi shouted after Kimboti. The little chimp remembered the leader's words when he said there would be no more such occasions, and also remembered how mother had looked at Mbazi, her eyes, her face. He now understood why they had to come out here, across the border, to simply eat.

Kimboti ran. She kicked his legs like crazy. Andy hugged his mother tightly, trying to hold on to the long hair with his little paws. He buried his head in the fur. He could hardly stand the wind whistling past his ears.

“Mom, please stop!”

“I can't Andy! We have to go, we have to run as long as we can!” Behind them, the males were closing in. Their deep bellowing echoed throughout the forest.

Then everything went up in the air. The trees, the leaves, the approaching males, everything turned upside down.

“Andy, no!” Andy fell to the ground from the air, almost hearing his ribs cracking from the fall.

“Mom, mom! Where are you?” The forest was spinning with his little head again. He had no idea what had happened or where his mother had gone. “Why don't you answer?”

“Son, son!” Andy looked in the direction of the sound, but couldn't believe what he saw. His mother was hanging in the air, surrounded by some kind of brown tendrils that were reaching down from one of the trees. He had never heard of such plants before. Kimboti pulled at the tendrils trying to chew them off, but she couldn't.

“Mom, please come down.” Andy jumped up and down trying to reach those strange tendrils, but they were too far away from him. “Please, mommy, please... Ah!” The little chimpanzee felt a tug on his neck and suddenly found himself above the ground. He was hanging in the air, and something was clinging to the back of his neck like some kind of eagle, almost tearing his skin off his body.

“I found this next to the mother. Will this be good too, boss?”

“Time will tell. Let me see.” Before the cub stood a tall, two-eyed creature with a hairless face he had never seen anything like that before, but nevertheless he felt as if he had seen this face, this look, somewhere before. His heart had never pounded so fast as it did at that moment.

“Well?”

“Fair enough. We can charge extra money for it, after all, we will deliver more than what was requested.”

“W-what are you saying? What does the word 'money' mean?” Andy understood the speech of this hairless face just as if his mother had spoken to him.

“Boss, Mr. Hungary.”

“I already said, my origin is Hungarian, not my name.” The hairless face said to the other in a stiffed voice.

“Sorry. I just wanted to say that monkeys are coming from the forest, and quite a few of them.”

“Not for long.” This “Hungarian” took out something long, resembling a tree branch, and raised it towards him. The branch faced the forest, then fire came out of the end of the branch, accompanied by a flash of lightning. Andy flinched. The frantic screams coming from the forest suddenly turned into desperate howls.

“Mbazi is bleeding, the leader is bleeding!” The hairless faces didn't seem to understand the wailing, but Andy did. This strange creature had wounded Mbazi, their leader, whom he and his mother were so afraid of. Andy reached for the hand that held him and tried to peel

it off his neck, but the fingers wouldn't budge. He ran at it again, and again, and again, but the result was the same.

“You're a restless little bugger, aren't you?” Andy was now faced with another face.

“Put this in with his mother, too.”

“With his mother?” Andy looked around, but he couldn't find his mother anywhere. “Mom, where are you?” Cried with all his might.

“As you wish Mr. Andrew.” The hairless face threw the little chimpanzee into a narrow space. Andy was surrounded by a straight, greyish thing from which light shone. Here he could finally find his mother.

“Mom, mom! What's happening? What are these animals?” No response came from his mother to the little chimpanzee's words. She lay motionless, body wrapped around this strange, massive brown tendril. “What happened to you, Mom?” Andy went for the tendrils trying to pull them, bite them, chew them off, but the things were too massive. Then he felt a stab in his side and this narrow, grey space, the forest, and the hairless faces became a blur. He heard a strange hooting – a sound that he had never ever heard, which was full of joy –for the last time before everything went dark before him.

Andy woke up to an unpleasant, almost bitter smell as if rotten mangos were around him. His eyes were

heavy, could barely open them from the strong, white light that cut his pupils like a claw of an eagle. His head was throbbing, as if he had fallen from a tall tree without branches that would have softened the landing. After getting used to the light, the little chimpanzee looked around. He was again in a narrow space, where many hairless faces walked, got up and down, wearing some strange, long white fur. There was dead silence, only some knocking disturbed it, coming from below from this strange looking, white and plain straight ground as the hairless faces touched it with their 'paws'. At least Andy could only describe to himself those limbs as paws. Andy could watch all this from an even narrower space, surrounded by grey tree branches.

"Son, my son? How do you feel?" Andy turned his gaze to the side.

"Mom, mommy!" The narrow thing tipped over as he hit it with his tiny head.

"Are you okay, son?"

"I'm fine, mom, I just don't know where we are. What is this place and what happened to the forest?"

"Unfortunately I have no idea." His mother, like him, had been languishing in a narrow thing like this, surrounded also by grey tree branches for who knows how long. The narrow thing reminded Andy of a hollow he had once fallen into.

"Okay. A female chimpanzee, twenty years old. Check. A male cub, six months old. Check. Both in

cages. Check. Prepare them for the experiments.” One of the hairless faces was looking at something in its hand.

“Mom, they're talking about some experiment.” Andy said in a trembling voice.

“Who mentions this?”

“These hairless faces. What is an experiment?”

“Honey, that's impossible. They just grumbled something, they didn't say anything meaningful.”

“I, I heard it clearly. What does the word, experiment, mean?”

“I don't know, my son. If I knew, then, then...” Kimboti grasped the narrow branches. A hairless face leaned very close to her, looking her in the eye. It even put his hand on the narrow thing which they probably called a “cage”.

“We can take this specimen to the detergent test.”

“Mom, mom, this creature said they are taking you away.”

“I only heard growls and noise.”

“Mom, I think they're really going to take you away.”

“Andy, please don't scare me. It'll be okay, it won't be...” Then the cage moved.

“Mom, they're really taking you away...” Andy reached out through the grey branches, attempting to reach his mother. “I don't want them to take you away.

“Son!” Kimboti reached out, too, stretching her fingers, shoulders pressed against the cage as she was trying to reach Andy. “I can almost reach you.”

“I don't want you to leave me here!” There was only a seed's distance between the little chimpanzee's finger and his mother's when the cage moved away. “Mom! Andy only saw his mother being taken into another place. *So little was needed to reach out but those took her away.* It was just a blink of an eye. He was alone.

Alone in this cold, pungent-smelling space, inhabited by creatures with unknown intentions who had torn away from him the one thing that was dearest to him. *Alone.* Andy had neither the strength nor the spirit to move, he could only turn his head. It was just now that he realized in his tiny brain that his life so far, his planned future, his intention to one day replace Mbazi and make him pay for what he had done to his mother, had all been shattered. Only uncertainty remained, this strange emotion, which carved into his stomach like a claw of a leopard. Then the top of the cage opened.

“The LBT03 experiment can commence.” A hairless face grabbed Andy by the neck. Andy struggled and screamed but it was no use, the hairless face would not let him go. They put him in a strangely shaped structure that resembled a vulture's foot, then they clamped down on all four limbs and his head with brown tendrils cut deep into Andy's skin. He couldn't even turn his head.

Another hairless face went to a white thing and took something out. It pressed a mass of frog saliva on his finger, then stretched Andy's eyelids and rubbed it in.

"No! Let me go!" Andy groaned in pain as this strange frog saliva burned his eyes.

"Dilated pupils, vascularized sclera. Subject appears to be reacting intensely to the agent. Phase 2 can commence. Trial LBT03/A, analgesic." It nodded.

"Leave me be! I want my mother! I want her, not Phase 2!" Maybe the absence of his mother was even more algetic than the saliva itself. *It was no use. No one cared for Andy.*

Another hairless face took out a handful of seeds from a small transparent cage that fit in his hand. The seeds were a strange colour, white instead of brown or green. The hairless face took out another strange, grey thing that looked more like a beak of a small bird. Andy just rolled his eyes, heart already pounding in his throat, couldn't even swallow.

One of the hairless faces stuck this grey bird beak into Andy's mouth. Cold, hard, tasted like sour blood. Then the hairless face squeezed its two ends together, the little chimpanzee opened his mouth involuntarily. He had no choice if he wanted to relieve this unpleasant, tensive feeling in his jaw. The hairless face stuffed the white seeds into him and pressed six of them down his throat with its finger. Andy's throat tightened, his stomach twitched, tried to gag, but the hairless face was more alert

and with one movement snatched the bird beak out of his mouth and squeezed his jaw with its hand. Andy had no choice but to swallow the seeds back together with the contents of his stomach. Andy's belly swelled from it all as if he had swallowed a mango in one go.

The hairless face then left him alone, but not for long. Andy could only blink five times, could only rest for this long and his head was already inserted into a round, grey thing with small, grey, jagged branches on the sides. They secured his head, then the hairless face began to roll the two jagged branches inward.

“The screws are three millimetres deep, no reaction.” It looked at the other white fur and waved his hand, and wrapped two more jagged branches around it. “Five millimetres deep, still no reaction.” It waved again and the branches went even deeper.

“What is this? Stop it!” Andy was breathing heavily, his eyes bulged, his teeth almost shattered, feeling as if his skull was about to explode. And he was still alone. *If only Mbazi was here. Perhaps he is a brute leader, but he wouldn't have let this happen to a member of the group. He would have torn off the limbs of these creatures and then...and then Andy would be together again with his mom.*

“Visible reaction. Continue to seven millimetres deep.”

“Please, p-please, let me go!” The hairless face didn't react, just kept twisting.

“Up to a depth of fourteen millimetres.”

“That's enough, enough, e-enough!” Then the talking, the growling, the noises began to fade. Andy's heart suddenly began to slow down, no longer was breathing in a rush. *It was almost relaxing.* He closed his eyes. Out of the blue, he saw his mother at a distance, walking proudly towards him with her forelegs outstretched. She got closer and closer and finally stood in front of him. Andy jumped on her neck with outstretched arms. *The pain was no longer there, nothing was there.* He felt his mother's silky, soft fur on his face, his paws, his whole body again. *Yes. He was finally home again.*

“The amount of paracetamol should be increased.” In his last moment he took this much from the world, while he was in his mother's arms again. *Free from this space, from the hairless faces, from Mbazi, from the weight of all.* “Experiment LBT03 is over, the subject is dead. Bring another one.”

Chapter 8

The room was spacious, yet he felt as if the walls were about to crush him. Salty drops fell like rain from the hunter's forehead onto the floor, his heart was trying to dig itself out of his chest, his hands and legs were trembling like a thin branch trying to resist the stormy wind. He couldn't even stand, supported himself on his hands and knees on the floor which was transparent like glass. The walls were also similar to the floor, on the other side of which he could see nothing but the endless blue ocean. Again, just like last time, although here he didn't have to gasp for air.

Andrew was not alone, the Creator was with him. He did not look at him, just stared out of the windows. It seemed as if he had been mesmerized by the monotonous, regular waves of the ocean. The hunter wanted to speak, very much, but he could not, simply could not, only sighed heavily, taking long breaths in and out trying to calm his racing heart. The Creator finally looked at him.

He floated towards him at an easy pace, Andrew looked up. His gaze met the Creator, who spread his curled hand towards him, Andrew did the same, but at the last moment, just as he was about to touch the entity, the Creator pulled his hand away, raised it towards the ceiling and snapped.

“No!” That was all Andrew could say as the room blurred and the blue ocean was slowly consumed by the white light.

The ocean’s cool, dark blue waters surrounded her completely as she pushed herself through the dense environment with her long fins. Her soft, deep song travelled all the way from Greenland to Iceland.

“My little son, where are you?” No response came. “It’s time for lunch.” She could only take the song of another member of her species, but not her son’s. “My son, come here, please.” Listened, but didn’t hear her child. She pointed her nose towards the surface of the water, then her huge, long body rushed forward, and reaching the surface jumped up like a shark, turned her body over, spread her fins and crashed into the ocean, creating waves of several schools of fish, not just on the surface of the water. The waves travelled through the bubbles of the deep blue like bursting sounds of several crab pincers. After a while, a smaller, dolphin-shaped shadow headed towards her.

“Yes, yes, I heard you, Mom.” The baby humpback whale spun around as he saw his mother. Her little son barely lived through a great migration.

“Baldur, my little son, where have you been? I have called you several times.”

“We just played with Aron and Helga at the black gorge.”

“I’ve told you I’m not happy when you play there.” Andy shook her head. “It’s dangerous, you should know that. Sharks and bipeds could be there.”

“Yes, yes, you have already told that many times.” Baldur lowered his eyes. “But no one had seen anything there for several full moons, so it didn’t seem silly.”

“My little son.” The mother spread her fins and her son swam underneath, clinging tightly to her. “You’re just like your father, but I hope you’ve inherited something from me as well.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy.”

“It’s okay, it’ll be okay. It’s time to go.”

“Where are we going?”

“To hunt. I told you this yesterday.”

“Oh, really.” Baldur’s eyes sparkled. Mother and son set off into the vast, endless ocean. Little Baldur was ahead of his mother, went ahead to chase the seals, to compete with the tuna. Andy was amazed at how much he had grown in just four moons, how skilfully he was moving through the water as his confidence grew. He was almost a male. Only a few strokes of their fins and they reached their destination.

“Peace to you, Gunnar.” Andy greeted the male member of the group.

“Hello, hello Andy. I see you took your little boy with you too.”

“It’s time to learn tactics.”

“Hi, Uncle Gunnar.” Baldur greeted him with his high song.

“Nice day to you, too, Baldur. Pay attention, because it's important to master the method well.”

“As you say, Uncle Gunnar.”

“Observe how we move, who swims, when and where.” Andy said.

“Consider it done, Mommy.” Andy nodded slowly with her heavy head, then looked at Gunnar, who nodded as well. Baldur swam aside and with three other cubs watched the adults from a distance.

Gunnar and Andy joined five other whales. They'd been waiting for the right moment. A school of herring was approaching them, unaware of the whales watching them. When they were close enough, Gunnar started and charged towards them. He blew bubbles the size of crabs from his nostrils, causing the herrings to stagger and head to the left, but another whale was already waiting for them, also blowing bubbles. The school of herring shifted into reverse and headed in the other direction, but someone was waiting for them there, too. Finally, they fled in the only possible direction, and there Andy, in perfect synchrony with the rest of her companions, released air balloons in front of the school.

Andy and her companions circled the shoal in an ever-narrowing spiral, constantly releasing air bubbles through their nostrils forming a kind of barrier for the herrings. The fish group size of many sharks swarmed

together only into a larger bubble. Andy and the others then bit off their own share of the bubble one after the other. The adults signalled to the cubs that lunch was served. They swam over with long tail strokes and ate their share, though, didn't devour the whole shoal, they left a good few as Andy and the other adults had taught them, so they could continue to grow their own little families.

“So, how did you like it?” Andy asked from his son.

“Mommy, that was amazing. I didn't even think herrings would be so afraid of this little trick.”

“To them, it's like rolling a rock in front of them.”

“And this coordination. First Uncle Gunnar, then you.”

“Everyone has their own role and assignment. You have to time it well, otherwise the swarm might slip out of our fins.”

“It was good to see you.” Baldur was clearly filled with joy and excitement.

“You'll join next time.”

“W-what?” Baldur asked with wide eyes.

“That's why I took you here. Next time, you'll be blowing after Gunnar, a little to his right.”

“If-if you say so, Mommy.” This wasn't quite the answer he had expected. The mother could see in her son's eyes that he still believed he had a little time left, still had some of his carefree childhood left.

“But now let's sleep. Our stomachs need some time after eating.” Andy following the rest of her group, swam to the surface sticking her head out of the water just enough to show her nostrils. Baldur followed her, although he had a harder time getting to rest, since he did not get tired from hunting herrings. He nudged Andy's side with his nose, circling her like a shark around a bleeding seal, bumping his head several times, pretending that he was a giant sperm whale and had to defeat an even bigger monster. Andy left him do this for a while, then, after the tenth blow to her kidneys she lost patience and told her son that it was time for him to rest, too. Baldur bowed his head and rose to the surface.

After a few moments of half-asleep, Andy opened her eyes, looked around, but she was alone. None of her teammates were there, not even Baldur. She just could not believe it. She was only half-asleep, but despite that, she didn't sense anything, not even a tiny fin stroke. Called out to her little son, but didn't get an answer, though, could catch a faint song from afar.

“This metal fish wants us!” Andy recognized Gunnar's voice. Without hesitation, she headed towards him, swimming as fast as her fins and tail could propel her body through the ocean.

“It's not letting!”

“You cover it from the other side.”

“We have to hurry!” She heard more and more desperate singing from the direction where Gunnar's

voice had come from. She stroked even faster. When she got there, Andy's heart skipped several beats.

One of their friends was caught in a large, wide, grey thing as if he had been grabbed by a giant squid. Andy had seen something like this before. At that time, her parents warned her against this creature, which they only called a net. Their friend got caught in this “creature”, the two ends of which were connected to one large thing floating on the surface, which her parents also named, namely a ship.

Gunnar and a third companion seized the monster, grabbing it with their mouths. The water churned around their fins as they struggled with the net and the ship. Even Baldur attacked the "thing".

“Come on Baldur, don't let go!” Gunnar said with the monster in his mouth. Andy was both afraid and proud of her son for wanting to help his comrade at all costs. Andy's mind was racing with thoughts of what to do: pull her son out and swim away or grab the net and join the seemingly hopeless struggle. Her eyes were moving left and right, stomach was distended as if she had swallowed a whale, her fins were tingling, and heart pounding in her head. Then, it was done, she had made her decision.

Andy used all her might to attack the side of the ship, rushing through the dark blue, using her head to knock it out, making to sway and even crack. Fortunately, the net loosened just enough for their

trapped companion to open a gap and swim out. At that very moment a thought crossed Andy's mind that she wished she had told the others about her action, especially her son.

Although the sudden momentum freed their companion, Baldur took his place as he was pulling the net. Only in a few moments the ship regained its balance and continued on to who knows for what purpose now with Baldur in the net. The net, like an octopus on an unsuspecting fish, grabbed Andy's son and pulled him to the surface. The others, not even Gunnar could grab the net with their mouths again.

Baldur disappeared. He was no longer in the water. Andy screamed to herself, gathering her remaining strength, she jumped out of the water to somehow catch this metal monster that held her only child captive.

When she jumped out and could only see for a moment the ship and the bipeds on it on her starboard side. Her gaze caught on one of them for a fleeting moment. She thought she was dreaming, because it was as if she was looking into the water's mirror as if she had always known this biped, who looked back at her with the same incomprehension and amazement.

“Okay people, we have what we came for.” The biped spoke and Andy saw a long arm in his hand, at the end of which was a shining shark tooth. The biped's hand swung, Andy felt a stab in her side, the strange shark

tooth hit her, feeling as if all her strength had been sucked out by some blood-drinking monster.

She fell back into the water, although she could feel the net on the tip of his tongue. The water behind the ship stirred up and they set off, stirring up huge waves. Gunnar and his comrades tried to follow them, but the ship was too fast, they simply could not keep up with it.

Andy swam to the surface and stuck her head out and could only watch as this ship took Baldur from him for no reason. She struck with her fin, which caught a shark tooth protruding from its side. She winced in pain but it was dwarfed by what she felt deep inside. Gunnar swam to her, though, didn't say and didn't ask anything. He snuggled up to Andy but she moved away. Andy looked into Gunnar's eyes. She saw the regret in them, the apology for not being able to save her son. Andy shook her head. It wasn't his regret that she needed, it was her son, her one and only, her tiny little son, but somewhere in her heart she knew that she would never see him again.

Chapter 9

Another blurred, white flash. After another blinding beam of light, Andrew wandered from the ocean to here. Here, into an empty, desolate space, where he saw no trees, no bushes, no slow-moving stream, no clouds in the sky. He wasn't even sure if there was a sky here at all, or where "here" was. Everything was white. Touched the white floor, or ground, he didn't really know what, in short, he was standing on. It was mirror smooth, reminded him more of a room that hadn't been decorated yet just painted, although this space was at least a hundred times bigger than an average bedroom.

He heard no sound, not even the chirping of a cricket, not even the falling of a dewdrop on a blade of grass. He snapped his fingers, heard the sound, and remarked that he hadn't gone deaf. Then began to walk, slowly putting his left foot behind his right, then quickened his pace. His feet took on the rhythm of running as they had never done before. He was wrong. The room was perhaps a thousand times the size of an average room. He ran for half an hour but got nowhere, even though he could hear the floor crunching under his feet. He was in the same place, seeing the same endless whiteness everywhere. Andrew wiped his forehead.

"Where are you?" The question echoed in the space. "Why don't you show yourself?" Answer did not come.

“Of course, now you're not coming out.” Andrew spread his arms. “Are you scared perhaps?”

“Do you think it can feel fear?”

“Maybe, yes, I don't know. If I knew, I wouldn't ask.”

“Can it feel fear? Can it feel fear at all?”

“I've never seen anything like this before, so I have no idea. Why don't you show me your face?”

“I don't think he will.”

“He has always showed it, always. He will show it now as well.”

“Not sure if he will now.” There was no one else in the room but him.

“Oh, yes he will! Where are you hiding, you deity? When will you show yourself again?”

“Why do you want to see him so much?”

“I don't want to, he wants to see me.”

“I'm not so sure about that.” Andrew still had no one.

“Really? Do you want to say something?”

“I think you want to see him. You want him to be here.”

“Why would I want to? What reason would I have to see that hooded monster?”

“I think it's because you're afraid.”

“Me? Afraid?”

“Y-yes.”

“Me? I've faced more tigers and hippos than you'll ever meet.”

“Still, I feel you're afraid.”

“What am I afraid of? What? Tell me, please!”

“You know that.”

“What would I be afraid of? If you're so smart, you could tell me. What would I be afraid of? That he'd show up again and start pushing this extreme greenish crap on me? That he'd lecture me again, then grab me by the scruff of the neck and throw me into some crazy reality? That I'd wake up from there with a stomach-ache again and a heart rate of two hundred?”

“Well, yes, there might be something to it. Is that what you're afraid of?”

“I fear nothing and no one!” Andrew emphasized the last word with a frothy mouth, although he was still alone.

“But you just said, or rather admitted that yes, definitely yes.”

“I said no such thing!”

“You admitted that you fear the Creator.”

“It is just a delusion, a false idol, a thing that only exists in my head.”

“The realities were very lifelike, not to mention his grip.”

“No, no and no. He can't exist, yes, that's it. This whole thing is just a figment of my imagination.”

“Then you are truly afraid of him.”

“A lie. I don't fear him. I did not even see his face. So, how could I fear him since he's in my head, right?”

“You should know this.”

“One hundred percent that he only lives in me, otherwise, otherwise...”

“What are you afraid of?”

“That's it, yes! How could I've been such a fool?” Andrew began to pace up and down.” This is all just a dream, yes, it must be.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“It must be a dream, otherwise, otherwise...”

“What are you so afraid of?”

“Otherwise, everything I experienced was real, it happened. I am responsible for everything.”

“You really tell me what you are really afraid of.”

“Because – Andrew fell to his knees and took a deep breath – I have to live it over and over again. I have to feel the stab in my heart again, the cramp in my stomach when it ends. I have to put myself back into the skin of an animal whose life I ruined. I have to face what I might really be.”

“What might you really be?”

“A monster.”

“That's a bit of an exaggeration, don't you think?”

“Exaggeration? Exaggeration? I took the mother away from the little piglets, who only wanted to protect them, to teach them the things of life. Hell, even my mother once pulled me away from a bush in the yard

because she saw me trying to reach a snake. She scolded me after that. And now those little piglets are alone, defenceless.”

“Sooner or later someone else would have done it, right?”

“I lacked self-confidence and didn't have a girlfriend for a long time, until my first hunt.” Andrew swallowed.

“Please, just go ahead.”

“Back then the goal was still to reduce the number of individuals. We shot a few wildebeest in a herd and there was a woman. She was the one who introduced me to everything, she showed me how wonderful a woman's touch could be. I thanked God that I had finally, at some point, found a girl who accepted that I was still inexperienced who didn't mind. I finally found her then just like that orangutan in Sumatra that I sold to a sick collector.” Andrew stopped for moment staring the white floor, and enlacing his hands searching for something. After a while he cracked his fingers, finding nothing just him, only him.

“Are you OK?”

“No.”

“Listen, the past is the past. Don't worry about it...”

“The past? No. It's not the past, it's who I really am.”

“You can always learn from the past.”

“I feel them, I feel them in here. Everyone.” Andrew grabbed his clothes and around his heart, wrinkled it. “When I took the two tiger cubs from their mother I

looked into her dazed eyes for the last time. I didn't understand then but I do now. Like the humpback whale I shot with a harpoon, but all she wanted was her son back."

"You can always apologize." The hunter could only hear his own thoughts.

"I don't deserve forgiveness. Not after what Kimboti and her child went through. I can't, I just can't." There was no response. There was silence. All he could hear was his own sobbing. Cries of the creatures echoed through his ears.

Suddenly, a white rabbit appeared out of nowhere. It was just like the one Andrew had seen at his godfather's: brown button eyes, white, silky fur, long, floppy ears. The little animal hopped towards the hunter, but he backed away.

"Don't come any closer! Get out of here!" However, the rabbit did not listen to the command. "You're not safe. I, I'm a monster." Andrew continued to back away, crawling on all fours from the approaching rabbit. "Please stop!" He held out his hand in front of the animal. It worked, the rabbit stopped, stood on two legs and looked at the hunter, staring at him with its pair of brown button eyes.

"Look, he's not afraid of you."

"It, it should be. If it knew, it really would know how many of its brothers I've shot just to adjust my Remington rifle."

“That's the past.”

“I could have done it differently, on a target, but honestly, I somehow enjoyed the sight of the tiny bodies flying away. Like a real monster.” The rabbit stared at Andrew with pricked ears.

“Maybe it would forgive you.”

“I don't deserve it. Please go away.” Andrew looked into the rabbit's eyes. “Go away before you find yourself on my list. Please, get on with your life.” The white rabbit came closer, searching the hunter's eyes, but he caught its head feeling that he did not deserve even the appearance of forgiveness.

Out of nowhere, Andrew could see a figure moving in the distance. He didn't quite understand how he had gotten there, because he had walked across almost the entire space but had not seen anyone. The figure got closer and closer, and Andrew recognized it: it was a scalp hunter, with a rope hanging from his side with all kinds of animal furs, from badger to fox to arctic hare. In his hand he held a Model 1886 Winchester with which he could easily hit games from a distance.

“How does this get here?” Andrew asked himself. “How do you get here?” Asked the scalp hunter, who instead of answering started loading his rifle. Andrew looked at the rabbit. “Get out of here. This hunter is coming for you. Do you hear? You have to get out of here!” However, the rabbit didn't move, and no matter how much Andrew tried to shoo it with his hands, he

couldn't do anything. "You really have to get out of here! Oh my God!" He picked up the rabbit and with jerky steps trying to find some cover, some hiding place for the animal. But the space was empty, there was nothing and no one else there except the three of them. Then he heard the click.

The unmistakable sound of the Winchester as it cocks the .45 caliber round from the magazine into the barrel. The scalp hunter raised the gun to his shoulder and aimed straight at the rabbit. Andrew clutched the rabbit to him and turned just as the deadly bullet was about to go.

Bang.

The hunter blew out the air. He didn't hear the sound of the lever of the rifle anymore, the scalp hunter wouldn't shoot again. He took a close look at the rabbit in his hand, examined it carefully, from its legs to its snout, but found no sign of penetration let alone blood. Then he touched his belly. The rabbit fell out of his hand, while he fell to one knee, feeling a sharp, stabbing pain in his back as if hundreds of tons of rock had been dropped on him. He took his hand from his belly and to his surprise found something inside: a bloody .45 caliber bullet. Andrew blew another sigh then lay on his back and smiled.

The rabbit escaped unharmed. With the strength he had left, he looked up from the floor and, fortunately, there was no sign of the scalp hunter. He took another

whiff causing every muscle in his body to ache. The rabbit moved closer, looked and sniffed at the bleeding hunter, who continued to smile.

“Now, um, it can't hurt you anymore. You can go. Don't worry.” But the little animal didn't move away from him, instead moved even closer right up to his ear.

“Andrew.” The rabbit spoke to the hunter's great surprise. However, the surprise was not that the animal spoke but that he recognized its voice. “Andrew, congratulations! You have regained your soul.” The Creator spoke.

Chapter 10

“Mr. Andrew, what have you done again?”

“W-what?” The sun was hurting his eyes, he could only open them a tiny slit, and even then, could only see blue, green, and orange spots. He could hear the sound of explosions in the distance, but everything around him was buzzing as if cotton balls had been stuffed into his ears.

“I should leave you here for this.” He felt a tug on his arm.

“Geez!” The sharp, shooting pain jolted him awake. Looked around, and he was back on the savannah, in his own skin, not a meerkat or a warthog.

“You really got caught in that buffalo trap.” A gamekeeper tried to pull Andrew out of the thorny ditch, while not far away the charges were exploding more and more frequently. Suddenly his memories returned.

They were about to restrain the elephant herd, when a baby broke away from the group. He chased it and fell into the pit. Then came the journey. The Creator, the animals. *Could it all have been a bad dream?* The stomach cramps, the pain squeezing his heart like a vice, his grandmother's cat, the little chimpanzee cub, the mother whale. *No, it couldn't have been a dream. That would be too simple for an answer.*

“After hospital treatment, you are to go to a prison.”

“Is that you?” Andrew recognized the gamekeeper because he was the first one he fought a firefight with to take the skull of a great kudu.

“Who else would be foolish enough to go towards the explosions?”

“Thank you.

“Sir, sir, don't just thank me.” The gamekeeper looked to the left with his head, Andrew looked to the right. Honestly, he hadn't expected this especially after all this, especially after what he had wanted to do to it.

A trunk was wrapped around his right arm. The small, wrinkled body part belonged to the baby he had wanted to shoot not so long ago. Andrew searched within himself for the answer to the why, what reason this kid could have to help him, what considerations would it have for doing this. Maybe because of its inexperience, it didn't yet know what a human being is capable of, that no living creature more vile than him had ever really walked the Earth. It might still believe that everyone was as innocent and good as it was.

As he was thinking about this, they pulled the hunter out of the trap with one last, coordinated pull. The spikes tore through his thigh and side, leaving a very ugly mark in their way.

“Mr. Andrew, you're bleeding like hell!”

“Thank you so much.” The hunter turned to the baby. Despite the throbbing, sharp pain, the blood streaming from his legs and sides, Andrew was still

searching for an answer. He touched the baby elephant's forehead and ran his fingers along its rough skin. The uneven bumps tickled his smooth skin. The elephant shook its head and snorted. Andrew did not take his hand away, but looked into the baby's black, round eyes, hoping he would finally find the answer there. The elephant put its trunk on the hunter's shoulder, then slid up to his face. Andrew smiled. *Maybe he could save him too, like that white rabbit.*

Then heard a deafening thud and the baby elephant fell down.

“No!” It was as if his heart had been ripped out. Andrew crawled over to the baby lying in the sand, blood pouring from its side. Andrew clenched his hand into a fist, fingers biting into his palm spilling a few drops of blood. Andrew had no idea where the shot had come from. Turned his head attempting to locate the source of the noise while thoughts were racing in his brain. Andrew simply couldn't understand how such an accurate shot could have been fired in such a dust and noise filled chaos. Maybe it was Emeric. He had shot badly, but sometimes he could have incredible luck. *Bloody hell!* The .308 bullet had hit right behind the ear, severing the tiny elephant's esophagus.

“Mr. Andrew, come here immediately!” The gamekeeper took cover behind a nearby tree with a tiger's leap, couldn't have known who had shot or from where. “Come on now!”

“Not you! Not you!” Andrew put both hands on the elephant's wound and tried to squeeze it but blood flowed even between his fingers, while he himself was bleeding, but didn't care in the least as long as the cub somehow survived. Though he knew in himself that his attempt was futile, the hit was too accurate.

The little elephant put its trunk on the hunter's shoulder, then slid back up to his face and wiped the tears away. For a moment, Andrew wondered how this barely a few-months-old cub could know that the accumulated tears were interfering with his vision and he couldn't wipe them away because he was trying to squeeze the bleeding wound. He sighed heavily, but not from the struggle. The trunk then came back to his shoulder, then lower and lower from there. It fell down like a leaf on the ground. Andrew looked into the black, round eyes. He saw his sparkling reflection fading in them as his tiny soul left his fragile body faster and faster. Finally, the hunter's reflection disappeared, and Andrew fell sobbing on the lifeless head.

“Mr Andrew, please.” The gamekeeper could barely speak. “Please...”

“He was only a few months old. Do you understand? A few months old!” The hunter looked at the gamekeeper.

“I knew this, Mr. Andrew. We've been tracking this herd for years.”

“And now it lies here. Did it deserve this? By what right did we decide its fate?”

“You should ask yourself and your friends about this.”

“You’re a good man.” The gamekeeper smiled.

“You’re not bad anymore.”

“Is that really you?” Andrew lifted up his head from the baby’s head, wiping the tears off his eyes. It appeared before him with wavy lines on the hot sand and at that very moment he realized that he had not dreamed it, that somehow it had happened to him.

“You are not dreaming, Andrew. It is me but only you can see me.”

“I, I would have a question...”

“The journey was real. That’s why you felt that man was eerily familiar to you as a cat or even a chimpanzee cub.”

“Yes, I did those things to them, now I understand.”

“You have experienced what they have experienced. You have felt what they have experienced. You have rejoiced when they have rejoiced, you have been sad when they have been hurt, and you have died when they have died.”

“But I’m still here, where it all began.”

“That white room was not an ordinary room. There you could choose what kind of person you wanted to be. You sacrificed yourself for the rabbit.”

“Is that why I came back to watch this poor thing die in my arms? Wasn’t, wasn’t that enough?” The Creator did not answer, only smiled. For the first time the hunter saw his full face from behind the hood. The jurors appeared, too, all twelve of them, blurring and floating before his eyes.

“Well, it’s time to decide the question. Does everyone agree with me?” The Creator turned to the animals. The gazelle stamped its hooves, the salmon jumped up, the dragonfly touched its tentacles, then the leopard and the wolf nodded their heads, the platypus, the lobster, the zebra and the okapi indicated their response with their tails, the rhinoceros only with its eyes. The orangutan clapped its hands.

“Eleven yes so far. What’s your decision?” Everyone looked at the elephant, who in turn watched Andrew, looking at the hunter then his gaze wandering to the baby lying next to him for long seconds. Finally, he shook his head. “So, it’s done. Andrew, use it wisely!” The Creator and the jury disappeared from Andrew’s sight, who clutched his head, hunching over from the excruciating pain then laying down on the ground. Trembled as if two heavy rocks had crushed his skull. He couldn’t even keep his eyes open, couldn’t even scream, just waited for it to pass.

He deserved it. That was the only thought that flashed through his mind. He deserved the pain, the suffering that he had caused. The bleeding wounds, the

unbearable headache. Maybe it was for the best. There would be one less poacher after this torture was over. Although this herd would die, there would be no more such operations after this, since he, the leader of the wolfpack, would no longer be there. A few minutes. That was all he had to endure before the life force would finally drain from his body from the loss of blood. *Soon, one person less would be destroying them.*

It was over in just a few minutes. The headache had passed as quickly as it had come, and it was as if he had been alive. Andrew reached down to his thigh: the wound had disappeared. Touched his side too: there was no trace of the fatal wound. Inhaled the air slowly, and could smell the mixture of the scent of blooming flowers and the unwashed fur of baboons as it rose in the air. A bitter mixture, but it showed that he was still alive, still here in this reality. He touched his forehead, and could feel the beads of sweat on his fingers. Andrew had to open his eyes to see that he was really still here. He did so with trembling eyelashes, but closed them immediately, rubbing them, then opened them again, but couldn't believe his eyes, his own sense organ, because what he was receiving, was beyond all his imagination. Andrew had to sit up.

He saw reddish-brown dots, or rather shapes, all around him so clearly that they seemed to be drawn in his eyes as if they were right there in front of him. The shapes walked, flew, moved. They were alive. He had no

idea what they were, and then looked down in front of him, also saw a red shape in the tall grass that reminded him most of all of a cricket. Reached down for the shape and, to his greatest surprise, was able to take it in his hand, to touch the reddish-brown cluster of dots.

It was indeed a cricket, a giant armoured cricket. He stared at the animal that took up the entire palm of his hand. The cricket also looked at Andrew with its small, black button eyes, stroking the man's hand with its hooked, rough feet, making his skin tremble. The animal leisurely made two circles around itself, then looked back at Andrew again and bit his index finger. Andrew groaned softly and let it go, standing speechless before the incident. He was not surprised that the animal had bitten him but that he had noticed it in the grass. Practically, he couldn't have spotted it at night even with a thermal imaging camera, even though it was bigger than most insects, it was almost impossible in the tall grass. And now, in this heat, and so easily.

“This is a present.”

“What?” Andrew looked around but saw no one.

“This is a present.” The voice repeated.

“It’s you again.”

“You are a good observer.” The Creator answered.

“I don’t understand this.”

“What can’t you understand?”

“I thought you had decided that I was finished here and now. Then my wounds healed, disappeared, and what's more...”

“Yes, do continue.”

“I see all kinds of red shapes. At least...Are they shapes?”

“Tell me what you can see.”

“Countless reddish-brown dots, spots, and I was able to pick one up. A cricket.”

“They are not simple shapes or spots but living beings.”

“What? Living beings?” Andrew scratched his head.

“Like I said: living things. You can see every animal within a radius of at least a kilometre, whether it's a tiny ant or an elephant.”

“My Lord, yes. I can see the herd through the dust cloud, gathering closer together. But...but...”

“I'm listening, Andrew.”

“Why do I see them? Why did this happen to me?”

“This is what we decided.”

“The decision...yes...you said it would take a long time, what, what...”

“By the time we get it. Finally, we did it.”

“So, I can see them.”

“Yes, but this is just the beginning. You can connect with them.”

“With them?”

“Like I say.”

“Please, not now. Please leave these riddles alone.”

“Just look up at the sky. What can you see?”

“A vulture circling right above my head.”

“Look even closer. Focus on it.” Andrew followed the Creator's instructions, since he could do nothing else, because he simply had no idea what was happening to him.

“Ok, I'm looking at it.”

“Splendid. You should now see the outline of the bird blurring in front of you.”

“Y-yes, yes, I see. I really see something.” The vulture flew across the sky like a black mist in the hunter's eyes.

“Okay. That's it. Just relax. Breathe out slowly.” Andrew exhaled, his lungs were completely empty, and then the vulture began to approach him at high speed. He could almost see the large bird slam into his face. Then it became dark, but only for a moment.

“W-what happened?” The hunter asked in a choked voice.

“You tell me. What do you feel, what do you sense?”

“I feel, I feel that, that...” He couldn't finish the sentence. Andrew thought he was dreaming, but it seemed so real, and such things are only possible in dreams, when you can see the events taking place below you from a height of tens of meters: the increasingly

dense clouds of dust, the confused, panicked elephants, the trees with the people on them.

“What do you feel?” The Creator asked again.

“I can feel the air between my wings. I can feel the wind blowing through my feathers. I can feel the claws on my toes, as if they had always been there. What happened to me?”

“You are now one with the vulture. Now...”

“You turned me into a vulture? Dear You...” Andrew's voice began to tremble. “Couldn't it have been a bear instead?”

“Don't worry. Your body has remained the same, only your consciousness has migrated.” Andrew didn't say a word, just spun around in the air once, then twice. He could not believe he was flying, that he could move his wings, his head, his legs, as if he had always been born this way. Just like on the journey, but he had memories of his childhood, of his grandmother, of his first hunt, when his godfather took him into the forest.

“This is amazing! I'm flying but I can see myself on the ground.”

“That's right. Your consciousness is in the bird's body, while your own has entered a meditative state.”

“I'm in the bird?”

“Just like you say.”

“And mine is...” Andy looked down. He saw the gamekeeper standing next to a man and nudging him on the shoulder, but the man didn't react, just sitting cross-

legged, motionless. Andrew began to plummet and hit the ground kicking up a lot of dust.

The ranger raised his head and looked at the vulture, then back at the man, and then back at the vulture, Andrew, who just stood there looking at the man. The brown eyes that had seen so much already looked at him, trying to figure out what was going on in his mind. The gamekeeper wiped his forehead and looked back at the motionless man, then slowly looked back at the vulture. Andrew nodded “yes” with his head, then nodded to the side, several times. The ranger pursed his lips, nodded his head, too, and left as if he knew what was going on here, as if he felt what Andy felt. Andrew stepped closer to the man with his eyes closed: the grey hair, the missing piece of his right ear. He was really sitting here cross-legged with hands resting on his knee.

Andy gently pinched the human thigh that felt it on his thigh, in fact, on the vulture's thigh. *This is not a dream. This is happening here, now, at this moment.* Andy moved even closer resting his head on the man's chest rising and falling, heart taking on a rhythm, each beat of which was a separate symphony. Andy took his head away and just stared at the man.

“This is indeed the reality, Andrew.”

“My heart. I've never felt this way, this much...”

“Yes, I know.”

“How long can I stay like this, in this body?”

“Well, I hope I won't have to limit that. I hope you'll use this gift we've given you wisely.”

“So... Why me?” Andy looked up at the sky.

“You deserved to suffer.” The vulture was silent. “But I'm not cruel, and in the end I was right.”

“I don't know. Yeah, maybe. Maybe I understand now.”

“I think you get it. But now I would like to ask: what are you going to do with this?” Andrew's gaze was still fixed on the sky. Spread his wings and flew up, very high, looking down once more at the cloud of dust, the noise, the chaos he had caused. Moved his gaze down at the elephants approaching the cages ever so close, close to their very end. On a tree, not too far away, he saw a leopard that seemed not to dare to leave the safety of the treetop.

“I think I know what I'll use it for.” The big cat's outline blurred before the vulture's eyes, then exhaled. Within a second Andrew was sitting on the branch.

Spread his claws and split the thick branch of the acacia tree. The razor-sharp claws left a deep mark. Andrew's skin trembled, as he had never felt so much strength within himself. His entire body, all 80 kilograms, was made of pure muscle. Roared. At his deep, hollow voice, birds flew up from a nearby bush. Looked up at the vulture still flying above his head. Perhaps it could have experienced it all as a dream,

perhaps it didn't even know that it had flown down to a man and touched his head.

Andrew shook his head and looked slightly to the left. He didn't have much time left. With a big leap he landed on the hot ground below and started moving, and only in a few moments he was running at an incredible speed. The wind whistled past his ears, making him shiver. He couldn't believe how easily he could move his strong, flexible leopard body. The charges of the penultimate round were already starting to explode.

Andy entered the dust curtain, nose filled with sand and gun powder particles which were burning through his lungs. The consecutive explosions pierced his ears like thousands of razorblades and made his eyes flash like millions of dying stars. Also, the cries of the elephants made his eyes engulfed with tears. Andrew roared, could feel each and every muscle as they tensed and got pumped by the adrenalin. With clenched jaws Andrew made the move, though it was difficult to navigate in the noise and the rising, thick cloud of dust and sand, but lucky for Andrew the blueprint was there in his head. He knew where he had to go, where he had to dig up the ground a little to access the wires.

A quick turn to the left. A sidestep to right. Another quick jump to the left. In this dust and sand hell, Andy had to avoid the column-like feet of the panicking elephant herd. *Those leopard eyes and ears were really helpful.* Finally, he got there. With his powerful jaws, he

was able to bite off the bundle of wires immediately. *The electric current first tickled, then burnt his gum, though it did not matter. Nothing mattered. Neither the dust nor sand, nor the noise, nor the pain in his body, just the task. To save these creatures and his soul.* Andy wasted no time, went to the second pair of charges, then the next, eyes on the targets the whole time. There was still a lot to go and he couldn't rest for even a tenth of a second. There were only four pairs of charges left when a bullet hitting the ground blocked his path.

He couldn't believe it himself, but Andrew could see where the shot had come from. *"So you won't let me finish. Okay, Emeric, I won't let you finish either."* The leopard advanced towards the hunting ambush, where two of his former comrades were targeting him. Andrew approached the ambush in a large semicircle, from the left, at the pace of the ambush, bullets raining down on him, but none of them hit him. He knew very well that his comrades were aiming very badly to the left despite asking them to practice.

The leopard disappeared from Emeric and Carlos's sight. Andy climbed the tree, bracing himself with his claws and in a few moments found himself under the rickety planks of the hunting lodge. Blew a big breath and looked up from under the planks. Emeric and Carlos were scanning the ground, probably looking for him. Andy tensed, gathering the strength in his limbs, then he jumped up onto the ambush.

Launched himself at Emeric aiming for his wrist. His French friend screamed in pain. Andrew felt fresh human blood on the tip of his tongue. Pulled Emeric, dropping the rifle in his hand as the leopard bit him. Without hesitation Andrew threw his French comrade from the ambush with a casual nod. *Try to target innocent cubs after this.*

Carlos came after him. With trembling hands tried to quickly load the .44 revolver but Andrew didn't wait for him to do so. Jaws slamming the thigh. Taking advantage of his old friend's weakness Andrew bit him. Carlos screamed, still holding the gun. A slash to the stomach. More blood. Ripped open the lower abdomen. Carlos was lying. He squeezed the wound with both hands trying to stop the pouring blood. The gun was no longer in his hand. Andrew put Carlos's bag in front of him and tore it open, rummaging around for a while, then finally found the first aid kit and threw it at his friend. Carlos was speechless. He had certainly never experienced anything like this before. Andrew jumped down from the rack. He didn't think that one day he would have to help his comrade like this and then would have to leave him for good.

Andrew looked towards the herd. Although he had managed to stop the chain reaction, some of the elephants were already in the cage. Looked at his companions in the nearby tree, Massimiliano and James, and could see them already holding the joysticks fingers on the push

buttons, ready to fire the transformer. Andrew roared, maybe everything was in vain. They were too far away for him to reach them in time to stop them. This small interaction with Carlos' could cost him a lot. With his new "vision", Andrew could not find any animal that was close enough and could stop the hunters, only saw ants and flies. Then his eyes stopped on a small tree. A baboon was clutching a branch with two paws, probably been separated from its group in the confusion. It was close to the hunters, but even closer to the cages. The primate's outline blurred in front of the leopard.

Andrew jumped down from the tree without thinking, and in the body of a baboon hurried towards the cages. Hidden from Massimiliano and James' eyes the baboon was able to sneak away. When he reached the transformer, switched off the main fuse, then the fuses of the two branches, then he pulled the plugs just to be sure. Andrew went on to the second cage. Counted the steps in his mind, following his own thoughts precisely, crippling the second device just as he did with the first one. It was a mere miracle that he noticed this baboon, its thumbs were a great help grabbing the parts of the transformer.

"Bloody hell!"

"What's going on?"

"First the charges now the transformer. I think it has burnt out. It's not working!" Andrew got that much out of the conversation. He took a deep breath then let it all out. He wasn't late.

“What shall we do now, Massimiliano?”

“I’m not sure. Andrew! Andrew! He’s not answering.”

“What?” James shouted.

“No response from him. I, I think it’s time for plan C!” Andrew raised his head at the sound of Plan C. Looked left and right like a madman, calculating to himself how many victims the plan might claim. Andy moved his gaze up at the hunting ambush. *He couldn't think of a better idea, had to try it again.*

With the agility of a cat climbed up the acacia tree, where James had already raised his Lee-Enfield rifle to his shoulder and licked the corner of his mouth. Andy was too late. Or maybe not yet. Andrew leapt at the rifle. The gun fired. Growling and trumpeting came from below. Andy gazed his eyes to the herd. The bullet hit a young bull, but only at the leg. With a red face James swore, then looked down at his gun, watching with wide eyes as a baboon, Andrew gripping his rifle with both hands.

Andrew tried to take the weapon. Pulled and tugged, but his former comrade-in-arms wouldn't let him. They started a bizarre scuffle.

Andy and James wrestled for minutes in the unbearable African heat. They paced left. Then right. Forward and backward on the rickety shack. Andrew pulled, then tugged. Clenched his jaw. Roared and screamed. Showed of his fangs. But James wouldn't let

go of the gun. Andy's long face was covered with the man's sweat, and more than one even went into his eyes. In the scuffle, Andrew's gaze occasionally strayed to Massimiliano. He saw a pistol in his hand, but didn't use it. *How could he, since it was impossible to aim it?*

The baboon just blinked. He was patient and just searching, waiting for the right opportunity. He knew James, taught him how to wrestle. The baboon backed up a little. Then leaned to his right, letting the man weigh on him. James put his left foot forward. He had it. Andrew let go of the rifle. From the momentum, James leaned forward. A hit. Andy's fist landed on James's eye.

James touched his eyes, but was still holding the rifle in his other hand. Without hesitation, Andrew sank his sharp fangs into the defenceless man's wrist. *The Lee-Enfield rifle was now his.* Andrew pressed the stock to his shoulder tight and aimed the gun at the men.

"Leave, right now!" The baboon pulled the bolt of the rifle back. "Didn't you hear it? Get out of here!"

"Is this talking to us?"

"I don't know." The two men just looked at each other and shook their heads. All they could see, all they could understand from the whole thing was that a baboon was pointing their own gun at them and muttering something.

"If you really want this." Andy clinched his paw on the beechwood grip and fired the rifle. The bullet hit the rotten plank of the hunting lodge just millimetres from

James' feet. The two men didn't move, Andy saw the fear of death in their eyes, the same fear he had seen in hundreds of animals. They apparently couldn't comprehend that Andy was constantly pointing the rifle at them, then at the SUV parking nearby.

"I think it wants to say something." Massimiliano broke the tense silence.

"And what? It's just a simple monkey."

"A simple monkey wouldn't point your Lee-Enfield rifle at us. I think it wants us to get out of here." Andy nodded.

"The hell with that! I'm not leaving this pile of money here for a fucking animal." James stepped closer to the baboon and reached out to take his weapon back. Andy was alert and, seeing the intention hitting the man in the nose with the rifle's stock, then pressed the barrel of the rifle to his throat. James did not move.

"OK, OK" James raised both of his hands, and Andy could see in those green eyes that he acknowledged his defeat.

"Come on, let's get out of here." Massimiliano grabbed his comrade's arm and pulled him away. The two men climbed down from the ambush and got into the SUV. The two-ton monster kicked up the yellow sand and set off, carrying the two hunters inside.

Andrew took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked around the savannah, searching the ground and the sky but could not find the vulture. It probably realized

that there would be no dinner here now. Instead, however, he found another living creature. Andy Borrowed the body of the long-legged, black and grey, secretary bird with its decorative feathers on its head and flew up.

He went to the first hunting lodge he attacked, and could find neither Carlos nor Emeric anywhere nor even the SUV. They probably realized on their own that this prey, this family of elephants would not be theirs now, but suspected that Carlos realized that their physical safety was more important, especially after he had thrown Emeric from a height. He searched in vain for their new companion, Ababio, found no trace of him in the area. In vain his young heart was not tenacious, perhaps he had already fled when he went after the baby.

Andrew flew towards the cages and even from a height of several tens of meters could clearly see how the thick legs trembled as they took their steps. Andrew could only guess what they must be feeling deep inside. The members of the herd stopped for a moment, huddled close together, put their trunks on each other's heads, and then continued on their way. They did this several times as they slowly approached the trap where the little one's lifeless body laid.

They stopped at the trap and surrounded the little baby. Andrew's trance-like body was nearby, very close, but the elephants didn't care as if it were just a bush or a flower, they simply stood by it. *Perhaps they too felt*

what Andrew experienced as a vulture resting his head on his own chest.

The family members fondled it, caressing the little baby elephant with their trunks, from its huge forehead to its hind legs. Then the matriarch raised her head, stretching her trunk in the air, so did the other family members, touching and intertwining in the middle, right above the little one as if they were dozens of fingers of a hand. They stayed like that for a long time, even the secretary bird flying above them could not count to itself for how long. A grape-sized tear rolled down from the eye of one of the young bulls, falling onto the tiny dead ear. Andy could clearly see this tiny drop of water, into which a sea of emotions could condense.

“Thank you again.” From Andrew’s eyes a drop also fell. He took a slight turn in the air, wanted to see one more thing.

He set off after James and Massimiliano. From a distance he saw the tracks of the bumping SUV. Followed them, the tracks for a while, wanting to make sure that James wasn't doing anything stupid. Andrew finally landed on a branch. He was tired, still had to get used to this new form, or forms. Shook his head and looked around once more, sensing every form of life, looking into the everyday lives of every tiny animal. Then he flew up.

He returned to the trap. The herd had left, Andrew could still see the dust cloud they left behind. Andy

looked down at his own body, the outlines of which were slowly beginning to blur.

He opened his eyes and could feel himself, his heart still beating in that rhythm. The hunter touched his face, his ears, his legs, and finally the little elephant. He was himself again, in human skin again. Stood up and rubbed his face and made a few head circles. His gaze was scanning the savannah.

“So many lives, I can’t believe it.” The dry sand blew away a drop from his eye. “For so many years...hmm. And it all started with my grandma’s poor cat. Poor bastard.” Andy bent now and picked a fistful of sand, watching as it flowed down between his fingers grain by grain. “Too many lives and I have so little time. But don’t fear, I am here for you. Now, I’m here. I will not rest until I have given back what I have taken from you.”

The EnD

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