

THE VERGE: BOOK ONE

THE  
**BEAST**



Alex Bobrov

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Special thanks goes to James C. McVay, who not only translated this novel from my native language but helped "Americanize" it.

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# Instead of Prologue

**T**his book neither shows nor teaches people how to act—it does just the opposite. It makes clear what happens to those who transgress the invisible bounds of human morality. You may find some of the episodes in the book distasteful— still, though they may make you cringe, there is truth in them all. As you near the end, however, your attitude may change for the better, and you may find the characters becoming more likable and sympathetic.

*(From the author to those who will not understand)*

Although I sincerely hope it won't happen, you may recognize yourself at some points in the book. If you do, seek psychiatric help immediately!

*(Author's warning)*

The book may affect people in different ways and they might draw different conclusions about its author. But only someone mired in mud to his neck can truly describe mud. Now, having this knowledge, your conclusion will be correct.

Young people who find freedom, loose morals, and promiscuity attractive frequently ask me why they should *not* act as the characters in the first half of my book do. My answer to them is this: go right ahead, act the same; you cannot truly rejoice in the light until you have reached the bottom of the darkest pit. You can only appreciate purity and innocence when your soul is caught deep in sin. If you find the characters appealing

## Instead of Prologue

at the book's beginning but not at its end, it's time for you to reach the bottom. I believe we need to learn from our own mistakes.

## CHAPTER 1.

# The Faceless Monster

“I’m not, I’m not myself  
Feel like I’m someone else  
Fallen and faceless  
So hollow, hollow inside.”  
*(An excerpt from the song “Faceless” by Red)*

I was walking through the streets of my hometown on a bright sunny day, recognizing familiar places and remembering my childhood. Ghosts of the past surrounded me, and I became a small boy again, but at the same time I was that little boy’s future self in a world with colorful signs, expensive cars, and crowds of strangers dressed in the latest fashions, all of it simultaneously both foreign and a place where I belonged. I looked around curiously, staring at each building and peering into the face of each person I met. Everything was familiar and strange at the same time, and I mentally compared what I remembered from my childhood with what I saw in the present. This odd journey of past and present took me to my old school.

The building looked gloomy and deserted to me that Saturday, yet very peaceful. I gazed into the schoolyard and remembered playing with my buddies. I even recognized the battered timeworn wooden horse that

my friends and I often used for a time machine, an airplane, and even a spaceship.

It was still there, unchanged after all these years. Actually, it wasn't even a horse; it was a crooked and arched old stump, blackened by the years. I wanted to sit down on it and imagine that I was flying back into the past, to my earliest school years, when my fascinating and exciting childhood began. I closed my eyes, and within seconds I was on the horse and then in the past. Mike and Pete joined me and we started pretending we were space pirates trying to capture a federation ship. I became engrossed in my fantasy, and for a brief moment I forgot where and when I was.

After standing in front of the school with my eyes closed for several minutes, I opened them and looked around, trying to get my bearings while my eyes became accustomed to the bright light. And then I saw her.

I recognized her immediately—my schoolboy crush. But I won't reveal her name. Let that be our secret. Instead, I'll call her Katherine, a name I personally don't like. But I hope you'll forgive me if you have such name or you're in love with someone named Katherine. However, there was no Katherine among my classmates, so it lets me keep her identity a secret. It was a warm day, and she was in a vibrant, colorful summer dress that the gentle May breeze sent ballooning around her knees.

"How pretty she is," I thought, as I gazed at her, but the way she had looked 15 years ago flashed before my eyes.

It was only when she came close that I emerged from the mists of the past and noticed the wrinkles and concerned expression on her face, and the few extra pounds that the thin fabric of her dress couldn't conceal. No, she wasn't fat, but neither was she that slim—one might even say skinny—fourteen-year-old girl that I remembered. The years had taken their toll, but in another world a long time ago, in a world of dreams, I had thought her the most stunning and beautiful girl in the world. Still, she looked more feminine now despite her age, and she was still attractive and desirable.

I called out her name as she walked by. Inertia carried her on for a few steps, then she stopped and turned, not recognizing me. Squinting funnily, she came a little closer. I introduced myself, grinning from ear-to-ear. She remembered me then, smiled with surprise, and laughed, nice dimples forming in her rosy cheeks.

"Nick, it's you! It's been a long time!"

“It certainly has... It’s been years. And you’re still as beautiful as ever...”

“Oh, you flatterer,” Kat smiled, and her cheeks grew even pinker. “That’s not the way I remember you. You usually avoided girls. You’ve certainly grown: you’re broader in the shoulders now, and you’re taller.”

“Yeah, the last time we saw each other we were still children, brainless and stupid.”

“I never thought you were stupid. On the contrary... Remember, we danced once at a school party... But what are you doing here? Where are you living now?”

Pleasantly surprised that she remembered dancing with me, I told her that I had come back to my hometown out of a desire to revisit where I spent my childhood. I told her I was hoping to see some old friends. I was talking easily which was unusual for me. For some reason inhibition, that was usually present when I had conversations with beautiful girls, did not show its face.

“And now you’ve seen me,” Kat said, smiling. “We weren’t friends, but we can fix that...”

“I’m certainly willing,” I said in the same tone.

We exchanged a few meaningless phrases, and after a brief hesitation I suggested that we continue our conversation at a restaurant.

Katherine agreed immediately. She led the way to her favorite diner, telling me about herself and asking what I had been up to as we walked. We talked until evening. I mainly listened, and I found listening to Katherine surprisingly interesting. She was working as Delta flight attendant on short domestic routes (from Chicago to New York and back), and she returned home each evening. She liked her work a great deal, but it was very tiring. However, every job has its perks, and Kat told me several funny stories about passengers.

As I sat listening to her at the table with empty plates and half-full wineglasses, a wild Beast awoke in me, changing me, putting strange and immoral thoughts into my head. There she was, sitting across from me, the girl of my dreams. Fifteen years ago, I hadn’t dared touch her, and now I was having a calm conversation with her, feeling that I was more sophisticated, and smarter. Now I had a better idea of what a woman needs in a man other than his fat wallet—which, incidentally, I had and which was waiting for the right moment when the waiter approached and softly

told us that the restaurant was closing. I was listening to her, but my mind was far away, no, not far away but simply watching from the sidelines, as though I were observing the situation from the outside, feeling the Beast in me jerking and thrashing about, demanding its freedom. He wanted me to act upon his dirty ideas.

And finally I let the Beast out, giving her crude, completely inappropriate compliments, kissing her hands and casually touching and stroking her legs near her knees, not yet daring to let my hand roam higher. I gave the Beast free rein, but instead of getting angry Katherine laughed cheerfully at my stupid jokes, flushed from the wine she had drunk. Each light touch sent shivers over my body, and the Beast in me grew excited, feeling encouraged, becoming more brazen and almost shameless.

It was time to leave. After quickly settling up with the waiter and leaving a decent tip, I confessed to Katherine that I had nowhere to spend the night, because I had been unable to find a hotel room. She immediately offered to let me stay with her. And why not? I was alone, without a family, and she lived by herself in an apartment with no husband or children. My thoughts, however, had not been pure and innocent for quite some time. And on the way to her home I was already imagining how I would eagerly take off her clothes and kiss her and kiss her and kiss her, demonstrating my macho virility and my ability to sexually satisfy the opposite sex, so that she would never again remember me as that shy boy from her distant childhood.

I put my arm around Katherine's waist as we walked, preventing her from tripping and falling. She was a little drunk, and I needed to support her. My heart beat faster from excitement. I felt her warm, supple body through her thin dress and looked forward to throwing myself on her and tearing off her dress. I imagined how we would fall on her bed, and I would hurriedly spread her smooth legs apart. I thought how it would be to kiss her, beginning with her red lips and gradually moving to her neck, then to her breasts and on to her stomach. But I wouldn't stop there. I would move lower and lower, not letting her clothing stop me. Gently, almost carefully, I would pull off her panties so I could admire her nakedness. But why be gentle? I would rip off her panties with a single jerk, hungry to possess her as quickly as possible, hungry to satisfy my sordid needs, hungry to stare into her gray eyes, and hungry to hear her loud moans. Submissive and subdued by me, she would gladly take my flesh into herself, embracing me and fiercely demanding that I penetrate her more deeply, digging her

lacquered nails into my back in time with my movements. With my free hand, I would take her by the throat and squeeze, but not too hard, not to strangle her but simply to show her how strong I was, to demonstrate my power over her, total power that I had dreamed of since I was a child. Her screams would mingle with her moans; she would feel pleasure like never before, and I would be happy.

Alas, Katherine lived close by, and my reverie ended so reality could take over and the Beast, that was drooling in anticipation of its upcoming freedom, could be released.

We reached her apartment, and the Beast that ruled me didn't even give her time to make up a bed on the couch for me. In the entryway, I grabbed her in a tight embrace and kissed her. Katherine resisted timidly, but I was ready for that and began whispering in her ear that I understood that she was alone, that we were adults and not schoolkids, that she wasn't a virgin and I was a very sensitive and tender lover, that everything would stay between us, and that I would be leaving on the next day—in other words, I told her all those things that single women longing for the caresses and affection of a man secretly love to hear. She blushed shyly, and I softly whispered everything that I figured she wanted to hear—about her beautiful eyes and hair, about how I had always dreamed of being intimate with her, about how I still thought of her even after many years apart, about how I had long dreamed of being close to her. I held her in my embrace and gently kissed her ear and neck until she, essentially a child in an adult's body, believed me and surrendered to me with the same unfeigned passion, sensitivity and unbridled desire that I offered her in return. And my dreams became reality...

So I had my victory, my revenge for the way I had been mistreated, for my ignorance and loneliness (in the sense that I was deprived of the love of a female) childhood, when, succumbing to my hormones in my dreams, and only in my dreams, I slept with every good-looking girl in my class. I was victorious—king of the mountain. I stood at the top of a pyramid I had built myself, and from there I could look down on everyone who previously had been beyond my reach. A sweet rage awoke in me, and it was more rotten and worse than the Beast: the Beast wanted only what it saw; this rage demanded everybody and everything. Rage consumed me and I took what I longed for.

Much later, as her head was resting on my chest and her hand was

slowly stroking my torso, which was covered with sweat from our sexual games, I imagined how I would meet up with all my old female classmates, seducing and corrupting them regardless of their social status, how they looked, and whether they had a husband, a lover, or children, forever banishing the complexes of the past. Why would I do that? Because I could and because I wanted to. Because they were snobbish and had been unattainable, thinking themselves superior, and because they had never imagined themselves in bed with me. But I grew up and changed for the better (or so I believed). I had achieved much in life, and now any one of them would be fortunate to sleep with me at an age when sex with the same partner becomes mundane and boring, and they were still young and in the prime of their lives, secretly looking for an excuse to show off their many years of sexual experience.

Rage boiled in me. The Beast was exultant, and I lay with my eyes closed, trying not to disturb Katherine, seeing a huddle of naked and obedient girls ready to serve me and surrender themselves to me, ready to yield their bodies to me so that I could slake my lust for power over them.

Suddenly, I came to my senses. Something pricked my conscience, reminding me that daydreams like that had no place in my head. What was I doing? Where was this lustful rage coming from? Where were these dirty, raunchy thoughts coming from? I didn't understand what was happening to me. I had become a faceless monster. I had crossed a moral line. This wasn't me; maybe it was somebody else, but not me. I wasn't like that. I wasn't a hypocrite. I couldn't give my love and tenderness in a such perverted way. I didn't want insincere sex, and I was beyond the age when youthful hormones controlled my body. And although I actually was a good lover—sensitive, passionate, and sincere—all that would vanish like smoke if I gave way to such sordid and depraved deceit. I was enveloped by a feeling of sadness like I had never felt before, and it soothed the Beast and dampened my rage. I had raped Katherine, although she herself wouldn't see it that way. How could I replicate that act of violence and cruelty with others? How could I look Katherine in the eye? I had only thought about doing it, but I was burning with shame nevertheless, as though it had already happened, as though I had already abused my classmates to satisfy my twisted and erotic desires. I was consumed with shame and immeasurable guilt.

I named myself The Faceless Monster. There was something sordid, dirty, and terrible in those words. The Faceless Monster—that was the lewd

Beast in me. The Beast that I could never let free, that I could never let out. And it would never get out again, I silently vowed. But could I keep that oath? I doubted it. Time would tell. I sighed softly. Would I be strong enough to keep the Beast in check?

I looked at a clock hanging on the wall, peering at its thin, silvery hands. It was 3 AM. Katherine lay on my chest, gradually drifting off. I waited until she was completely asleep, got up quietly, trying not to wake her, and walked out into the darkness, into nowhere.

“I’m sorry, Katherine.” I pleaded silently. “I promised you nothing, because I had nothing decent to offer. Forgive me for my shameful weakness. After all, I’m simply human. I am an Ordinary Man.



## CHAPTER 2.

# Honor is My Life. Glory is My Death

“Mine honor is my life; both grow in one.  
Take honor from me, and my life is done.”  
*(William Shakespeare, Richard II)*

“If you can’t avoid death, at least die with glory.”  
*(Aesop)*

I feel no fear... I charge into the mass of fighters, twisting and punching. I squirm like a snake, I sweep a leg—an opponent flies to the side. I spin, block someone’s arm, squat, and an opponent flies over my head, waving his arms awkwardly and trying to catch hold of something but grabbing nothing but stupid, useless air. Leaping sideways, I look about myself, take a breath, and return to the fight. A sea of arms and legs surges toward me, but I’m quicker. I fly at their feet, knocking my off-balance opponents about as though they were bowling pins, and skillfully recover my footing. Punch, kick, block, punch, punch again, kick, block. My head abuzz, I accelerate the pace, trying to match the rapid beating of my heart. Heartbeat—punch, heartbeat—punch, an enemy goes down, but I have no time to check on him. Another torso extends its arms toward me as if begging to be beaten, and I grant its request. Heartbeat—punch,

heartbeat—punch, sidestep. Someone grabs my shoulder, and I leave him with a broken arm. Heartbeat—punch. My subconscious tallies seven seriously wounded or dead opponents. Seven in just ten seconds! I calculate automatically: that leaves forty-three.

It's a good thing these puppies don't know how to fight as a team. By trying to reach the front rows, they interfere with each other. Then they quickly regret it when I break a bone. Heartbeat—punch, heartbeat—punch. I do a backflip, extending my arms to the sides and painfully striking the groin of an opponent as he runs up. A leg shoots toward my face; I squat to let it pass overhead, then quickly grab and throw my opponent, taking advantage of my superior strength and speed. But I have no time for him: new arms and legs come at me. I throw myself forward, taking a blow deliberately as I scatter opponents. I twist the neck of the one who hit me. I break someone's nose with my elbow, and blood sprays in all directions. One of my opponents can't avoid the blood and is momentarily blinded. I immediately take advantage of that to break his leg, taking him out of the fight but leaving him with his life.

I feel cold berserker Rage awaken in me. It's high time. I've experienced this Rage since I was a child; it has helped me through many ordeals. It knows no rest and has no limits; nothing exists for it beyond a lust for blood, a desire to kill and crush my enemy without pity or sympathy. My Rage is insane. It's the Beast within me. It takes over my body, and that means I can relax. My mind can afford to let go and stop paying attention to the trail of blood I leave behind. I allow my trained body to function as it has been taught over the course of many years, while I retreat into the past, back to the time when I was sixteen - just a stupid aspirant to the high calling of gladiator.

“The lack of fear is what makes a man a warrior,” my Master said as he struck my bare legs with a rod.

I stood on the edge of a cliff, afraid to move for fear of losing my footing on the slippery gravel. I closed my eyes, but tears welled forth against my will.

“The ability to tolerate pain is an important attribute of every gladiator,” Master pronounced and struck me again. “You whiny little girl, acknowledge your tears and say goodbye to them! I am going to make a man out of you.”

Another blow fell. And another. My legs were black and blue from the beating, but I didn't dare let them tremble. My stance was as solid as granite, for I already knew that I would be a gladiator. I knew that I would pass all the tests—that was my duty.

“So! Here is your reward for withstanding the pain.” With those words, Master sharply jammed the rod into my stomach, knocking me backwards, and I fell, repeating the same words over and over: I'm a warrior, I'm a warrior, I'm a warrior. I gave in and closed my eyes before reaching the ground.

I awoke lying on sand. The pain in my legs had subsided, so I didn't know how long I'd been unconscious. Had it been two hours or two days? I wasn't greatly concerned about the answer, however, because it wasn't important. On the other hand, my conditioning could be affected if I'd missed training for several days. Master came up to me, and I immediately jumped to my feet, bowing my head and greeting him.

“You closed your eyes when you should have welcomed death. A real warrior greets death with a smile.”

I fell to my knees and bowed my head low:

“Forgive me, Master. Next time I'll keep my eyes wide open, like an owl.”

“I am not mad at you, child. First of all, you have learned to endure pain. And second, that was just your first test of this type. I did not expect you to pass it the first time. Tell me, what did you learn yesterday?”

“Having no fear is what makes a man a warrior,” I answered quickly. His question told me that I had been unconscious for at least half a day.

“Excellent. Now give me two hundred pushups.”

I dropped to the sand and started pushing. When I had counted one hundred ninety, I felt a shadow fall across the back of my neck. I raised my head and locked eyes with a lion, which was kind enough to show me its long, sharp fangs before leaping. I trembled inside, but I didn't close my eyes as I strove to awaken the Rage within. And Rage responded to my summons.

“The lack of fear makes a man a warrior...,” I whispered, rising to my full height so that I could meet my death as a real warrior.

Oil mingles with sweat on my slippery body. Someone holds out a towel

towards me, and I clench my fingers into a fist, but I avoid responding with a punch. My head is ringing, and I'm half blinded by someone else's blood. I have no enemies at the moment—the first round is over.

“Where is my Master?”

At first, nobody answers me, and I repeat my question more loudly. The answer finally penetrates the background noise: Master is dead. Killed.

“No!” I shout. “It's too soon!”

I find myself in the arena, where a warrior has only one thing to do—kill. With Master dead, I have just one way forward—I have to be victorious. Anger seizes my body, but I quickly suppress it as once long ago my bare hand snuffed out a candle's flame. A warrior must be shrewd and as cold as ice. The void of space is the perfect gladiator. It is indifferent to everything; it is unbeatable. I once fought the void; now I have become it. And I know that there will be no mercy. There will be only my victory. The Rage inside me flares up anew, ready for battle, and I remember my first fight in the arena.

A year had passed since the day I was initiated. I was seventeen. For most people, a year goes by without their noticing that they have aged. It is a time made memorable only by a promotion at work or a new blonde girlfriend in place of a brunette. For me, a year was an eternity! A time filled with justly earned scars and bruises, and mounds of muscle under tanned skin—my mother wouldn't recognize her own son! I had the honor of fighting an actual gladiator in the first round. Me and forty-nine other trainees just like me. I don't remember his name or his face. Bloodlust clouded my mind; it would be a great honor to defeat a gladiator candidate. There were fifty of us against one candidate. All we needed to do was stay alive, but we wanted to win. Six of us remained when the round ended. I was lucky—both my arms were broken, but others suffered much more. Thus, I learned my twentieth lesson: not to take on more than I can handle. But five years later, I had happily forgotten that lesson when I was again called upon to fight a gladiator candidate as part of a team with nineteen of my peers.

Now, I am about to fight again: against only twenty in the second round—twenty pupils trained in martial arts with lightning reflexes only a little slower than mine. I rush forward without waiting for them to come

at me, spinning sharply in front of them. I let several jump kicks pass over me and kick out to mow down those before me like wheat. Defense is for cowards; a real warrior attacks first. I take immediate notice of who is alert and who has managed to jump up, and I strive to deal with them first. I increase my tempo to the limit. I'm faster than my opponents, but not by much—they succeed almost by accident in deflecting or blocking most of my blows. I remember my advantage: during the last five years of my training I studied how to improvise in combat. I make a deceptive move that ordinarily would be followed by a blow to the solar plexus with the other leg. I don't disappoint my opponent and perform the kick, simultaneously grabbing by the wrist the arm he uses to block me. He doesn't expect that, and I take advantage of his momentary confusion to kick his knee with my other leg, breaking it. I am off the ground for an instant and that saves me, because an opponent behind me who also expected that kick to the solar plexus following the deceptive move executes a squatting leg sweep, counting on the fact that a single-leg stance makes one vulnerable to being thrown, and a downed opponent is easier to finish off. When he does so, however, my leg is off the ground, and it comes down on my opponent's leg, snapping it like a brittle twig. I roll to the side to avoid the other attackers. My salvation now lies not in speed, but in precision. A punch—two heartbeats and another punch. Someone makes a mistake, and I instantly break his neck, then I bend forward to let a strike to the spine pass over me, and kick backwards, breaking an unfortunate fighter's jaw.

Seven opponents join forces. They are hoping to overwhelm me with numbers by acting smoothly and carefully while supporting each other. They rush toward me, and I grin at their attempt. I already know they'll fail. I pretend to fall into their trap, then abruptly make my own move, jumping to the side and catching one with my leg. The trap closes, but I'm no longer there. Now there are six: bewildered and confused.

The fight goes on. I bend, wave a hand, turn. I kick and kick again. Someone finally lands a blow to my stomach, but I take it and leave him with a broken nose as my elbow passes over his face. A punch—two heartbeats, another punch. Half of my opponents are down; the remainder are covered with sweat and breathing hard. I laugh and sprint towards them, and my thoughts once more dip into the past, back when I was eighteen...

I did a split and dodged another ball. The balls were fist-sized, and they came at me more slowly than throwing knives, but there were two throwers, and each had two baskets of balls. I was already covered with sweat, but there was no time to wipe: I constantly had to jump, roll, lie prone on the ground, and do everything possible and impossible to avoid letting a single ball touch my body. I loved this exercise in spite of its difficulty, because I understood that in a fight with a real gladiator only lightning reflexes could help me win.

Master waved a hand to stop his assistants.

“You will fight me,” he said, taking a short rod as long as his forearm in each hand.

“It is my great honor.” I bowed to Master, showing him respect and humility.

A rod flew with the speed of a thrown knife and struck me in the stomach. I swayed but withstood the blow.

“Master,” I objected, “you’ve lost your weapon!”

“But I taught you to pay attention,” he chuckled and charged me.

His sudden onslaught stunned me. Even with a rod in just one hand, he managed to land two blows every second. I was forced to quickly retreat. He employed several techniques that almost caused me to run, but showing one’s back to the enemy means the fight is lost. It was then that I realized an overwhelming attack is better than waiting cautiously for one’s opponent to act.

The second round has ended. I become a real gladiator by winning it. But it’s not over yet. I have one fight left, the hardest of all, because my opponent is no trainee. He’s a real gladiator too. His Master is also dead—a Master can’t survive his pupil. Someday, I, too, will become a Master, unless I die in the arena first. Someday, I will have a worthy student to whom I will impart all of my knowledge, and I will be killed. Honor is my life. Glory is my death. I am a Gladiator!

## CHAPTER 3.

# Keep Moving to Survive

“You got to keep on moving, whatever comes your way.  
If you want to keep yourself alive  
you’d better use all your instinct to survive.”

*(An excerpt from the song “Instinct to Survive” by Steve Walwyn)*

**T**he man in the impeccable black suit put down his Colombian cigar and answered the telephone. He was seated in the dim light of a desk lamp in a spacious but modestly decorated office that had no windows facing the street.

“John Cornyn,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I heard from you.”

“The main thing is that you haven’t seen me, Dick,” John responded.

“Of course. Just a second.”

Dick, as the man was addressed by the mysterious voice, placed the phone on the desk and picked up his cigar. He took a drag and slowly exhaled. Then he set the cigar aside and picked up the phone again.

“Are you sure this phone isn’t tapped?”

“I’m sure. I’m calling on an encrypted line.”

“How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank God.”

“What can I do for you, John?”

“I need your best team. I have a job for them.”

“Who?”

“Congressman Will Hurd.”

“Ah yes. He’s black, and his security detail is all white. My people wouldn’t have a problem picking him out.

“That’s the one. “

“How much?”

“Seventy thousand.”

“With all due respect, John, that isn’t enough. It’ll cost you at least two hundred thousand, because Hurd has a full security team.”

“I thought your people could handle an entire army. I’ve heard stories...”

“John, you know my fee is fair.”

“A hundred twenty. That’s my final offer.

“Fine. It’ll be taken care of.”

“Don’t let me down, Dick.”

“My people never fail.”



Keep moving to survive. We entered the opera house lobby with cheerful expressions on our faces. We moved with the throng of attendees and avoided lingering where suspicious cameras might pick us up. We weren’t actually afraid of being recognized, but there was no point in calling attention to ourselves. We had our mission—take out the target and disappear as quickly as possible.

I was twenty-nine years old and a top-tier professional assassin. Only high-ranking members of the government hierarchy or millionaires could afford my services. My partner was Jennifer, a twenty-five-year-old, innocent-looking, blue-eyed blonde of medium height who was new to the profession. Yes, I had a female partner, and she was a woman no red-blooded male would forget. However, hair can always be dyed and colored contacts

worn—and she already had thirty-six kills to her credit. She had bagged more than half of them under my supervision and protection.

We always worked as a team: it was entirely a matter of nonlinear mathematics. One professional can take out two enemies before they can react, but two can take out six. For some reason, that's how it worked out when we trained on the practice ground. The number of kills increased nonlinearly, progressively. Nevertheless, it's difficult for three professionals to work together. A third person is superfluous in narrow, cramped spaces. That's why our bosses settled on a two-member team, and in most situations we have no equal.

So, flowing with the crowd, we entered a private box across the theater from the one our target would use. The second act was due to start in forty-six seconds. We went in and froze, but only for a tenth of a second. Then my body automatically moved to the right, my left hand drew my pistol, and my index finger lightly touched the trigger. My partner simply crouched in the doorway and pulled her own gun. The box was supposed to be empty, but it already held two people.

They turned at the sound and, after a brief delay, reached for pistols hidden under their jackets.

“Take it easy,” I said, scrutinizing their faces in the semidarkness. Why would they send two teams for the same job?

I put my pistol away and slowly walked toward them so they could get a good look at me.

“Damn, we were in training together, you're...”

“No names here, and we don't know each other,” I said, quoting the famous phrase from the first course at the school of assassins. This rule was very well-known among my peers. We were teasing and making fun of our teacher after he taught us this rule but did not follow it himself by calling us by a name to step forward and answer a question.

“Right. So you're here on a job?”

“Of course,” I replied. I signaled Jen to stand up and put her gun away.

“To avoid any misunderstandings, this is our target.” The assassin showed me a photograph.

“And this is ours.” I smiled and showed him the same picture.

“The clock is ticking, gentlemen,” chuckled my partner. “This means

somebody wants four bullets in the target. So let's get to it. I'll put one in his heart."

"I'll take the head," I said.

"Heart."

"Head."

The head was my favorite target. In my eyes, a neat hole in the forehead and little blood made for a clean and tidy kill. Maybe it was because that was the way I left my target in my first assassination ten years ago. Actually, I didn't always kill with a shot to the head—the job didn't allow for that kind of sameness. Once, I even had to use poison. However, I wasn't the one who decided how to take out a target: a special team followed the person for several weeks and determined the best method of removal—a bullet, knife stab, poison, or a fall from the twentieth floor.

The four of us stood in the shadows at the sides of the box, took out our pistols, and screwed on silencers. We saw on the target's bodyguards checking out his box on the other side of the theater. Then he entered it and sat down. We all took aim and, as though on cue, four muffled gunshots sounded together just as music introducing the second act began swelling. No one heard the shots, or if they did hear, they simply paid no attention. No one missed, and the target fell backwards.

"Time to go," someone said.

There was no crowd to mingle with now. Members of the audience near the target didn't realize what had happened and stayed in their seats. However, the target's bodyguards had reacted immediately and were already speeding toward us.

Our target was a big shot, and he always surrounded himself with dozens of bodyguards. Several members of his personal security detail were in the box next to ours, and they realized immediately what the suppressed sounds of the gunshots meant. They were the first to rush us. But we were ready for them as they came out: we fired quickly, and two bodies fell.

We ran to the rear exit, shooting bodyguards hurrying to intercept us as we went. Many of them didn't even have time to raise their weapons. They stood no chance—there were four of us, and that meant we could take out twelve opponents within a second. A three-man surprise was waiting for us at the back door. They were witnesses, so even though they had just wanted a smoke and were unarmed we had to eliminate them. To be

entirely honest, pumped up by adrenaline in the heat of battle, we simply killed everyone we encountered to avoid being delayed.

Four police cars pulled up in front of the opera house. We quickly realized that the street was closed to us and darted into the building next door—a casino. Here, I had to empty almost my entire magazine at security guards who were trying to stop us. I paid no attention to frightened people who were dropping to the floor, in an attempt to save few remaining bullets. Note to self: a casino isn't the best route for an escape. We wound our way through the slot machines and gambling tables, not stopping for a moment. Delay meant death. We needed to split up, but the other team was following us, and I couldn't afford to stop for a discussion. We finally found an exit. We jumped out onto the street, and I looked around. To the right, police cars were blocking the street at the end of the block. We could have gone in that direction, but the street ran alongside the casino building, and nine security guards had come out another exit and joined three policemen who were running toward us. We might have exchanged fire with them except for the fact that I was almost out of bullets. On our left, there was a line of shops where it would be difficult to avoid pursuit due to the simplicity of their layout and the lack of rear exits. I had noticed that while reconnoitering the area earlier in the day. We needed to find another route. I heard the wailing of a SWAT vehicle's siren. The police had reacted quickly, surprisingly quickly. It was as though they already knew about our job.



“Good evening, John Cornyn,” said the man calling from a mobile telephone near the opera house.

“Harry Reid, why have you contacted me?”

“I wanted to be the first to inform you that the target has been eliminated.”

“Dick has already told me that. He said there were two assassination teams on site. Was one of them yours?”

“Yes, John.”

“Why? What were your boys doing there?”

“They were carrying out a mission.”

“Whose mission? Who ordered it?”

“I did, as a ranking member of our organization.”

“Dick is the president.”

“My team will take him out, as well.”

“You’re overreaching, and you might find yourself minus your head. And what if Richard proves to be too much for your team?”

“Then I’ll send you my head.”

“Goodbye, Harry.”

“See you later, John.”



We turned left. There were already several cops at the intersection, but they were slow to fire and were even slower on the uptake. They were trying to box us in, and that left us only one option—to charge and break through them. I turned around and saw that the members of the second group were reloading their pistols. We only carried one magazine for a job. Two magazines meant...

“We’re witnesses!” I shouted and ran to the left, zigzagging like a fox.

My partner understood instantly what I was doing. Witnesses must be eliminated. They hammered that into us during early years at the school. Shots rang out. I wasn’t afraid of the cops’ bullets; they weren’t the ones I was worried about now. We had to keep moving to survive. We were easy targets. Another three or four seconds and a bullet would find one of us. Jennifer was running two strides behind me, providing cover for me as the senior member of the team. The Beast within me awoke, demanding that I turn and fire my last bullet at a colleague who dared attack me. But I kept it in check. I understood that survival was the priority now. I could take revenge later, and I knew from past experience that payback was inevitable. The Beast knew it too and didn’t resist, trusting my silent promise to settle the score with the other assassins.

I sprinted to the other side of the street, where I saw a doorway into a private home that could save us. Kicking it open on the run was no challenge. We ran inside, closed the door, and propped a chair against it. The couple that lived there ran toward us; the man had a knife in his hand.

I automatically grabbed another chair and prepared to defend myself. Then I saw the man hesitate.

“Wait.” Jen grabbed my arm. “Look.”

I automatically looked around. Paintings. A large number of nice paintings were hanging on the walls, and although I knew nothing about art, I recognized immediately that they weren't cheap ones. That was what this family valued, and that was what they would defend at all costs.

“We aren't going to touch your pictures,” I said and tossed the chair aside. I ran upstairs, paying no more attention to the residents, who were watching me in confusion. Jennifer followed at my heels. We passed the second floor and came out on the third. At first, it looked as though we could go no further, but then I saw a door. It led to another room. A dead end. My heart was going into overdrive. But at the school, they taught us to keep moving, always keep moving, never stop. We didn't run marathons, but I could run fifteen miles without a break. Beside me, I heard the accelerated breathing of my partner, who was looking around in search of an exit.

A window! I looked out the window; it opened onto a ledge. The window was on the opposite side of the building from the street where the cops were looking for us. That suited me just fine.

“Follow me,” I ordered.

The ledge was broad and took us to a small ladder that we climbed to reach the roof. We could hear a helicopter as we ran across the roof under the cover of darkness. We had to jump and cross several roofs before we found an unlocked hatch. We opened it and went down into the building. The sirens were falling quiet. I mentally retraced our route from the opera house. We were relatively far away and safe.

“To keep moving is to survive,” Jennifer smiled, as though she were reading my thoughts.

I nodded my agreement and took a breath, checking my pistol. There was only one bullet left in the magazine.

“How many do you have?”

“Three,” my partner answered, dropping the magazine out of her pistol and checking it.

“You willing to share?”

“Sure,” she agreed. She removed a cartridge and handed it to me.

Four bullets guaranteed four victims.

*The night's young, more people could die*, I thought.

The night was young, we could still kill or be killed. We could slip from building to building, eluding our pursuers, or we could find a dark corner in some shed. We could still live and take joy in every moment, every atom of our surroundings, or we could die, be cremated, and have our ashes spread all across the world. I love my work, but my life is at risk every minute. That's why my training was so long and so hard. My training officially began when I was nineteen. However, sometimes I feel as though I was born to kill. Who am I? Is it really a mystery? I am an Assassin!



“Dick, it’s good to hear your voice.”

“Weren’t you expecting to hear from me, John?”

“It wasn’t my idea, you know. I felt sick for you; I’ve never liked that upstart, Harry Reid.”

“Nobody likes him. Incidentally, check your mail tomorrow. There’ll be an interesting package in it for you.”

## CHAPTER 4.

# Three in One

“Only a madman (a writer) can combine several completely different stories into a single narrative. That applies to me.”

*(Author)*

I am the Gladiator. I am the Assassin. But no—I’m the Ordinary Man. I had just walked out and left, without saying goodbye, without writing a note, leaving nothing of myself behind that would remind her of me. That’s right. I left nothing behind and simply ran away. I had used her as I used everything I got my hands on, regardless of whether it was an inanimate object or a living person. Why remind her of the disgrace? Why give her reason to remember me and guess why I had acted the way I did? I couldn’t stay after all of the thoughts that had flashed through my head; the shame wouldn’t let me look into her beautiful and expressive eyes. Yes, I had done the right thing... Or had I? Should I have overcome my shame and admitted everything? Should I have stayed and fixed her an omelet for breakfast as I had so often seen people do in Hollywood movies—kissed her again, felt her sweet lips on mine, embraced her and told her everything? Would she understand? Would she forgive me? Or would she have slapped my face and kicked me out? But wouldn’t that have been better? Wouldn’t it have been better to open up and tell her the truth regardless of the consequences? And have a clean conscience. I would still be a faceless

monster, but at least I would be an honest one. An honest monster—that was funny, but for some reason I didn't feel at all like laughing.

What am I thinking? That's all nonsense. I need to run, to escape, and, if possible, take revenge. We were obviously set up: a second team wasn't needed to take out the target. Two teams are never sent to assassinate one person. We were their real target, of course. But why? Jennifer is just beginning her career, and I'm still young enough to be useful to my boss. I've always executed every mission flawlessly, always followed orders, and never asked too many questions. Have I screwed something up? But if so, what? And when? So many questions, and no answers. I need to get in touch with Dick; he would help. But what if it was his idea? What if he was the one who set us up? I can't trust anyone but Jen. They're trying to eliminate her along with me. Wait, hold on a minute—I break off that line of thought. I'm confused. Where's my partner? And where's my pistol? For that matter, where am I?

Why is it so dark? I can see nothing. Have I gone blind, or are the sweat and blood of my enemies running down my face and blocking the light? There is no point in trying to wipe it off. I would just smear it around: my hands are just as bloody as my face. I need to listen. If an opponent is near, I can punch him out with my eyes closed or, at the very least, break a bone or two. I refuse to give up. I will continue fighting to the end. I am a true gladiator, and gladiators fight as long as life remains: theirs or their opponent's. There is no other way. If I am blind, it matters not. I do not need eyes; I've fought in darkness before. But where is my opponent? What is he like? Why is everything so quiet? I hear no footsteps, no screaming spectators in the stands—I hear nothing. Have I gone deaf, too? It is impossible to fight in the dark if I cannot sense my opponent. But I must. I will not give up. Honor is my life. But could this simply be another test? Could it be a hallucination? A dream?

"I am confused in spades," I heard the Assassin in me say.

"Shut up, you... worthless killer," interrupted the Gladiator. "You do not know what true honor is."

Without even noticing it, we had automatically accepted the fact that we weren't alone. We could talk to one another, swear at each other and argue. We habitually acknowledged this new reality even though we were in darkness, not knowing where or what we were, unaware that we were

conversing without opening our mouths or making an effort to be heard—and that we knew things about each other without having been told.

“And what kind of honor do you have?” objected the Assassin. “You’re no better than I am. How many people have you put down knowing that they’re much weaker than you, that your ability in the martial arts is greatly superior to theirs? How many have you crushed and killed without pity or remorse? I know what honor is. I only take out my target and any obstacles; I leave everyone else alive. That is true honor in a professional.”

“An assassin with honor? That’s laughable. Try going up against a real gladiator who has studied martial arts under his master for seventeen years...”

“So what? While he’s swinging his arms and legs around, I’ll put a bullet in his skull. Haven’t you seen the Indiana Jones movie with the guy who was brandishing his sword like an idiot? Indiana simply shot him.”

“You wouldn’t have time to draw your gun and shoot. A gladiator is as fast as a hawk, agile as a tiger, and deadly as a cobra.”

“Oh, I could manage to get a shot off. Maybe Indiana Jones couldn’t, but I’m a professional gunman. I can shoot four people before you can blink. Do you think I haven’t killed people like that?” the Assassin said easily.

“It is only your filthy weapon that makes you strong. No man with honor would resort to something like that. Try fighting a gladiator with just your bare hands.”

“Screw you. Like I really need to get my hands dirty.”

“I despise you, Assassin. When did you lose your honor? Or did you ever have any?”

“Enough swearing,” I interrupted. “You’re preventing me from thinking.”

“Shut up, jerk,” the Gladiator and Assassin said in unison.

But my words had an impact. They caused the Gladiator and Assassin to think about what they were doing and stop jumping to conclusions. Got them to lay off the thoughtless accusations.

“I told you, I have honor, but on my own terms. However, let’s not argue right now... To tell the truth, I respect you, Gladiator,” Assassin unexpectedly said in an effort to make peace. “I don’t think I could survive

against fifty opponents by myself. Taking out twelve or sixteen is a simple matter, but while I was reloading my gun...”

“A warrior must be as cool-headed as a stone. I recognize that in you. We are of one blood, you and I,” Gladiator said, using long-forgotten ritual words from some book in agreeing to make peace.

“What do you say we put the arguments and the peacemaking on hold for a while! Does either of you know what’s going on here?” I said into the pause in the conversation, trying not to get offended at being called a “jerk.”

The Gladiator and Assassin fell silent.

“Where am I?” We all asked together after a short pause. “Who am I?”

I heard an unintelligible, barely audible, but apparently ordinary sound from somewhere off in the distance. Then, silence. Nobody had an answer. But were we even expecting an answer? In the depths of our consciousness, we all understood that we would get no response, that there would be nothing at all. And indeed, no answer to our questions came.

We were in a place that was neither light nor dark. I couldn’t tell if I was dreaming or waking. There was nothing, yet I still had my senses. I felt as though I (but who am I?) was reaching out to an island refuge, trying to catch, gather together, and understand my fleeting thoughts. Something strange was happening, something incomprehensible, mysterious, and frightening—all at the same time. I was gripped by fear. I think we all were. I started talking to dispel the oppressive and eerie silence.

“I remember, yes, I remember,” I began timidly. But my voice grew more confident and resonant with each word. “I remember it was nighttime, and I remember her beautiful naked body in moonlight shining through white curtains on the half-open window, glistening from sweat after our caresses. I left her. I had nowhere to go, but I left. I called myself a faceless monster. Why did I do that? She was delightful, pure, and as naïve as a child. I could have stayed and loved her. We could have made a future together, had three children (for some reason I always wanted three), but I got cold feet and ran. I threw my past into the garbage, never to return. I despised myself for my thoughts, for the sins I would have committed if I had followed that path...”

“You have to keep moving to survive,” the Assassin told me. “I remember being chased by the police, SWAT, and my fellow hired assassins, but I managed to hide in a dark basement with my partner, Jennifer. I remember

her: a pretty, blue-eyed blonde who was shaping up well as a professional assassin. She's killed almost as many people as I have, especially after that job in the opera house. She's a great girl. She takes everything as it comes, and it's always a pleasure to work with her. It was a beautiful evening. Hot. We had to take out a lot of witnesses as we were getting away. I don't think I would've made it otherwise."

"Honor is my life. Death is my glory—could I be dead? I remember fighting. Blows fell like hail; I had to increase the pace, speed up my heart, turn momentarily to deflect a punch, execute a deceptive move with my arm, do a split and strike upwards, flip backwards, punch, block, punch again, and again—and block again. I went on the attack, carried out a series of punches and then successfully blocked my opponent's strikes. He seemed to be made of steel and never got tired, but I persevered. I darted to the side and threw myself to the ground, dodging a blow to the spine... Did I die? Could I have been too slow? Could a kick have broken my back?"

"You don't know that that's what happened," I said, trying to be encouraging.

"Be quiet," the Gladiator muttered. "I'm trying to remember."

"Right, don't bother us," the Assassin told me. Then he spoke to the Gladiator: "We aren't amateurs, and with our extensive experience in extreme situations we can solve any problem. Why do we need the Ordinary Man?"

"I am not sure he's of any use to us, either," said the Gladiator. "He's just a distraction."

"Stop, stop! Don't do that," I shouted desperately, suddenly feeling that the more powerful personalities could snuff out my "self" like a candle. I wasn't weak, but the wills of the Assassin, who could defeat someone with a glance, and the Gladiator, who could walk barefoot over broken glass and ignore the pain, were stronger than mine. I felt myself being pushed into a dark corner of my consciousness, and panic seized and overwhelmed me. No! I tried to resist. My "self" unraveled like that of a drowning man's under the desperation and complete hopelessness. I struggled to get free, grabbing at threads in my efforts to escape—but it was useless. There were no physical shackles restraining me, nothing material or tangible. This was something I had never felt before, an enormous feeling of depression that enveloped me and squeezed and crushed me with its inevitability. An eternity passed...

“What do you want?”

The feeling of being restrained suddenly vanished. I spoke rapidly, stumbling over my words:

“You... I... When you attacked me, I realized that it wasn't happening on the physical plane. Your minds were assaulting me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your minds! Your personalities! You weren't attacking me physically. It was internal. Inside me! You're in my head!”

“No, you're in our head,” the Assassin answered. “I figured that out without you. I got tired of your childish babbling. Tell me something I don't know.”

“Wait, don't be in a rush to get rid of me. I know that it's your nature to kill, Assassin, and yours too, Gladiator, but I can be useful to the both of you. I give you my word that I will! You've both spent a long time training your bodies and your wills. Physically, I'm nothing compared to you. But I'm smart. I've lived a full life, and I've got a lot of experience. You know how to fight, but what's needed right now is a good analytical mind. We aren't on a battlefield. I'm a programmer, and I know how to think logically. We need to understand what's happened to us, where we are and how we got here. We don't even know if we're in the same body. Are we even in a body? Could it be that our minds are wandering somewhere between dimensions?”

“That makes sense,” the Assassin agreed reluctantly. “This doesn't seem like Hell to me, or at least it isn't Hell as I imagined it. Maybe our spirits are lost somewhere between spaces.”

“You're not making sense,” the Gladiator muttered. “Either that, or the strange words you're using are making my head spin. What is a programmer, and what does logically mean?”

“I'll clarify that later... There are three of us,” I began explaining my deductive chain, ignoring the Gladiator's grumbling.

“We don't need you to tell us that,” the Gladiator said. “But go on?”

“Secondly, we're together in one body,” I continued, ignoring that last remark and speaking rapidly, afraid they would push me back into a corner again. “And thirdly, we aren't dead.”

Forestalling any questions, I continued:

“The Gladiator remembers a fight where he could have been killed, the Assassin that he was hiding from pursuers, and he could have been killed also. But I walked out on a woman in the middle of the night simply because I was afraid of looking her in the eye. My life wasn’t being threatened. My honor, maybe, but not my life! And neither of you remembers dying!”

“That’s what you’re basing your theory on?” the Assassin sneered. “You could have been killed when you went around a corner and not even know it. You left at night—that’s an excellent time for an assassination.”

However, I had stopped paying attention. I had succeeded in bypassing the minds of the Gladiator and Assassin and sensed the physical body for a brief moment. That let me open my eyes. I was immediately brushed aside: not physically, but mentally. The Assassin and the Gladiator battled briefly for control; then, due more to wordless persuasion than his opponent’s strength, the Gladiator gave way to the Assassin.

We were sitting on asphalt in a dark corner of a dead end alley between two buildings. Limestone was pressing against our back, causing a slight but quite tolerable discomfort. Our blue jeans were a little wrinkled, and our shirt wasn’t tucked in, but there was nothing strange about that. We could see that it was getting daylight. We looked around the alley, and our eyes fell on five young men dressed like street hoods slowly walking toward us. We apparently looked like easy prey to them.

We continued watching the approaching men, a little bewildered, uncertain what to do, and trying to get our bearings in unfamiliar surroundings. At that moment, we understood one thing—this wasn’t Heaven and it wasn’t Hell. “I think, therefore I am,” I thought, recalling the famous phrase from my philosophy classes.

“There are three of us here, all thinking together. Does that mean we exist threefold?” I wondered. “Three people in one body. That’s interesting. Doesn’t it break some law of nature?”

“Please excuse my rudeness,” the Assassin suddenly said to me. “I’m usually more considerate, but I’m confused. Something strange and unexplained is happening. I’ve never heard of anything like this before. I don’t know, maybe we broke some kind of universal law, but none of us did it on purpose.”

“I apologize also,” the Gladiator admitted his guilt. “This is not combat where I need to crush an opponent. I should not be so tough when I’m not fighting, and especially in an unfamiliar situation.”

By now, the young punks had reached us and begun looking us over with an easy air of contempt.

“Hey man, having a hard time?” one of them said, making it as much a statement as a question.

“Got any money?” asked another.

“Hand it over,” a third growled.

I realized that the situation was shaping up to be unpleasant, although not for us—for those unlucky men. I noticed that the Assassin, who was in control of our body, was flexing our muscles and grinning ominously. I hated confrontations like this and did my best to avoid them. This time, however, I wasn't alone, and I understood with every cell of my body that the Gladiator and Assassin would somehow come to my aid. These young hoods were nothing compared to them.

“Now this is a familiar situation,” muttered the Gladiator, preparing inwardly for a fight.

“I think the Gladiator is the best person to handle this,” the Assassin suddenly agreed and gave up control of our body.

The Gladiator didn't hesitate. He acted immediately, leaping to his feet and running at the men, who weren't expecting a surprise attack. The nearest had no time to react before finding himself doubled up on the ground after a blow to the solar plexus. The others tried to put up a resistance, but they were as helpless as a spider that has caught a cat in its web. The Gladiator simply evaded their attempts to defend themselves, bending and twisting while simultaneously scattering his opponents with well-aimed blows to vulnerable areas. The fight was over within seconds, and I hurt everywhere. I understood that the few seconds the fight lasted had put this body in a world of hurt. Only my body could be so weak and untrained.

“This body is totally unfit for combat,” the Gladiator remarked, breathing hard. “If I had to fight with this body in the arena, I don't think I could win even the first round. It's a good thing this isn't the arena...”

“Good job,” the Assassin told the Gladiator. “Your training paid off even in this body.”

I said nothing. I was stunned for two reasons: I had never seen anyone move so quickly and precisely. It seemed unbelievable, even though I had witnessed it firsthand. The Gladiator had just fought a flawless fight, but with my body! And that was the second reason—I was in my own body,

the body I had lived in for many years. I owned this body: I was the host and the Gladiator and the Assassin were only my guests!

“Maybe the body is yours, but this mind is mine, and the mind rules. The body needs to be controlled by someone with a strong will,” the Assassin said, reading my thoughts as though they were his own.

“If it’s his body, we need to back off,” the Gladiator objected.

“Is that your honor speaking again? If you hadn’t been in control of the body just now, we would have been badly beaten and would be lying face down on the ground, but our honor wouldn’t have suffered,” said the Assassin. “Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right, so stop arguing,” I quietly answered. “Yes, it’s my body, but there are three minds in it now, three personalities, three awarenesses—and we need to understand why it happened. Who’s in charge isn’t important. The important thing is to find out what happened to your bodies and where they are. But there is another possibility. Maybe I’ve gone crazy and I’m just imagining you.”

“If you’re imagining me, then who did this?” the Gladiator chuckled and looked meaningfully at the five men who were just now coming around, moaning and trying to get to their feet, supporting themselves on each other and on the wall of the building.

“Well done—and you didn’t kill them. In this world, I think it’s better not to kill without good reason,” the Assassin said, assessing the defeat of their recent enemies and complementing the Gladiator once again.

The Gladiator turned to the young men and said, “Get out of here.”

They immediately hurried out of the alley. It was obvious from their faces that they had failed to completely grasp what had happened and couldn’t understand how one person could have so severely beat them. Someone they had considered easy prey had turned out to be a powerful predator.

“If the body is mine, then it’s likely that this world is also mine. Actually, it is best here to avoid killing people,” I confirmed, “and you’re right, Gladiator. This pain is no hallucination, so it isn’t a dream. That means we’re all in one body.”

“Three in one, no argument there,” the Assassin said thoughtfully.

“So let’s find out the cause of this anomaly.”

“We need to leave,” I thought, although it didn’t matter whether I

thought it or said it aloud. The Gladiator and Assassin could read my thoughts clearly. “We need to go somewhere. We won’t learn anything sitting in this alley.”

“We can go for a stroll,” the Assassin agreed, “and it would be a good idea to get something to eat. I’m hungry.”

“Let’s go.” The Gladiator who was still in control of the body’s muscles, set off for the entrance to the alley with a firm gait and walked out into the street. The sun was coming up, and the streetlights were going out.

“Wait... I...,” someone’s voice whispered quietly in my head.

And then we all understood that the body had another guest, one who had previously stayed on the sidelines and not revealed himself. Up to that point, he had managed to hide in the back of my mind, but, now that he had spoken, all of his thoughts and actions, all of his previous life became accessible in the blink of an eye.

“It’s me...,” I said, horrified. “No, it’s not me, but... it’s someone I could become, a sort of faceless monster. No, it’s even worse! A Pervert!”

And then it dawned on me...

## CHAPTER 5.

# The Sated Beast

“Soon, soon now, the sated beast will give way to the man, and tenderness will replace cruelty. But for now, there is only passion. Passion that cannot be stilled.”

*(An excerpt from the poem “Wind, Blood, and Silver,” by Asagi-ku-san)*

For the eleventh time, I watched her as she came out of the school. At this time, a bunch of girls and boys of different ages would come out of the school. But she stood out from the crowd. I didn't know her name so I called her Doll. She was slim and long-legged. Her breasts were just beginning to develop, and her delicate, rosy face reminded me of a Barbie doll. Like a Barbie, she was wearing a short, black skirt and a neatly tucked and nicely ironed white blouse. I was twenty-nine and she was barely fourteen, but more than anything in the world I wanted to kiss her body, inhale the scent of her long golden hair, and tenderly stroke her smooth, slender legs from the tips of her toes to the insides of her thighs.

The main thing was to avoid repeating the mistake I made last time. No, this wasn't my first attempt at seducing and corrupting an underage girl. But the last time I'd been too aggressive; I had rushed things and lost her. But this Doll wouldn't get away, I swore to myself. I stared at her, and my heart beat faster, as it does when I imagine every detail of an erotic night with a girl.

Doll wasn't alone; she was with a friend. She always walked with someone, but that didn't put me off. I was prepared. They were arguing about something as they exited the school building. I was anticipating that. That isn't to say I was expecting it, but an argument between friends was something I could take an advantage of. When the girls drew even with my car, I rolled down the window and shouted:

"Hey young lady, would you like a ride home?"

The girls stopped and looked at me. "Wonderful," I thought happily, "they're not ignoring me."

"Hi there!" I said through the window. "It's about to rain, and you don't have an umbrella. I don't have anything I have to do. Come on, I'll give you a lift."

I deliberately ignored the other girl and looked only at Doll. She glanced at her friend, slightly confused. She obviously wasn't offered a ride home often.

"Don't be stupid," her friend said quietly, "you don't know him."

"No I don't... So what?" Doll said, suddenly indignant. "He looks okay. And he's got a nice car..."

"Don't be stupid," her girlfriend repeated. "Let's hurry. We can still beat the rain."

Doll looked at the darkening sky. Storm clouds were gathering. I wondered what she would decide. I had deliberately chosen a day when rain was in forecast. Our city often got rain and heavy fog in the early spring.

"Don't try and tell me what to do after what you did today. I *am* going with him," Doll nodded in my direction.

I put on an honest face and silently continued listening to them squabble.

"But you don't know him."

"So what? I'll get to know him."

"Don't go," her friend insisted.

"I'm doing it. I don't want to get wet. Momma washed my dress just yesterday."

"But he's old!"

"That's good! That means he's smart, not like someone I know..."

“You’re so stubborn!”

“Oh? But you copy off me because I’m the smartest and you don’t even do it right, so I got a D because of you!”

“But Ally, what if he’s a bad guy?”

“What do you mean, a bad guy? You’ve been watching too many horror movies. He’s got a nice car, and I’ve never ridden in one like that.”

“A nice car... big thrill! You’re going to go for a ride with somebody just because you like his car?”

It was true. I did have a great car, almost new. My job paid well, and what else does a single guy have to spend his money on? To tell the truth, Doll wasn’t the first girl I got to know because of my car. Girls don’t know anything about cars, but a nice one will catch their eye. Seeing that Doll was hesitating, I decided to joke around a little. I made a scary face and said:

“I’m a highwayman. I rob passersby by night,” and after a short pause I continued in a calmer voice, “and once a week I eat little girls.”

After that, I made a serious face and added:

“But today’s my day off, so you have nothing to fear.”

Doll smiled.

“I don’t want to have to run in the rain,” she murmured thoughtfully, still wondering whether to get in a car with a stranger.

“Well, go on then if you’re so stubborn. But I’ll remember his license plate number just in case,” her friend said glaring at me. “If you do something to Ally, I’ll report you to the police.”

“No problem, I’m just giving her a ride out of the kindness of my heart,” I answered in a straightforward manner.

“Well, okay then. Bye, Maria!” Doll finally screwed up her courage, opened the front door, and got in.

The trap slammed shut. I’m speaking figuratively, of course. Actually it was the car door that slammed shut, not a trap. This isn’t the end of my story, of course. Did you really think I was that stupid and in a rush to go to prison? It was just the beginning, the first stage in an ambitious plan I had developed over the past two weeks as I secretly watched Doll. On this occasion, I just wanted to drive her home. The idea was to establish trust. Once a girl begins trusting you completely, you can do anything you

want with her. But until you get to that point, you just have to be patient and do everything you can to get her to see you as a cool, honest guy who isn't planning anything bad. Hang on for a month or two, indulge all her whims, and she'll fall head over heels in love with you.

"Nicholas," I said, introducing myself.

"Allyson."

"I'm pleased to meet you," I reached out and gently shook her little hand, then put the car in motion.

The trip was short; it lasted only about five minutes. It would have taken Allyson twenty minutes to get home on foot, of course, but cars cover ground a lot faster. We would have made it even faster if there had been no traffic lights. I was prepared to make it a quick trip because I knew where Allyson lived after driving around the area and stalking her several days earlier. Seeing that she was tensed up and on guard, I spent those five minutes telling her jokes. That made Doll laugh, but she kept looking out the window, keeping a close eye on the route I was taking.

When I got to the right house, I stopped the car.

"Thanks, Nicholas," Doll said, sighing with relief and jumping out of the car. She had apparently been afraid that I would drive her to some dark spot and do all kinds of nasty things to her. Or maybe that's what she wanted. Hopefully, I didn't disappoint her as I simply waved goodbye and left.

A week passed, and I was again sitting in my car near her school, wondering if Doll would come to me this time, or if I would have to call her over. The last bell rang, and the students began coming out onto the street. Despite my doubts, she came over on her own.

"Nicholas, what are you doing here?"

"Want a ride?" I asked casually, ignoring her question.

"Sure," she agreed happily and waved goodbye to her girlfriend, who stuck out her tongue in response.

"Is she jealous?" I asked when Doll got in the car.

"A little," Allyson admitted. "She was convinced that you were going to take me someplace far away..."

“Well, I did take you someplace, just not far away. I took you home as promised. Do you like my car?”

“Uh huh.”

“Okay, you live really close, so how about I put on some music and we drive around a little. What kind of music do you like?”

Her smile faded.

“They’re expecting me at home, but I suppose it would be okay if we drove around for a little while,” Natasha said uncertainly, looking me in the eye.

“Ten minutes, no more,” I immediately agreed and began entertaining Doll with idle chatter while playing Justin Bieber songs. I knew young girls liked him.

Just as I’d promised, I didn’t take her far, and ten minutes later I stopped the car in front of her home, completely restoring her trust in me.

After that, I began giving Doll a lift almost every day. The seventh time I picked her up, she asked me point blank why I was doing it.

“I like giving you a ride because you’re so sweet,” I admitted.

“And you don’t want anything in return?”

“No. Well just... maybe...,” I pretended to be hesitant.

“Aha! So, what do you want?” Allyson asked suspiciously.

“I’d like you to come with me to a coffee shop. My treat.”

“Oh, Nicholas, all of the girls in my class really envy me. Nobody drives them home. But I can’t.”

“I understand,” I said with a sad face. “You aren’t interested in an old man like me.”

“No, you aren’t an old man!” Doll exclaimed. “That isn’t it at all. It’s just that Momma expects me to be home, so I really can’t. Let’s do it tomorrow, okay? I’ll tell Momma that I’m going to Maria’s so we can do homework together. We do that pretty often, so she won’t suspect anything.”

“Tomorrow it is,” I smiled. So far, everything was going according to the plan.

Another three weeks went by. We went to the coffee shop five times,

and I bought Doll all kinds of sweets and soft drinks. Nobody paid us any attention, because everybody figured I was just a father spoiling his daughter. I grew a mustache and a beard to make me look older than I was. Doll especially liked jelly doughnuts, which she washed down with Coke. I ate almost nothing. I just looked at her, admiring her chaste young body that I found so attractive. I truly had no appetite. It was as though just being with her gave me energy. I did my best to avoid rushing things, but little by little I became obsessed with the desire to have her. When I got home after each of our times together, I would rush to the bathroom and release my sexual tension. That didn't satisfy me emotionally or morally, but it cleared my thoughts for a time and let me think about something other than sex.

Doll got used to me and became less cautious than she had been during the first few times we were together. She liked being the only girl in her class who was driven home; she liked the quiet envy of her classmates and girlfriends; and she even began kissing me on the cheek where everybody could see when she got in my car. Like a child, she was always cheerful and enjoyed everything. Sometimes her merriment infected me and I laughed along with her, but at other times I found it irritating and could barely keep myself from squeezing her leg above the knee, throwing myself on her right in the car, pressing my lips into her snowy white neck, ripping off her blouse, and grabbing her immature breasts. I restrained myself with a tremendous effort of will and remained friendly, polite, and considerate towards her. Had it not been for my weekly hookups with girls I picked up in bars, I don't think I could have held myself back as long as I did.

One day, Doll asked me directly:

“Nicholas, you want to be my boyfriend, don't you?”

I didn't want Doll to look upon me as a second dad or older brother, of course, so I had to answer that I did. And it was true, but wasn't it too early for her to realize that?

“I really like you, you know,” I said somewhat hesitantly, surprised by her question.

“But you're a lot older than me. You're almost as old as my daddy.”

“That's true. And you'd probably like a boyfriend your own age...”

“I've never really thought about it but I probably would.”

“But don't you like riding around in my car?”

“Uh huh.”

“And don’t you like going to the coffee shop?”

“I like that too.”

“A schoolboy... a boy your own age could never treat you the way I do. He simply wouldn’t have any money. Money lets you do whatever you want. If you’ll be my girlfriend, I’ll pick you up at school every afternoon. We’ll go to restaurants on Saturdays. You’ll live in my apartment, away from your interfering parents who just want to control you. You’ll be able to go shopping and buy anything you want. You’ll be independent. Wouldn’t you like that?”

“I do... But wouldn’t it be improper? Shouldn’t I date someone my age?”

“I know you like one of the boys in your class, but what does he have to offer you? He’s just younger than me. But I’m more experienced and wiser. I know how to act towards a girl, and I’ll treat you like a princess.”

Doll smiled and kissed me on the cheek.

“Okay, I’ll think about it if you promise to take me to a restaurant. I’ve never eaten in a restaurant.”

“It’s a bargain,” I said, playfully shaking her little hand.

I kept my word. One Saturday evening, we went to a restaurant. An expensive one, one of the best in town. Doll wore her best dress. She was the youngest girl there, and she charmed the waiters and other patrons with her spontaneous youthfulness and beauty. As in the coffee shop, people saw us as a father with his daughter and asked no questions. Allyson liked the restaurant, but I saw that she couldn’t truly appreciate the expensive delicacies that I ordered for her.

A few days later, under the pretext of showing Doll some computer games I suggested that we go to my apartment. She wasn’t very interested in video games, but she agreed nevertheless. Perhaps she was simply curious to see where I lived—and maybe she wanted to be alone with me now that I had officially become her boyfriend after keeping my end of our bargain. I didn’t think much about her motives; I carefully prepared for the day: what I would do and say, how I would act, what my apartment should look like.

The next Saturday morning, Allyson told her parents that she was going for a walk in the park with Maria and went out to the street, where my car

was parked at the curb. Allyson got in the front seat, looked around to see if any neighbors were spying, and, as usual, kissed me on the cheek. I gently caressed her palm with my finger and took her hand in mine, something I had never done before, and we drove away. She didn't pull her hand away, but why should she? We learn in kindergarten to walk hand-in-hand, so there was nothing intimate about the gesture. But my heart started beating faster. This was the first time I had touched her as my girlfriend, not as a simple acquaintance. I was afraid Doll would notice how excited I was and reluctantly let go of her hand, trying to focus only on my driving.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at my building and went into my apartment.

"Have a seat," I said, pointing to my couch, which was imported from Italy.

Doll obediently sat down on the couch, tucking her legs under her, and began looking curiously around the room. I had eyes only for her and her little legs, which were bare to the knee. I was thinking that I would soon be kissing them. It was a warm day in May, and Doll was wearing a lightweight blue dress that complemented her golden hair and blue eyes.

"Would you like something to eat?" I suggested forcing myself not to stare at her so obviously.

"No thank you, Nicholas. I just had breakfast. Do you have any Coke?"

"Of course."

I went into the kitchen and soon brought out a glass of Coca-Cola. Allyson took a few sips and handed the glass back to me. I put it down on my desk and took a seat next to Doll on the couch. We said nothing. Her scent beckoned me like the smell of food draws a dog. I could barely restrain myself. I quickly glanced at her white knees peeking out from under her dress. That didn't help; they just excited me further. We were finally alone, and she was completely in my power. Was it going to happen or not? It was, I decided. My time had come.

"May I kiss you?" I asked quietly, even shyly.

Allyson looked at me with surprise.

"On the cheek?"

"On the cheek," I quickly agreed and joyfully kissed Doll on her outstretched cheek.

She blushed, and her rosy cheeks grew even redder. I waited fifteen seconds and then asked with more confidence:

“And on your lips?”

“Oh, Nicholas! You’re a lot older than me,” Allyson said, embarrassed.

“But I like you... Wouldn’t you like me to be romantic... and hold you in my arms when we’re alone and caress you?”

“But that wouldn’t be right. I...”

I realized that she was completely innocent and had never been kissed. She obviously wasn’t willing to be my girlfriend, at least not willing to have the intimacy it entails. But that wasn’t a problem. She was in my apartment now. She was in my dominion. She was in my control. I just needed to find a different approach. Fortunately, I had already thought through the different ways this date could go and was ready for any eventuality.

“Allyson,” I said firmly, “look me in the eye. Haven’t you ever kissed a boy?”

“No,” Doll quietly replied. “I’m too young.”

“You aren’t too young, my Doll.” That was the first time I had spoken my nickname for her out loud. “Surely you don’t want boys to laugh at you.”

“No.”

“So you need to learn how to kiss. That’s very important if you want to go on a date with a boy. Do you like somebody?”

Allyson blushed and lowered her eyes:

“Joey... He’s in my class. Well, and you, of course... Not the way I like Joey, but you’re nice.”

“Now, now... don’t get upset,” I said softly. “I’m not jealous of Joey. But if you want him to like you, you need to be a good kisser. Let me just show you how it’s done. Okay?”

“But Nicholas, you’re so... You’re a grown up.”

“That means I have a lot of experience. Don’t you want to be good at it? Then you could go out with any boy.”

“I could?”

“Sure. And it feels really good, believe me. It’s even better than a jelly doughnut. I’ll make you an A student at kissing. You’ll see. You will be the envy of all your girlfriends.”

“Okay, teach me.”

I leaned closer and kissed Doll on the lips. But we just touched lips, because she kept her lips tightly closed and it wasn't a real kiss. Just a peck.

“Oh, it tickles,” Allyson said, pulling her head back. “Your mustache tickles.”

I mentally swore.

“Be patient. You'll get used to it.”

“Is that all there is to it?” Allyson asked in surprise.

“No,” I smiled. “You still have a lot to learn. First of all, open your mouth a little when I kiss you, as though you're surprised at something.”

We kissed several times, and Doll started feeling more at ease and even began timidly responding to my kisses. But I wanted more, much more. No longer asking permission, I started kissing her tender neck.

“Oh, that tickles,” Allyson complained again.

I was sorry that I had grown a mustache.

“Just tickles?” I asked, breaking off a kiss.

“No, it feels good too.”

“That's great!”

About twenty minutes went by. I held Doll close, kissing her cheeks, her lips, and her neck by turns. Her face was flushed, either from embarrassment or from my kisses, but I saw that she liked what I was doing.

“Take off your dress,” I whispered, not willing to wait any longer and wanting to see her bare body.

“No, I can't do that.”

“Don't be silly, Allyson.” I was as gentle as a puppy. “Surely you don't think you could shock me ...”

“But...”

“You don't need to hold back with me. Think of me as a doctor. Haven't you ever taken your clothes off for a doctor?”

“Once, a year ago... when I started having my cycles. But Nicholas, you aren't a doctor!”

“No, but I've had a lot of experience, and I want to share it with you. Have you seen other girls naked?”

“A few. In the dressing room at school...”

“Well, aren’t they just like you? Maybe their breasts and waists are different sizes, but all girls are the same under their clothes. I’m much older than you, and I’ve seen lots of naked girls. Believe me, I just want you to be comfortable, and when I kiss your tummy you’ll see how good it makes you feel.

“No, I can’t. I’m too embarrassed...”

“Sure you can. Here, I’ll help you.”

Overcoming Doll’s light resistance, I pulled off her dress. As it turned out, she was wearing a bra, but Allyson still covered her breasts with her hands. I didn’t look at her breasts, though—they were still too small for me to find attractive. My eyes traveled downward, over her smooth stomach and seductive beige panties; and when I imagined the virginal pink button under them, the sex-hungry Beast within me suddenly awoke. The Beast, the enraged Beast that had grown weary waiting for this young female body finally broke free. It could be patient no longer. It was fed up with being on the sidelines. A powerful frenzy of lust overwhelmed me and took possession of my body, and I lost control of my actions. I was no longer master of my body; I surrendered to the Beast. I howled and threw myself into kissing Doll, paying no attention to what she was saying and her intense but futile resistance. I started with her stomach, not as tenderly as I had originally intended, but frantically biting, and sucking her sweet flesh into my mouth. I reveled in her smell and her soft, supple body, but I delighted even more in the fury that was overpowering me. This rage, this primitive animal passion eclipsed my reason, and I was no longer capable of making rational decisions. I was a predator, I was a wolf on the hunt; before me was my innocent, snow-white lamb, the prey I had stalked for so long. People would call her “a victim.” I would object that she was my well-deserved prize. And now I had her—my victory, my triumph, my exultation!

I don’t remember how her bra ended up on the floor, but I found myself sucking at her left breast. Allyson was shouting something, but I took her cries for moans, which inflamed and aroused me even more. I lowered my guard and surrendered my entire body to the Beast. I sank into a sweet fog of rage, trying to quiet the furious passion inside me. But the passion that had erupted did not subside. I fought fire with fire; I couldn’t do otherwise. Doll squirmed beneath me, but I weighed twice what she did. I clamped my right hand over her mouth, muffling her cries, while I

tongued and nibbled her pink nipple. But my tongue didn't linger there long. It slid down her body, lower and lower, until it reached her sweet-scented panties. I simply ripped her panties off, delighting in the brutal violence. And a powerful lust overwhelmed the Beast when the girl was naked. A sordid, animal passion took its revenge...

Sated and experiencing enormous bliss and pleasure, the lascivious Beast fell asleep. When I came to my senses, I realized what I had done and felt remorse. I heard Doll's quiet crying and slowly helped her stand up, giving her a chance to catch her breath.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking away.

Her body was pink from all the bruises and bite marks. A thin trickle of blood was flowing down from her groin. I picked her dress up from the floor and tossed it to her, still not looking at her.

"Get dressed. The bathroom is down the hall to the left."

Allyson didn't feel like talking, and I remained silent all the way to her home. I was sorry. Not for her, of course, but because I had let the Beast escape prematurely. If I hadn't taken her so brutally, I could have had her many times, in different positions, and done everything that my rich imagination desired. But I ruined everything by letting the Beast break free at the wrong time. I sighed. I would have to look for another Doll. It's not important, I'm still young, I consoled myself. I have time to gain experience. Still, it's a pity that everything happened so quickly. I had traded two months of my life for an hour of fun. Maybe if I had restrained myself I could have enjoyed her virginal body for many days. Is it possible, I thought, that Allyson would agree to come to my apartment again? It wouldn't be as exciting, of course, but she could take care of my sexual needs while I looked for another victim. I perked up a little and even smiled inwardly. Actually, she still had a lot to learn. I hadn't even had anal sex with her. That could be fun.

"It's all going to work out," I muttered.

Wiping her teary eyes, Allyson didn't reply. When we got to her home, she got out of the car without speaking a word or saying goodbye.

The next morning, my doorbell rang. I looked at the door with a wonder—I wasn't expecting anyone. Maybe my neighbor needed me to

hang a picture for her. I went to the door and looked through the peephole. It wasn't my neighbor; it was a man who reminded me of someone. I opened the door uncertainly.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"That's him," said a quiet but familiar voice from behind the man.

"You disgusting pervert!" The man exclaimed as he snatched a pistol from where it was tucked in his belt at the back and pointed it at my forehead.

I didn't know that Doll's father had been in the Army and owned a gun. It was immediately obvious that he was a professional and had killed before. Without wasting words or making idle threats, he pulled the trigger. The last thing I saw was a flash of light. My last thought was astonishment at how accurate he was at identifying my nature. I am the Pervert!



## CHAPTER 6.

# Afflatus

“Afflatus is a Latin term that has been translated as inspiration. In English, afflatus is used for this literal form of inspiration. It generally refers not to the usual sudden originality, but to the staggering and stunning blow of a new idea.”

*(from Wikipedia)*

**A**nd then it dawned on me. Or rather, it hit all of us, not me alone, for I sensed that the Gladiator, the Assassin, and even the Pervert had all come to the same conclusion.

“We’re all the same person,” I said. “The same man... The same personality...”

I quickly corrected myself. “No, not the same personality... Our personalities are different. Although, something has brought us together in this one body. I realize now that we are from parallel worlds and yet we are the same man. One and the same – from different universes.”

“I don’t believe in parallel worlds,” the Gladiator responded. “There is the Earth, one Earth, where every year a battle for Champion is held among contenders for the title, and where...”

“Take a look around. Does this really look like your Earth?” The Assassin said, backing me up. “I like the Ordinary Man’s explanation.”

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, it’s true. The existence of parallel universes is

generally accepted now. I remember reading an article on the Internet not long ago about how scientists from the University of California and Griffith University in Australia believe that our world could exist in parallel universes and they could even interact with one another. It has something to do with quantum mechanics.”

“It is magic,” the Gladiator insisted. “My Master pushed me once and I fell from a cliff for a whole minute, but it was only an illusion. And now...”

“Believe me, there’s no magic in this world... But parallel worlds really do exist, and scientists even think it’s possible to communicate with other universes. Anyway, this obviously is really happening. It’s not a pie-in-the-sky idea.”

“As much as I wish this was all a dream... or an illusion, I think the Ordinary Man is right. We’re the same person, just from parallel Earths—that explains a lot. That’s why we’re here. Now. In this body that’s ours and yet not ours. I’m afraid we died a long time ago, my friend.”

“We’re dead,” the Pervert agreed. “I remember dying.”

“Yes, I lost my fight,” the Gladiator agreed unexpectedly. “I don’t remember how it ended, but I fear that victory was not mine.”

The knowledge that I was right took my breath away. The Gladiator quickly conceded that my interpretation of the situation was correct, and once he accepted the idea, his emotions overwhelmed us. Thoughts whirled through our collective consciousness, each spinning faster than the last. However, something was bothering me, though not physically—an unpleasant thought had occurred to me.

Could it be that we had the Pervert to thank for this inspiration? Had his unexpected appearance that made it seem as though we were in a game played by cosmic forces affected me so much? I was horrified. No wonder they say God works in mysterious ways. Even a crazy guy can make a contribution. It appeared that everyone had a role to play. And what was so bad about the Pervert? Who are we to judge Evil? We don’t even really know what Good is. Do good and you’ll be rewarded threefold, my grandmother liked to say. But who determines what that is? If dropping atomic bombs on Japanese cities is doing good, who are we to judge anyone or anything? When our Commander-in-Chief risks starting a war by sending twenty-four men to kill one person, isn’t he valuing their life less than that of his enemy’s? Or, when you try to help an elderly cripple in the subway and he shouts that he hates you, apparently out of his mind, are you

doing good? Most of us don't think about problems like that. We simply don't have the time or the desire; our lives are monotonous and revolve mainly around our jobs. We don't think for ourselves. We watch movies or read books that instill in us the difference between good and evil. We're incapable of thinking independently. Instead, we model our behavior on things we've heard, seen, or read.

But why was I thinking like that? I was no philosopher, no politician, no professor or scientist. How could I tell whose ideas were more correct. Who was I to intellectualize about good and evil. I was the Ordinary Man: I wasn't smart enough to evaluate and understand the subtleties of what it means to be human. I certainly lacked the wisdom to answer questions that have puzzled people for millennia. No, I couldn't blame human society for everything. I simply had no right to do that. I couldn't shift blame to others while I myself was mired up to my neck in that society. I needed to understand myself, to sort through the emotions intermingled with my thoughts. I had seen the ugliness in my own soul and called myself a faceless monster. Why "a faceless monster?" Because I was afraid even to admit my sins to myself mentally, afraid to identify with the man whose nature I found so completely and despairingly frightening. But wasn't it this that drew these other selves to me? The Pervert and the killers?

"I am no killer; I am a gladiator," objected the Gladiator.

"It's the same thing. How many kills have you made?" asked the Assassin.

"I didn't kill her, honest," the Pervert whispered, answering instead of the Gladiator. "She came to my apartment herself."

"Herself?" the Assassin sneered.

"But I didn't kill her!"

"What you did was worse than murder," the Assassin insisted.

"Much worse," agreed the Gladiator. "If I could, I would tear you to pieces."

This interchange broke my abstract train of thought. Perhaps it was for the best; I didn't understand what was happening. This was no time to ruminate on humanity. I needed to think about myself and try to understand these different personalities that were stuck in my body.

"But he couldn't help it! The Beast took over." Returning to reality, I tried to justify the Pervert's actions.

“Beast?” said the Assassin with surprise. “What Beast? There is no Beast. There are only perverted sexual desires that every normal person has to suppress. There’s a line that no one should cross. Anyone who does isn’t a man but a filthy animal that it’ll be my great honor to kill.”

“No,” the Pervert howled, and he felt his inner self being snuffed out by the force of the Assassin’s will.

“Stop,” I begged. “We might need him. You’re killing yourself!”

“He isn’t me,” the Assassin growled, “and he never will be.”

“But he’s part of us now!”

“That means nothing to me. I’ve gotten along without crazies in my head my whole life.”

I tried to interfere, but he flung me aside like a kitten. Not literally, but somewhere inside myself, where four different awarenesses were joined together within a single body.

“Jerk,” the Assassin hissed as he continued his attack on the Pervert, suppressing his very will to live and enveloping his essence in impenetrable darkness.

The Pervert was being figuratively squeezed into a corner and was thrashing about to the extent he could. His identity was fading as the flame of a kerosene lamp fades when its wick is turned down. He wanted to live, to escape the powerful vice crushing his ego, but the Assassin’s will was much more powerful than his. Unable to resist the unbearable pressure, the Pervert gave up. He began trembling, his mind clouded. If he had a heart, it would be covered in ice. It seemed to him as though he heard a bugle sounding somewhere far off in the distance. The tune was sad, funereal. He was in darkness, but not the kind of darkness you see at night with your eyes closed. He was in Absolute Darkness. He sensed that this was the end, and squeezed by the Assassin’s invisible vice, he could do nothing. He was fading into nothingness.

“Why do we need light when there is darkness?” The Pervert whispered, losing his will as he attempted somehow to slow his disappearance into oblivion.

“Yes, why?” The Assassin said without easing up.

“Why do good when there is evil?” The Pervert continue raving.

“I agree—why?”

“No, trouble always comes in threes...”

“Alas, there is no happiness to be found on earth,” the Assassin agreed.

“Why do we need light when there is darkness?” the Pervert repeated, obviously unaware of what he was saying.

My skin turned to ice. There was something familiar in all this, something familiar and frightening. It made no sense. However unlikely it seemed, three of us had been killed. Could it be that he was fated to die? Was he the only one who knew what death is? The only person in the world who had come back from death?

“I know the answer!” I suddenly exclaimed. “I know the answer to the Pervert’s question.”

The Assassin stopped his attack in surprise.

“Answer to what question?” The Assassin asked distractedly.

The Pervert began to recover, and all three focused on me. I felt as though I was standing in a spotlight surrounded by darkness with my head held high. There was something theatrical about it. I was reminded of school plays I had acted in as a child. And in a loud voice ringing with excitement, I recited:

Why do we need light when there is darkness?  
It beckons the unholy into its embrace.  
The road to distant lands sparkles.  
Cold hearts... Remnants of immortal souls.

“Why do we need light?” I shout into space.  
I wave my hand before my eyes, sensing darkness.  
No, troubles don’t come alone.  
One trouble? Silly. They come in threes; it’s true, I know!

Why do good when there is evil? I start down the road,  
My footstep nervous, infinitely lonely.  
I inhale fear. A bugle blows.  
My skin turns icy at that distant tone.

But that's no answer. Silence replies,  
And it has a lot to say.  
Why do we need light when there is darkness?  
God has forgotten the response.

I look around me in the silence...  
My spirit remains immortal, even dauntless.  
It whispers: on Earth there is no happiness.  
In my unbelief fear turns me white...

Why do we need light when there is darkness?  
A final cry bursts forth:  
Because we have a soul!  
And then a light dispels the darkness.

I stand in shadow, blinded by the light.  
I ascend into oblivion, abandoning my body.  
And again, excited as a child,  
I boldly fly to meet God.

“Nice delivery,” the Assassin said after a brief pause, “but we don’t need the Pervert in our head.”

“Wait. You don’t understand. The soul—that’s what we all have in common! We share a soul and that’s what unites us. Don’t you see? That’s the key to the puzzle. It explains why we ended up in one body. You’re all dead. I’m the only one still alive. That’s what brought you to me. We all have the same soul!” I said excitedly. “Do you realize what that means? The soul exists. Not as people imagine it, but it exists! A lot of people have tried to understand what the soul is, how to find it, touch it, sense it. But no one has ever guessed that people from parallel worlds would share a soul.”

“We truly are dead... All of us except the Ordinary Man,” the Gladiator mused. “Our soul is keeping us in this body. That makes sense. Stop, Assassin. You can finish the Pervert at any time. You mentioned a line. This is the line you must not cross. Not to kill even when you very much want

to; is that not the basis of your personal philosophy? What controls your actions: instinct or reason?”

“Reason—but I will not share a body with this filth.”

“You have no other option. For some unknown reason—or maybe it was just chance—we all find ourselves in this body. We need to find out what our mission is...”

“Mission?” said the Assassin. “There’s no purpose to this. It was just a coincidence that we all died except for the Ordinary Man. That’s why we were all drawn to him, the only one of us with a living body. We all share a single soul.”

“So you agree that there’s just one soul!” I said happily. “Do you really want to kill yourself? By killing the Pervert you would destroy part of yourself, because the two of you share a soul.”

“I won’t miss his part of it.”

In my head, where it seemed as though I was talking to myself, the Assassin took a step toward the Pervert. The Gladiator moved in front of him. The Assassin would find it hard to shove the Gladiator out of the way, maybe even impossible.

“Move,” the Assassin said peacefully, realizing that he couldn’t compete with the Gladiator.

“No.”

“Why not? Don’t you despise this scum, too?”

“I will not go against a soul brother, no matter what he has done.”

“I won’t either,” I said, standing beside the Gladiator. “The Pervert helped us understand that we share a soul. Thanks to him, we’ve found at least a partial explanation for what happened. I’d begun thinking I’d lost my mind.”

“You have all lost your minds,” the Assassin said, still restraining himself. “This scumbag deserves to die.”

“He’s already dead. You don’t know what will happen if you permanently extinguish the Pervert’s will. It’s entirely possible that I’ll lose my mind for real. He started talking crazy when you almost suppressed him the last time. Do you really want to share a head with a personality that’s gone stark raving mad?”

The Assassin retreated reluctantly. Being in the same head with an insane person didn't strike him as an attractive proposition.

I continued trying to persuade him: "And what if by killing the Pervert you also kill yourself, me, and the Gladiator? He might go off to another world and take our combined soul with him. We would be dragged along, and a body can't live without a soul... Or at least, that's what they say..."

"If you were alive and in a different body, your death at my hands would bring me great pleasure," the Assassin said to the Pervert, reluctantly yielding to my arguments.

"I know... why you want... to destroy me," whispered the still weak Pervert. "I know your past."

"Shut up," the Assassin said fiercely, but the memory washed over him—no, over all of us, and it was as clear as though it had happened only yesterday.

## CHAPTER 7. The Assassin

“The difference between man and animals is that man commits murder.”

*(“The Psychology of Murder” by Yuri Antonyan)*

They had us stand in formation for inspection as we did before roll call every morning—without weapons. Upper-level commanders rarely visited the compound where our detachment was located. I was assigned to a special airborne detachment—an SAD. We called it a “sad unit,” because we were essentially on permanent lockdown, virtually cut off from the outside. We were subject to rapid deployment anywhere in the world and had to be ready to go 24/7. The compound was small: it housed a hundred seventy-five enlisted men and five officers. To keep its profile low, it was located fifty miles from the nearest city.

The general’s visit was a big deal, so we had spent the previous two days scrubbing the barracks and the latrines and generally getting everything into shape.

I was standing with my squad in the third row. “An inspector is coming,” I thought to myself, remembering Khlestakov from Gogol’s play, “The Inspector General.” I had read it for a classic literature class I took at the orphanage.

It hasn’t caused much of a stir when I went to the recruiter’s office upon

turning seventeen and announced that I wanted to enlist. At the time, many young men who hadn't done well in school aspired to a career with the police or military. I had studied hard and done fairly well, but a kid coming out of an orphanage had few options in the real world. Without relatives or a place to live and work, I had only one real choice. But I didn't join up only because my situation was hopeless. I wanted to be a soldier: I loved shooting. My hand was steady and my vision excellent. I had gone to a firing range with friends every weekend before joining up and would usually spend all of my pocket money to rent a rifle or pistol and buy a couple of boxes of cartridges.

I excelled at marksmanship during basic training and was sent to a sniper school for advanced individual training. I graduated at the top of my class and was posted to the SAD.

The general arrived in a HMMWV—not a Lincoln as I had been expecting. That kicked my respect for him up a notch. A HMMWV is a lot bigger than the civilian Humvee and a lot less comfortable than either it or a Lincoln. He was wearing a simple camouflage uniform with no insignia beyond his two stars. But one glance at his worldly-wise eyes and military bearing told me that the man standing before the formation was a general officer.

“Who's that?” I asked out of the corner of my mouth.

“That is Major General David G. Perkins,” said my friend Max, who was standing to my left. “Don't you remember? He was here a year ago.”

I remembered his face, but I'd forgotten his name. A lot had happened at the compound in the past year. I quietly thanked Max for the reminder as I stared at the general without blinking.

The captain called us to attention, then he and General Perkins walked through the ranks, looking into faces and checking uniforms. Standing in front of the formation, he had given a short speech in which he said he had reviewed the files of several outstanding young men on the compound, and that was what had brought him here. He said he was going to do a preliminary interview with each of them and then pack them off to a new assignment. He told us he didn't like having to give up soldiers, but the request was one he couldn't refuse. The inspection finished, he and the captain returned to the front of the formation.

“They're looking strack,” the general said.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’ll use your office.”

“Yes sir.”

“Send in Thomas Peterson, Christopher Tran, and Nicholas Glaude, one at a time.”

“Roger that, sir.”

“Turning to the soldiers, the captain shouted:

“At ease! Left face! Peterson, Tran, Glaude—fall out! Company, forward march!”

When it was my turn, I walked into the captain’s office and found General Perkins there alone. He was sitting at the captain’s desk, smoking a cheap cigarette. I recognized it by the smell: there were a lot of cigarettes like that in the compound. I had three packs myself, although I didn’t smoke. I stopped just inside the door and saluted.

“You would be Specialist Glaude. Take a seat, soldier,” the general said, nodding at the nearest chair.

I sat down on the very edge of the chair, maintaining my erect posture.

“At ease, son,” the General smiled. “You’re not on parade.”

I scooted back a little on the chair and allowed myself to relax. The general opened a thick folder that was lying on the desk in front of him.

“This is your file. It’s very complete. Want to read it?”

“No sir, it’s none of my business.”

“We’re just having a friendly conversation here, son. No need to be formal.” He glanced down at the open file. “So. It says here you’re an excellent marksman—and not just with a rifle. You’re pretty good with a handgun, too. Is it true that you can hit the bull’s-eye from twenty meters?”

“Yes, I can. I’m the best marksman in my squad.”

“Can you do it while moving?”

“If I need to...”

“If you need to,” the general said, a little sarcastically. “Can you do it from thirty meters?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried. But probably.”

“How do you like it here?” the general suddenly asked. “Any hazing?”

“No sir,” I lied.

I'd had a few run-ins with other soldiers, especially during my first three months in the detachment. But I was no stranger to that sort of thing. Life in the orphanage had been no piece of cake, and I'd picked up a few tricks. I could take care of myself, and I wasn't going to rat on anyone.

"You don't have to lie. But never mind, I have a proposition for you. A buddy of mine has opened a school. It's not military—it's in the private sector. But the training you'd receive would be as good as any soldier in a special ops unit gets, and the pay during training is a lot better. Then when you graduate and start work, you'd be earning double what I do. What do you say?"

"What would I have to do?"

"Good man. That's an excellent question. You'd have to kill. Not in a combat situation—in clandestine operations. This school trains professional assassins."

"Not interested, sir," I said, almost without thinking.

"Are you sure? This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You'd be living off base—and living quite well. You'd have an apartment in the middle of Manhattan. And no one would care what you do at night or during your off time while you're away on a mission."

"Sorry," I said. "I'm not a killer. It's one thing to kill somebody in a war, but I couldn't shoot someone simply for money."

"Fine." The general sighed and handed me his card. "Call me if you change your mind. And not a word to anyone about what we just discussed here."

"Yes sir." I got to my feet and saluted.

"Good luck, son," General Perkins said as I was leaving.

For some reason, I had the impression that he was happy I'd turned him down and wasn't going to try and talk me into accepting.

Two months went by after that remarkable conversation. My buddy Max tried to find out why the general had wanted to talk to me, but I kept my mouth shut. Peterson and Tran, the other two men who'd been pulled out of formation, left with the general. They had no time to tell anyone anything, even if they'd wanted to.

The detachment's exercise season was in full swing, and I was sent on a reconnaissance mission with Max and four other soldiers. The team was

led by Lieutenant John Lemmons. Our assignment was to find an enemy base and transmit its coordinates back to headquarters. Our team was airdropped in a forested area about five miles outside a small town in West Virginia.

I adjusted my rucksack, tightened the strap on my rifle, and checked my knife.

“Ready?” I asked Max.

“Just waiting on you,” he replied, smiling.

We advanced quietly and stealthily, in single file. The narrow path meandered, skirting bushes and small ravines. José Vargas, the lieutenant’s second, was walking point, scrutinizing the area around us. Suddenly, he stopped, raised his fist, and crouched down. We crouched, too, and froze, shifting our rifles from our shoulders to our hands, ready to engage an invisible enemy.

“What is it?” whispered the lieutenant.

José suddenly smiled.

“It’s just a local girl. No need to hide. But don’t make any noise.”

We walked quietly out into a clearing. A girl in shorts was standing with her back to us on the other side of the open area. A basket sat on the ground next to her. She was bent over a bush, picking blueberries and dropping them into the basket.

“What an ass on her!” somebody said, unable to resist.

“Quiet,” the lieutenant hissed, but it was too late.

“Oh,” she exclaimed and turned quickly to face us.

“Don’t be afraid,” Lieutenant Lemmons said. “We’re just some soldiers on a training exercise. Nobody’s going to bother you.”

The girl looked to be around sixteen- or seventeen-years old. She had a pretty, freckled face and a snub nose. Her small breasts were nicely outlined by her thin, blue blouse. She obviously wasn’t wearing a bra. The girl regarded us suspiciously and squinted slightly in the bright light of the sun at our backs. I noticed that she was wearing a short hunting knife on a belt.

“Take it easy,” the lieutenant said. “What’s your name?”

When she didn’t reply, he began introducing us one at a time.

“And my name is John,” he concluded.

“I’m Kate,” the girl said at last.

“Come a little closer, Kate. We won’t hurt you. We just want to know if you’ve seen any other soldiers around here.”

Kate took a hesitant step toward us.

“No, I haven’t. There’s nobody here but me,” she answered, seeming a little reassured that we weren’t going to harm her.

“That’s too bad,” the lieutenant replied. “We got separated from them, and I think we’re lost.”

“I can tell you how to get to town,” Kate offered.

“What town is that?” The lieutenant asked.

“Ashwood. That’s where I live. It’s not far from here, about a half hour’s walk.

“Is it a large town?” Lemmons was asking questions he knew the answer to, and I wondered what he was doing.

*What do we need with her? Let her go,* I thought to myself.

While Lemmons was distracting Kate, one of the soldiers—Dan Sterling—slipped up to the girl from the side and whipped her blouse up, exposing her breasts. Kate pulled out her knife and waved it at Sterling, making him jump back. We laughed. That is, everybody laughed but me. Even my buddy Max went along with the rest. Lemmons gave a signal, and the others began moving to surround the girl. I stood frozen, not understanding what was happening, not knowing what to do. The girl realized what was going on before I did and took up a defensive stance, raising her arms. Her eyes shot from soldier to soldier. Her knife flashed in the sunlight, as though warning us. While I was trying to think of how to stop my buddies and cursing myself for being slow on the uptake, Lemmons rushed Kate while she was eyeing a soldier who was trying to get behind her. He grabbed the arm holding the knife and forced it to the side, then pulled her toward him with the other arm. She dropped the knife, and Lemmons kicked it away with the toe of his boot. The girl tried to break free, but she lacked the strength of an adult male.

“What are you doing?” I shouted, shrugging off my rucksack as it dawned on me where things were headed.

Lemmons pushed the girl toward another soldier who immediately grabbed her. He walked over to where I was standing, and I saw the cold eyes of a killer—at least that was my impression at the time. I grabbed for my rifle, but Lemmons was too fast for me. He was the only one of us

with a sidearm. He drew it and pointed it at my head from where he was standing, no more than three feet away.

“Drop your weapon,” he ordered.

I hesitated a few seconds, trying to take stock of the situation. The lieutenant was slower than me, but he clearly had the drop on me. I was looking right down the muzzle of his pistol. Our weapons were only loaded with blanks, but I knew a blank fired at close range could seriously injure me, possibly even kill me. I had no choice but to obey his order. Once that sank in, I obediently lowered my hands and let my rifle fall to the ground.

“You asshole! Were you going to go against your own buddies?” Lemmons said, spitting out his words.

“No sir!” I replied firmly. “I just wanted to ask you to leave the girl alone.”

“Ask, my ass! What is she to you? Is she your sister or something?”

“No sir. But she... She’ll be a mother someday. You can’t treat her like that.”

“We’re just having a little fun with her. Nothing bad’s going to happen. You understand, Glaude?”

“But what about our mission...?”

“Don’t worry about it. We have time for a little fun.”

“But lieutenant, this isn’t right... What if somebody finds out?”

“Shut up and stay out of it. You got that, Glaude?”

“Yes sir.”

“Just take a seat and be quiet... Sit down!” Lemmons ordered.

I did as I was told and got down on the ground because there was nothing else I could do. Meanwhile, the man holding the girl, Andre Spears, was trying to paw her breasts as she struggled silently. Kate succeeded in grabbing his hand and sank her teeth into it like a bloodthirsty vampire.

“Ah, you bitch!” Spears said, releasing her.

Kate tried to run, but Vargas grabbed her, and when he’d had enough of her, he pushed her to another soldier. The girl began crying, either from fear or the hopeless situation. Ignoring her tears, the men began passing her around like a baton in a relay race until Lemmons was done pinning me to the ground with his eyes and turned back to the sobbing girl.

“I’m first,” he said and started issuing orders. “Vargas, keep an eye on Glaude. Spears, you hold her arms. Sterling, you take her legs.”

The lieutenant walked up to Kate, drew his knife, and, with a disgusting smirk on his face, began cutting away her shorts and blouse with quick, precise movements. I gritted my teeth, but Vargas held his rifle to the back of my head, and I couldn’t do a thing to change the situation. When the girl was down to her panties, Lemmons cut them off too and threw her to the ground. Spears grabbed her arms, and Sterling held a leg to stop her kicking. The lieutenant moved between her legs. Biting her lip, Kate put up a desperate resistance, and another soldier had to help control her legs. Sterling and Max spread her legs apart, holding them tight against the ground. Taking his time, the lieutenant removed his boots and started undoing his pants. I closed my eyes, because I couldn’t bear to watch what was happening. It didn’t help much, however; I heard Kate’s shrieks as the soldiers took turns raping her. Her screams were etched in my memory for the rest of my life. My heart grew colder each time the girl cried out or a soldier laughed. Rage, a wild fury, awoke in me. The Beast within me had finally awakened.

Like a lapsed time video of a plant sprouting from a seed, the Beast instantly shot up inside me, gathering strength. It demanded action. The Beast thirsted for blood. It set me aflame, imploring me to release it and give it control of my body. But I restrained it. *Be patient, your time will come*, I thought, unsure whether I was soothing the Beast or myself. The Beast roared and strove to break free, but I held it back with a supreme effort of will. I imagined it in a studded leather collar secured by a thick iron chain that I wrapped around a two-hundred-year-old oak tree. I imagined it in a muzzle that I held between my hands. I reassured it gently and tenderly with a promise of vengeance. But the Beast balked. The Beast was boiling with rage. I felt as though the Beast gained more primitive, animalistic power with every cry and moan from the girl, and every laugh or jeer by the soldiers. It was growing more and more difficult to restrain it. My imagined oak tree creaked and bowed under the strain from the imaginary chain. Beads of sweat ran down my forehead even though I hadn’t moved since it all began. It felt as though my internal mental battle with the Beast lasted years. But Kate’s torture went on for an eternity, and I needed to win my mental struggle for her sake.

I hatched plans for retribution as her heart-rending cries continued. That was all that kept me from losing control. It was my only consolation

in the face of the vile, disgusting rape of an innocent girl. It was the only thing that kept me going and gave me the strength to keep the Beast from taking over my body and hurling itself at them all, at the risk of being shot without being able to exact vengeance. I wasn't afraid of dying, but I wanted to settle accounts with Lemmons. The girl soon fell silent, although it seemed to me that it took a hellishly long time. Finally, the abuse ended, and slowly, not quite believing that the torture had stopped, I opened my eyes and looked at Kate.

She had fallen silent; she simply no longer had the strength to fight. She was lying on her back, motionless, naked, covered in scratches, her green eyes turned to the sky. They no longer shone. They looked dull and lifeless. I thought she was dead, but then I saw how quickly her chest was rising and falling. I turned away and locked eyes with the lieutenant, who was watching me coolly, apparently waiting for some kind of reaction. But I squeezed my feelings down to the size of a fist and tried to appear unaffected.

"What do we do with her now?" someone asked.

"Let her go," my buddy Max suggested, fastening his belt.

"But what if she tells somebody?"

"Yeah, what could she do to us? Who would she complain to? Who would believe her?"

"Suppose someone did believe her...?"

"So what? Leave her. She doesn't know our names, and we'll be outta here soon."

"She knows my name! The lieutenant used it when he told me to hold her legs, and she could identify you from fifty yards away!"

"No she couldn't."

"Sure she could. A fat soldier like you... she'd only need one look."

"What do you mean, fat? I just have big bones. Take a look at yourself. With your hair she'd pick you out with no trouble at all."

"Aha, so she could identify us!"

"We need to get rid of her."

"But can't we let her go?" Max said, almost plaintively.

The soldiers continued arguing until the lieutenant stopped them.

"We won't risk it," he said. "We'll kill her and leave her here. Animals

will eat her. People will think it was an accident—maybe she slipped, hit her head on a rock, knocked herself out, and a bear came along during the night and tore her to pieces. Spears, take care of it.”

“But I... I...” Andre said, hesitating.

Seeing that Andre was reluctant to carry out his order, Lieutenant Sterling spat.

“Help him, Vargas.”

“I’d be happy to, lieutenant, but I’m dead tired. The girl completely wore me out. I don’t have the strength.”

The lieutenant frowned.

“Cowards... Never mind, I’ll do it myself. Watch and learn!” he said.

Lemmons walked over to the girl, crouched down, grabbed her neck with both hands, and started choking. This time, I didn’t close my eyes. I watched the lieutenant closely. The Beast began seething and snarling inside me, but I knew how to calm it down—I pictured my vengeance. More out of instinct than a desire to live, the girl tried to stop the lieutenant, but her thin, weak arms were powerless to stop her killer. He just flexed his muscles and squeezed until her eyes rolled up and she stopped struggling. The lieutenant let go of her a few seconds later—it was over. He had killed her, an innocent girl, a victim of lecherous soldiers.

The lieutenant, spit and walked over to me. He regarded me silently for a few minutes.

“We ought to kill you too, so you don’t squeal,” he said at last.

“I’m not going to tell anyone,” I said unflinchingly.

“That’s what you say now. But what about when we get back, huh?”

“I’m not a rat,” I said.

I understood perfectly well that my life was hanging by a thread. I looked at the others in hopes someone would stand up for me, but they were all looking anywhere but at me. Max was my only possible source of support, but after all that had happened I no longer trusted him. The only person I could count on was myself. I was prepared to say or do anything to save my life. I needed to stay alive so I could exact retribution.

“I don’t betray my friends,” I said. “Ever. That’s not who I am.”

“How can I believe you?”

“I’ll do anything you want if you don’t kill me,” I said, knowing I

was humiliating myself. But it was better to be humiliated today and take revenge tomorrow than to remain forever in this forest and be meat for wild animals.

“He’s one of us,” Max said suddenly, coming to my assistance. “He’d never rat us out. He grew up in an orphanage. If he says he’ll do something, he’ll do it. For real! He’d never fink on us.”

“You vouch for him?” Lemmons asked, shifting his gaze to Max.

“I’d stake my life on him.”

“Fine. But if anyone ever finds out about this, you’re both dead. I’ll track you to the ends of the earth. Is that clear?” Lemmons barked.

“Yes sir,” Max quickly agreed and looked at me.

“Yes, lieutenant,” I agreed, looking straight into the gray eyes of a killer. Soon, my eyes would have the same look.

A week went by. The exercise ended, and we returned to the compound. Nobody came looking for us, and the crime went unpunished. I kept my word and said nothing to anyone, but the lieutenant kept a watch on me nevertheless. Sterling, Spears, or someone else from the reconnaissance team was always nearby, keeping an eye on everything I did. But I behaved myself and gave them no reason to be suspicious of me. I kept my plans for vengeance to myself. It was a good thing no one could read my mind, however.

Lemmons eased off after a while and stopped giving me threatening looks. Now was the time to put the first stage of my plan into action. After the atrocity I had witnessed, the starving Beast in me was demanding blood, and, to be honest, I was tired of restraining it. I needed to phone General Perkins. After I did what I was planning, the school of assassins was the only place where I would have any kind of future.

“Hold on, it won’t be long now,” I reassured my rage, my wrath—my Beast.

Getting to a telephone was difficult. I had no mobile phone, and the phone in the captain’s office was the only one in the compound I could use to call out. That was a complication because only the captain himself and his lieutenants had access to his office. I waited until Lemmons was the OOD—Officer of the Day. To avert suspicion, I decided to let him listen to my conversation.

I rummaged in my locker for something of value and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. My last pack. But I would no longer be needing cigarettes after tonight. I waited until the evening, then took the pack and went to see the lieutenant.

“Lieutenant Lemmons,” I said, saluting.

“What do you want, Glaude?” Lemmons looked at me lazily, a little surprised that I had spoken first.

“A friend from my orphanage has taken ill. Request permission to phone him.”

“Why should I let you do that?” Distrust flashed in his eyes.

“Here,” I said, offering the lieutenant my package of cigarettes. “You can be there while I’m talking to him. I won’t be on the phone long.”

The lieutenant took the pack from my hand and put it in his jacket pocket.

“All right, come on.”

There were three of us in the group that went to the captain’s office—Lemmons, Vargas, and me, with Vargas walking behind me, as always, like my shadow.

“We need to make a phone call,” the lieutenant casually told the soldier on duty, and he let us in.

I went to the telephone and dialed the general’s number, which I had memorized.

“Hello,” came a voice on the other end.

“Hi!” I said. The need to address the general so informally almost caused the word to catch in my throat. “This is Nicholas Glaude from the SIB. Remember me?”

“It’s good to hear from you. Has something happened?”

“No, everything’s fine. How are you feeling?” I paused, then asked: “Is your offer still on the table?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind,” the general said, sounding a little surprised.

“Yes, I’m willing to give it a try.”

He hesitated briefly, then said:

“Okay. A vehicle will come for you tomorrow.”

I hung up and glanced at the lieutenant. He was looking at me suspiciously.

“Willing to give what a try?”

I had clearly either underestimated Lemmons or overestimated myself. I had no answer ready for such a simple question. I needed to make a slight change to my plan.

“I agreed to testify,” I grinned, deciding to go for broke.

“You son of a bitch!” Lemmons leaped at me, raising his fist, but Vargas stopped him.

“We’ll take care of him, lieutenant, but not here.”

I got around them and ran out of the office.

“Something’s happened to the lieutenant!” I shouted to the officer on duty.

He ran to the office door, blocking the lieutenant as he was coming out. Wasting no time, I ran to the armory. It was very dark, and I found it hard to follow the path in the compound’s dim lighting. I stopped running when I drew close to the armory and took a deep breath to slow my breathing.

Terry, a friend of mine, was on duty. I had looked at the duty roster earlier and was counting on that. He didn’t raise his weapon as required by the SOP when he saw me. I had helped him in a fight with two soldiers once, so he was always happy to see me. Terry had greatly appreciated my assistance, because it wasn’t often that the older soldiers were friendly to newbies.

“Hi Terry,” I said, grinning from ear to ear.

“Hi! What are you doing here?”

“Something’s come up,” I said as I drew closer.

When I was near enough, I punched Terry in the solar plexus. He folded at the waist and I moved behind him, caught him in a sleep hold, and held him until he passed out.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, because I hadn’t wanted to hurt him. “But it’s better for you this way.”

I knew time was short as I entered the armory, and I immediately grabbed up two M24 sniper rifles with optical sights mounted that were located near the door and filled my pockets with 7.62 mm cartridges. These rifles had entered service back in 1988, but there was nothing more modern

in the armory that would let me hit targets from ranges of up to 1500 meters. I would have liked to take a pistol or a knife as well, but I couldn't afford to spend any more precious time arming myself. Running out of the armory, I hurried to a nearby spot on the wall around the compound where I had previously set up three barrels—two side by side with one on top. Hopping up onto the highest barrel, I threw my jacket over the razor wire. But somebody saw me.

“Hey!” a soldier yelled at me.

I turned, but I didn't recognize him.

“Say hello to Lieutenant Lemmons for me,” I shouted back and vaulted over the wall.

Being seen to go AWOL suited me just fine, because I was very sure that Lemmons, as the OOD, would lead the hunt for me. I stopped where I could keep an eye on the gate with the telescopic sight on one of the rifles and was relieved to see that the lieutenant was acting true to form. Ten minutes later, six soldiers came out of the gate wearing night vision devices. Five were armed with M4 carbines, thirty-round magazines inserted. One was carrying an M249 light machine gun—a squad automatic weapon. I figured they intended using the M249 for suppressive fire, knowing it would be difficult to spot my exact location in the dark.

There was only one highway leading away from the gate. I didn't have much of a jump on them, so I didn't want to go through the forest—that would slow me down too much. Therefore, I ran along the road, knowing that Lemmons and his men would come to the same conclusion and follow. Several months previously, I had noticed a place where I could easily set up an ambush. It was on a curve lined with thick bushes on both sides. I hurried to reach that spot.

I climbed a tree that would give me a good line of sight back down the highway, loaded both rifles, and settled down to wait. It didn't take long: my pursuers appeared on the road about a half mile away a few minutes later.

As always, Vargas was slightly in the lead, carrying the M249. He was followed by Lieutenant Lemmons and two other soldiers. Max, my former friend, was walking on the left side of the road, and Sterling was on the right. I waited until they were well within range and took aim at Vargas's head—I needed to take the SAW out of the fight as quickly as possible. My palms were sweating. I wasn't sure if it was from tension or excitement. I

had never killed another human being before. Sure, I had beat people up in fights as a kid, but I had never murdered anyone. I knew it was either them or me: there was no turning back. But it was still hard to squeeze the trigger!

“They deserve it,” I whispered to myself.

With those words, the Beast came awake and exploded within me. An insane fury instantly spread throughout my body. The Beast demanded revenge. It was thirsting for blood. It had waited a long time for this, savoring the vengeance to come. The Beast was raging, but I calmed down and my pulse slowed. My palms were dry. A feeling of peace came over me, relaxing my tense muscles and nerves. Imagining myself on the shooting range that I had loved visiting since I was twelve-years old, I squeezed the trigger. My shot rang out, and Vargas fell.

The other soldiers immediately scattered, hiding behind bushes. I knew they would be scanning the forest to try and locate me. No one wanted to show himself and risk taking a bullet. Completely calm, I worked the bolt to chamber another round. I had found it easy to kill, especially knowing that my enemy deserved to die. I fired four more times to make someone move, not aiming, simply firing in their direction. I figured they knew I had an M24 with me, and if they were counting my shots, they would know my rifle was empty. Thinking he would have several seconds while I reloaded, Sterling popped his head up. I was expecting that; I fired again and Sterling fell with a hole in his forehead. It was a good thing that they didn't know I had taken two rifles. A soldier I didn't know lost his nerve. He broke cover and started running back down the highway toward the compound. It was a long-range shot and he tried zigzagging, but it didn't help—my bullet caught him in the back of the head. The extra time I had spent at the firing range shooting at moving targets was paying off. Now, there were three enemies left.

“Hey Glaude!” Lemmons shouted and fired a short burst in my direction. “You're dead. You know that, scum?”

I didn't reply: they still hadn't located me. Spears also started firing at random in support of the lieutenant. Their bullets all passed far below me; they hadn't thought to look up. But their muzzle flashes were very visible in the darkness. I shot at Spears, aiming for his heart, not his head. The bushes deflected my bullet slightly, and I hit him in the arm. Spears swore and stopped firing.

But Lemmons had spotted me. Staying in the shadows and hiding behind trees, he began carefully sneaking towards me, signaling Max to follow him. When he thought he was close enough, he raised his rifle and started firing. The range was still too far for accurate fire, and his bullets missed—but not by much, alarming me. It was time for me to change position. I dropped my rifles and began quickly climbing down, using the tree trunk for cover. When I reached the ground, I grabbed my weapons and ran to the side where I had noticed a shallow ditch. I lay down with a rifle in front of me and took aim.

Spears jumped out onto the highway. He had somehow managed to bypass Lemmons and Max and determine my exact position. Spears ran toward me, firing one burst after another that forced me to hug the ground. He was thirty or thirty-five meters away when he ran out of bullets. He paused in confusion but quickly recovered and reached into his pouch for another magazine. He was too slow. I didn't miss this time, and my bullet caught him right in the heart. I had decided for some reason to stick to the same target and not shoot him in the head. That left two enemies—and one bullet loaded!

Taking advantage of the distraction provided by Spears, Lemmons and Max had drawn nearer, one to each side of me. First one, then the other fired at me, executing a bounding overwatch maneuver and forcing me to keep my head down as they closed the distance between us. I realized that shortly they would catch me in a pincer movement and I wouldn't survive their crossfire. But I needed to, I had to punish the lieutenant. Noting that Max wasn't shooting accurately, I took a chance. I raised up and aimed at Lemmons. A bullet flew past, just nicking my ear. But no one existed for me except my target - the lieutenant. Another bullet grazed my left shoulder. I put everything else out of my mind: the pain, my desire for vengeance, my humanity. I got his head in my sights as he ran towards me in a crouch, quickly closing the gap that separated us. I immediately squeezed the trigger and ended Lieutenant John Lemmons's life.

After taking the shot, I dropped back down and tried to reload by feel, but Max stopped firing and fell back.

“Nicholas! It's me, your friend. Don't shoot,” he shouted.

Max raised his hands and walked out into the middle of the highway.

“Don't shoot,” he repeated. “I give up.”

“I'm not taking any prisoners,” I shouted in response.

“But I’m your friend!”

“That’s why I let you live longer than the others. I no longer have any friends. Why did you rape her?”

“I had to. You saw what was happening. I swear I didn’t do it for pleasure. I talked the lieutenant out of killing you... If it hadn’t been for me...”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“Just let me go,” Max begged. “Let me go and you’ll never see me again.”

“Take your pick: the heart or the head.” I was adamant.

“Please! I want to live.” Tears ran down Max’s face. “I give up! Have mercy!”

“No mercy,” I said, finally succeeding in reloading.

“Don’t!” Max exclaimed and started running when he heard me work the bolt on my rifle.

“Close your eyes,” I coldly advised and took aim.

A final shot rang out.

Morning found me in bushes near the gate to the compound. My shoulder hurt badly, but at least I hadn’t been seriously injured: the bullet had only grazed my skin. I had bandaged myself as well as I could, knowing that the wound wasn’t dangerous, just painful with a nagging ache that had kept me awake. When the captain didn’t hear from the lieutenant, he sent out a second group—twenty soldiers this time—to find out what had happened. They found the soldiers’ bodies and brought them back to the compound. No one was looking for me; they either thought I was already far away, or they were afraid of being the next victim of the “mad sniper.” That’s what the other soldiers were calling me. I heard them talking as they returned to the compound.

A HMMWV drove up to the gate and blew its horn. The guards began opening the gate, and I came out of the bushes and approached the vehicle, almost staggering from fatigue. A major got out and stared at me.

“Are you Nicolas Glaude?” he asked, comparing my face to a photograph he held in his hands.

“Yes sir,” I answered, saluting.

The guards on the gate pointed their rifles at me, and someone in the guardhouse set off the alarm. About ten men with assault rifles ran out of the gate and took aim at me, then waited for orders. I raised my hands to show that I was unarmed, yawned without bothering to cover my mouth, and leaned against the HMMWV.

“What’s this?” the major asked.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” said the captain, who was walking out of the gate.

I wasn’t sure who would take charge here: the SAD commander or the general’s secretary. As the lower ranking officer, the captain saluted first, and quickly, suggesting he recognized the other’s authority.

“I have orders to take this soldier to General Perkins immediately.”

“I can’t let you do that, sir. This soldier is a deserter and a murderer.”

“I’m sorry, but my orders are quite clear.”

“He needs to be turned over to a military tribunal. I’ll answer to the general.”

“Answer all you want, but I have to take Glaude with me today.”

“Major, this soldier needs to be punished. The general can’t protect him from that.”

“I’m just following orders. I’m not concerned with anything else. You’re free to come with us and explain your point of view to the general.”

“I can’t leave my unit right now. Thanks to this deserter, we lost our best officer last night.”

“Fine, then I’ll phone the general,” the major said and took out his mobile phone.

After trying to explain the situation to the general for several minutes, the major handed the phone to me.

I took the phone and calmly said, “Good morning, sir,” as though I didn’t have a dozen rifle barrels pointed at me. I heaved a sigh of relief at being able to lower my arms.

“Explain,” General Perkins asked curtly.

“I just passed my entrance exam for the school of assassins,” I quietly responded.

“How many did you kill?”

“Six.”

“Why did you do it?”

“They raped and murdered a young girl.”

There was a short pause, then the general asked me to hand the phone to the captain.

They let me leave with the major. The captain gritted his teeth and glared at me, but he obeyed the order. I knew I'd I would never see the captain or any other SAD soldier again. Thus lacking any other option, I exchanged the career of professional soldier for that of professional assassin.



## CHAPTER 8.

# Deliverance

“The trope derives from the ancient concept of Princess and Dragon, where The Hero must save a woman from an invading monster. This is usually used as a metaphor for real-life conflict.”  
*(from “Save the Princess”, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SaveThePrincess>)*

**H**earing what happened to the Assassin when he was a young man helped clarify for us why he hated rapists so intensely. “We understand, Assassin,” I said after a moment’s silence, “But you can’t give in to your feelings. The Pervert has paid for his crime. That’s why he’s here, in this body. I might need him—no, we all might need him. I don’t know what for, but I have a hunch that we will.”

(including flexion and extension projections) “I’d like to squash him like a mosquito,” the Assassin said, “but I see your point. I never would have thought it would be so disgusting to share a body with someone like the Pervert. Actually, though, I never knew it was possible to share a body... Well, so be it. And what about you, Gladiator, don’t you find it disgusting?”

“Of course I do,” the Gladiator said firmly. “But I agree with the Ordinary Man. Given all that’s happened, we should not be quarreling.”

“That’s right. We need to cooperate and not squabble over every little thing.”

“Don’t kill me, I’m already dead,” mumbled the Pervert. “I’ll do anything you want. Just don’t kill me.”

“If I was killed, I want to go where all dead people go as soon as possible. Do not take it amiss, but I find your company unpleasant,” the Gladiator said, “and this world is boring...”

“We’re all dead, aren’t we?” The Assassin suddenly asked.

“Yes, we are.” As I answered, I suddenly realized what had been bothering me. “You’re all dead but me!”

“True. Whose body would we be in if you were dead?” the Assassin asked rhetorically.

“But why me? Why am I alive when everyone else was killed?”

“How should we know?” the Assassin answered for everyone.

“When were you shot, Pervert?”

“On May twenty-first, twenty fourteen,” the Pervert answered in a weak voice.

The Pervert’s reply provided the missing piece to another puzzle.

“Today’s the twenty-first of May!” I exclaimed.

“I may also have died on the twenty-first,” said the Assassin. “That’s the date of the last job I remember. I was escaping pursuit and hid with my partner in a basement. I don’t recall anything after that.”

“My world uses a different calendar,” said the Gladiator, “but I remember it was the first cycle of Heat, and I was twenty-nine full cycles old. We are all the same age, not so?”

“So it seems,” said the Assassin.

“Yeah, I’m twenty-nine, too,” said the Pervert.

“So if everybody else was killed, why wasn’t I?” I asked again.

“Fate,” the Assassin said in a melancholy, half-questioning tone.

“You’ve led a less dangerous life than we have,” the Assassin said.

“Then us being in the same body couldn’t have been an accident. I must have been in danger, too. I was supposed to die, too... If we all share a single soul, it would’ve made sense for all of us to die at the same time. But I didn’t. In fact, I didn’t even know I was in danger...” I said, thinking

out loud. “That’s why you all ended up in my body. I was the only one who survived, and that saved you from dying. Well, I got carried away, but I think I’m close to finding the answer...”

I fell silent, trying to catch hold of an idea that was eluding me. I felt as though I had answers to all my questions and an explanation for what had happened. Now, I just needed to figure out how to change things. But that begged the question: did things really need to change? Did I really need to get rid of these other personalities? What would happen if I did?

Realizing I had gone off on a tangent, I returned to my original train of thought. I lived while the others died. Why? Straining my mental capacities to the utmost, I was coming close to figuring things out. Finally, I grasped a thread I could hold onto and exclaimed:

“Kat!”

“What?” the Assassin asked me, not yet understanding what I was thinking.

“It’s Katherine! She might be in danger because of me.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I left her during the night. I hadn’t planned on doing that, and I shouldn’t have. I had no place to go—I wasn’t supposed to leave her. I suddenly realized what I was doing, and that interrupted my obscene thoughts, stopped me in my tracks, and made me walk out on her. I went against my fate and interfered with the universal order, or something like that. If I’d stayed, I’d be dead now, too. That means Kat’s in danger. I have to save her. Maybe there’s still time, but we need to hurry.”

“Imagine that, the Ordinary Man has a sense of honor,” the Gladiator chuckled in surprise.

“Allow me,” said the Assassin, suggesting that the Gladiator should give him control of my body. “I know from the Ordinary Man’s memories where she lives, and I’m better able to run through streets crowded with people.”

I agreed and the Gladiator said, “Then let us be off.” He didn’t like wasting time.

The Pervert said nothing. He was still afraid of calling attention to himself by saying something irrelevant. But even he was in agreement with the others: we needed to check on the girl to see if she was still alive. And

we were wondering what was supposed to have happened in her apartment. What could've killed us? Perhaps an earthquake?

We raced down the street toward Katherine's apartment. The day had begun, and people were hurrying to work. The Assassin deftly threaded his way through the throng, occasionally running out into the roadway, cutting corners, and crossing the street when he could. I... we... or rather my body was starting to pant. If I had been in control, I would long since have stopped to catch my breath, but the Assassin didn't seem to notice my fatigue. We reached Katherine's apartment building within fifteen minutes and, ignoring the elevator, ran up the stairs to the seventh floor where her apartment was located.

"Now you take over," said the Assassin, releasing my body back to me.

I rang the doorbell, trying to slow my breathing. When Kat didn't come to the door, I rang the bell again. And again. Finally, I heard the steps on the other side of the door and started calming down.

Kat opened the door a crack, showing only the left half of her face, and looked at me in surprise. I sighed with relief. She was alive. Looking more closely, however, I saw fright in her eyes, rather than surprise.

"Kat, what...?"

"Go away," she begged, almost in a whisper.

"What's happened?" I asked, unwilling to leave without getting an answer.

Suddenly, the door was flung wide open. A tall man in a blue tracksuit was standing behind Kat. He was broad across the shoulders and stood half a head taller than me. The somewhat envious thought flashed through my mind that he obviously worked out and looked like a bodybuilder. But here was my answer. I knew suddenly that this man would have killed me if I hadn't left the apartment.

"Nick, this is George. George, Nick," Kat said, introducing us, but I was looking at the large bruise under her right eye and paid no attention to what she was saying.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "What happened to your face?"

"So you're the one!" George suddenly roared, roughly pushing Kat aside and punching me in the head.

I couldn't react in time and fell painfully back against the stairs. The blow had caught me by surprise, and my head rang. A brawl in the morning,

a run, and now another fight? How much abuse could my poor, untrained body take? I sensed that much more of this and I would simply fall down exhausted and pass out. My vision was growing dim, and I felt as though I was already losing consciousness.

“Give me control,” I heard the Gladiator say through the fog. “Give me control. Hurry!”

Realizing what he wanted, I happily yielded control of my body. The Gladiator tensed, shaking off the fuzziness in my head and preparing himself for battle both mentally and physically. He willed my body to obey him and respond to every command. George leaped at me and began kicking. At first, the Gladiator simply went on the defensive, blocking the most dangerous strikes. It wasn't easy even for him: my body simply wasn't in shape to take a beating. This man was much stronger than me, and I was exhausted and taking a lot of punishment. I thought it was my turn to die.

“He can handle it,” the Assassin told me encouragingly. “We aren't going to die. This is the Gladiator!”

“I hope you're right.”

Seeing that George was tiring and slowing his assault, the Gladiator pushed against the steps in an effort to rise. This angered George, and he aimed a punch at my nose. However, the Gladiator abruptly leaned back, and George's fist struck the wall. He howled in pain. Wasting no time, the Gladiator thrust George away with his foot. The blow wasn't strong, but it forced him back. Grasping the banister, the Gladiator pulled himself up. He knew he needed to end the fight as quickly as possible—my body was almost drained of energy.

“Now we dance,” muttered the Gladiator and he took a step toward George.

The two men spun and twisted in a martial two-step. They fought in silence except for an occasional expletive from George, who was no novice at fighting. He executed a beautiful series of kicks, revealing that he had studied karate. The Gladiator simply dodged them in an effort to maintain distance between us, and he succeeded in doing so despite the cramped quarters of the stairway landing. That only excited our opponent more. George couldn't understand why he was finding it hard to defeat someone who was so much smaller and weaker than he. When George got close enough to use his fists, the Gladiator ducked under a blow aimed at his head and struck his opponent in the stomach. That was the first real blow

the Gladiator landed. Unfortunately, the man had strong abdominals and my arm could only deliver a weak punch because I lacked powerful, trained muscles, so it had little effect. George aimed a knee at me, but the Gladiator dodged. Missing, George raised his fist for another punch to my head. The Gladiator dropped to my knees to let the fist pass overhead and struck the man in the groin. That was unsportsmanlike, but the situation left no alternative. George gasped, stepped back, and bent over. That brought his head down level with mine. The Gladiator exploited the temporary advantage by striking our opponent's right cheek as hard as he could, handing a blow first with my fist and then my elbow. This double blow knocked George off his feet, and he fell to the floor. The Gladiator straddled him and began violently punching him in the face. Blood sprayed from his broken nose, but the Gladiator continued beating him furiously. My—the Gladiator's?—fists were covered in blood. My knuckles hurt so much that I thought some of the blood must be mine.

“Stop!” I shouted, not wanting to become a killer.

“Stand down!” the Assassin said, knowing that in this world he had no protector to keep us out of prison.

“Enough!” said the Pervert, who was beginning to feel sick from the sight of blood.

“Finish him,” Kat said, evidently wanting to be free of him.

The Gladiator didn't seem to hear us. He was in the grip of a cold fury because he had nearly been defeated, because the man had almost got the best of him. That had never happened before. He was taking his anger out on his opponent: his rage demanded a victim. For him, nothing and no one else existed: there was just he and his enemy—a dance with death that one of them wouldn't survive. Those were the rules of this dance, a dance that the Gladiator had been training for since early childhood.

“That's enough!” I shouted, horrified that I might kill someone, even if indirectly because I wasn't in control.

“No more!” the Assassin said, knowing we shouldn't get involved with the local authorities.

“Stop it!” shouted the Pervert, who had never been in a fight and couldn't bear the sight of someone else's blood.

“Finish him,” Kat begged, wanting her freedom.

I didn't condemn her: I had understood immediately that this wasn't

the first time he'd beat her. But did she really want him dead, or did she just think she did? Would she regret it later if I—that is, the Gladiator—finished him off? No, I was no judge. I had no right to condemn anyone; I was just curious. However, I wasn't prepared to commit murder to satisfy my idle curiosity or to please Kat. I felt that George would never raise a hand against her again, would never threaten her, and would leave her life forever, so we didn't need to kill him. "Kat, you're free," I wanted to shout to her. I was both glad that I had come to help Kat and feeling pitying indifference toward George, who was taking a terrible beating.

George somehow managed to raise his hands and cover his face. His defense was sluggish and weak, but it slowed and hindered the Gladiator. Then the Gladiator started punching him in the side, in the liver. He raised his fist for another blow, a strong one that might end George's life.

The Gladiator raised his hand to strike. There was something familiar and significant to him in that motion. It reminded him of something very important that had turned his life around. The Gladiator came to his senses, and the bloody haze dissipated, revealing the wrongness of his insensitive and icy fury. He held the punch. He realized that the fight was over. This was it, the line that he mustn't cross. A line that, having once having been crossed, had set him on the path to becoming a warrior. And with that, a flood of memories from the Gladiator washed over us.



## CHAPTER 9.

# The Gladiator

“You’re the saddest bunch I ever met  
But you can bet, before we’re through  
Mister, I’ll make a man out of you.  
Tranquil as a forest, but on fire within  
Once you find your center, you are sure to win.  
You’re a spineless, pale, pathetic lot  
And you haven’t got a clue  
Somehow I’ll make a man out of you.”

*(An excerpt from the song “I’ll make a man out of you,” from Disney’s cartoon “Mulan”)*

The audience was stirring impatiently as the third bout got underway. But I was looking forward to it even more than they were. I was still alive, and that meant the seventeen years of training I had endured had not been in vain. This was to be gladiator versus gladiator—a battle between martial arts giants. The people in the stands roared their welcome as we entered. I took my time walking to the center of the arena, as did my opponent. I bowed first, showing respect to my senior. I had just become a true gladiator after winning my first two bouts. They told me before the fight that he had been a gladiator for four years. I did not even know his name. But that did not matter. Winning was the important thing. He bowed to me in return. I rushed him without a word, throwing

myself enthusiastically into the fight out of the desire to prove myself a true gladiator as quickly as possible.

He blocked each of my blows with an arm or leg as hard as granite, and I parried each of his. We were equally matched in terms of strength, speed, and skill. I knew that this would be my hardest fight so far. The dance began.

Punch, kick, bend, shift to the side, kick, bend. I upped my speed and fought my fastest. My arms and legs flashed like spokes on a bicycle wheel. Roll to the side, punch, attack, kick, punch, retreat, block, punch again. I let a few harmless strikes through my defenses. The main thing was to sense my opponent's rhythm, anticipate his strikes, predict his next move, and attack instantly after spotting weaknesses in his defenses. I strove to reach my opponent's pressure points and thereby force him to make mistakes. He was doing the same to me. It was as though I were fighting myself. Making a huge effort, I increased my tempo to a level I had previously believed unreachable. My breathing quickened, and my heart beat like a bird caught in a trap. Beat—punch, beat—block. But my simple and direct punches were ineffective even at that speed. I threw several combinations in a row, improvising on the fly and forcing my opponent to fight on the defensive. But when my set ended, he switched quickly from defense to offense and executed his own series of techniques. I stepped back, defending myself. All of my attempts to interfere with his combinations failed. "No problem," I consoled myself. "I can wait. Let him wear himself out."

A minute had passed since the fight began. A full minute, and the outcome remained uncertain. "Think," I ordered myself. I hunkered down to avoid wasting my strength and thought about how to outwit my opponent. Pretending to slip, I started falling forward. He raised his knee, intending to strike my head. I reached out, grabbed his knee, turned my fall into a squat, and heaved upwards, flipping my opponent onto his back. He immediately leapt to his feet and assumed a fighting stance. My momentary victory had gained me nothing. The gladiator sneered at me as though reading my thoughts and launched an attack.

We circled each other, exchanging blows as the crowd roared. Nothing and nobody existed for me except my opponent. This was a dance with death, for only one gladiator would leave the arena alive after earning the affection of the spectators. Those were the rules, rules that a gladiator heard his entire life. And I loved to dance.

My opponent finally made a mistake and took a serious blow to the pressure point on the anterior muscles of his right arm, momentarily paralyzing it and rendering it virtually useless. Exploiting my brief advantage, I executed a combination of strikes that he was unable to block with one arm. It did not bring victory, but it weakened my opponent. He stepped back to recover. I pressed my attack, denying him the seconds he needed. Punch, block, punch, bend, punch, another punch. My opponent concentrated on my fists and forgot about my legs. At the risk of being swept off my feet, I kicked him in the knee. He reacted instantly by dropping to the ground and trying to sweep my legs. But it was too late—my blow had injured his knee, neutralizing the entire leg. I rolled to the side, expecting a blow that, however, did not come. Limping, my opponent moved away, out of danger, avoiding me. Back on my feet, I attacked.

It may seem that a wounded gladiator would be easy to defeat, but I knew the fight was far from over. Now, however, I had hopes of winning, and that gave me a burst of strength. I circled my opponent, preventing him from catching his breath. I executed a combination of techniques that I had learned from my Master or invented myself.

My flurry of movements wore down my opponent, but I took a few painful punches to my own head. Kick, block, punch, kick. Another series of strikes succeeded, and my opponent fell. The spectators roared. I leapt forward, landed on the gladiator, and raised my arm for a crushing blow to the kidneys at the point where the muscles are smaller. The gladiator opened his eyes and looked at me. I gazed back at my enemy's eyes. They were blue. Our eyes met, and some unknown force squeezed my chest. I began having trouble breathing. Everything slowed down, swam before my eyes, and then froze. The spectators were silent. An imaginary second hand advanced and stopped.

“What was I doing?” I asked myself suddenly. “Why was I doing this?”

I mentally reviewed my past to find an answer to that simple question and thought back to something that had happened when I was twelve-years old. I was an ordinary boy, and I had no Master then.

I had a day off from school, and my parents had given me permission to watch gladiators fight for the first time. It was not the annual match for the title of Gladiator, but a less significant event at which former gladiators' better pupils and hardened gladiators competed to demonstrate their

strength and agility. In these bouts, the fighters were not allowed to kill or even break bones. Anyone who bled—even from an accidental scratch—was eliminated and declared the loser. I was very excited nevertheless, and my spirits were high as I left for the match, driven by my father in his own carriage. He could not attend himself because of some business, but he promised me that he and my mother would pick me up afterwards.

“Don’t wander too far away from the arena entrance, and we’ll find you,” my father instructed.

“Yes, Father,” I answered, obediently.

“Take this,” my father said as he handed me some money, “and buy yourself a ticket. There’s enough for a meal if you get hungry.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Check to make sure you get the right change.”

“Okay, Papa,” I nodded.

“Count it before you leave the cashier.”

“Papa, I’m not a little boy anymore...”

“Don’t argue with your father, Nik.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“That’s the way. Now go!” my father said, smoothing my hair down.

“Bye, Papa!” I said and ran to the cashier.

I bought my ticket with no problem, sensibly keeping enough money for food—not as much as Papa wanted me to, but sufficient for a sandwich. And that let me afford a seat in the fifteenth row, much closer than I could have dreamed. I was so close that I could even see the expressions on the faces of the gladiators. Settling down, I waited impatiently for the exhibition to begin. Music began playing, and the pupils and gladiators started coming out into the arena. There was about a hundred of them. They walked around the arena so everyone could see them and appreciate the bulging muscles on their well-shaped bodies. The parade of fighters lasted ten minutes. All but two left the arena, leaving the fighters standing at opposite ends. They had drawn the first slot.

The fights were fantastic. They were either one on one, group on group, or a melee in which it was every man for himself. I had never before seen such a display of skill. I was astounded and enthralled by what they could

do. I even tried to memorize some of the techniques I liked. I looked at their well-proportioned, oiled, muscular bodies with envy and imagined myself in their place.

During an intermission between bouts, I ran to the concession stand and bought a ham sandwich and apple juice. That took almost all of the money my father had given me, leaving me with just a fifteen centis coin in my pocket. Returning to my seat and hurriedly cramming the food into my mouth so I wouldn't be distracted during the bouts, I sat transfixed, waiting for the next fight.

But nothing lasts forever. The time passed quickly, and the last bout was fought. I exited onto the street with the other spectators and waited for my parents. The others dispersed quickly into the twilight streets, and I was left alone. Something was delaying my parents. But I was not worried. Seeing no one about and impressed by what I had just seen, I began imitating some of the leg techniques, sparring with an imaginary opponent.

But then five boys appeared as if from nowhere and began making their way unhurriedly toward me. I paid them no attention at first; I just stopped what I was doing so they would have no reason to make fun of me. But they continued walking in my direction, clearly intended to come close. I braced myself mentally, knowing what a street gang was capable of and sensing that they would find a stranger threatening.

"Hi," said the oldest.

"Hey," I answered quietly, trying not to show fear.

There were five of them: the oldest was of my height and build. The others were a little shorter, and the smallest seemed six- or seven-years younger than me. But he was holding a weapon that looked like two sticks joined by a chain. They stood in a semicircle with me in the middle. Local punks, I figured. I did not want to have anything to do with them, but there was no avoiding it. My father was due to arrive soon, so I did not want to leave.

"How about a loan?" the oldest said.

That much was clear. They wanted money, and I had none. For the sake of appearances, I stuck my hand in my pocket and felt my fifteen centis coin. A mere fifteen centis would buy nothing—and it was all I had left. But I did not want to give even that up, either out of greed or because I knew that it would not satisfy them. Or maybe I simply did not want to give in and show weakness.

“I don’t have any money.”

“So if we turn you upside down and shake you like Pinocchio, nothing’s going to fall out?”

“No, nothing,” I lied without batting an eye.

“Is that right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Okay, then take off your pants.”

That made me mad: how could I give them my clean pants—pants my mother had washed and ironed just that morning? But what I liked even less was that giving them my pants would leave me in my shorts. I hated that idea. It would be better to die here than to return home in my underwear. So I was determined not to give up my pants under any circumstances. My pants meant my honor. And for my honor I was prepared to fight for real. However, I didn’t really want to fight... But did this thug really think I would strip down to my underwear in front of them? I refused to be humiliated like that.

“I won’t do it,” I replied curtly.

“Do it or else.”

“I said no.”

Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain on my left temple. I had lost sight of the others while I was talking to the oldest. The youngest, who was standing to my side, had suddenly hit me with his stick. Caught off guard, I took the entire force of his blow. I kicked at him in an instinctive effort to strike back, but he had already jumped out of reach.

“Aha! So you want to fight,” the oldest sneered.

He was wrong: since I was outnumbered, I definitely did not want to fight. He was the only one able to fight me on equal terms, but they had a weapon and there were a lot of them. They would gang up on me, and I would be unable to get away. It was shaping up to be an uneven fight, and I saw no shame in backing down. Those were the thoughts swirling around in my head. Sensing that I could be attacked again at any moment, I turned and ran. I had lost hope that things would end peacefully.

I ran as hard as I could, knowing my legs would save me. Still, the unpleasant feeling that I was a coward stayed with me. I remembered the fights and the strong and brave gladiators I had seen that day. A real gladiator would never back down. A real gladiator would never turn his

back on an enemy. Honor was life itself for a real gladiator. But where was my honor?

A sudden fury swept over me. It seethed and began to boil, seeking an outlet. I might get a beating, but I was not going to back down. Maybe I would go home bruised and in my shorts, but I would do so with my dignity and self-respect intact, because I had stood up for myself. My rage gave me confidence. It awoke in me the spirit of a gladiator—a Beast—and it was calling for blood.

I abruptly stopped, turned around, and stuck out a knee that one of the boys chasing me ran into, unable to stop in time. He doubled over in pain and I shoved him aside. Now there were four street toughs after me. The oldest was lagging; he had received the weapon from the youngest punk, who assaulted me first. I stood in silence, watching three of them surround me. The one I had kneed was in no hurry to join them.

“Well?” I asked, catching my breath. “Are we going to do it?”

My attackers looked at me incredulously, not believing that I really intended to fight. I quickly looked them over. They were not ready for a brawl. They had anticipated beating up a weakling; they were looking to stomp on someone defenseless. They had not planned on a real fight. And they wanted a confrontation with a desperate and infuriated victim even less. One of them, a little shorter than the oldest, seemed especially dangerous to me. So he was the one I chose. Disregarding the others, I pounced on him, swinging my fists. He had not expected such a spirited attack, so several of my punches struck home. I landed good punches with one fist to his head and the other to his stomach. Then the youngest and one of his buddies jumped me from behind to try and pull me off him. *This small fry couldn't whip a kitten*, I thought gleefully. They only held me back for a moment, then I threw them both to the ground. And the one I had attacked was no longer confident of victory. He tried to fight back, but I was the stronger. My rage had made me so powerful that I could have fought a real gladiator. After stunning my opponent with a surprise attack, I gave him no time to recover. Unable to stand up to my attack, he gave up and ran away.

Then the oldest member of the group, who at first had only watched the pursuit from afar, walked up to me. He looked me over appreciatively, surprised at how quickly I had dealt with his gang. He held the stick clenched in his fist, and that alarmed me. The weapon clearly made him

more powerful than me. I was already out of breath and had taken several hefty blows from my opponents.

“Your head’s bleeding,” he said suddenly.

“It’s not the first time,” I answered, trying to look at ease while enjoying a short break.

“Did you watch the fights?”

“Yeah. Did you?”

“Of course. We live nearby and always go to the arena for the competitions. We sat behind you and noticed you immediately. You didn’t look dangerous then, just reckless.”

“Appearances are deceiving.”

“That’s true. So why did you run just now?”

“It was a way of splitting you up, and it worked, didn’t it?”

“Do you fight often?”

“I fight when I have to,” I lied deliberately. Actually, I had not been in that many fights.

“Why did you hang around? The arena’s been closed for quite a while. It’s almost dark.”

“I’m waiting for somebody. But enough questions.” I had recovered somewhat and wanted get this over with quickly.

“Fine. I challenge you to a fight,” the boy said, formally pronouncing the ritual phrase.

He dropped the weapon and took up a fighting stance. I followed his example. We began exchanging blows with our feet, which caused almost no harm. At the next exchange, I tried to grab his leg. He managed to avoid it, but I immediately pounced on him. Our fists came into play. He hit me wherever he could, the blows landing painfully on my torso. I realized immediately that I needed to strike the most vulnerable spots and not waste energy on punches that caused an opponent no harm. Therefore, I aimed my blows mainly at his head, and sometimes at his stomach. My fists were starting to hurt, but my rage would not let me stop. Rage overwhelmed me as soon as the fight began. Nothing and nobody existed for me except my opponent. I continued hitting him, even after he fell. His face was covered in blood, but I did not stop. I could not stop fighting. I wanted to, but I

could not. I was in the grip of a frenzied, furious rage that kept me from stopping, and I pounded my enemy's face again and again.

Suddenly, someone pulled me off him from behind and spun me around. I looked at the man's face. My rage subsided immediately and I unclenched my fists.

"Father!" I exclaimed.

"Nik! What happened here?"

"A gang picked on me, and we got into a fight." With the worst behind me, tears of relief flooded my eyes.

My father looked around at my three moaning attackers and their leader, who was lying on the ground, unconscious.

"You did this?"

"Yes, Papa," I sobbed. "They..."

"Your face is all bloody. I'm going to call an ambulance. And be a man—don't cry."

My father called the police and an ambulance to take me and the other brawlers to the hospital. I listened in silence while Papa explained to the police what had happened. They agreed that the first thing we should do was see a doctor. The investigation could wait.

The examination in the hospital showed that I had suffered no serious injuries other than the head wound I had taken when the fight began. The doctor said that if the blow had struck a few millimeters to the left, it would have struck me directly on the temple and, as a minimum, would have knocked me out. All I got was a few stitches. The older boy, my last opponent, came off with much worse. His nose and a rib were broken, and his entire body was black and blue and swollen where I had hit him. I did not remember beating him so severely, but my memories are very vague and indistinct when the rage takes over.

The next day, the bruise on my head had swollen to the point that it closed my left eye. Mama wanted to call the doctor, but Papa assured her that I was okay, that the doctor had warned us it would happen. I stayed home from school and spent the whole day in bed, reading books about famous gladiators. That evening, we were visited by a tall, older man in a black suit.

The four of us sat around the kitchen table: me, Mama, Papa, and the stranger.

“My name is Jin-Jo,” the man said by way of introduction.

My parents did not react, but I almost choked and stared at the stranger.

“Jin-Jo, the Jaws of the Lion?” I asked.

Papa looked at me in surprise, then at Jin-Jo.

“I think I’ve heard of you,” he said. “Aren’t you a gladiator?”

“Of course he is, Papa!” I explained. “He’s Jin-Jo, the Jaws of the Lion. He’s won sixteen fights in international arenas. I told you about him!”

“That is me,” Jin-Jo smiled. “Nik, I see that you are seriously interested in arena fights. But I have been victorious seventeen times, not sixteen. You forgot about my win yesterday.”

“Oh, right. Sorry,” I said, embarrassed.

“The police told me about you: you handled five opponents by yourself.”

“Not all at once, though—one at a time,” I said modestly. “I couldn’t have beat that many simultaneously...”

“But you were wounded right at the start, before the fight began. You should be proud.”

“Yeah, I screwed up and got hit...”

“It could have killed you. Courage is important for a warrior. I like you, Nik. You have the makings of a gladiator, and I’m looking for a pupil.”

“You want Nik for your pupil?” My father interjected.

“Yes.”

“Nik is our only son. We can’t give him up.”

“I’m afraid you have no choice.”

“What do you mean?” My father half rose in anger.

“Sit down,” Jin-Jo answered calmly. “This is not a matter of what I want. Nor does it have anything to do with Nik’s wishes. The police told me that one of the attackers your son fought died during the night from internal bleeding. Now, Nik will be tried for murder. Considering his age and the circumstances, he will probably get no more than seven years in a juvenile correctional facility.”

Mama broke out crying, and Papa sat down, his anger gone. He looked at me.

“Is this what you want, Nik? Do you want to be a gladiator?”

“Very much,” I answered. “I *am* going to be a gladiator!”

“If Nik becomes my pupil, he will not have to go before a court,” Jin-Jo broke in. “Even potential gladiators have privileges. So take your choice—seven years in prison for your son or the life of a gladiator. If you choose the latter, I am prepared to compensate you for your loss.”

“I think Nik has already decided for us,” my father said and sighed. “But can you give us time to think about it?”

“Of course. I will come back for your final answer tomorrow. Unfortunately, that is all the time I can give you. I must leave town the following day.”

With this, Jin-Jo left us. Mama embraced me, kissed my forehead, and began crying again. Papa and I tried to calm her down with hugs and comforting words. My father turned to me when Mama stopped crying.

“Is this what you really want?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I really do.”

“And do you understand that you won’t be able to visit us? Trainees are not given holidays or let out until they become gladiators.”

“I understand, Papa. I’ve read about it a lot. I know all about how it works,” I sighed, “but I still want to be a gladiator.”

Papa hugged me, and Mama embraced us both. We sat in each other’s arms for about an hour. I breathed in the smell of people dear to me, my home, my favorite toys. I knew that I would never again smell these things that were so dear to me. I would never see my mother and father’s face again as long as I lived. I knew that tomorrow I would begin a new chapter in my life and embark on the difficult road to becoming a real gladiator. My honor was my life. And glory... Well, glory was still a distant dream.



## CHAPTER 10. The Police Station

“Do you think a cop can be smart but women can’t?”  
*(from “Marshals of the Moon: Short Stories and Novelettes,” by  
Alexander Bushkov)*

“**T**hat guy really pissed you off...”  
“I went too far once,” the Gladiator said, getting up off the unconscious George. “When I was a child, I killed my first opponent.”

“He didn’t die right away, though; he passed away in the hospital,” the Assassin objected.

“But he did die from the beating I gave him. I hope George does not suffer the same fate. He has a strong body.”

“One of the neighbors has probably called an ambulance,” I said cheerfully, not feeling very sorry for the guy.

“You can handle this without me now. Since you know this woman, I yield our body to you.”

I staggered from exhaustion when I got my body back. I resisted the urge to return control to the Gladiator and tried to cope with the pain and fatigue. I walked over to the wall, leaned against it, closed my eyes, and tried to catch my breath.

“Are you okay?” Kat asked, coming up to me and taking my hand.

“Yes, I’m just worn out,” I answered.

“I’ll be right back,” Kat said and slipped into the apartment.

As she did so, I heard a man coming down the stairs. He gaped at George on the floor, at me, and then froze on the last step.

“Can I get by?” He asked cautiously. “I, uh... need to get down...”

“Go ahead,” I said politely.

The man meekly crossed the landing quickly and continued down the stairs without looking back. Kat returned a minute later, carrying a glass of water. I thanked her and gulped it down.

“I called the police,” Kat said. “You can’t be here.”

“No, I’ll stay.”

“You need to go, Nick. I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me.”

“I’ll be all right. If I take off and you lie about what happened, you could get in trouble. It’ll go better for you if you tell them what kind of guy he is and what happened between you.”

“We met two years ago,” Kat sighed. “He would get mean sometimes, especially when he was drinking. I broke up with him about a month ago. But he showed up in my apartment unexpectedly after you left last night—he’d made duplicates of my keys. When I refused to sleep with him, he hit me. Then he passed out on my couch and slept until you got here.”

I appeared more closely at Kat to give my mental companions a good look at her.

“This wasn’t the first time he hit you, was it?”

“No, it wasn’t.” Kat lowered her eyes for a moment.

“Was it a long time ago?” I asked, wondering if what I felt was simple curiosity or deep sympathy.

“What can I say? A man beats a woman—it happens all the time.” Kat smiled slightly and looked at me. “Go, Nick. Please. I’ll handle the police.”

“I’ve never run from the law. I beat George up, and I’ll answer for it.”

“I didn’t know you were so stubborn.”

“You see? I can still surprise you.”

“You always used to surprise me when we were kids. You were getting

in trouble all the time,” Kat laughed, but then, glancing at George who still hadn’t moved, she fell silent. “Do you think he’ll be okay?”

“I think so. But he’ll never bother you again.”

Kat sighed in relief.

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I left last night without saying goodbye. I... I needed to take a walk and clear my mind. Everything happened so fast between us... I didn’t want you to think that I...”

“I’m a grown woman, Nick. I understand. You’ll be gone in a few days, and I’m not going to hold you back. What happened, happened because both of us wanted it to. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“But I used you to satisfy a whim...” I started to say “my lust” but bit my tongue just in time, because I didn’t want to be too direct with her. I knew from experience what being too honest could lead to. I once admitted to a girlfriend that I hadn’t liked her on our first date and had only asked her out again because a mutual friend wanted me to. I told her that after we’d been going together for a year, but she got so offended she didn’t speak to me for three days. That taught me that I should keep some thoughts to myself, even when I don’t think they could be hurtful.

“I just used you...”

“And I used you. It was nice being with you last night, plain and simply nice. Was that somehow bad, or shameless?”

“Even so, I’m sorry. I was rude...”

“You gave me nice compliments. You kissed me with passion. I haven’t been kissed like that in a long time.”

Kat moved closer and kissed me firmly on the lips.

“Shut up, stupid,” she said with a smile. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

I answered by putting my arms around her and squeezing. How could I tell her what I was thinking? How could I admit that I was nothing more than a lecherous, faceless monster? I felt torn by conflicting emotions that demanded release. Should I reveal what I was really thinking, or was this one of those cases where I needed to play it close to the chest and keep my mouth shut? And even if I did decide to confess everything, was this the right time? The police could arrive at any moment and interrupt our conversation. But what sort of person would I be if I didn’t tell her how I

was feeling? I decided it would be better to tell her the truth right away. There's a time and place for everything.

"You are what you are," the Gladiator said within me. "Look your fear in the face and just confess."

"Don't say anything. Why spoil it for her?" the Pervert objected.

"What about you, Assassin? What do you think he should do?"

"As surprising as it may seem," the Assassin said after a short pause, "I have to go with the Pervert this time. Right now, you're a gentleman in her eyes, a knight who saved a princess from a dragon. Keep it that way. She'll be better off without your candor. Or do you want her to always see you as a faceless monster? Do you want her to despise you for the rest of her life?"

"No, but I can't pretend to be something I'm not. I have to be honest with her."

"I agree," said the Gladiator. "Nothing but the truth can free you from the shackles of shame and dishonor."

"Did you say something?" Kat asked, stepping back from my embrace.

"I hope you'll..." I began, but I was interrupted by the appearance of two policemen.

They came up onto the landing and looked around.

"Find out when the ambulance will get here, Mike."

"Okay, Sergeant."

"What happened here?" The sergeant asked us.

"This guy was hitting her," I answered, pointing at Kat. "Then he attacked me and we fought."

"Let's see some ID."

I handed him my passport.

"You're from Canada? Is this your current address?"

"Yes, I'm here on vacation."

The cop looked at George, who was still lying on the floor unconscious, with bruises on his face; then he looked at me:

"You handled him all by yourself?"

"Yes."

"Okay, we'll sort things out down at the station. Will you come along willingly, or do I have to handcuff you?"

“I won’t give you any problems,” I laughed a little nervously. “If I weren’t willing to cooperate, I wouldn’t still be here.”

“There’s nothing funny about this. If you’ve killed this man, we’re going to have a problem,” the sergeant said without smiling.

I went down the stairs with the two cops, then they put handcuffs on me anyway and sat me in their squad car. I was soon joined by Kat, who had been asked to come along and give a report. They didn’t handcuff her.

“You shouldn’t have stayed,” she whispered.

I just winked in response as the cop behind the wheel pulled out into traffic. Not wanting the cops to overhear us, I didn’t say anything to Kat on the way to the station. Ten minutes later, we were pulling up at the station. They separated us immediately and put us in different rooms. Soon, an older detective came in and introduced himself:

“I’m Lead Detective Paul Jefferson.”

“Nick Glaude.”

“I’ve been assigned to investigate your case. The sergeant told me that you waited for the police, didn’t resist, and came down to the station voluntarily.”

I nodded my agreement. Detective Jefferson set down at the table across from me, reached over and unlocked my handcuffs, then started the interview. I had nothing to hide and, rubbing my wrists, told him everything that had happened.

“So, you’re claiming self-defense?” The detective asked.

“That’s right,” I said. “He attacked me first. I just defended myself—myself and my friend. This wasn’t the first time George hit her.”

“How did you manage to beat him? No offense, but George is taller and stronger than you, and he has a black belt in karate.”

“I might look puny compared to him, but I’m trained in a secret martial art something like judo.” I knew nothing about martial arts, and that was the best analogy I could come up with on the spur of the moment.

“I didn’t think there was any hitting in judo, and it’s obvious that George has been punched.”

“I compared it to judo to give you some idea of what it’s like. But it isn’t judo.”

“Fine, I need to ask your girlfriend some questions. If your stories match, we can let you go.”

“Thanks,” I said and sighed in relief.

“Meanwhile, we’ll put you in holding.”

A cop came in and took me to a jail cell. I counted seven other men in the cell besides me. I could see immediately that, despite my torn shirt and all the bloodstains, I was too well-groomed and well-dressed to fit in. I stuck out like a sore thumb. Needless to say, this wasn’t a sweet-tempered group of men. They looked at me with distrust and animosity, recognizing immediately that I was different. I felt out of place among these thugs and criminals and braced myself mentally.

“Let me take over,” said the Assassin, who had been silent until now. “I have been in spots like this before and I know how to conduct myself.”

“Be my guest,” I said. I felt much better after surrendering control: I didn’t need to think about how to stand or what to do with my hands; I didn’t need to remind myself to breathe; and, most importantly, I was no longer feeling pain. Controlling my body had become a strain, not a privilege.

A burly guy came up to me and, mouth slightly ajar, stared unblinkingly at me with his beady eyes.

“What are you looking at?” The Assassin demanded bluntly.

“I’ve taken a fancy to you. It’s been a long time since I saw fresh meat.”

“You lose your mind, hog? Who you calling fresh meat? You don’t know who you’re messing with. Back off!”

The punk was taken aback.

“You bullshitting me? You pulling a bluff?”

“You try pushing me around, you’ll find out you’re making a big mistake. Who’s the tank boss here?”

Another man got up and walked over.

“Go back to your bunk, John.”

The punk did as he was told but kept staring at me. The Assassin just grinned and deliberately turned his back on him. The man who approached us was smaller than John; still, he was bigger than me. He and the Assassin looked at each other without saying a word, each obviously trying to stare the other down.

“I’m Anthony,” the man finally said.

“Nick. Why the rustle? Who’s calling the shots?” the Assassin said with an edge to his voice.

“I am. Don’t get swoll, we do everything by the numbers here. Where have you done time?”

“San Quentin,” the Assassin lied.

Given the similarities between his world and this one, he was counting on there being a San Quentin here also. Neither he nor I was very familiar with prisons on this Earth. Even in his own world, the Assassin had never actually been in prison. But he knew all about San Quentin, because it was part of his cover story. According to his fictional résumé, he had been behind bars for six years instead of spending the time in the Army and at the school of assassins. His instructors had made sure that he knew every stone and every face in San Quentin and was fluent in prison slang.

“I did time there,” Anthony drawled.

“When was that?”

“Ten years ago. You?”

“I been out five years now.”

“Remember any of the tank bosses?”

“Let’s see, there was Rossi, Garcia, Esposito...”

“I knew Esposito. His hair’s probably gone gray by now.”

“Bullshit! He’s bald as a cue ball,” the Assassin said in a surprised tone, knowing he’d just passed the test.

“Oh, right, I forgot. No hair. Listen, don’t be mad at John for driving you. A bull came and offered him some money to beat you up. But you’re a standup guy. He ain’t gonna touch you.”

The Assassin guessed immediately that the detective had decided to test his fighting ability. He glanced around and saw two cameras hanging from the ceiling. Okay, that meant we had to fight.

“Sorry, Gladiator, but apparently it’s unavoidable. They’re watching us. Want to show ‘em what you can do?”

“With pleasure,” the Gladiator answered. “I am always willing.”

“Do we have to?” I asked mournfully, not wanting them to give me a hard time about my body again. “My muscles are still sore.”

“Deed’s got to be done,” said the Assassin. “This way, they’ll let us go sooner.”

“Are you sure?”

“Right now, the detective thinks we ganged up on George. Either that or we used some kind of weapon on him, and that would be worse. Do you know how much time we would get for that? This way, we’ll show him we can handle ourselves.”

“I guess you’re right,” I agreed.

“Why not take the green, Anthony? I’m willing to go one-on-one with John. He needs to keep his word to the bull.”

“What are you, a guy that just likes to fight?”

“You know how it is. You go soft if you don’t get a little exercise now and then,” the Assassin said and relinquished control.

Anthony called John over and whispered a few words to him.

“Uh-uh—this is going to be a real fight,” said the Gladiator, overhearing Anthony.

Anthony shrugged his shoulders and backed away. Wasting no time, John took a roundhouse swing at the Gladiator. The Gladiator ducked under his arm, punched him in the side, and was behind him in an instant. John turned around and aimed another roundhouse at the Gladiator. The Gladiator repeated his technique, only now he struck John’s other side, over his liver. John again turned to face the Assassin, but this time he didn’t manage to repeat his signature punch, and his face turned red, either from rage or from pain. The Gladiator smiled.

“Don’t worry, I will not kill him; this is no death match,” the Gladiator told Anthony.

That only angered John. He began punching, trying to hit the Gladiator, who was calmly retreating. But John’s wild swings went wide, and he could not even touch the Gladiator. Sensing that the wall was behind him, the Gladiator dropped down on one leg to let a punch pass over his head and kicked John in the foot with his other leg. John screamed in pain and raised his foot. Then the Gladiator sprang forward and, falling to his both knees, grabbed the leg his opponent was standing on. The Gladiator gave it a jerk, and John fell backwards, striking his head against the floor. The Gladiator jumped on him, trapping opponent’s arms under his knees, and raised his fist for a blow to the head.

“I give up,” John cried.

The Gladiator stood, straightened his shirt, brushed off his jeans, and, ignoring the astonished onlookers, sat down on the bench.

“You came out on top, as always,” I said admiringly.

“That was not an interesting fight. He relies on his height and strength, and they are meaningless in martial arts. What do they teach you here?”

“They don’t teach how to fight professional gladiators, that’s for sure,” the Assassin laughed.

“I hope the detective liked the show,” the Gladiator said and gave our body back to the Assassin.

Anthony walked over and gave us a thumbs up. I could tell from his expression that he was starting to respect me a great deal.

“Now you know why I didn’t see any point in fighting the punk,” the Assassin said with a smirk.

“Yeah, now I understand. John’s usually pretty hard to beat.”

“No problem. I’m going to sleep while you keep watch,” the Assassin ordered, knowing that now he would be obeyed without question.

I was very sleepy, to tell the truth. I hadn’t slept since yesterday, and all these adventures had really worn me out. The Assassin lay down on the bench and closed his eyes.

“Nap time,” he said.

The Pervert wanted to say something, but we dozed off and our body plunged instantly into a deep sleep. I hadn’t fallen asleep that quickly in a long time.

“Hey, wake up,” came a voice from far away.

The Assassin opened our eyes, and we saw Anthony leaning over us.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Three or four hours. The pigs have come for you.”

Two cops were standing outside the cell, looking unsure of themselves. They wanted to come inside, but John’s threatening stance in front of the door was spooking them.

“Hey, Glaude, the detective wants you!” One of them shouted.

The Assassin stood up and yawned, feeling lethargic from napping too long.

“I’ll get us going,” the Gladiator said, taking control of our muscles. He gave some kind of mental push, and a warm wave spread throughout our body. The logy feeling disappeared instantly, leaving us alert and refreshed.

“You’ve got to teach me that trick,” the Assassin said.

“Easy,” the Gladiator promised. “Meditate for a few years and you’ll be able to do it too.”

“Isn’t there a quicker way?” asked the Pervert.

“No.”

“You wish,” muttered the Assassin. “That kind of ability only comes with sweat and blood.”

“Hopefully an enemy’s, not yours,” I added jokingly.

The Gladiator and Assassin regarded me with disgust and contempt, as if I were the enemy. Apparently, the Pervert was the only one who got the joke. I decided to change the subject.

“You know, I’m starting to get used to having you guys around.”

“Me too,” agreed the Assassin. “I’m starting to feel better about it.”

“I thought I was losing my mind before,” said the Gladiator, “but now this just seems right.”

“People can get used to anything,” the Pervert said. “Maybe we aren’t the only ones this has ever happened to. Maybe it’s just that nobody ever talks about it.”

The Assassin felt the urge to reply with an insult, but instead he simply said:

“No, I suspect that out of the eight billion people in the world, we’re the only ones.”

I let them put handcuffs on me. Then, conversing mentally with my companions, we walked unhurriedly to the detective’s office with the two police officers escorting us. I had control of our body again because, after all, this was my world.

“I just saw the video of your fight with one of the other prisoners,” Jefferson said, getting right down to it. “It was amazing! I’ve never seen that style before.”

“It’s a style unique to a Japanese family I studied with in Canada,” I

lied, knowing there was no way the detective could check my story. There was certainly no way I was going to tell him about the Gladiator and his world.

“Well, your lady friend backed you up. She confirmed that the other guy started the fight. Since you were just defending yourself and George has decided not to die, we’re not going to detain you any longer.”

“Does that mean I can leave?”

“You’re free to go, young man. Someone will be in shortly to remove your handcuffs.”

“What about Kat?”

“Who? Oh, Katherine Grayson, your friend! She left about three hours ago, as soon as she was done giving her report.”

With that, Jefferson walked out of the office. A few minutes later, I heard the door open and turned around. A pretty girl in a police uniform walked in the room.

“Eve?!” I burst out.

Except the outburst came from the Pervert, not me. The emotion she sparked in him was so strong that, incredibly, he was able to seize control of my speech muscles for a moment and cry out. I shoved the Pervert back down, but it was too late. The word seemed to hang in the air between us.

“Do you know me?” The girl asked in surprise, peering into my face.

“Who’s Eve?” The Assassin asked in surprise. The response came as a sudden flood of memory that explained not just who Eve was, but why the Pervert had become a pervert.



## CHAPTER 11.

# The Pervert

“A pervert’s first victim is always the outcome of a purely chance encounter. Several factors coincide to make someone a victim—a powerful instinctive desire at its peak combined with a set of circumstances (opportunity and safety).”

*(From an interview with the psychologist Julia Konovalova)*

I was dating Eve for four long years. The first year was wonderful and full of adventures. We spent it getting to know one another. The second year was great. And although we had begun to quarrel, the love we shared overcame all differences. The third year was okay. I wanted one thing and she another, and I often gave in to her to avoid an argument. But the fourth year was sheer torture. She was beginning to bore me and had stopped satisfying my physical needs. Well, that’s not entirely true. We did have sex, but I always wanted more. Frankly, I was strongly attracted to other girls. Not to one woman in particular, but to them all. It was like when I was fourteen and my burgeoning hormones were driving me to have sex with any girl who was willing. Of course, they were only willing in my rich imagination.

It’s perfectly normal for a beautiful girl to catch the eye of the average man as he is walking down the street. I, on the other hand, would turn my head and stare at all girls and women indiscriminately. I was attracted to all females. I longed to possess them all. I looked at women hungrily,

almost drooling at the mouth. I sometimes thought that my behavior and my thoughts weren't entirely normal for a healthy man, but I lacked the courage to ask my friends. I was almost hit by a car once as I was crossing a street while looking at a girl walking past. She wasn't all that pretty, but I still couldn't take my eyes off her hips as they swayed in the twilight like a boat on gentle waves. My morbid interest had almost killed me.

Every day, I saw dozens of girls I wanted to sleep with. I gazed at their faces, their necks, their arms, their breasts, their bottoms, their legs; and I felt a burning desire to touch their bodies. Their flesh drew me as a flower draws a persistent bee. I restrained myself, of course, but the desire to kiss, caress, or just pat an appealing butt was unbearable. My workday was filled with inner torments, because that was when my preoccupation with sex dominated my mind and thoughts entered my head that sometimes made me feel ashamed. I tried to distract myself with work. It didn't help. Whenever I stood up from my desk, I would walk with my head down, fearing that the way I looked at women would give me away.

I rode a bus to work. I left home early, so the bus was never full, and I could look at the girls sitting across from me and next to me. My eyes would flick from one to another, like a petty thief who has been caught in the act. A girl who looked at herself in a mirror or studied her fingernails was especially desirable, because that meant she cared how she looked.

To avoid seeming intrusive, I would try and avert my eyes from a girl. But I couldn't keep that up for long and would go back to stealing glances at her, admiring her and undressing her with my eyes. I would imagine squeezing her thigh, sliding my hand upward... pressing against her and nuzzling her neck. I especially liked looking at a girl's reflection in a dark window. I could do that without being noticed. If she caught me, I could always pretend I was looking at shop windows or passing cars. That way, I could stare at the most intimate parts of a girl's body without looking away for many minutes at a time. These actions and thoughts only aroused me, and I couldn't extinguish the flame burning inside me, so I would return home gloomy and irritable. Eve began noticing that I was in a bad mood at night, but she couldn't understand why. I didn't want to tell her about my raunchy thoughts and blamed my mood on fatigue when she asked what was wrong.

Some people know how to appreciate fine art. They visit museums, discuss paintings with friends, and throw parties dedicated to art. I freely

admit that I'm not one of those people. But the female body is for me like art is for them. I survey and appraise the curves of girls' bodies, the size of their breasts, the length of their legs and necks, and the presence or absence of tattoos and piercings. I even notice their shoes (whether they're wearing heels or some kind of unusual frills) and their clothing. I wanted all of them—the skinny, the plump, the tall, the short. To keep my passions under control, I began masturbating in my morning shower. That helped me avoid thinking about sex for a few hours, but it didn't keep me from being interested in women's bodies. How could a true connoisseur ever get enough of art? If he has money, instead of going to museums he goes to auctions where he can buy paintings he likes, and he wouldn't have a single bare wall at home. I don't mean to imply that I wanted to buy love. Not at all! The thought never entered my mind. I believed that love could not and should not be bought like a commodity. But at the same time, I dreamed about filling my apartment with naked girls of all ages like a man who loves art dreams about covering his bare walls with paintings.

Once, as I was staring at a young girl's naked knee, I began imagining how I would take the seat next to her and offer her a lot of money to let me touch her leg. She would agree and, happy, I would reverently move my fingers up her shin, gently touching her smooth, snowy white skin, until my hand reached her knee. But it wouldn't linger there for long. I would slowly and tenderly slide my hand under her skirt, touching the inside of her thigh, stroking it lightly near her pussy without crossing an invisible line. But I would stop myself a millimeter away from her fragrant panties. I would tease her like that, sparking a desire in her for sexual intimacy. This brief fantasy aroused me so much that I was glad my backpack was on my lap.

One day a week later I was traveling home after work at six in the evening. A pretty girl in a skirt was sitting next to me on the bus in a position that left her knees bare. I couldn't keep my eyes off them. I imagined my hand touching them, slowly moving under her skirt, caressing her smooth legs, squeezing her thighs... That reminded me of the previous encounter when I got so excited that I was grateful I had my backpack on my lap covering my erect penis. Reproaching myself and not wanting to repeat that experience, I reluctantly looked up from her leg, and at that moment our eyes met.

"Hi," I said, embarrassed.

I figured that while staring up her skirt would have been in bad taste I didn't think there was anything wrong with looking at her kneecaps. However, I worried that my improper thoughts might be obvious from my expression, and that embarrassed me.

"Hi," the girl answered, looking at me questioningly.

I looked away, out the window, not knowing what to say. Surely, I couldn't say what was on my mind! On the other hand, why not? Maybe being frank would turn her on.

"Stop fantasizing!" I told myself and stared through the window even more intently.

A restaurant sign flashed outside the window. This was no time for doubts if I was going to play around.

"You have beautiful knees," I ventured, turning back to her.

She smiled.

"I've never had a compliment like that before. Did you think it up all by yourself?"

"Sure," I smiled and nonchalantly said: "Would you like to get a cup of coffee? We just passed a restaurant."

She thought for a moment.

"Just for a little while," she said, standing up.

I stood, too.

"I'm Nikolas," I said and stuck out my hand.

"Maria," she said shaking my hand.

We exited the bus and walked back down the street toward the restaurant. I hadn't really noticed anything in the bus other than her face and knees, so I hung back a little to get a look at Maria from behind. She was wearing a white blouse and a bright blue skirt that came to her knees. Her auburn hair was unbound and fell to the middle of her back. But what really caught my eye was her ass under her billowing skirt. She looked back, and I pretended to be looking to the side.

"Why are you walking so slow?"

"I just couldn't take my eyes off you," I answered honestly.

Maria laughed. She was easy to be with; I felt as though I had known her for a long time. I didn't even have to lie when I paid her trite compliments as we sat in the restaurant. She liked it, she laughed often, and the

Apple Martini I bought her turned her cheeks pink. I had a vodka with tonic water, which quickly loosened my tongue. Hoping to get her turned on and in the mood for sex, I told her an off-color joke.

“A beautiful girl is lying on the beach. A sailor walks by and says admiringly: ‘I’d like to enter that harbor!’ But the woman doesn’t like the sailor because he doesn’t have his sea legs yet and is swaying from side to side. Then along comes a pilot who looks at the girl enthusiastically and says: ‘I’d like to land at that airport.’ But she doesn’t like the pilot either, because she figures he’ll flirt with the stewardesses during flights. After the pilot comes a racecar driver who exclaims ecstatically: ‘I’d like to take a few turns around that track!’ The girl thinks to herself that he couldn’t cheat on her while he was behind the wheel, but she could cheat on him while he was on the track if she wanted to. And that’s just the kind of guy she needs. So she agrees and invites him home with her. They have dinner, drink some wine, and go to bed. The driver falls asleep immediately. ‘How about taking a few laps?’ The woman asks angrily. But he answers: ‘I don’t drink and drive.’”

Maria liked the joke, and I knew a lot more like it and could tell them well. Encouraged by my success, I told her another: “A man walks into a bar and orders a double whiskey. He knocks it back and orders another. He swallows that one in one gulp and asks for the bottle. The surprised bartender eyes his customer, who is swallowing shot after shot:

“Problems, man?”

“Yeah, it’s my six-year-old son...”

“Trouble at school?”

“If only! It’s much worse than that. His eighteen-year-old nanny got knocked up because of him.”

“That doesn’t make sense! Your son’s too young to...”

“He’s not too young to poke holes in all my condoms!”

Maria answered that with a riddle:

“What hangs down during the daytime but gets put in something at night?”

The obvious answer popped into my head. “She’s ready,” I thought. I gazed into her eyes, but mentally I was examining other parts of her body, gradually baring them, freeing them from her clothes. I was about to reply but I hesitated, trying to think of a proper word.

“Give up?” She asked playfully.

It suddenly dawned on me that the riddle probably had a trick answer.

“I give up.”

“The hook on a gate,” Maria prompted and laughed, seeing the surprise on my face.

Several hours flew by. I needed to go home to Eve, but I was attracted to Maria. I didn't know how to take the first step and was hoping she would give me a signal that it was okay to make a move. We left the restaurant, and I offered to walk her home. She happily accepted.

At some point we found ourselves in a dark alley. My shyness, my fear of making the first move, and my other doubts suddenly disappeared. Aroused and overwhelmed by my lustful thoughts, I could no longer restrain myself. The Passion Beast awoke in me, overcame my sense of reason, and started demanding decisive action. I stopped abruptly, and Maria stopped as well. She turned to face me, asking with her eyes what had happened. Without answering, I stepped forward and kissed her. That was the first time in four years that I had kissed anyone but Eve. It was my first time cheating on my girlfriend. To my surprise, I felt not the least bit of remorse. My conscience silent, I instantly forgot about Eve. I felt completely at ease with myself. I pushed Maria up against a nearby wall, put my arms around her waist, and began passionately kissing her on the lips. That dark alley had unexpectedly released the Beast in me. After a year of painfully holding myself back, I was finally surrendering to my feelings. I basked in the small but significant victory as the girl and I continued sharing kisses.

After a short while, Maria gently pushed me away and whispered:

“Let's go to your place.”

I would have happily agreed, but Eve was there.

“Couldn't we go to your place?” I asked.

“No, we can't, my parents...”

“Me too,” I lied, with a genuine sigh.

“You still live with your parents? How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven,” I answered honestly, because there was no reason to lie.

“Then let's go to a hotel.”

I thought for a moment about how much hotels cost in our city. No, that would be too expensive.

“We can’t, I don’t have enough money on me.”

“Okay, be prepared next time,” Maria sighed. “For now, just take me home.”

“Wait, let’s do it here!”

She looked at me with contempt:

“I’m not some slut who fucks in doorways.”

“Of course not, you’re the most beautiful girl in the world! Let’s give it a try. Nobody’ll see us.”

My compliment flew past her. Maria moved away from the wall and headed for home. I wanted to follow her and persuade her to stay. I thought feverishly: where could I take her? Nothing came to mind other than a prohibitively expensive hotel on the far side of town. She knew I didn’t have any money. Offering to go to a hotel now would indicate that I lied earlier. I looked at my watch: it was late—half past ten. The Beast in me began subsiding in disappointment.

“To hell with her,” I thought, letting her go.

I was angry at Eve for making me miss a great opportunity to have sex with a strange girl.

“To hell with her,” I repeated aloud, thinking of Eve this time.

Suddenly, the Beast, which had just fallen asleep, opened eyes full of wild rage. My cursing Eve had told the Beast that all was not lost, that I could still fight and win the freedom I hungered for. A mad fury swept over me, causing me to hate everything around me. Blood pounded in my head, and I couldn’t restrain myself. I pounded my fist into the wall furiously, trying rid myself of the agitation filling my mind. But all it got me was pain. I rubbed my bruised knuckles, realizing as I did so that it was time to break up with Eve. She had taken away my freedom, my will, my independence, and I hated her for it. I had to be free; I had to give vent to my feelings. I wanted to fuck them all: the plum and the thin, the tall and the short. Eve was the only thing holding me back. Eve was in the Beast’s way. The Beast growled. The Beast roared. The Beast rebelled. I rebelled. It was time to throw off the shackles. I decided that freedom was worth anything. I was going to get my freedom back.

I shouted at the top of my lungs—a furious cry burst from me of its

own accord, taking with it all of my negative feelings and rage. Satisfied with my decision, the Beast began calming down and falling asleep, leaving me alone with myself. I smiled, looking forward to a new phase in my life.

I didn't wake Eve when I got home. I decided to wait until morning. After all, I was no sleazeball; I wasn't going to throw her out in the middle of the night. At breakfast the next morning, I told Eve calmly and even cold-bloodedly that I wanted to end it. First she was surprised and then she got mad. She couldn't understand why I had decided to do that. We talked for a long time. She begged me to explain myself, but I didn't tell her the truth because I didn't want to make it even more painful for her. We had a big row with tears and shouts. Like a stubborn ass, I refused to budge.

"But why, Nikolas? What did I do?" Eve asked.

I knew I had to say something, at least.

"I don't love you."

Those words crushed Eve like a bolt of lightning from a clear, blue sky. She threw a plate at me, called me an idiot, and added a few names a longshoremen might use.

"Get out," I told her, tired of all the shouting and cursing.

My name was the only one on the lease for the apartment; Eve had no right to it. But I wasn't worried about her: she had a lot of girlfriends she could spend the night with. She did as I asked. She gathered her things together and left.

Eve came back the next day. She looked bad: no amount of makeup could hide the fact that her eyes were red from crying.

"Have you changed your mind?" She asked.

"No," I said firmly, secretly rejoicing that very soon I would be able to breathe freely and begin a new life.

"Then I'll get the rest of my things."

"Go ahead," I said indifferently.

My feeling of indifference convinced me that I really didn't love Eve. This was fantastic. The shackles were gone. I had only needed to do one thing in order to escape my jail cell forever, and I had done it. Hurray, I was free!

Several months went by. I was enjoying my unexpected independence, my sudden freedom. Now, I could date any girl without feeling guilty. I

could invite them home and do anything I wanted. I was no longer seeing Maria, but that didn't bother me: there were lots of other girls. I met them on the street, in public transportation, everywhere a pretty girl caught my eye. Not all of them were interested in me, of course, much less wanted to sleep with me. Most of the girls I made a play for already had boyfriends. But I didn't let that upset me: in three months I had slept with four different girls. I didn't date only on weekends; I went out after work, too.

Five months passed. I had now had sex with seven more girls. In my spare time, which, incidentally, I was having less and less of, I began thinking of how I could get better at picking up girls, how I could cut right to the chase—but not with prostitutes: with ordinary girls I could talk into having sex without wasting a lot of time. In the end, I concluded that I needed to broaden my circle of acquaintances. I promised myself that I would make love to all kinds of girls, not just to the pretty ones.

While walking home one fine evening, I noticed a girl ahead of me who was dragging a suitcase on wheels. I caught up to her when she stopped at a traffic light and gave her a covert once-over. She was short and had an unattractive face and a large nose with a pair of awkward-looking glasses perched on it. I held back a little when the light turned green, because I was thinking about how to make her acquaintance. My eyes unconsciously fell on her ass.

*She's ugly... But despite her short legs that butt isn't bad in those tight jeans... And I'm sure what's between her legs is no worse than what any other woman has... Plus, she's young... I'd like to grab her by the ass and cop a feel, then undo her jeans and pull them down, but not all the way off... bend her forward, get behind her, take her from the rear.* Those thoughts were flashing through my mind as I walked behind her. The mental picture was getting me more and more excited. My fantasy was having an effect on me even though she was unattractive. I felt a strong and passionate desire for her. I became a predator, and she was my prey. The Beast awoke. He looked around and rejoiced in anticipation of an orgy of unrestrained passion. My arousal prompted me to make my behavior surprisingly correct, exactly like that of a true gentleman.

Quickening my pace, I caught up with the girl and politely asked:

“Can I help you?”

She looked at me and smiled:

“Thanks, but the suitcase isn't heavy. After all, it's on wheels.”

“Let me help anyway. A girl shouldn’t have to haul shit when there’s a man around. Oh, excuse me. I didn’t mean to insult your things.”

“It’s no big deal—unless you plan on stealing them.”

“Do I look like a thief? I’m a regular guy, honest. So what do you say?”

“Okay,” she answered confidently and passed me the handle of her suitcase.

“Where are you headed?”

“Home. Well... not exactly home.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m looking for place to spend the night. I just got in town. Maybe I’ll go to a hotel.”

“Why don’t you come home with me? I’ve got an extra room.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“We only just met.”

“Then let’s get to know each other. My name’s Nikolas.

“And I’m Samantha—Sam.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sam. Well? What do you say? Will you come home with me?”

“No, it wouldn’t be right. I haven’t even known you five minutes...”

“Listen, you’re probably hungry. Let’s go to a restaurant. My treat. And then if you still don’t want to spend the night at my place, I won’t keep you. I’ll walk with you wherever you want to go. But I don’t want you wandering around a strange city at night by yourself. So what do you say?”

“Okay,” she agreed.

Sam turned out to be a trusting girl indeed. I had no trouble charming her in the restaurant, and she went home with me gladly and without fear, not suspecting that she was walking with a cruel Beast who lacked all shame and who was already imagining how he would take her in a variety of erotic positions all over the apartment.

Long story short—I added another notch to my gun. However, the Beast wasn’t satisfied. He demanded new victims. But I had become bored with chasing feminine charms. Females were basically all the same: stupid and boring. At best, I would happen across a bitch who only cared about

her own needs, but I had no desire to waste either my physical or my psychological powers on girls like that. I had long since stopped calling them girls; instead, I would think, “How about that bitch? What big boobs that bitch has! That bitch is a real looker. I could screw that bitch right now.”

Thoughts like those assailed me every day. More and more, I was seeing girls as sexual objects. I stopped giving them presents and flowers. One date became much like another. I would take them to a restaurant and a movie and then bring them back to my apartment where I would undress them and, like a vampire feeding on blood, I would ravish their flesh.

After that, they would often call me, especially if they wanted something. But I didn’t want to waste time on them. I would lose interest in a girl after sleeping with her, and I wouldn’t answer when she called. Screw and scam—I liked that saying and made it my motto. I had one girl after another, and it went on like that for seven more months.

I got tired of hitting the bars and pretending to be a nice guy. I wanted to simplify the process, so I turned to the Internet. I found a website where young girls offered themselves to older guys for money. They didn’t consider themselves prostitutes. Most of them wanted long-term relationships and referred to sex with men as a mutually beneficial arrangement under which they would be paid an agreed-upon sum by the date or by the month. The only way in which they differed from real prostitutes was that many of them wouldn’t date just anyone or go to bed after the first date.

For our first date, we typically met in a restaurant or a bar. If we liked each other, our second date would take place at my apartment, where I would give her some money and she would undress, lie down on the bed, and spread her legs. I should say that almost all of the girls liked me, so I was able to have four or five partners every week. I had no problems with these girls. After the financial transaction, they would disappear from my life. If I liked having sex with a girl, I would sometimes call and ask her to come again. But I never called anyone more than twice.

Soon, there were very few girls on the site that I hadn’t already screwed. I started with twenty-five-year-olds and gradually transitioned to younger girls, working my way down to eighteen-year-olds who calmly accepted the fact that I was ten years older than them. I had so many girls that I lost count.

And the Beast still wasn’t happy. I sensed his dissatisfaction, his never-

ending hunger that I was never able to completely satiate. What was it he needed? And what did I need? I finally found myself looking more and more often at very young girls whose breasts were just budding, whose skin was soft and supple, and whose faces hadn't been touched by a makeup brush.

Girls who hadn't yet known a man. I could sculpt them as I pleased. This was what the Beast needed. And so did I. An innocent virgin to whom I would be a god. And why not? I would kiss her by the hour, teach her the art of love, and be her first man. She would go along with my every whim and anticipate my fantasies, gently caressing me for as long as I desired. I would sweep her off her feet and make her my sexual slave. She would be different from all the girls who believed they were doing me a favor by spreading their legs, and who felt that a few minutes of sex was sufficient service for the money I paid them.

It's hard nowadays to find a virgin older than sixteen, so I decided to look for a girl between thirteen and fifteen. A lot of girls that age rode the bus to school. Whenever one of them sat down next to me, I would strike up a conversation with her. They usually weren't interested in me, because I looked like their grown uncle. Other people would also look askance at me if they felt I said or did something inappropriate. But I didn't despair. I simply stopped trying to make their acquaintance on buses, choosing other places instead.

I started frequenting locations near a school, watching for girls walking home alone. One girl in particular appealed to me. She had a beautiful face and long dark hair. Her breasts under her white blouse were large for her age. Her blue jeans hugged a figure that was almost that of a woman. I would watch her walking home, unable to take my eyes off her. In my imagination, I had already undressed her, torn off her blouse, and tugged down her tight jeans. Imagining how her soft, pink lips would accept my erect, pulsating member, I couldn't restrain a lustful moan. The Beast, scenting prey, woke up. He approved of my choice. These chaste young things were to the Beast's liking. *Do it*, he ordered me.

I caught up with the girl and said hello. Despite all my preparations, I had no specific plan for how to proceed. The Beast raged. *Get going!* He demanded that I throw her to the ground and have sex with her right then and there. *Courage!* He commanded me to stop shilly-shallying.

"Are you going home?" I asked, trying simply to sound polite.

“Yes, why?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Have you ever kissed a boy?”

That question caught her by surprise. She got embarrassed and blushed. None of the bitches I’d been going out with recently would react like that. But this girl was embarrassed to talk about kissing! If she had any sexual experience at all, it was very little. As if confirming my guesses, she answered:

“Once. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious. So, did you like it?”

“Not really.”

“Was it just a little unpleasant or totally disgusting?” I asked.

“It wasn’t exactly unpleasant, just strange. I don’t know how to explain it... My girlfriend talked me into giving it a try. I wouldn’t kiss a boy for anything if she hadn’t.”

“But you said it wasn’t really unpleasant. Would you kiss somebody for fifty dollars?”

“I don’t know... I’ve never thought about it.”

“Think about it. You could buy yourself a new dress for that.”

“Yeah, I saw a green dress in a department store that cost about that much. I’d probably kiss somebody once for that dress.”

“Then give me a kiss.”

“Huh?”

I took a fifty dollar bill out of my pocket and offered it to the girl.

“Take it.”

“Right now?”

“Sure. You said you would.”

The girl stopped, gave me a close look, and took the money.

“Let’s walk off to the side,” I suggested.

We walked away from the street and stopped next to the wall of a building. The girl obviously didn’t want to kiss me, but she wasn’t about to give the money back. Fifty bucks was a lot of money for her.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” she said out loud to egg herself on. “But close your eyes or I’ll be embarrassed.”

I obediently closed my eyes, bent down slightly to make it easier for her to reach me, and froze, waiting to be delighted. The Beast within me fell silent in anticipation of the pleasure. I felt as though the entire world had stopped, waiting for the moment when our lips would meet. My entire being was now centered in my lips. Several agonizing seconds went by before the girl kissed me quickly and then backed away.

“Is that it?” I said in surprise as I opened my eyes.

“Was that okay?”

“You call that a kiss?”

“Wasn’t it?”

“A kiss has to last for at least a minute. You need to open your mouth a little so my lips are between yours. And you didn’t use your tongue at all! Don’t you know how to kiss? No, that won’t do.”

“You didn’t say anything about that, so I earned the money honestly. I’m outta here.”

“Wait!” Digging in my pocket, I pulled out three fifty-dollar bills. “Here’s a hundred and fifty dollars for a real kiss.”

The girl hesitated. She wanted to leave, but a hundred and fifty dollars isn’t easy to turn down.

“Okay,” she agreed, after thinking it over for a few seconds.

“I need to hug you when we kiss,” I said quickly, taking advantage of her confusion.

She sighed.

“Fine. But no more than a minute.”

I hugged her, pressing her unresisting body to mine and closing my eyes as our lips came together.

“Nikolas!” came a sudden familiar voice. “What are you doing?”

I opened my eyes, breaking off the kiss in annoyance and pushing the girl aside. Eve was looking at us. I haven’t mentioned it before, but my ex was a cop.

“You should be ashamed of yourself!” Eve exclaimed, walking up to us and looking the girl over from head to toe. “Scram,” she told the girl. “And I don’t ever want to see you skinny little alley cat with this man again.”

“But my money...” the girl whispered.

“Scat! Or I’ll take you down to the station.”

The girl ran off in a fright.

“What’s wrong with you?” Eve said. “She’s just a little girl! What are you up to, you...”

“Eve, don’t be mad. You don’t understand...”

“Do you want me to arrest you?”

“No, of course not. But I... she... It just happened... I swear.”

“How could you, you bastard?! Did you dump me for her?”

“No way! We just met...”

“What’s her name?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t...”

“You were seducing an underage girl and you don’t even know her name? Do you know that what you did is considered an aggravated criminal sexual abuse under Illinois Statute 720 ILCS 5/11-1.60? Do you know how much jail time you could get? No? I’ll tell you— up to seven years. And do you know what they do to people like you in prison? Pedophiles don’t last long...”

“Honest, I didn’t want to...”

Eve was beside herself. She wouldn’t hear my apologies and kept shouting and berating me. Didn’t she understand that only girls like this one could extinguish the fire that burned within me and calm the Beast? How could I explain to her what was going on in my mind? It was impossible. I was helpless to do it. I stopped listening to her shouts and just stood there looking into her innocent eyes, because I no longer wanted to try and justify myself. There was no way she could understand my pain, my suffering, my longing for feminine affection. She couldn’t understand that I would never get enough of the hunt... or rather, enough prey.

And I was in the right. It’s easy to criticize someone when you don’t understand what drives them. I lived in a world of temptations that I had to overcome. But that didn’t mean I was always successful. Once, a long time ago when I was a boy, my father told me that life is a struggle. I didn’t know what he meant at the time, but now I understood perfectly. I had to fight for the right to be with those I wanted to be with, to associate with

people I liked. Yes, I had missed out on a lot of girls, but that was my fault. I had failed to fight for them.

And the girls I had succeeded in being with during the past year had wanted me. They desired my caresses, my love, my Beast. I didn't rape any of them. This girl, for example, opened her tender lips in anticipation of a kiss all on her own. She could have proudly refused the money and walked away, but she stayed. So how was I to blame for that? I did nice things for the girls I dated. I took them to movies and restaurants, bought them drinks, and gave them flowers and other presents. I brought them to the peak of sexual pleasure. For them, I was sheer perfection, their god.

I was wrong about only one thing—I wasn't a hunter, I was a victim. Tormented as I was, I was easy prey for bitches who wanted to have fun at someone else's expense. But I believed in kindness and kept looking, trying to find pure love among young girls who were in the process of becoming women. Where else to look? I at least had hope that I could find one unspoiled, chaste, and virtuous girl that I could protect from the evils of the world, one girl I could teach to be a true lady and faithful wife. After all, nobody has ever taught girls how to satisfy men, and the teaching needs to begin as early as possible, before movies, books, girlfriends, and other "founts of wisdom" have ruined them, turning them into selfish bitches who love only themselves and money.

Not even this young girl could be my beloved once I knew she was willing to kiss a stranger for fifty bucks. Yet I might have given her the two hundred dollars if Eve hadn't come along.

"Thank you," I told Eve aloud out of gratitude for stopping me.

Eve ignored my awkward thanks, and I plunged again into my own thoughts.

This girl was a prostitute in the making; that was all that needed to be said. After all, at age fourteen, or however old she was, she was ready to sell herself for a few pennies. She was a tart, a lady of the night, a woman of easy virtue—or whatever euphemism we might choose to mask the indecency and shamelessness of women. This epidemic was our fault (by that, I mean the fault of men). We've lost control of ourselves, and uncontrolled lust is the cause of immorality in women. We've forgotten words like immorality, vice, and corruption. We gave free rein to our base emotions, and that road leads straight to hell. It wasn't my fault that I was looking for just one girl

who hadn't yet been defiled. I simply wanted to make the world better and purer.

"You dirty pervert!" Eve's contemptuous words penetrated my thoughts.

"Yes!" I shouted back, not restraining myself. "I want innocence! I am a pervert!"

Eve slapped me in the face, turned, and walked away. At that point, I decided that I would no longer restrain the Beast that was rampaging within me, demanding a chaste girl. Only a pure and innocent creation would satisfy him and save me. And I would find her, no matter how long it took. I swore that she would be mine! I would be her mentor, her lover, her god. I would be everything for her. And the Beast would finally be sated.



## CHAPTER 12.

# Eve's Secret

**E**ve went to God and said:  
“Lord, I have a problem!”  
“What kind of problem, Eve?”

“Lord, I know that you created this beautiful garden and gave it, all of these wonderful animals, and this hilarious snake to me, but I’m still unhappy.”

“Why, Eve?” came God’s voice from above.

“Lord, I’m so alone, and I’m sick to death of apples.”

“Okay, Eve, in that case I have a solution. I’ll make a man for you.”

“What’s a man, Lord?”

“He will be a spoiled creature with a heap of bad habits. He will be deceitful and vain, but he’ll be stronger and faster than you, and he’ll love to hunt and kill. He’ll look silly when he’s aroused, but since you complain, I’ll make him able to satisfy your physical needs. He’ll be simpleminded and enthusiastic about such childish amusements as fighting and games involving balls. He won’t be too smart, so he’ll need your advice in order to think properly.”

“That sounds great,” Eve answered, raising one eyebrow ironically.  
“What’s the catch, Lord?”

“Well... You can have him under one condition.”

“What’s that, Lord?”

“Like I said, he’ll be proud, arrogant, and self-absorbed... So you’re going to have to let him believe he was created first. Just remember, this is our little secret... between us women.”

*(An old joke)*

“I hadn’t planned on raping Doll,” the Pervert admitted, mentally returning to the present. “All I wanted to do that day was teach her how to kiss. I wanted to make her a decent, honest person and a good and loving wife. I believed that I needed to start with girls who were young and pure. I thought only innocent girls could be worthy of me.”

“And now?” the Assassin wondered.

“Now, I’d give anything not to avoid repeating those mistakes. It would’ve been better if I’d lived my entire life without sex if it would’ve kept me from doing what I did to Allison.”

“Do you really regret what you did?” I asked.

“Yes, I do. Do you really think I haven’t learned anything from you guys? I have access to all of your memories and impressions; it’s as if I’ve lived four lives instead of one. Now, of course, I understand what honor is for a real man. I would never give my lust free reign now. What can I say to convince you?! What I did destroyed Allyson’s life forever. And not just because my raping her could cause her to have mental problems, but because she may end up without a father because of me! He’s sure to go to prison for killing me.”

“How could you do something like that to a child?” the Assassin asked, seething with anger. “If I were Allyson’s father, I would’ve done the same thing. And I wouldn’t care if it meant I had to spend the rest of my life behind bars.”

“Calm down, he has repented of his action,” the Gladiator said.

“Please understand, I’m not like that anymore. I wouldn’t ever... No, I *will* never do anything like that again. I need to speak to Eve, even if she condemns me...”

“Would you trust her with your life?”

“Definitely. We all need to talk to her. We can trust her with our secret. She’s the only person who can understand.”

“Do you know me?” Eve asked again when she got no answer, interrupting our internal conversation.

“Yes, I do. That is, no I don’t. It’s hard to explain.”

“Try anyway.”

She definitely had the skills to be a detective. Vague answers wouldn’t work with her.

“Not here. Let’s go get a cup of coffee, and I’ll explain everything.”

“I don’t date people in handcuffs,” the girl said, smiling a little.

“Then take them off, please.”

Eve walked over and unlocked the handcuffs.

“They told me to escort you out of the station.”

“How about that coffee?”

“Some other time. You need to go home and change first. Follow me, and we’ll get you out of here.”

She was right: my shirt and pants were wrinkled and soiled, and I looked like a bum. But I had no place here where I could change, and my home was too far away, in Toronto. And wanting to travel light, I hadn’t brought a change of clothes. Also, the Pervert argued, we couldn’t let Eve get away; he might not get another chance to speak with her.

“Let me talk to her,” the Pervert said.

“Okay,” I agreed after a moment and relinquished control.

“Eve, I know I look like a real bum,” began the Pervert, “but we need to talk.”

“Only if you tell me now where you know me from.”

“Detective Jefferson called you by name. He said Eve would come in and take off my handcuffs.”

“And that made you so happy that you shouted out my name when you saw me?”

“I didn’t mean to do that. I was distracted, and then you walked in.”

“Don’t try and fool me. Detective Jefferson never mentioned my first name. He calls me Detective Aidan. What are you hiding? I have a good memory for faces, and I’m sure I’ve never met you, but you know me from somewhere. Admit it!”

“Well,” the Pervert sighed. “You look a lot like my ex-girlfriend. Her

name was Eve, too. It's just a coincidence that you have the same first name."

"That, I can believe. Here's the exit, so long."

"Wait, how about that coffee?"

"Let's get together tomorrow evening, unless you've changed your mind by then. I'll give you my number."

"I've got to talk to you right now."

"Too bad, I'm working."

"I won't be here tomorrow evening. I'm flying back to Canada," the Pervert said, thinking fast.

"I'm sorry, but I really can't leave until my shift is over."

"I'll treat you to a strawberry ice cream," the Pervert offered, using everything he knew about the girl.

"Your Eve liked strawberry, too?"

"She loved it."

"And what else did she love?" Eve asked curiously.

His Eve had loved asking questions. And stopping her once she got started was no easy matter. But the Pervert didn't actually want to do that; he was glad that it let him stay with her and talk to her. He probably shouldn't have been so forthright, but he was on a roll and couldn't stop. The urge to talk with Eve was irresistible.

"She loved cooking herself an omelet with braised vegetables in the morning."

"That's interesting. Your Eve is more like me than you might think. And what else did she cook?"

"She was a wonderful cook. All of her dishes were delicious. But I especially liked the way she fried potatoes with mushrooms."

"I'm a good cook, too" she said, smiling slightly. "So where did your girlfriend work?"

"She was a cop."

"This isn't funny anymore, Nicholas... uh... Glaude."

"I'm not laughing. My Eve called me Nick. Why don't you call me that, too. She really did look a lot like you. You could be her twin. I'll tell you everything; I promise. Just give me a chance. Please!"

“Well, Nick, since you know so much about me, I’d like to find out what else you know. You really intrigued me. But maybe you don’t know as much as you think you do. I suppose I could take my lunch now.”

“Thanks, Eve. You won’t regret it, I swear.”

She smiled.

“There are several small restaurants within a few blocks of here. Would that suit you?”

“Sure, let’s go.”

The Pervert’s need to tell Eve about himself was greater than her desire to find out how he knew so much about her. He understood that, but he knew Eve would get interested once his secret was revealed. He believed his meeting with Eve was no accident, that nothing happened to him by chance, so Eve might be key to understanding what had happened to us.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to tell her about us?” I asked. “After all, she’s a cop. Mightn’t she throw us in jail or, even worse, send us to an insane asylum?”

“She wouldn’t do that. I can tell her anything. This is Eve! You’ve seen my memories of her. Don’t they tell you what she’s like, how smart and fair she is?”

The Assassin chimed in to support me: “Oh, sure, you could tell her anything when she was your girlfriend, but she’s not your girlfriend in this world. Don’t forget that. You don’t know each other here. And anyway, how could *she* help when we don’t even know if we need help? There are four of us in this one body, so what next? We know we all died except for the Ordinary Man, so we can’t go back to our own bodies. Or are you in a rush to get to the other side?”

“Just give me an hour, please. That’s all I ask. Do I have to beg?”

“Fine,” the Assassin relented, “we won’t take control away from you. Have fun while you can. Anyway, there’s nothing else we can do.”

“And try not to get into any fights,” the Gladiator added, mentally nodding at me. “Please forgive me for saying it, but your body is not used to taking punishment.”

Distracted by the internal conversation, the Pervert remained silent as we walked. Also, he was collecting his thoughts for what he was going to tell the girl, trying to put all of the relevant facts in some kind of order. He was thinking about how to start the conversation. If he started out by

saying his body was inhabited by four personalities, Eve may fail to understand him and, at best, she might simply get up and leave.

"Here we are," said Eve, turning into a gated area where tables and chairs were laid out. To the waitress who met us she said: "A table for two, please."

It was an outdoor restaurant under a canopy of old oak trees. The waitress led us to a small table in the corner next to a black metal fence that separated the restaurant from the street.

"Would you like a menu?" The waitress asked.

"We won't need one if you have what we want," answered the Pervert. "Do you have strawberry ice cream and cherry juice?"

"We sure do."

"The girl will have that. I'll have a glass of water and... What do you have that's hot?"

"Our specialty today is a spicy craft cheeseburger with French fries and a salad."

"That sounds good."

Eve was no longer smiling at my knowledge of her culinary preferences.

"Did Max put you up to this for a joke? she asked.

"I don't know any Max, but nobody put me up to anything... This is no joke, you know," the Pervert answered honestly and, deciding to jump right into it, asked:

"Eve, do you believe in parallel worlds?"

"No... I don't know... I never thought about it. Why do you ask? Wait, are you saying you're from a parallel world?" she asked, suddenly realizing where the Pervert was taking the conversation.

"Yes, something like that."

"What do you mean?"

"I somehow got moved from my world to this one and put in this body."

"I don't believe it," Eve laughed. "Nick, stop trying to kid me. Max really put you up to this, didn't he?"

"No, I'm telling you the truth. You were my girlfriend in that other world. That's how I know all about you. We were together for four years!"

“And I was the same there as I am here?”

“Absolutely! Our worlds are apparently very close to each other. Well you know... that is, you can't know... But when I was a child I liked physics and used to read about parallel worlds and how the further apart they are, the more they differ... But on the other hand, our worlds are very similar, so that means they're close to each other.”

“Nick, if don't tell me the truth, I'm leaving right now.”

“What about your ice cream?”

Eve started to get up.

“Please don't go, I beg you. I'm not lying. How else would I know that you have a birthmark above your left heel?” the Pervert said in desperation.

“Max knows that, too,” she said, but, she sat back down.

“Who's Max?”

“He's my boyfriend. Are you sure he hasn't put you up to this?”

“Of course not! Nobody put me up to anything. I don't even know your boyfriend... Wait, let me think. I can prove I'm telling you the truth... How long have you known Max?”

“A year.”

“That means he can't know everything about you. At least, when we were together it took several years before I knew everything about you. You were in no hurry to share all your secrets. Did you tell him where you got the scar under your right knee?”

“Congratulations. He briefed you well. Of course I told him.”

“How about your parents' divorce?”

“Max knows about that, too.”

“And the reason you became a cop?”

Eve looked serious.

“I've never told anyone about that.”

“But I know!” the Pervert said happily. You had just entered the Police Academy when we first started dating, and you told me. So I know the answer.”

“Wait, you said we were together four years. But I went to the Academy seven and a half years ago.”

Eve was definitely a skilled detective. She caught all the inconsistencies in the Pervert's story immediately.

"I didn't say we were still together. We split up three years ago."

"Why did we do that?"

"Well... it's a long story..."

"Give me the short version. You brought it up, so let's hear it."

The Pervert sighed and dropped his head, not daring to look Eve in the eye:

"I wanted to have a fling."

"I see..."

"No, you don't understand, but it isn't important right now. I loved you, I really loved you. You are the only woman I could trust."

"Okay, but you still haven't told me why I joined the force?"

"Your cousin was killed in a fight with some hoodlums when you were seven years old. You decided to become a cop then and there so you could go after criminals."

"That's right. Max didn't know about that," Eve whispered, turning a little pale.

Our food came: Eve's juice and ice cream and my food. The cheeseburger turned out to be chopped turkey. The Pervert should have known Eve would choose a health food restaurant. He picked up the glass of water and drank it down in one gulp, then took a big bite out of the cheeseburger. We hadn't been given anything to eat or drink while I was in jail, and we were very hungry.

"You attacked your food as though you haven't eaten for a week," Eve smiled.

"Too much has happened today. It's taken all my strength," said the Pervert as he chewed. "So do you believe me?"

"No. I don't know how you learned about my cousin, but that doesn't prove anything. I never find it believable in a science fiction novel when an ordinary guy suddenly becomes a hero or gets contacted by aliens."

"I'm not an alien; I'm from a parallel universe."

"It's the same thing to me."

"But why? Why don't you believe me? What can I say to make you believe me? I know that your favorite color is purple, that you loved to

draw when you were a kid, and that you have one of your pictures hanging in a frame on your wall. You like..."

"Stop, Nick. That's enough. I believe that you know me very well, and I don't know how. But it doesn't prove anything. There's nothing science-fictionary about this. I know a secret, Nick, a secret that keeps me from believing you."

"What kind of secret?" the Pervert said in surprise.

"Promise me it'll stay between us. Knowledge of this secret opens up great opportunities. If it's properly used, it makes a person very powerful."

"I swear, I won't tell anyone."

"We're all people."

"What?" asked the Pervert, not understanding—and neither did the rest of us.

"We're people," Eve repeated. "That's the secret."

"There's something I'm not getting..." the Pervert said, racking his brain to try and understand what she meant.

"How can I make it clearer? You see, the realization that we're all people makes the person who knows it superior to others. It breaks down the barriers that constrain us to normal behavior."

"I still don't understand. I know already that you're a person, our waitress is a person, I'm a person. Everybody knows we're people. What's secret about that, and how does knowing it make anybody different?"

"Okay, let's look at some specific examples. Think, how would an ordinary person behave toward, let's say, Jennifer Lopez? He'd be nice to her, right?"

"Sure."

"But why? Because she's a singer and an actress—a celebrity? We all work for a living, although most of us earn less than she does. Women envy her and men want to sleep with her, but what's so special about her? Is it that she's beautiful? The world is full of beautiful girls. Understanding that J.Lo is just an ordinary person is the essence of my secret. People forget that she was born in the Bronx to low-income Hispanic parents, and her family had to scrimp and save to buy a house. They tried to talk her out of going into show business, and it was years before she got her big break. Now, she's regarded almost as a goddess, but actually she's an ordinary person with strengths and weaknesses just like the rest of us. If people thought about

the fact that she goes to the bathroom and strains on the toilet like other people, they'd stop seeing her through rose-colored glasses. Believe me, sex with J.Lo would be no better than sex with me. But for some reason, I don't have a lot of men chasing me and trying to get me into bed..."

The Pervert blushed. He knew very well from personal experience what sex with Eve could be like. But she didn't notice his embarrassment, or pretended not to.

"I think I'm beginning to understand."

"Take the movie 'The Last Stand,' for example," Eve continued evenly. "Have you seen it?"

"What's it about? X-men?"

"No, it's not a science fiction film. It came out about a year ago and stars Arnold Schwarzenegger."

"No, I haven't seen it. So Schwarzenegger has started making movies again?"

"Yeah, he's made a few. Apparently, being governor of California wasn't enough for him. I see every movie he makes. I've been a fan of his since I was a kid... Anyway, in the movie Schwarzenegger plays a sheriff in a small town on the border with Mexico. He's not young anymore, and this job is supposed to be kind of like an escape from his life in the big city. But his plans are disrupted when a drug lord running from the FBI decides to pass through his town. But that's not the point of the story. Arnold frequents a local diner where a pretty girl waitresses. Do you think maybe I wouldn't notice if he flirted with her?"

"I don't know... Did he?"

"No! That's the thing—he didn't. And why not? Simply because the script didn't call for it. But if this had been real life instead of a movie, he definitely would have been smiling, winking at her, and asking her to go dancing with him. Well, you know Schwarzenegger. In the movie, he acted like a robot, as though he were playing the Terminator. But he's a man. An actor, sure—but a man! Do you really think he'd act like that in real life? Do you really think a real person wouldn't want to start a family instead of spending his last days alone, in a remote little town where nothing ever happens?"

Eve had become more and more animated as she spoke, and the Pervert could only nod in agreement. He knew from personal experience that when

Eve got fired up like that, it was better not to argue with her. But he didn't want to argue. He had begun to understand what she meant when she said that we're all people.

The Pervert leaned back in his chair, prepared to listen. He had cleaned his plate.

"Yeah," drawled the Assassin, "there's never a dull moment with your Eve. I like the way she thinks."

"There is much truth in what she says," agreed the Gladiator. "I have never seen a movie, but I have seen actors in plays—they always follow the script. And if they were people, that is if their role were not set, they would behave differently in a given situation. After all, to be a person means to feel, and feelings can differ according to mood."

"My success in seducing Kat gave me too high an opinion of myself," I said. "My feelings played a bad trick on me. I believed that sleeping with all of my old female classmates would give me some kind of power over them. I was really naïve! If I don't turn my life around, I'll continue being mired up to my neck in mud, and, in fact, I almost went down that road, starting with Kat. It's a good thing I left in time. And not just because it probably saved my life, but because by walking away I avoided taking the straight road to hell. I didn't think at all about the feelings of all those people I wanted to have sex with. I only wanted to use them and didn't think about the consequences. I'm just a blockhead. I'm a..."

"Faceless Monster," suggested the Assassin. "But I'm the dirtiest of us all. I'm at the very bottom of a pit filled with mud, and I'll never be able to dig myself out. You all know how many people I've killed in cold blood only because I was paid to do it. I used to think I was doing the right thing, that I was ridding the world of evil, but I was actually depriving children of their fathers and mothers. And yes, I killed women, too. I didn't care who I killed so long as it increased the size of my bank account. But paradoxically, I believed that I was an honorable person. An honorable assassin. But that's simply ridiculous! I was deceiving myself. It was a lie that let me sleep peacefully at night. But I was wrong. I was a Faceless Monster because I committed masked murder, and it ruined my soul."

"I never looked at life or at people like that," the Gladiator admitted. "There were three types of people for me—masters, their assistants, and my opponents. It never occurred to me that they were all people and thus subject to human emotions, desires, and appetites for pleasure. I hurt them,

disregarding the fact that they were human—weak and defenseless, sure, but on the whole just like me. No better and no worse. Just different. I beat my opponents while inwardly laughing at them, sneering at their weakness and inability to stand up to me. And now I do not even know why I did it, why I became a Gladiator. For me, my opponents were faceless monsters that I had to trample into the dirt. I did not even look them in the face as I cold-bloodedly and mercilessly crushed them. I am the Faceless Monster, not them. I deserved death, not them.”

“And what do you have to say for yourself?” I asked the Pervert.

He said nothing. He yielded control to the Ordinary Man so he could quietly reflect on his past life without being distracted. He got a catch in his throat, even though he actually had no throat. The Pervert shrank into himself as though someone were pushing him down, as the Assassin had recently done. But he was free: there were no iron shackles constraining him. His shackles were on the inside, not on the outside, but he felt them as though they had the power to become real. If he had tears to shed, he would have cried. If he had a mouth, he would have shouted. He would have torn his breast open and ripped his heart out if he had one. He would have cut himself if he had flesh. He felt that I, the Ordinary Man, was innocent, that I had done nothing wrong. Kat herself admitted that she'd wanted to sleep with me. The Assassin didn't become what he was of his own volition, and he mainly killed people who deserved it. The Gladiator fought in the arena with people just like himself, volunteers; they knew what they were getting into. But what the Pervert had done to Allison, an innocent child, was unforgivable. Eve was wrong—not everyone is a human being. He was worse than a faceless monster, because the word “monster” suggests something alive and capable of feeling. He was a lewd and callous animal that existed only to serve its base instincts. He thought himself smart, but actually he was an insane pervert who failed to understand how far he had fallen.

“Apparently it's starting to get to the Pervert,” the Assassin said, commenting on his silence.

It took only a moment for us to accept our true natures, so we missed nothing of what Eve was saying. She gave us another example.

“I studied criminal psychology at the Police Academy, so I know something about the motives behind crimes. Take a killer, for example. Not someone who kills at random, and not a serial murder, but a profes-

sional hitman. A short profile of him might read something like this: A man between twenty and thirty-five with a high school education who's been in the military or has a criminal background and who works in an organization that has murder as its main source of income. He comes from a dysfunctional family or has no relatives at all. His actions are rational and deliberate. His propensity toward murder developed in puberty, in situations where conflicts were primarily decided by violence."

"Where did she learn all that?" the Assassin asked, puzzled. "She's absolutely right. She's describing me!"

"That's the typical profile of a hitman," Eve continued, unable to hear the Assassin's comment, of course. "But many people forget that a hitman is also a human being. I recently solved a contract killing and interviewed the perpetrator. It turns out that he grew up in an intact family, didn't abuse alcohol, wasn't skilled in the use of weapons, and was a fan of comedians like Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, and Stephen Colbert. He doesn't fit the stereotype at all, does he?"

"No, he doesn't," I agreed.

"But he had five hits to his credit. A contract killing gives the person ordering the hit a solid alibi, and the hitman himself has no relationship with either his victim or the person who hires him. He usually works through a middleman or an organizer and leaves no traces at the crime scene. That greatly complicates the investigation. It takes a lot of time to investigate this kind of murder, and the killer usually gets away clean. Unfortunately, our country has a low success rate at solving crimes like these, so real hitmen are rarely brought to justice. A month ago, I was assigned to find a crook who had killed a man in his apartment building lobby. The victim had a lot of enemies, but they all had alibis, so it wasn't hard to figure out that it had been a contract killing. If it was a hit, then that meant the killer was probably a stranger in the victim's neighborhood. Now, a professional would reconnoiter the area before making the hit. From talking with the victim's coworkers, I knew that he left work to go home at different times, so the killer would have had to spend some time waiting for him. So I started thinking: the killer is a human being who does things ordinary people do. And what is something that people often do?"

"They talk."

Eve smiled.

"Right, they talk. And they eat. And a lot of people smoke. I made the

rounds of all the diners, restaurants, and shops within a radius of several blocks from the crime scene. I asked the people that worked there if they'd had a customer who had dropped in on a regular basis for a while and then stopped coming.

"Did it pay off?"

"Of course. Locals know their customers very well and notice new ones. The crook bought cigarettes at a stand a block away from the crime scene, and he ate in a Chinese restaurant two days before the murder. These witnesses were able to describe the killer well enough for us to create a portrait. But that wasn't enough. I looked through our mugshot library in an effort to identify him, but either the portrait wasn't entirely accurate or he had no record, so I couldn't find him. Then I showed the portrait to bus drivers who stopped near the crime scene. One of the drivers recognized him but couldn't say exactly where he got off his bus. The killer presumably lived within a thirty block radius.

"So how did you find him?"

"Very simple, Nick. I knew the killer liked Chinese food, and there were only four Chinese restaurants in the area. I sent people to each one of them and had them both compare each customer to the portrait and pay attention to what they ordered. The killer was identified within two days; we found him and brought him to justice."

"Ha! That was quick."

"Yep, I received an award for solving the crime in record time. And all because I knew the secret."

"You are a genius!" I exclaimed. "A real Sherlock Holmes!"

"This isn't like TV where CSI comes in and solves the crime based on a single hair left at the scene. Things are much simpler and more ordinary in real life," Eve said, smiling broadly and showing her white teeth. "Now you understand why I can't believe you. There's no place for fairytales in the real world."

"I'm not lying, Eve. But I didn't tell you the whole truth. I'm not alone. There are several people from parallel worlds in this body. And one of them is the Assassin."

"You couldn't be a professional killer, Nick. As I just told you, I've studied them. You don't fit the profile. You don't have the right character traits. A hitman is emotionally cold, meaning he lacks empathy, the ability

to understand and share another person's experiences and emotions. I can tell you're not like that."

"The person talking to you right now isn't the Assassin, I'm the Ordinary Man. I really couldn't commit cold-blooded murder. But maybe a conversation with the Assassin himself would convince you."

"Okay, I'll play along. Let me talk to him."

"You already are," said the Assassin.

Eve took a closer look at me and burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" The Assassin asked, puzzled.

"That's quite an expression," Eve said, still laughing. "You didn't move a single muscle in your face."

"Do you still think this is a joke?"

Eve instantly stopped smiling.

"Maybe you have dissociative identity disorder?"

"What's that?"

"A split personality—it's when there are several ego states in a single body. It's a rare mental disorder, but at least you're still a person, not an alien from another planet."

"It's not the same thing. I'm not imagining this. I know for certain that there are four personalities in my body."

"Listen, Nick, I don't mean to insult you, but your symptoms are clearly similar. Judge for yourself. You have two or more identities, each of which has a stable worldview and its own mindset and attitude towards reality. Isn't that right?"

"Sure."

"At least two of these identities alternate in controlling your behavior. Right?"

"Right."

"There are serious gaps in your memory that go beyond normal forgetfulness. Right?"

"No, not right! I remember, I know everything about all of the personalities within me. There aren't any gaps in my memory."

"Are you sure? Many people can't remember what they ate for dinner two weeks ago but don't notice the gap."

“Actually, the other personalities in my brain can talk with one another even when one personality is controlling the body. So I know that there’s no switching among personalities. Without that main symptom of the disease, I have to conclude that I’m mentally healthy.”

“You can’t diagnose yourself,” Eve said, smiling. “But let’s say I believe you. You say the hitman personality is the one talking to me now?”

“That’s right. I’ll prove that to you in a moment, and then you’ll really believe me.”

“I read in Antonyan’s book *The Psychology of Murder* that killers develop a particular trait—tension and anxiety that transitions into a fear of death. I don’t see any of that in you. You look completely relaxed.”

“That depends on the individual. I don’t fear death. I didn’t become an assassin by accident and not for the money. I killed six men who deserved a worse fate than they got from me. I felt no remorse, and my conscience didn’t bother me. I killed because I believed it was the only right thing to do. When you gave us the profile of a killer, it all sounded so familiar that I felt as though you were describing me. But I didn’t become just a hitman. I was trained in a special school that taught me more than just how to use weapons. I was psychoanalyzed and underwent psychological training and other procedures. My mind is perfectly stable, otherwise I wouldn’t have become the person I am.”

“That’s impossible! Who would train people to commit murder?”

“Imagine that there are people close to the government who oversee the training of young men and women in order to form a small army of professional assassins. These assassins don’t ask questions and eliminate all obstacles that stand in the way of reaching their goals. They can’t be intimidated or bought...”

“That’s interesting. I’ve heard about that, but I thought it was just a rumor.”

“It’s no rumor. My world is very similar to this one, so I’m sure that something similar exists here.”

“But if you’re from a parallel world, you can’t be sure.”

“You’re right, I can’t know for certain. But I can give you the names of several of the people that ran my school.”

“Okay, let’s talk about that later. Were you paid for what you did?”

“Of course.”

“But you just said that you can’t be bought. If they paid you, that means money was important to you. Would you refuse to kill if you didn’t like the amount you were being offered? Or would you kill a different person? And what would you do to save your life?”

“I have my honor, which wouldn’t let me do anything immoral.”

“Did everybody coming out of the school feel that way, or just you?”

“Everybody,” the Assassin said firmly and then checked himself—how could he be sure he was right?

“Death finds a hitman sooner or later. He’s given a suicide mission, he’s betrayed by his employers or colleagues, or he ends up behind bars, where hitmen generally aren’t well-liked.”

“Do you think Eve is right?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” For the first time, the Assassin felt unsure about what he had said regarding honor.

Something was bothering him. Some deep feeling was striving to come out; some truth was trying to break from the innermost depths of his consciousness. What was tormenting him so? Eve’s observation that death finds a killer was a truth that he hadn’t suspected at first. He was dead. That meant he’d been betrayed. The Assassin probed his memories, searching through his past. His recollections poured over us, sweeping us into his past, where an inevitable death awaited us at the very end.



## CHAPTER 13.

# Death of an Assassin

“God is with me, the devil is with me, my love is with you,  
Let me die in tears on your lips,  
My love means nothing to you,  
Your every word covers my heart in blood.”  
*(An excerpt from the song “Oath” by KA2)*

The ledge was broad and took us to a small ladder that we climbed to reach the roof. We could hear a helicopter as we ran across the roof under the cover of darkness. We had to jump and cross several roofs before we found an unlocked hatch. We opened it and went down into the building. The sirens were falling quiet. I mentally retraced our route from the opera house. We were relatively far away and safe.

“To keep moving is to survive,” Jennifer smiled, as though she were reading my thoughts.

I nodded my agreement and took a breath, checking my pistol. There was only one bullet left in the magazine.

“How many do you have?”

“Three,” my partner answered, dropping the magazine out of her pistol and checking it.

“You willing to share?”

“Sure,” she agreed. She removed a cartridge and handed it to me.

Four bullets guaranteed four victims.

*The night's young, more people could die*, I thought.

"Do you think they'll find us?"

"I hope not. They'll search for another four hours or so, more for the sake of appearances than anything else, and then things will quiet down."

Jennifer took a breath.

"It's hot in here," she observed.

My eyes were beginning to adjust to the semidarkness. I looked around and saw that we were in some kind of utility room. Up near the ceiling was a small window through which a dim light was seeping. Shelves along a wall held boxes and crates, but I had no interest in their contents. Just in case, I secured the door by propping a mop against it. It wouldn't keep the cops out if they found us, but it would keep other people from casually popping in. I looked at my partner.

She had taken off her blouse and pants and was sitting on the floor in a lotus position. My eyes widened in surprise.

"It's hot and stuffy," Jennifer explained when she saw my look. "Why don't you get undressed, too?"

"Don't mind if I do," I replied.

I turned my back to Jennifer, removed my jacket, took off my shirt and trousers, and placed everything in a tidy pile on the floor. My body was glistening with sweat. I wanted to shed my shorts, too, as I usually did at home, but that would have been awkward. I knew it took a lot to phase Jennifer, however. I wondered what would she do if I took everything off?

As if in answer to my unspoken question, Jennifer got to her feet as gracefully as a cat, came up behind me, and put her hands on my shoulders. They were cool despite the heat. She began slowly massaging my shoulders, kneading every muscle. Her fingers were thin and gentle but surprisingly strong as she rubbed my upper back. It felt so good I froze, wanting her to keep doing what she was doing.

"Relax," Jennifer said softly.

"I don't recall that being taught at the school," I said, trying to make a joke.

"They don't have to teach this. It's in women's genes."

Jennifer removed her hands after about five minutes. I wanted to turn

around and thank her for the massage, but she stopped me, embracing me from behind and pressing her bare breasts against my back. She wasn't wearing a bra.

"Gunfights and chases turn me on," she whispered in my ear, standing on tiptoe. I felt her warm, gentle breath as she spoke.

I turned around anyway and looked at her. I saw her for the first time not as my partner, but as a very attractive and alluring woman. She was completely naked. I looked into her blue eyes, lowered my gaze to her breasts, and then lower still.

"You like?" she asked, smiling coyly.

In answer, I pulled her to me and pressed my lips to hers.

"So you do like," Jennifer said, taking her lips from mine after a few seconds.

Her hand slid over my naked torso, softly caressing my chest and stomach. I bent down and kissed her again, more passionately this time, yet with tender anticipation. My arms wrapped around her waist, but they didn't linger there for long. They began wandering over her responsive body from her shoulders to her bottom and back again, finding new spots to caress. She copied me, doing everything to me that I did to her. Although our kiss lasted for several minutes, it seemed to me but a moment. One hand moved down to her shaved pubic area, gently palming the area between her legs. Jennifer pulled away.

"Do you want me?" She asked.

"Yes," I whispered softly but fervently, wondering how she could think otherwise.

"Are you sure?"

I realized that Jennifer was teasing me, trying to excite me even more.

"No, I'm not sure," I said, deciding to play along. "You're a good partner in a fight, but are you any good in bed?"

"Why don't you find out?"

"Will it be worth it?"

"I think you do want me."

"What makes you think that?"

She put her hand down and took hold of the tip of my manhood.

"This does."

I laughed and started kissing her even more passionately, aroused by this little game. Very soon, without either of us noticing, I had lowered her to the floor and got between her legs, which she had spread wide in anticipation. Butt Jennifer slipped out from under me, flipped me onto my back, and sat up on top of me like a mischievous cowgirl. It was dark outside, and I could barely make out the silhouette of her naked body.

“I’ll lead this parade,” she declared. I recognized it as a line from a bedroom comedy we had both seen during a break between jobs and laughed.

“I surrender,” I said, admitting defeat and grabbing her buttocks.

My partner stopped talking after that: for the next ten minutes, nothing came from her mouth but sensual moans and sighs of pleasure. Jennifer began moving slowly and steadily. But she sped up little by little; her movements coming faster and faster until finally, as we were getting close to climaxing, they became almost convulsive. Our bodies were covered with sweat, shining in the semidarkness. My back was sticking to the floor. But little things like that couldn’t cramp our style. While I laid there surrendering to uncontrolled passion, I disregarded the discomfort of being on the dirty floor. At that moment, I just didn’t care.

But everything comes to an end ... We were lying naked on the floor, smiling at each other like two dazed drug addicts. We had forgotten that people were searching for us. She stretched languidly and kissed me on the cheek.

“That was fun.”

“It’ll do for the first time,” I agreed.

She got up and walked over to her things, pulled her pistol from under her clothes, and pointed it at me.

“Unfortunately, Nicholas, this was your last time.”

“What? Is this a joke?”

“Doesn’t matter whether it’s a man or a naked woman—it’s no joke when a trained assassin points a pistol at you. I’m sorry.”

“Wait! How can you do this after what just happened!? Was I that bad?” I figured a joke to test Jennifer’s reaction couldn’t hurt.

“You were simply magnificent, dear. Thank you for that. I’ll never forget it. But now you have to die.”

“Why? You might at least tell me why you want to kill me,” I said with mingled feelings of frustration, anger, and even fear. I realized that she had decided to take me out even before we made love. And like a fool I let her screw me. This is why it’s better to work without female partners. On the other hand, she had always had my back before and had been a reliable partner. If it hadn’t been for her, I would have been killed during an operation in Texas a year and a half ago...



We had been sent to Texas with orders to eliminate a local man named Alex Davila, who owned a large trucking company. His company was just a cover. He was actually a major drug lord. His trucks moved freely back and forth across the border with Mexico and often brought in large quantities of cocaine from Latin America that he cut with methamphetamine and sold all across the country. Cocaine and meth make for a very profitable but dangerous combination. He had made himself untouchable by buying off law enforcement officials at all levels, so assassination was the only way to deal with him.

Someone tipped him off soon after our arrival in the border town of Del Rio, and he surrounded himself with an army of bodyguards. Getting at him wasn’t going to be easy: his house was like a small fortress, and he never went out for fear of being attacked by competing gangs.

I called my boss, Dick, and briefly told him what the situation was.

“Yeah, the surveillance team described things differently... But you have to proceed. The fee’s already been paid,” he said.

“You know I never give up. But I need a backup. Send out another team.”

“It would take too long. You have to act now. Stick to the schedule. It’s like a fortress, you say? That just means you’ll have to storm the fortress. How’s your new partner? Is she working out?”

I winked at Jennifer and said,

“She’ll do.”

“I’ll be watching the news this evening. Make sure there’s a story on it that’ll interest my client and me.”

“Okay, We’ll get right on it.”

After briefly discussing my plan with Jennifer, we went into action. She insisted we drop by a boutique on the drive to Davila's place. She bought a slinky red minidress that showed off her figure and a fancy new purse large enough to hold her pistol with a silencer attached. When we reached Davila's place, a three-story house surrounded by a wall, I took Jennifer's arm and we walked slowly down the sidewalk that passed by the front gate.

Two bodyguards were lounging at the gate, keeping a close eye on goings on in the neighborhood. They must have been local guys and not well trained, because they barely glanced at me. They began ogling Jennifer and smiling. When we drew even with them, Jennifer accidentally dropped her handbag.

"Oh," she squeaked.

Before I could help her, she bent over to pick up her handbag with her butt toward the guards. Her short skirt rode up, exposing the lower part of her ass. The bodyguards stared at her, forgetting everything else. Remaining bent over, Jennifer took her gun out of her purse and stuck the barrel between her legs.

When they saw the silencer, the bodyguards began blinking rapidly. They reached into their jackets for their guns, but it was too late: Jennifer squeezed the trigger. I took out the second guard. He was too distracted by Jennifer's charms, and my pistol never failed me.

Unfortunately, we were seen. A third guard was watching from a second story window. Unable to take an accurate shot, he ran to give the alarm. There are usually two choices in a situation like this: run, or act very quickly. The first option had been ruled out for us.

"Let's move!" I ordered. We ran through the gate, across the courtyard, and burst through the front door.

We came into a small entryway and saw two men about fifty feet away running toward us down a long corridor. Two shots rang out, and they fell. I walked on quickly. A side door opened behind me, but Jennifer spun and took out the threat. When we reached about the midpoint in the corridor, two people started firing from around a corner in front of us. We dropped to the floor, taking cover behind the men we had just killed. Other than their bodies, the corridor was empty. Knowing the sad fate of their comrades, the bodyguards at the end of the corridor were firing at random without looking around the corner. Although, they wouldn't have to aim very carefully in the long narrow corridor to hit an enemy.

Lying on my stomach and resting my pistol on the back of one of the guards, I took aim at the barrel of one of the guns pointed around the corner. I signaled to Jennifer to take the one on the right. We had to act quickly, so as soon as Jennifer nodded that she understood and had the muzzle in her sights, we fired. The bullets didn't damage the pistols, but they knocked them out of the guards' hands. They started cursing in Spanish. I jumped up and ran forward with the intent of reaching the end of the corridor before they could retrieve their guns.

"Behind us!" Jennifer suddenly shouted.

I didn't react, hoping my partner would cover me. There was no room to maneuver in the narrow corridor. I couldn't afford to stop and give the bodyguards time to pick up their pistols, so I just kept running. Two more guards had appeared behind us, at the other end of the corridor. I heard the crack of a bullet passing me. Jennifer rolled onto her back and opened fire. The bodyguards fell, dropped by her bullets. I reached the end of the corridor and shot the man on the left as he picked his gun up off the floor. The second bodyguard threw himself at me, trying to knock my gun out of my hand. I punched him in the jaw and kicked him to the side. He fell down. Feeling a pistol under his hand on the floor, he smiled triumphantly. I don't know why, because I shot him before he could bring it to bear.

Jennifer walked up to me.

"You okay?" She asked.

"I'm fine. Thanks for covering me. How about you?" I asked.

"Not a scratch."

"Shall we continue?"

We kept going. A few more bodyguards tried to stop us but failed. We walked on, leaving them on the floor with holes in their bodies. After searching the entire first floor without finding our target, we went upstairs to the second floor. We didn't run into anyone else: no one ran to meet us or shot at us from around a corner. We found to our surprise that we had taken out almost all of the bodyguards. We checked all of the rooms, but they were empty. That left the third floor, where we found one of the rooms locked. I listened and heard quiet voices on the other side of the door.

"He's in there," I whispered to Jennifer.

We stood on either side of the door. I thought for a moment. Our target wasn't alone; there were probably as many as five bodyguards in there

with him. If I were them, I wouldn't be standing directly in front of the door. *This is a new house*, I realized, thinking back over the route we had taken in our assault. The interior walls in modern houses are drywall, not masonry.

"What do we do?" Jennifer asked, staring at the door.

I told her my plan. We sat down on the floor a yard apart with our legs stretched out and leaned against the wall opposite the room where our target was hiding. At the count of three, we began firing through the wall. Shots rang out in response, but the bullets struck the wall above our heads. The return fire ended soon.

"Cover me," I told Jennifer, standing up and trying to break open the door with my shoulder.

The door held. I shot several times at the latch and latch plate, not at the doorknob as actors do in the movies. Then, kicking the door open with my foot, I burst into the room, rolled into a somersault, and came up seeking a target. But all I saw was Davila lying under a dead bodyguard. Apparently, the bodyguard had done his duty and taken a bullet for his boss. Davila pushed the body off him but didn't get up. When he saw my gun pointing at him, he stammered:

"Don't shoot. I'll give you everything. Just don't shoot. What do you want? Money? I've got lots of money. Don't shoot."

I calmly looked him in the eye.

"Are you going to be long?" Jennifer asked, peering into the room.

"No," I replied and put a bullet in his forehead.

I took my mobile phone out of my pants pocket and dialed a familiar number.

"Hello, I need a Cleaner. Code 5-5-7-4-2. The address is 212 Paisano Drive, Del Rio. Thanks."

"It's time to split. The Cleaner will be here soon."

Jennifer straightened her torn dress.

"What a pity, it was a nice dress," she complained.



“What’s this about? Can’t you at least tell me why you want to kill me?” I was starting to get angry. “Who paid you to do this?”

“Why do you want to know, Nicholas? Just accept it.”

I slowly stood, keeping my hands in plain view to avoid provoking my partner into pulling the trigger.

“And after I’m dead, you’re just going to call a Cleaner as though nothing just happened between us? You’re going to call in a team to get rid of my body and wipe away your finger prints? Then you’ll forget about me? Don’t I mean anything to you? We’ve been working together for two years!”

“Try to understand, Nicholas. This isn’t personal. It’s just business. Do you hear that helicopter? They’re still looking for us. They’re looking for you. They want to kill you, not me. I’m five years younger than you, and they have a lot of money invested in me. They don’t need you. I don’t want to die just because you crossed somebody.”

“But we’re partners...”

“Not in this.”

“Jennifer,” my voice gave away the tenderness I felt for her.

“What?”

“I love you.”

Jennifer laughed.

“I’m not a naïve fool, Nicholas. We were trained in the same school. I know all the tricks you can pull. Goodbye.”

“Wait! Please, give me a minute. Just a minute, I beg you. This is very important to me. Let me have just one minute to tell you something. That’s all I need.”

“Okay,” Jennifer lowered the barrel of her gun slightly. “You have exactly thirty seconds.”

“I’m sorry,” I said and took a step to the right.

She hadn’t expected me to move, and although her hand holding the pistol turned to follow me, it was already too late. I jumped abruptly to the left and leapt at Jennifer. She managed to get off a shot, and a sharp pain seared my right side, but I was already on her. I knocked her pistol hand aside. She fired again, sending a bullet into the ceiling. With her free hand, Jennifer punched me in the side she had shot. I cried out in pain, but I didn’t back off. I twisted her arm, and the pistol fell to the floor. Grabbing

it, I forcefully pushed Jennifer away. She fell but sprang to her feet again like an expert gymnast.

“Get back,” I ordered, threatening her with the pistol.

My former partner took two careful steps backwards. I pressed my free hand against my side, trying to stop the bleeding. The wound wasn't fatal, but it needed medical attention.

According to everything I had been taught and all of the regulations that governed our lives, I should have shot Jennifer immediately and without hesitation. I shouldn't give her the chance she gave me. My finger touched the trigger, but I couldn't do it. I looked Jennifer in the eye. Surprising as it sounds, the clear blue eyes of an assassin snuffed out all desire to kill her. She was my partner; she'd been watching my back for two years. Killing her would be like killing myself. How was I better than her? If she was right and they really were hunting for me, it would be better for me to die than her. My fury faded away without reaching the point where I would act without thinking. The Beast within me didn't want to come awake. I was a killer, the most horrible and disgusting criminal in the world, but this was something I wouldn't do; I wouldn't cross this imaginary line I had drawn in my head. I was no saint, but I wasn't quite a devil, either. Everything comes to an end. Let a young person live, the old man in me thought. It would be better for me to die than to kill Jennifer.

A feeling of complete remorse overcame me. I sensed that my death was imminent, and that meant the time had come for me to pray for forgiveness. I remained outwardly calm, but I was praying inside, remembering all of my victims. My thoughts couldn't be called a prayer, of course. I had never been especially religious, but I called it a prayer for lack of a better term to describe my state of mind and the depth of my remorse.

“Fight!” the Beast in me shouted, waking up at last. “Don't give up!”

I chuckled inwardly: I had heard that phrase so many times in movies or read it in books that I found it both sad and funny at the same time. In situations like this, the hero in a novel usually gets a second wind and defeats his enemy. That makes for drama in a creative work, and people like it. But it's different in the real world. Jennifer wasn't my enemy. There was no point in fighting her; it would just mean one person would die instead of another. If I were watching a movie with a storyline like this, I would disapprove and mentally tell the hero to continue fighting. But I wasn't watching a movie. And I was no hero. I was a man, and I was fed up with

the evil acts I had committed. I was going to die sometime anyway, so why not now? *I'm not going to shoot*, I told the Beast, expelling it from my mind.

“What are you waiting for?” Jennifer asked, seeing that I was hesitating. “We both know what you have to do.”

“You aren’t going to beg for mercy?”

“What for? You’re no fool, so shoot me.”

“I can’t,” I admitted honestly.

“Why, do you want to enjoy my body one last time?” Jennifer sneered.

I looked at her naked body, but I felt no desire. Not under these circumstances.

“No, I don’t, but thanks for the offer.”

“Fine then, have it your way.”

Jennifer took a step toward my things. I knew very well what she was doing. I suddenly realized I couldn’t stop her even if I wanted to. She had just fired two shots: unless she was lying earlier about having only two bullets left, that meant the gun I held was empty. But I didn’t want to check it. I knew my wound would keep me from going far, anyway. So be it. Let her think she’d won.

Jennifer pulled a pistol out of my things and pointed it at me.

“So long, Nicholas.”

This time, she didn’t give me a chance to say any last words. How quickly the young learn from their mistakes! The muzzle flashed, and everything seemed to explode and then immediately fade away. I was plunged into darkness. My body fell with a hole in my forehead. Thanks, Jennifer, for giving me a quick death.



## CHAPTER 14. Bikers

“Get your motor runnin’  
Head out on the highway  
Lookin’ for adventure  
And whatever comes our way  
Yeah Darlin’ go make it happen  
Take the world in a love embrace  
Fire all of your guns at once  
And explode into space

Like a true nature’s child  
We were born, born to be wild  
We can climb so high  
I never wanna die.”

*(An excerpt from the song “Born to be Wild” by Steppenwolf)*

“**Y**ou looked like you were a thousand miles away. What were you thinking about just now?” Eve asked.

“I was... in my past life... you’re right... I was betrayed,” the Assassin answered slowly and somewhat distractedly.

“By your employer?”

“No, by my partner. She was an assassin like me—but prettier,” the

Assassin said, pulling his thoughts back to the present and attempting a joke.

“Wait. Are you saying you died?”

“Yes.”

“But I thought you were from another world. Or do you have another explanation?”

“No, that’s right. I’m from a parallel world. But I was killed before coming to this body.”

“So, instead of somebody sending you to this world, you just ended up here?”

“Yes.”

“Of course you did,” Eve said sarcastically.

“You don’t believe me?”

“You haven’t given me much in the way of proof yet.”

“I suppose I’ll have to be completely honest with you if I’m going to prove to you that I’m an assassin. But you’d have to be a good psychoanalyst to make sense of who I am.”

“Well, try anyway. I studied psychology at the police academy while I was training to be a detective. But I told you that already. And I’ve also told you that I’ve dealt with hitmen in the past.”

“All right, I’ll give it a try. If I can get you to understand the kind of person I am, I think you’ll see a difference between me and the Nick you spoke with earlier.”

“Maybe. Go ahead—I’m all ears.”

“Where should I start?” The Assassin wondered. “You know, I rarely thought about myself, about what I was doing. I did everything I was told, just as I did when I was in the Army, and I didn’t think about reasons or consequences. I didn’t look upon my victims as living persons. They were just targets.”

“Targets? Like on a shooting range?”

“Exactly. My victims moved and spoke, but they were no different from the targets on a shooting range where I loved spending time as a kid.”

“I read somewhere that killers are necrophilic, that they’re driven to commit murder. Were you?”

“No. I could go for months without killing anyone and never feel the

urge to do so. A madman or a serial killer might feel compelled to kill, but not a professional. I killed because it was my job. I got no satisfaction from the killing itself, just from a job well done.”

“You know, murder gets to be acceptable when you become indifferent to it, when you don’t believe in anything and you’re spiritually disconnected from the rest of humanity.”

“That may be, but I was just a weapon. I wasn’t the one who made the decisions. To my boss, taking a human life was like a move in a game of chess. The important thing was the result, not the method used.”

“You’re wrong. If you’re really a killer, you can’t blame your actions on someone else, whether it’s your parents, your teachers—or your boss. You’re given an order, but *you* have to carry it out, and that means your conscience, your sense of humanity, ought to stop you. And if it doesn’t, if killing is just a normal day at work for you, it means you’re following your head, not your heart. You’re losing your humanity and becoming a misanthrope.”

“But I stayed human! I loved!”

“You loved? It’s possible. Most killers are capable of sincere affection and love for women. But what would you have done if you’d been ordered to kill the woman you loved?”

“That couldn’t happen.”

“And if it did?”

“I’d have refused.”

“Don’t make me laugh, Nicholas. What would have happened to you if you refused?”

“I’d have been killed.”

“And you would still refuse?”

The Assassin thought about it. He had refused to kill Jennifer, but did he have a choice? Perhaps that situation didn’t count; there had been no time to think and make the right decision. Could Eve be right? Would he have gone so far as to kill someone he loved? Was that the reason he didn’t make friends and had only fleeting relationships with women? He had known, of course, that he could be ordered to kill anyone. His employers had chosen him because they knew he was single and had no relatives. He had become a blind predator lacking the desire to go against his conscience and judgment. He had lost himself, his values and his humanity; not

associating with normal people had made him unsociable and gradually turned him into an animal.

The Assassin wanted to tell the girl that he would have refused, but his thoughts were interrupted by the roar of a couple dozen motorcycles. A gang of local bikers was cruising slowly past, eyeing pedestrians. Something caught their interest, and they stopped in front of the restaurant, but they kept their motors running.

“Hell!” Eve exclaimed, turning her head and hiding her face with her hand.

“Is something wrong?” the Assassin asked, shouting over the noise of the engines and looking at the girl.

“I hadn’t intended to leave the station, and I left my gun inside.”

“Do you think you might need it?”

“Do you see that bearded biker at the front, the one in the black T-shirt with a white skull?”

“Yes.”

“I arrested his brother for first-degree murder. You’d better leave, Nicholas.”

“You’re kidding, right? I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“I’m not joking. These guys are real crooks—they’re cruel and ruthless. You’d better not mess with them.”

“I’ve dealt with worse thugs than them.”

“This is no game. Get out of here! Hurry!”

“I don’t play games. I’m staying.”

“Don’t be foolish. They’ll kill you if they see that we’re together.”

“I’ll just have a talk with them, Eve. Don’t worry about me. Do you really have such a low opinion of me? You don’t really think I’d leave you here alone, do you?”

“You’re an idiot! They know I’m a cop. They’re not going to do anything to me. But they’ll take it out on you. Go! That’s an order!”

“Detective Aidan, I am not your subordinate, so you cannot give me an order,” the Assassin said, adopting a formal tone.

While they were bickering, the bikers turned off their engines, and three of them headed in our direction, led by the bearded man that Eve had pointed out.

“That does it. It’s too late now,” Eve said with a heavy sigh as she leaned back in her chair, looking like a panther ready to pounce.

Feigning unconcern, the Assassin looked at the approaching men curiously.

“How nice to see you,” the head biker said in the friendly tone. “My favorite detective—meet some of my friends.”

“What do you want, Richard?”

“You’re all business today, aren’t you, Detective? Maybe I’m just in the mood for some friendly conversation.”

“I know how friendly you are where your brother’s concerned.”

“Since you bring it up, when are you going to let him go?”

“I’m on break right now. Come down to the station, and we’ll talk there.”

“Oh, you know how much I hate tight spaces. We’ve got plenty of elbow room here, right? So nobody can stop me if I want to talk to you,” Richard’s tone switched from friendly to tough.

“Go away, Rich. I have nothing to say to you.”

“Don’t be so rude, Eve. Why don’t you introduce your friend to me? I didn’t know you hung out with bums.”

The Assassin, who had been interestedly examining the group of bikers that had surrounded them, turned his head and looked Richard in the eye.

“I’ve never met such polite bikers. Can I join your club?”

“Our club’s a private organization. But if you give me a thousand bucks, I’ll let you leave, and my fellow club members won’t lay a finger on you.”

“I’ll tell you what,” the Assassin said as he stood, “You let me have your bike and a thousand dollars and we’ll call it even.”

“Are you crazy, dude? Hand over the money and scram while you still can!”

“That’s not gonna work. Let’s turn that around. You leave and I won’t lay a finger on you or your buddies. Plus, you can keep your money. I’m in a good mood today.”

Eve bit her lip. She knew that standing up to the bikers would make her appear self-confident. Richard couldn’t know she didn’t have her service weapon with her. But when Nicholas acted more aggressively than she did, he drew Richard’s attention to himself. He would then transfer all of his

anger to Nicholas, because no alpha male would back down before another when there was a female present.

The Assassin assessed the situation calmly. He had been in his share of street fights even though his boss, knowing the nature of his profession, disapproved. There was usually something at stake in a fight—what a fighter brought to the table, and what he was willing to sacrifice in order to win. Getting beat up wasn't the worst possible outcome. If one's life was at stake, the rules changed. If you weren't prepared to go that far, the only option was to run. Eve's presence complicated matters, however. Running with a girl was difficult, because even a man with little athletic ability could easily catch her, especially if she was wearing heels—as Eve was. Then too, it would be hard to outrun the bikers, and they could simply hop on their motorcycles if he tried to detain them so Eve could get away. That meant he was going to have to fight. A quick look around told him that there were no weapons other than chairs and a small steak knife. A knife can be intimidating, especially in a one-on-one fight, but outnumbered as he was, a knife would be more of a hindrance than a help. It would only infuriate the bikers and provoke them into using weapons. Therefore, he could only use a weapon as a last resort; still, it would be good to have one handy, so he decided they'd better stay in the restaurant. There was a chance that someone would call the cops and they would arrive in time. After all, the police station was close by.

“Do not forget that I am here,” the Gladiator reminded him.

“Ah yes, I forgot about you in the heat of the moment,” the Assassin admitted. “Can you handle them?”

“All of them? There are too many, but I will try. It will not be easy, however.”

“Why take on all of them?” I suggested. “This pack has a leader, so you just need to call him out.”

“Do you think these thugs will follow the code of the warrior?”

“No, but if their leader doesn't accept your challenge, he'll lose face with his gang, and face is very important in groups like this.”

“Yeah, that might work,” the Assassin agreed.

Meanwhile, Richard had been looking me over suspiciously, as though he were wondering if I had at least a flamethrower tucked away somewhere.

“Hey, man, do you know who you're dealing with?”

“Of course I do. I’m dealing with the most polite bikers in the world.”

“Take your politeness and stick it up your ass!”

“So you aren’t polite? Hey guys, Rich thinks you’re a bunch of rude sons of bitches.”

“I don’t know who you are, but you’re dead.”

“You’re right, I’ve lived like this long enough. I’ll take your gang away from you, and everything’ll be fine then.”

“You laughing at me? Johnny, Gearhead—show ‘im who’s boss.”

The Assassin stepped back quickly, drawing his opponents deeper into the restaurant.

“Take it easy, guys,” Eve said, trying desperately to cool things down.

She didn’t understand that nothing needed fixing: everything was going according to plan. Johnny and the biker named Gearhead froze, waiting for their leader to give them the go-ahead. Eve stood up, her hand automatically reaching for her missing weapon. She bit her lip and looked around for help. We were surrounded: there were bikers behind us and on each side, and Rich was standing in front of us with three of his buddies. There were another five men behind them. In all, there were more than twenty bikers against the two of us. The Assassin shot Eve a look and saw that she was ready to fight and was looking at a nearby chair, evidently intending, like him, to use it as a weapon.

“Richard,” Eve said, “do you really want to start a fight here in broad daylight? In front of all these witnesses?”

Richard heard her but paid no attention. He realized that the detective didn’t have her gun, and his eyes lit up in anticipation of an easy fight.

“Stay out of it, Eve. Let us men solve our own problems,” the Assassin told her loudly enough for Rich to hear. He wanted to keep her out of the brawl.

“I told you to leave,” she whispered. “Now it’s going to be hard for us to get out of this.”

“They’re the ones that won’t get out of this easy,” the Assassin smiled calmly.

Rich and his buddies didn’t hear that exchange, but they noticed the smile. His eyes ran over my torso again, looking for a dangerous weapon. He couldn’t understand why I looked so confident. Finding no bulges in

my clothes that could conceal a bazooka, he glanced around, probably looking for a police car. But he didn't see one. His eyes returned to me.

"I challenge you to a fight," the Assassin suddenly said.

"Ha, I don't want to dirty my hands on you."

"Same here, but there's no way out of it," the Assassin said wearily, sighing. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Afraid of you? Hell no!"

"Then what are you waiting for? You don't think you can take me barehanded without six goons to help you?"

Rich's eyes flashed and he turned red.

"Show 'im, boss!" The other bikers began shouting. "Give it to 'im!"

The Assassin's plan had worked. The head of the gang couldn't refuse a fair fight without losing face. But Rich wasn't as dumb as he looked. He realized that the restaurant wasn't the best place for a fight. Its employees would call the police as soon as a fight broke out, and the stationhouse wasn't far away.

"Okay," Rich nodded to approving hoots from his buddies, "but not here. Let's move to the alley over there."

He pointed to a dark side street between two buildings down the street.

The Assassin shrugged:

"Fine. That's even better—fewer witnesses. I really don't want to land in the slammer twice in one day."

"What, you just got out of jail?"

"Something like that. Don't my clothes give me away?"

"What were you in for?"

"I beat up a bodybuilder a little bigger than you," the Assassin said in a matter-of-fact tone, not bragging. "He attacked me even though I hadn't said a word to him. He knew karate, but it didn't help him—poor guy. I tried to avoid fighting him, but he started waving his arms and legs around. He showed off all kinds of techniques for about five minutes. It was impressive. But I finally got tired of it and punched him a couple of times in the ribs, then in the head. Poor guy couldn't handle the beating and fell down. He was in pretty bad shape and we had to call an ambulance."

Rich's smile faded, but he couldn't back down. The Assassin was applying a system of psychological attack he was very familiar with to

intimidate his opponent before the fight and put him in a losing frame of mind. But it was no bluff, because everything the Assassin said was true, and no polygraph would have caught him in a lie.

“Why did they let you go so quickly?”

“The detective,” the Assassin said, nodding at Eve, “didn’t believe I could have beat that meathead with my bare hands and put me in a cell with a strong-arm type who took a dislike to me for some reason. I had to put some moves on him so he’d know who he was dealing with. The detective realized then that I hadn’t been lying, released me, apologized, and even invited me to have lunch with her at her own expense.”

Now the Assassin was exaggerating, of course. Eve hadn’t been the one who had arrested him and put him to the test, but that detail was irrelevant. It was evident from Rich’s face that he no longer wanted to fight. That was strange considering that he looked much more impressive than I did; I certainly wasn’t well-built.

“Don’t worry, though, I won’t kill you.”

“I’ve done some boxing, and I’ve beat worse guys than that,” said Rich, but he no longer sounded as confident as before.

“Right. When you’re lying on the ground you can console yourself with the knowledge that you did manage to beat somebody up once.”

We went into the dark alley that Rich had pointed to. The bikers parked their motorcycles on the street to block the entrance and came to stand in a circle around their leader and me. Eve stood off to the side, but something prompted her to come up to me, peck me on the cheek, and whisper:

“Good luck.”

The Assassin figured she had already mentally said goodbye to him and wanted to give him a pleasant farewell kiss. She should have remembered why I was arrested in the first place. However, the detective remained outwardly unconcerned, as though everything were going according to plan. Her expression was unreadable. The Assassin smiled.

“He’s the one who needs luck; my training will do for me.”

“Luck never hurts,” she said softly and walked to the side.

“Your turn, Gladiator!”

The Gladiator assumed control of our body as usual and did some warm-up exercises to check out our muscles.

“It is a good thing that we had something to eat,” the Gladiator said to the rest of us. “I feel stronger.”

“Be careful,” the Assassin warned. “Bikers are very tricky.”

“Come on, Rich! Let ‘im have it! Punch his eyes out!” the bikers began shouting.

Rich stood in front of the Gladiator and raised his fists in front of his face. He had evidently decided to play it safe and adopted a defensive strategy. The Gladiator smiled broadly.

“That’s good. Your hands are in the right position. But what if I do this?” The Gladiator said and quickly swung a fist at his opponent’s liver.

Rich managed to drop his arm and block the punch. And instant of glee showed in his eyes: *you aren’t so tough after all*. But in the next moment, the Gladiator struck Rich with an uppercut, and he fell to the ground unconscious.

“Excellent!” the Pervert commented, admiring the Gladiator’s skill.

“I am starting to get used to what this body can do,” the Gladiator replied modestly.

“I was expecting a longer fight and hoping to learn something,” the Assassin said in disappointment.

“It did not take long, because he does not know how to fight. He is accustomed to attacking with his gang. He is not used to fighting one-on-one.”

The bikers were looking at the Gladiator and their defeated leader sullenly. They didn’t get the spectacle they’d been expecting. The fight was very short, and they felt cheated. Not knowing how to react, they stood grimly murmuring among themselves.

“Let us go,” the Gladiator said, deciding to take advantage of the bikers’ confusion, and started walking towards Eve.

Behind them, Rich regained consciousness and began stirring.

“Don’t let ‘em leave,” he groaned, rubbing his bleeding and broken nose.

Instantly comprehending Rich’s order, the Gladiator rushed at the nearest bikers. Confused, they hadn’t yet reacted. Scattering several men, the Gladiator looked around. Eve understood that they wouldn’t manage to escape without a fight and spun, elbowing the biker next to her in the

stomach. Someone grabbed her from the rear, and she stomped down on his foot with her heel. He released her. But another two bikers ran up and grabbed her by the arms. They stopped short of striking the girl without an order from Rich. Eve twisted and squirmed but couldn't wriggle free. However, the Gladiator had not expected her to help.

He immediately went into fight mode, and time slowed as he counted. There were twenty-seven bikers altogether. Two were holding Eve, leaving twenty-five. Rich was injured and would stay out of it. Twenty-four.

"Kill them," the Assassin said. "Don't hold back."

"No," answered the Gladiator.

"Kill them," I urged, "or they'll kill us."

"No."

"Kill them," begged the Pervert. "They could do permanent harm to Eve."

"No."

"Why not?" asked the Assassin in surprise.

"You have been telling me all day that I must not kill. Why have you changed your mind?"

"Look around! Now isn't the time for nobility. It's them or us. There's no other option."

"I cannot. I will no longer kill."

"But there's twenty-seven of them! How else can you defeat them?"

"I can try."

"You can't hold back."

"No, I must. It is better to be beat than to be a killer."

"And if they win, if they beat you to death, what'll happen to Eve? Your life isn't the only one at stake. What about hers—and ours? Are you really going to hold back?"

"There is no time to explain everything to you. I feel that I can no longer kill. I remain a gladiator, no one can take that from me, but I do not have to take the lives of others."

"Get a grip on yourself! Don't let an innocent person die because of you."

“I will not give in. Killing is not the only way. I am not God. It is not up to me to pass sentence on people and execute them.”

“But you’re not a killer, you’re a gladiator. Sometimes, to defend yourself you have to kill. Nobody’s making you God, a final judge. But don’t you have the right to defend yourself?”

“I have a right to protect myself, yes. But not to kill.”

The Assassin, the Pervert, and I didn’t completely understand what was driving the Gladiator. He remained unmoved by all of our arguments and was insisting on doing things his own way. We suddenly sensed that the Gladiator had drawn an invisible but psychologically tangible line somewhere in his subconscious. He’d found the strength within himself to refuse to kill; he’d established a new barrier that he couldn’t cross. This conscious barrier would never again let him battle to the death, no matter how enraged or angry he got. Of course, the barrier could fall if his mind were completely destroyed and he were driven insane, but the Gladiator was nowhere near madness. For the first time in his life, the Gladiator was in complete control of his motives and emotions. For the first time, he mentally became as strong as granite and emotionally as cold as the vacuum of space. There is no place for feelings in battle—just coldhearted calculation. The Gladiator was ready to fight, even if death awaited him at the end.

The Beast awoke and whimpered, sensing the constraints imposed by the Gladiator. The four of us listened to him complain and cry in desperation, and plead for the barrier to be lifted.

“I no longer obey you!” the Gladiator shouted.

The Beast suddenly stopped howling. Realizing that he was powerless, he drew back. In this state, the Gladiator was unstoppable. Nothing remained in his world except the art of battle. At that moment, the Gladiator understood that battle has a pattern not everyone can perceive or understand. There is an aspect of creativity to battle; it takes skill and technique. Although he was not in his own body, the Gladiator was prepared to perform the most important act of his life. He was prepared to create a work of art.

A feeling of peace and grace enveloped him in a gentle cloud. Calmness, serenity, humility, and gentleness came upon him and rewarded him for his courage. As it did so, the Gladiator recalled his death. A warm, intoxicating flood of memories poured over us.

## CHAPTER 15. The Gladiator's Death

“After all you put me through,  
You think I'd despise you,  
But in the end I wanna thank you,  
'Cause you've made me that much stronger.”  
*(An excerpt from the song “Fighter” by Christina Aguilera)*

**T**he crowd roared, anticipating a quick finish to my opponent. I lunged forward and leaned over the gladiator, raising my arm for a brutal blow to his kidneys where the muscles were thin. He opened his eyes and looked at me. I looked back into my opponent's eyes. They were blue. As our eyes met, it felt as though some unknown force squeezed my chest. I suddenly found it hard to breathe. Everything slowed down, swam before my eyes, and froze. The people in the stands fell silent. An imaginary clock's second hand stopped moving.

*What am I doing?* I asked myself. *Why am I doing this?* To find an answer to that simple question I mentally thought back to my past, to a time when I was twelve-years old and had no master. All I could think of were the bouts between gladiators that had enthralled me as a child, but the fascination they held for me should have faded in adolescence. What was I: a fierce gladiator or a ruthless killer? Or was I both? Why did I feel entitled to be the victor? The fight rules had been drummed into me while I was still a green recruit, and I had not even bothered to question whether

the things I had been taught were just and proper. Why was it necessary to fight to the death?

The Beast within roared at me menacingly.

“Strike,” He commanded. “Don’t think—strike!”

But my upraised arm froze; I was reluctant to strike the weak spot. I hesitated, holding back the rage, restraining the Beast that was striving to break free and longing to destroy everything in its path. He was a wild Beast; He knew no other way, but I did. Controlling my fist, I refused to strike and was struck myself.

Seeing my hesitation, my opponent hit me in the chest and threw me off him. However, it was difficult for him to deliver a powerful blow from a prone position. Nevertheless, he twisted and managed to hit me hard with the lower part of his fist. I could have stayed on him, but that would have meant taking the full force of his punch. Instead, I felt nothing more than a push that threw me off. I jumped up and immediately assumed a defensive stance. My opponent got to his feet, also. An angry grimace distorted his face. I do not think he understood why I had held back. He probably took it as mockery, that I wanted to make fun of him by prolonging the fight. My hesitation gave him the opportunity to go on the offensive. The gladiator attacked me, executing a series of kicks and punches. I defended myself automatically, retreating when necessary, and responding blow for blow. But my thoughts were far away. I was reluctant to use my full strength, because I was unsure whether I was doing the right thing.

It was only now, at the worst possible moment, that I was starting question my actions and my long-ago decision to become a gladiator and win by killing my adversaries. Every sport involves struggle, competition for trophies and fame. But there was so much blood and pain in my sport. Why was that? The question drilled into my brain, gnawing at me, but I could not afford to think about it during a fight.

I retreated from my opponent, absorbed in my thoughts and defending myself instinctively. It was a good thing he had an injured leg—that was the only reason I was still alive. My Master’s lessons floated to the surface of my mind as I tried to get at the true reason for my passiveness and resignation.



We entered a single-room, windowless house with bare walls painted black, a wooden floor, no furniture, and just one door that bolted from the outside. I looked around the room but, seeing nothing to interest me, stared at my Master.

“Where are we, Jin-Jo?” I asked curiously.

Instead of answering, my Master slapped me on the cheek. My eyes watered from the pain and the undeserved punishment.

“From now on, you will call me Master. That is the only way you may address me. Do you understand, my Pupil?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Do you know why I struck you?”

“No, Master.”

“Wipe away your tears and think about it.”

I wiped my eyes and thought. I had done nothing wrong. My only offense was to call my Master by his name. But I did that before he told me how to address him. We stood unmoving for several minutes. Finally, unable to endure the oppressive silence, I said hesitantly:

“Was it because I called you Jin-Jo?”

“No,” my Master answered and slapped me on the other cheek.

Tears welled up in my eyes again.

“I hit you the second time for the same reason as the first. So, do you know the answer now?”

“I said something wrong?”

“No.”

“I did something wrong?”

“No. Think! You are going to be a gladiator!”

“I don’t know, Master.”

Jin-Jo sighed.

“Have you ever seen a gladiator struck?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Did you see him shed tears?”

“No, Master.”

“So why do I see tears in your eyes? My slap was a test, and you failed.

But do not worry. Few people your age can hold back tears. I will continue hitting you until you learn not to shed tears.”

To show he meant it, my Master took hold of my hand and bent it backwards. I felt a sharp pain, but I held my breath and bore it.

“Better already,” Jin-Jo praised me and let go.

“Thank you, Master.”

“If I break your wrist, will you want to go home to your parents?”

My parents... They were far away. Did I want to go home? I suppose not. I missed my mother a little, but I had to be strong; I needed to switch off all of my feelings in order to be a worthy pupil. I had read about how gladiators were trained and knew it would be hard. Only by turning off my emotions and keeping aloof from the entire world could I have a chance at becoming the best of the best. And when my mama and papa came to the Arena and saw me, their gladiator son, defeating his opponents—they would be proud of me. My training had only just begun, and I still wanted to become a gladiator. Crushing opponents as the crowd roared—what could be better? Therefore, I did not want to return to my parents.

“No, Master. You can break both of my wrists, but I’ll stay here, as your student.”

“Good. It is time for your first lesson. Get on your knees and kiss my shoes.”

“But why?”

“You will do everything I say without hesitation. If I say ‘dance,’ you will dance, ‘run,’ you will run, ‘hop on one foot,’ you will hop, ‘kill,’ you will kill. For your disobedience, I will leave you here for the night.”

“But what about dinner?”

“You have not earned it.”

With these words, Jin-Jo left the house and bolted the door behind him. I was left by myself in the dark, alone with my fears and worries.

*I will become a gladiator, I told myself. I will become a gladiator!*

I lay down on the floor in one of the room’s four corners, curled up into a ball, and tried to fall asleep. *I will become a gladiator*, I thought again, trying to take pleasure in the thought.

My Master walked in the next morning with the first rays of the sun.

“Now I will test you to see if you have learned the lesson,” he said.

“Yes, Master.”

“Dance.”

I hesitated because I did not know how to dance and there was no music.

“Wrong,” my Master said, then turned and left, leaving me in darkness once more.

He returned several hours later. I was as hungry as a dog and ready to do anything my Master told me without hesitation. I was prepared to run, dance, hop... anything that popped into my Master's head.

My Master gave me a sharp look.

“Will you do anything I say?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Why?”

“I'm hungry, Master... And I don't want to stay in this house.”

“You will only leave this house when the training outdoors begins. This is where you will live, so get used to it. A true gladiator does not need luxury. Do you want to become a true gladiator?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Do you think I am torturing you with hunger just to punish you? Not at all. It will be better if you have an empty stomach for what you are about to do. I do not want you to obey me because you fear punishment or feel guilty. I want you to look upon my demands as tasks that you must perform. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Then try to kill me.”

“But I can't!” I cried. I had not anticipated an order like that.

“Again you say you cannot,” my Master sighed. “I said try, and you have not even tried. Think carefully about what you just did, or rather what you did not do. You will not have time to think during a fight. You are lucky that you are not in a fight right now. I will return later.”

With that, Jin-Jo left. I sighed in frustration, reproaching myself for disobeying. I considered myself an obedient child. I had obeyed my parents and my teachers at school, so why was it so hard for me to do what I was told now?

I sat down on the floor and closed my eyes, preparing to meditate. My

father had taught me this, had shown me that I needed to empty my mind before attacking a difficult problem. Answers—or a way to find answers—often came when I meditated. I will be obedient, I told myself. I will do everything that my Master tells me, no matter how impossible the task may seem. I will not think about what I am told to do; I will do everything without thinking so as not to lose valuable time. I will become a true gladiator. I will use my fists to destroy and not think about the consequences. I will be unstoppable in a fight.



I had made myself submissive to make my Master's job easy and devoted myself to a life replete with blood—my blood and that of others. Today I became a Gladiator by winning the first bout against fifty snot-nosed kids and a second bout against twenty pupils. I should have been happy; I should not have been wondering why? I had this fight almost won; victory would make me this year's champion. I would be showered with honors and prizes; young people in this country and others would admire my fighting skills and dream of being like me.

But something was stopping me from taking my opponent's life. The first two fights were what I had spent many years training for. I had not considered my opponents people worthy of fighting a gladiator. It was as easy to cripple or take the life of those weaker than me as to mock those who could not hold their own.

The strong always beat the weak. It sounds trite, but it is true. The strong have been on top and ruled others since time immemorial. Ours was not a primitive society, but it was deeply rooted in survival of the fittest, and remnants of that system persisted to the present day. I was not thinking solely about gladiators. Their way of life was different. Power does not derive from mounds of muscle. It is a different phenomenon. My father was not weak, but he worked for someone else his entire life. He obeyed his boss's every whim, because his boss's social status was higher, even though he was younger than my father. Our position in society is what makes us powerful or weak.

My father... How long it had been since I last saw him! And my mother. Only now did I realize how much I missed them. I abandoned my family when I embarked on the way of the warrior and began a new

life. I was their only son, their hope for future generations, their dream... How difficult it must have been for them to let me go, to let me be taken from their lives. I, a seasoned gladiator, could not do that if I had a son or daughter. I would never see my parents again—gladiators were allowed no contact with the outside world to avoid having it damaging them psychologically. That was what my Master told me. He said the outside world had a lot of temptations that a gladiator was unprepared for, because he knew nothing but fighting. That was true. I trained in the art of unarmed combat for years, but I studied nothing that I had previously been taught in school.

Perhaps my parents were sitting in the stands right now and watching me, applauding me, taking pride in my victories. Or maybe they were sad because their son had become a killer. But I could not think about that now. I was the Gladiator; it was my job to crush.

Honor was my life. That phrase had been drummed into me for years and had deprived me of other concepts, like love, or friendship. It gave me something left to live for, a reason to wake up in the morning and go for a grueling workout. I lived, fought, and defended—as I naïvely thought—my honor as a warrior.

But what is honor? My Master told me that honor is the totality of a person's highest moral and ethical principles, something like a man's internal worth, where the chief attributes are the axiological norms of his natural personality. But I did not fully understand those abstruse terms even after consulting a dictionary and finding that the word "axiological" refers to a branch of philosophy dealing with moral and ethical values that determine the motivation behind human behavior. For me, honor more than anything means moral concepts like nobility, justice, loyalty, courage, and honesty. I lost my honor whenever I did something to violate even one of those concepts, and I could make amends and recover it only by performing an action opposite to my transgression. Preservation of my self-worth became the ultimate goal of my life. That is why I loved saying that honor is my life. But was I right? Was I acting honorably when I killed?

I would be severely punished if my Master were alive and able to hear my thoughts. He taught that the purpose of a gladiator's life is single combat, and that life consists of everything that comprises combat against an opponent. Fighting is a gladiator's life. Failure to fight for any reason, even compassion and humanity, is unacceptable and dishonorable. I acted dishonorably by withholding the fatal blow and balking at killing, and

only my victory or defeat could atone for my transgression. That meant I needed either to kill or to die myself.

These thoughts were swirling around inside my head as I fought. That was dangerous: a gladiator could not afford to think while fighting. He had to act on instinct and rely on muscle memory acquired during years of training to automatically execute techniques, punches, blocks, retreats, and attacks. Realizing that I was becoming immersed in dangerous thought, I shifted my attention back to the fight.

My opponent executed a clever series of punches that ended with a kick to my shin. I dodged, retreated, and blocked but still took a blow to my thigh. It was very painful but not dangerous. Angered, I attacked, accelerating my pace to three strikes per second. I worked my arms and legs in an attempt to overwhelm the other gladiator with speed. But he skillfully deflected all of my attacks. Soon, however, I sensed that he was beginning to tire. I stepped up the assault. Punch. Kick. Punch. Step forward. Kick. Punch. Kick. Step forward again. Now my opponent was retreating, but he could not retreat for long. The arena was fairly large and had sufficient space for maneuver. All I needed to do was wait until he got tired and made a mistake. Our competition was no longer about strength and agility but about endurance.

I made the first mistake. Carried away by thoughts of my imminent victory, I inadvertently placed myself within leg range. The legs are a formidable weapon for an experienced gladiator, because legs are stronger than arms, especially at middle and far distances. My opponent was first to realize that I had given him an ideal opportunity for a direct kick below my waist. When I moved to close the distance between us, he raised his knee sharply and quickly kicked forward, striking my right thigh with the toe of his tensed foot. I took advantage of inertia to try and reverse the position of my legs, but it was too late. The blow struck home. My opponent's leg instantly returned to its original position. Encouraged by his success, he attacked with a direct blow to my head. But I expected that. I caught his arm by the wrist and punched him in the chest with my other hand, knocking the breath out of him. Then I turned my back to my opponent—a move not usually recommended—and threw him over my shoulder with a thrust of my hip, trying to slam him into the ground as hard as I could. As soon as he was down, I jumped and landed on his chest with my knee. He softened the blow with his palm. My opponent turned onto his side by pushing with his legs. I rolled to the side and immediately leapt to my feet.

My opponent lay in a defensive position with his legs as close to his body as possible. One leg was slightly raised for hooking, kicking, or defense, and his hands were pressed against the ground. This position enabled him to protect his groin and rapidly scoot backward or roll over.

However, the gladiator on his feet in this situation has the advantage. Running at my adversary, I aimed at a kick at his head. He received my blow on both forearms, grabbed my shin, and instantly kicked me in my abdomen while at the same time pulling my leg towards him. It may have seemed to a spectator that I made another mistake by leaving myself open to his kick, but that was part of my plan. Sometimes it is necessary to take a hit in order to win in the end.

Not resisting, I fell on my opponent, trying to crush him with my weight. The gladiator kept his wits about him: he grabbed the back of my neck with one hand and began pressing on my eyes with the fingers of his other hand. I immediately knocked his hand away from my eyes and elbowed him on the cheek. That blow robbed him of his desire to resist further. He let go of me and covered his head with his arms, leaving the rest of his body unprotected. That was just what I had been striving for.

I raised my hand to strike but stopped suddenly as I realized that I was attacking a defenseless man. Indeed, he was helpless in this position. I remembered that I did not want to kill him. At least not now—not while I was still trying to understand my feelings. I needed to know what I was fighting for and why I had become a gladiator. I was not prepared to end someone's life just because I had been taught to do so. My opponent was a gladiator, just as I was. He deserved my respect, and, most importantly, he deserved to live.

For the second time in this bout, I held back from delivering a fatal blow. I could not keep on doing that. It was either him or me. I promised myself that I would not kill. Honor was my life. Glory was my death. That was what I had been taught. But now the opposite was true. Glory was victory, a trophy, and all of a victor's benefits. Glory was my life. Honor was refusal to commit a misdeed and refusal to break my word. Earlier, I had decided that honor was nobility and justice. It was impossible to be noble and just while killing people. I simply could not do it; I found it abhorrent. Therefore, it would be better to die than to kill an innocent person. Honor was my death. I made my decision. I chose a warrior's honor. I did not want glory.

Instead of striking, I raised both hands and, throwing back my head, noticed the cloudless blue sky for the first time.

“Strike.” My lips moved without making a sound.

My opponent's eyes widened in surprise, but he leapt at the opportunity. He struck me a hard, sharp blow on my Adam's apple. My vision faded, and I swayed. He may have continued hitting me, but I did not feel it. I was dead.

## CHAPTER 16. The Fight

“My fight. Only my fight.  
Even if my song is sung.  
Let’s, that’s my thrill  
And my pain. This is all my pain.

My fight. Fight against myself,  
height and broken lines.  
Only my fight. Fight against gossip,  
dream and the deaf and blind fate.”  
*(An excerpt from the song “My fight” by the Slot)*

“Look at what your reluctance to kill has got us into,” I said after a brief pause.

“This is my fault alone. I made this choice myself. I should not have been beat in the arena and should not have fought. I brought my death on myself by accepting the challenge. Everything was decided between us: it was either him or me. If I had won, my opponent would be with you now in this body instead of me. You would not have known the difference. We are both gladiators, right?”

“You’re wrong. That gladiator doesn’t share a soul with us.”

“But we do not know that sharing a soul was the deciding factor. Perhaps it was something else. He was a gladiator just as I was, understand?”

There was no significant difference between us. If I had died, he would have been the one who shared a soul with you.”

“Yes, I think I read about that,” I said. “The laws of the universe aren’t constant and can adapt to the situation. It’s like in quantum mechanics. A cat in a box can be both dead and alive at the same time until somebody looks in the box.”

“What does this have to do with a cat?” the Gladiator asked, puzzled.

“It’s just a theoretical example. When there’s no observer, the outcome can be anything.”

“I think I understand what you’re saying,” the Assassin agreed. “There’s a philosophical concept about something like that. When a man stands with his back to a forest, does the forest behind him still exist? He can hear sounds coming from there, of course, but what if they’re taken away?”

“Your forests and cats have me confused. But I would be able to sense a forest even without sound. I was taught that, taught to sense an opponent, a living being, even if I could not hear him or see him.

“We need to get back on track,” said the Pervert.

“Right,” agreed the Assassin.

“Scanning through your memories, I begin to understand a little about what you are saying,” began the Gladiator. “What it all means is that someone from my world had to turn up in this body. So why did it have to be me and not my opponent? You know what I was thinking at the moment I refrained from striking the fatal blow. Surely you understand that I cannot kill anymore. I promised myself that I would no longer do so. Honor is the most important thing in the world.”

“I beg you, don’t let them kill Eve,” the Pervert pleaded. “Do anything you want, but save her.”

“Then stop distracting me. Believe me, I can deal with these jerks without killing them.”

“Fine,” we all chorused.

“But if you begin losing the fight, I’ll take over and show ‘em what’s what,” the Assassin added.

“Your assistance will not be needed. I will handle the situation myself,” the Gladiator said confidently, having the last word.

The entire conversation after Rich gave the order to kill us lasted no

more than two seconds. The Gladiator was ready to fight. He understood that straight punches would be of little use. You hit when you know your enemy is unprepared to parry the blow. However, there are various other techniques and tricks that can be used. The Gladiator based his strategy on that. Delaying no longer, he rushed directly toward the confused bikers. They were still working themselves up for a fight, but the Gladiator was always ready. Also, they weren't expecting serious resistance, because they greatly outnumbered us, so actually they weren't ready at all. The Gladiator felt as though he were back in the arena, facing a large number of opponents. He was even a little miffed that there was no one to appreciate the fight except Eve. He began counting down the number of able-bodied opponents. Twenty-four.

The Gladiator leaped and kicked one biker in the stomach, his sixth sense telling him that they would not expect him to do that. That man fell, taking several others with him. Another biker tried to hit him in the head, but the Gladiator crouched, letting the punch pass over him, and punched the guy in the groin. This was his favorite technique: there were no illegal blows in his world. Grabbing his genitals, the biker doubled over in pain. He was out of the fight. The Gladiator stood up straight to meet new attackers. Twenty-three.

The most combative and self-confident bikers came at him first. That suited the Gladiator just fine: it was better to eliminate this type of fighter at the start, before he tired, or he could be injured. If Rich had been on his feet, he probably would have sent in the weakest fighters first. That is what a real strategist would have done. But Rich had not yet recovered, and there was no one to take the lead, to the detriment of his opponent's organization. The Gladiator began moving from side to side to prevent them from crowding him into a corner or closely surrounding him.

One biker grabbed the Gladiator by the arm from the rear. A second biker latched onto the other arm from the front. The Gladiator bent his knees so that his weight bore down the arms of the men who had grabbed him. The biker in front lost his hold and let go. Then the Gladiator turned, grabbed the other biker by the collar, went down on one knee, and flipped him over himself onto the ground. The biker fell onto his back; the Gladiator bent over him before he could recover and, with a precise move powerful enough to neutralize without killing, struck him in the Adam's apple—a vulnerable spot. Twenty-two.

Another biker grabbed the Gladiator in a bear hug from the rear. The Gladiator jumped up and kicked away men who were coming at him from the front. As he came down, he stomped on the foot of the biker holding him, a little-known tender spot. The man cried out in pain. The Gladiator leapt up again, pushing off the asphalt. Losing his footing after the blow to his foot, the biker behind the Gladiator released him and fell on his back. The Gladiator dropped and elbowed him in the stomach. His opponent screamed from the sudden blow and began frantically trying to draw air in through his open mouth. It would take him at least ten minutes to recover. Twenty-one.

The Gladiator rolled to the side. Someone tried to kick him. He blocked the blow, grabbed the biker's other leg, and jerked it toward himself. Not expecting the Gladiator to react so quickly, the biker lost his balance and fell. The Gladiator jumped on him and punched him several times in the diaphragm and lower abdomen. Twenty.

He was not as fast or as strong as he had been in the arena, but the bikers knew nothing at all about unarmed combat. There were a lot of them, but they did not know how to fight as a team. Each man acted alone, and that made it easy for the Gladiator to defend himself. They would have been much more difficult to handle if they attacked together.

Twenty able-bodied opponents remained. That was how many the Gladiator had faced in the arena during his second bout. As in the arena, he understood that he was no stronger or faster than his opponents were. His only advantage was his extensive training and fighting experience. His experience told him that he needed to keep on the move and avoid letting the bikers get too close. Space was his ally. Than too, he knew many unarmed fighting techniques, unlike his opponents.

Sensing a threat from the rear, the Gladiator rolled to the side. That put him close to other bikers who immediately rushed in to finish him off on the ground. But the Gladiator was ready. By hooking one foot around the biker's ankle and applying pressure to his knee with the other, causing the man to fall, he executed a classic takedown. Getting to his feet before the man could recover, the Gladiator struck the nerve endings on the insides of his thighs. *This man will be unable to walk for five minutes*, the Gladiator thought, automatically moving to the side to avoid remaining too long in one place. Nineteen.

The Gladiator faced his next opponent and, before the man could

react, twisted to the right and struck his solar plexus with his left fist. Then, bending his arm and leaning forward, he elbowed him in the throat. The Gladiator then twisted in the other direction and struck his opponent's neck with the edge of his hand. These three blows were enough to drop the wheezing biker to the ground before he knew what was happening. This man was also out for the duration of the fight. Eighteen.

The Gladiator rushed around inside the circle of opponents to prevent them from getting close enough to overwhelm him with numbers. He was in constant motion: jumping, moving sideways, rolling. Had he not been surrounded by attacking bikers, one would've thought he was dancing. And if his movements were linked together, they would have made a three-dimensional pattern that only another professional gladiator could have appreciated.

A biker behind him hit him in the side just above the waist. Pain immediately shot through his body, but the Gladiator suppressed it with an act of will. Stepping forward away from the threat, the Gladiator crouched and dropped his hands to the ground for support. Then he kicked backward, striking his opponent's knee. Not expecting the trick, the biker was unable to dodge and took the full force of the blow. Pushing backward off his hands, the Gladiator returned that leg to its initial position and threw the other one back, catching his opponent behind the knee. Jerking it forward, he swept the biker off his feet. The man fell on his back, striking his head on the asphalt. Clearly, no one had taught him how to fall. The Gladiator grunted in satisfaction. It was painful, but not fatal. Seventeen.

The Gladiator stood up face-to-face with another biker, who already had his fist raised to strike. Keeping his wits about him, the Gladiator stepped forward with his left foot while grabbing his opponent's fist with his right hand from below and his left hand from above. He had mastered this technique when he was fifteen. He had practiced it so much that it was automatic, and being in another person's body was no hindrance. Giving the biker no chance to recover and free his arm, the Gladiator pulled it toward himself while simultaneously moving his pelvis back and down, rotating his opponent's fist clockwise with his left hand and counterclockwise with his right hand. With his opponent's thumb to the left, the Gladiator extended the captured arm: first downward while crouching and moving back, then moving up towards him in an arc until his opponent's fist relaxed. Then the Gladiator pressed on the outside of his elbow and, crouching, executed a painful maneuver on his hand, pushing his opponent's elbow to the ground

and causing him to fall to the asphalt. The entire technique took a second. Finally, the gladiator executed two precision strikes to the back of the neck of the assailant. Another enemy was out of the fight. Sixteen.

Taking up a defensive stance, the Gladiator looked around. He was surrounded. There were still a lot of bikers. They understood now that they were facing a professional fighter, not an ordinary person; therefore, they were in no hurry to attack and had formed a tight circle around him.

“Well,” grinned the Gladiator, “who is next?”

“What are you waiting for? Finish him!” Rich’s voice sounded from somewhere behind the bikers in the rear.

“Fight back! You can do it!” came Eve’s shout from the other side of the bikers encircling him.

The Gladiator knew that he could only survive if he was faster and used all of our body’s resources. The Pervert was right: his life was not the only one at stake. The girl’s life was, too.

“Kill,” came a voice inside him.

That wasn’t me, or the Assassin, or the Pervert speaking. It was the voice of the Beast, the voice of animal instinct demanding blood and death. But the Gladiator was no animal; he suppressed the desire to strike indiscriminately.

“Kill,” insisted the Beast.

“No!”

“Tear them to pieces!” The Beast said, not giving up.

“No!”

“Your honor is blind. Are you really prepared to die yourself and let the girl die also for a promise you made in another life? You were killed then, and you will be killed now. Who needs honor like that?” snarled the Beast, not wanting to lose his power.

“I need it. Honor is my life.”

“Fool! You will die! Don’t you understand? You will lose this life.”

“So? There will be another. And if not mine—then the life of the person I spare. The world turns on honor. Without it, there would be no truth, justice, valor, or loyalty. What would happen to people then? Who needs a life without honor? Everyone has his own concept of honor. It may not be

the same as mine, but it exists. Without honor, people would turn into a pack of wild animals. Without honor, I would become you!”

“But what kind of honor can other people have? What honor does Rich have? When he lost, he broke his word and ordered his gang to kill you. What honor is there in that?”

“Yet honor exists. A man must not be judged because of one misdeed. Without honor, he would never have become the leader of his gang.”

“You think about others too much. Think about yourself. Let me save you from your enemies. Give me control, and I will give you the strength to win.”

“Leave.”

Enraged, the Beast roared: “Give me control!”

The Gladiator sensed rage growing in him, filling every cell of his body.

“No,” exclaimed the Gladiator, fiercely clenching his fists. “*You* submit to me.”

A biker in front of him tried to punch him in the stomach. The Gladiator routinely blocked the blow and answered his opponent with a punch to the head. His opponent tried to retreat, but the Gladiator grabbed him by his jeans, pulled him forward, elbowed him in the face, and then, abruptly letting him go, kned him in the groin. A wild, primitive rage overwhelmed him. He was so angry at the Beast that he wanted to destroy everything. Fifteen.

As he was automatically counting the number of bikers remaining, the Gladiator realized that what he was doing was wrong: he was giving vent to his rage. These people were not his enemies, simply his opponents. Recognizing his mistake and instantly calming his rage, the Gladiator concentrated on the fight. The Gladiator used his ability to meditate and drowned out the Beast’s words in a sea of calmness that he let permeate his conscious mind. The Beast was gone. A sense of harmony arose and gave birth to serenity and restraint, bringing inner satisfaction. Everything else was a mirage of the past. Forgetting instantly about the Beast as though they had never spoken, the Gladiator switched from a defensive stance to an offensive stance. This was his fight. No one could tell him how to proceed. He felt certain of victory.

Several bikers rushed him, not realizing that the Gladiator himself was ready to attack. He did not wait for their attack: with an abrupt move,

he kicked the nearest biker, pivoted toward the second, ducked under a punch, and knocked the man off his feet with his shoulder. Another biker grabbed him by the arm. Only by preventing him from moving would they be able to deal with him. But the Gladiator knew what to do; he was familiar with the fight techniques of four worlds, because my memory and the memories of the Assassin and the Pervert held images of many fights, although most of them came from movies and books. The Gladiator rotated his forearm to the horizontal at chest height. Turning his body clockwise, he took a step back. By continuing to turn while simultaneously crouching, he increased the load on his opponent's arm by pushing down with his elbow. His opponent's hand opened, releasing his arm, then the Gladiator twisted the biker's arm and thrust him away with his foot. When the man stepped forward, the Gladiator kneed him in the groin. His opponent gasped and fell, doubled over in pain. Fourteen.

One biker, who was apparently somewhat familiar with martial arts, tried to execute a straight punch with both fists. Leaning backwards, he made a sudden lunge toward the Gladiator and struck at his abdomen with his right fist and at his head with his left. Returning to his initial position, he rotated his right forearm so that the inner surface was facing up. The strike had been done correctly. But the Gladiator was faster. Blocking both punches with his arms, he kicked the man in the stomach while simultaneously placing his hands in the knife-hand position with the forefingers held tightly together and extended, and the thumb bent tightly against the palm. Quickly closing the distance between them, he struck both of his opponent's ears with his open palms, stunning him. Thirteen.

Several bikers realized they would not be able to take the Gladiator with their bare hands and pulled knives out of their belts. One of them tried to stab the Gladiator in the side. The Gladiator spun, grabbed the hand holding the knife, and, grasping it strongly, pulled it toward himself. His opponent lost his balance and the Gladiator dragged him to the ground, falling backwards. When the Gladiator fell on his back, ignoring the pain he struck the biker in the neck with the back of his hand before the assailant could recover from the fall. With his other hand, which was still holding the hand with the knife, he continued twisting the hand until it opened and the knife fell onto the Gladiator's stomach. Another biker approached, who had decided it would be easier to finish the Gladiator while he was on the ground. The Gladiator used his knee to block the blow. Not wasting a second and grabbing the knife with his right hand, the Gladiator stabbed

the biker lying beside him a little below the hip. He cried out in pain. The wound was not fatal, but the man was out of the fight. Twelve.

Paying him no more mind, the Gladiator got to his feet to meet the new attacker with his full strength.

“Whoever comes at me with a sword shall die by the sword,” shouted the Gladiator.

This well-known phrase from his universe seemed extremely relevant to him. When another biker appeared in front of him with a knife, the Gladiator frowned. That biker apparently did not understand the threat he had made. Lacking confidence in his superiority, however, the biker was in no hurry to attack. The Gladiator, on the other hand, was sure of his skill and did not intend to wait. After feint toward his opponent’s head that forced him to back away, the Gladiator stepped forward with his left foot, transferred his weight to it, and began spinning clockwise. As he did so, he raised his right leg to waist height and bent it at the knee. With his right side towards his opponent, the Gladiator extended his leg sharply and struck the biker’s body with his heel. His spin greatly increased the force of the blow, knocking his opponent down and causing him to drop his knife. Deftly picking it up, the Gladiator stabbed the biker in the calf. A promise to punish with the sword whoever comes at him with one flashed through his brain. But he did not want to completely fulfill his promise and kill. He only wanted to neutralize his opponent. Eleven.

The Gladiator now faced a new biker, one who evidently did not understand that a weapon was useless, because he had a knife almost as long as a sword grasped firmly in his hand. The Gladiator instinctively jumped to the side, and when his opponent tried to stab him, the Gladiator grabbed the knife blade with his right hand and shifted to the right of the line of attack. Then, pressing down on the blade with his right hand, the Gladiator struck up against the bottom of his opponent’s hand with the left forearm. His opponent opened his hand. A trickle of blood appeared on the Gladiator’s palm, but he ignored it, knowing the wound was shallow. Clenching his fist and taking the knife by the handle in his other hand, he brought it up and stabbed the biker in the thigh. Another cry of pain. Another victory. Ten.

The Gladiator shot a quick glance at Eve. She was no longer blocked by bikers as too little of them remained standing. Eve had stopped struggling and was watching wide-eyed as he dispatched his opponents one by one.

“I wonder what she’s thinking now,” the Assassin mused.

She seemed to be drinking in the entire fight, trying to see and remember every move the Gladiator made. Apparently, she rarely got a chance to see one person defeating twenty-five strong young men in real life, not in a movie.

“We haven’t won yet, don’t bother the Gladiator,” said the Pervert.

“Don’t worry about the girl. Nothing’s going to happen to her—after all, we have a real Gladiator with us.”

“Your talk is distracting the Gladiator!” insisted the Pervert.

“But I don’t think he even hears us.”

“That’s enough! Both of you shut up!” I put in, enjoying the fight.

“I can hear you perfectly, you know,” added the Gladiator.

“I’m sorry if I distracted you,” muttered the Assassin.

The remaining bikers were in no hurry to attack. They bunched up to come at the Gladiator in a tight group. But the Gladiator knew how to deal with a crowd. He lunged at them and crashed into a biker. The man recoiled but was pushed forward by his buddies. Extending his arms out to the left and right sides, the Gladiator struck the bikers standing next to his target. Bringing his arms back, he grabbed an opponent’s T-shirt under the left elbow with his right hand and grasped the shoulder of the T-shirt with his left. Then the Gladiator jerked his arms sharply up and to the right, simultaneously taking a halfstep with his left leg toward his opponent’s right foot and hooking his left leg with his own right foot. He threw his opponent with a twisting movement of his arms, punching him in the armpit as he fell. He finished the man off with a kick to the kneecap. Nine.

The Gladiator jumped sideways without looking back. Another biker tried to hit the Gladiator. The Gladiator stepped back and struck his opponent’s neck with the edge of his hand, but the biker did not give way and kicked the Gladiator in the right side. Not moving his arm to block the kick, the Gladiator closed with his opponent, grabbed the top of his head with his left hand and his chin with the right. Twisting his opponent’s head while simultaneously forcing it backward, he threw his opponent to the ground. But another biker who had slipped up behind him prevented him from finishing off his opponent. Falling forward onto his hands, the Gladiator looked back and kicked the biker in the groin with his left foot. Grabbing his testicles and doubling over, the man forgot to jump aside. The

Gladiator immediately repeated the same kick, planting his heel against his opponent's nose and taking him out of the fight. Eight.

The next biker tried to attack from above. Bringing a knee to his chest, the Gladiator deflected the blow and kicked upward and back with his left foot. The Gladiator moved forward with his weight on his arms. Ready for a kick, his right leg moved toward his opponent, while his left knee was on the ground. The Gladiator kicked another biker in the knee with his right foot, then brought that leg back next to his left and got his entire body into a ball. That position protected his vital organs and let him continue the attack. Then, pushing sharply off the ground with his hands and straightening his right leg, the Gladiator kicked an opponent in the knee with his left foot. This blow caused the biker's body to turn part way around and exposed his back to attack. But noticing a threat from the side, the Gladiator decided to break off that attack. Somersaulting away from his opponent over his right shoulder, the Gladiator jumped to his feet, grabbed the biker's wrist, and tugged it towards himself, pulling the man to the ground. As he fell, the Gladiator dropped onto him, kneeling him in the stomach. Groaning in pain, the man tried to roll away, but the Gladiator, who had retained his hold on his wrist, elbowed him in the jaw with his other arm. Then, throwing his opponent aside, the gladiator sprang to his feet. This man would not be getting up soon, either. Seven.

Crouching and protecting his face with one hand, the Gladiator struck the kneecap of a lunging opponent with the open palm of his other hand. Then he grabbed both legs behind the knee and pulled the opponent towards himself to take his legs out from under him. Butting him in the stomach, he knocked his opponent onto his back. Turning to another opponent, the Gladiator jumped to the left in order to avoid a punch and counterattacked with a fist to the solar plexus. However, the biker managed to block him. Almost simultaneously, the Gladiator kicked his opponent in the shin. That strike reached its target. The Gladiator continued his attack. He punched with his right arm, aiming at the lower abdomen, and struck at his opponent's diaphragm with his left. Blocking the punches from below, the biker left the upper part of his body unprotected. The Gladiator rotated his left arm up and struck his opponent on the neck with the edge of his hand. Then the Gladiator grabbed his T-shirt in both hands at the waist and shifted abruptly sideways to block a second biker's punch from the side with his opponent's body. Suddenly releasing his stunned opponent, who just had been struck by his own buddy, the Gladiator threw

his right elbow up and to the left, striking his opponent on the left cheek, then ended a series of punches with a precise blow to the solar plexus. Six.

Leaving the fallen biker, the Gladiator darted to the side, away from a dangerous cluster of arms and legs. He took two steps, turned, crouched, and extended a leg to undercut an opponent who was running at him. Another biker rushed at him with his arms outstretched in an effort to grab him. The Gladiator stood and let himself be taken in a bear hug, then struck his opponent's ears with both palms. The biker released his hold on him. The Gladiator kned his stunned opponent in the groin and turned to find another target. He found it almost comical how insufficiently these men protected most vulnerable part of their body. Five.

The Assassin and I were taking it easy, watching the battle from inside our body. We knew the bikers still on their feet would be unable to hurt the Gladiator. Even the Pervert was no longer nervous; he now recognized the Gladiator's skill and knew that Eve was no longer in danger. The fight was still underway, however; anything could happen.

The Gladiator was surrounded by five bikers who intended to attack simultaneously. The Gladiator's plans did not include letting his opponents carry out coordinated attacks. He threw himself toward the left but stopped before reaching an opponent, took one step back and kicked out with his right leg in case there was someone standing there, then rushed forward. He ducked under an upraised arm and knocked one opponent off his feet with his shoulder, then spun around and punched a biker who was running at him in the nose. Someone grabbed the Gladiator's wrist. The Gladiator leapt up and turned a complete flip in the air. Unable to hold onto his arm, the opponent let him go, and upon landing the Gladiator punched his exposed belly. His opponent fell back, writhing in pain. Another biker grabbed the Gladiator by the throat with both hands in an attempt to choke him. Keeping his wits about him, the Gladiator lowered his chin, tensed his neck muscles, got his thumbs under his opponent's little fingers, and tried to straighten them out. As soon as his opponent's grip loosened, the Gladiator made a half turn while simultaneously raising his opponent's left arm above his head and crossing his arms. Turning, the Gladiator kicked the biker in the groin and then, when he doubled over, kned him in the head. Four.

The Gladiator was beginning to feel very tired. Unfortunately, this was my body, not his; it had not undergone the rigorous training for this kind

of effort that he had. He was breathing hard and felt that the body we shared was working at the limit of its capabilities, and if the fight went on much longer he would pass out. Not counting Rich and the two bikers holding Eve, four opponents remained. Twenty of their comrades were lying or sitting on the ground, moaning in pain. The four still on their feet, who had already taken a couple of punches, were exchanging looks and were not eager to attack. That gave him a necessary breather. Ignoring the hostile and angry faces of his remaining able-bodied opponents, the Gladiator sat down, crossed his legs, and closed his eyes. He immersed himself in meditation, slowly getting his body back into fighting shape.

The bikers did not know what to do for an entire half minute. The Gladiator's behavior caught them by surprise, and they spent a lot of time deciding on their next action.

"Finish him!" Rich shouted, not realizing that the fight was lost. "He's gone unconscious. Do it!"

They surrounded him but dared not come closer. Finally, the biker standing behind the Gladiator approached from the left and tried to kick him in the head. But the Gladiator had already anticipated the threat. He blocked with his right arm, grabbed the leg with his left, and moved back. The biker hopped on one foot. When he tried to free his leg, the Gladiator kicked the inner thigh of his right leg with his own right foot, then struck a second blow to the inside of his knee. His opponent lost his balance and fell. Finishing off his opponent with a precise kick to the neck, the Gladiator turned to face the others. Three.

Three bikers rushed him simultaneously. Their arms and legs flashed, but they did more to interfere with each other than to present any kind of threat. The Gladiator skillfully deflected their blows and either retreated or advanced as required by the rhythm of the fight. He gave one of them a rising palm strike to the nose, then knocked the breath out of him with a powerful punch to the chest. Two.

His remaining two opponents posed no threat, but they did not intend to give up. Apparently deciding to fight to the end, they attacked the Gladiator frenetically, ignoring the pain. One of them got carried away and leaned forward, and the Gladiator threw him over his shoulder. The second tried to punch the Gladiator in the head, but he responded with a kick to the thigh. Then he executed a series of kicks that forced his opponent to retreat. When the biker had almost run into a wall, the Gladiator fainted

as though he intended to execute a palm strike to the head. His opponent raised his arms to protect himself. The Gladiator quickly bent over and grabbed his legs above the knees, lifting and throwing him onto his back by pushing against his stomach with his shoulder. If the biker had been standing a few inches closer to the wall, he would have struck the brick with his head as he fell. But the Gladiator did not want to kill and therefore judged the distance accurately. He gave him a quick kick to the groin, then turned to face his last opponent. That biker, however, was nowhere to be seen. Realizing the battle was lost, he had taken to his heels. Zero.

The Gladiator looked at the two bikers holding Eve and started walking towards them. They immediately let go of the girl and took two steps back.

“All right if we go?” one of them asked.

“Go,” the Gladiator said, wearily waving his hand in dismissal.

They heaved a sigh of relief, turned, and ran to their motorcycles. Rich was gone, too: he had left before the others—when only three opponents remained in the fight. The Gladiator lowered his hands, breathing heavily. The bikers lay around him in the alley, groaning and gradually recovering consciousness. Eve ran over and hugged me. Then she suddenly pulled away and, looking me in the eye, softly said:

“Now I believe you. You’re not human. No ordinary person could have done what you did. You’re no wimp, but you don’t look like someone who trains in martial arts as a sport, either. Not even a world champion in karate or kung fu could have handled a mob like this. No one could. So you’re an alien.”

“No! I am no alien! I am the Gladiator. One of the personalities in this body. In my world, what I did would not be considered superhuman. It would be expected of a gladiator. I began training at age twelve.”

“Whatever you say,” Eve instantly agreed. She was too astounded at what she had seen to argue.

“Not bad, nobody died. There might be a few broken bones, but they’ll survive,” the Assassin said admiringly.

“Good job!” the Pervert said enthusiastically. “And thanks for saving Eve. She couldn’t have handled them without you.”

“Still, she may not have been in this situation if we hadn’t been here. We challenged their leader to a fight,” I remarked.

“The Assassin is right—they are all alive. There were times when I wanted to strike a fatal blow, but I restrained the Beast.”

“Good for you, you kept your word.”

“Now, it’s my turn to talk to Eve,” I said. “I love talking to an intelligent person.”

“All right, go ahead,” agreed the Gladiator.

But before relinquishing control, he suddenly felt weak and distant, and as though he were rising up in the air. All three sensations hit him simultaneously. They all had something in common, and at the same time they made him feel extremely detached from the rest of us. At that moment, the Gladiator felt that he wanted to return to his own world, that he wanted to make amends for what he had done and never bloody his hands again. This was his chance; the way back was open. He did not understand how he knew it, but it was so. He only needed to make a slight effort, and he would return. He not only would be alive again, he would return to his past, to a time when he was not yet a killer.

“I want to go back to the beginning of the match,” the Gladiator shouted, but he felt as though no one heard his cry.

There was no answer. His shout apparently reached someone, however. Suddenly, an impeccably white light as bright as sunlit snow came from some unknown source and gently enveloped the Gladiator, banishing the darkness that surrounded him. He immediately felt weightless, and a moment later, bathed in the ageless absoluteness of the eternal enemy of darkness, he hurtled off to change his world’s history.



## CHAPTER 17.

# Repentance Day

“Fightin’ for what they did not create,  
Cryin’ peace while inflicting pain.  
Man deciding another man’s fate,  
Claiming power in their God’s name.  
Words of love but their actions speak hate,  
Seems like mankind has gone insane.  
Repent, repent, repent, repent.”  
*(An excerpt from the song “Repent” by Shaggy)*

“Papa, Papa! Let’s go to see the fights!”  
I tore myself away from the newspaper and looked down at my eight-year-old son.  
“What fights?” I asked, pretending not to understand.  
“What do you mean? What fights? The holiday fights. The ones held on this day every year.”  
“And what day is this?”  
“It’s the third day of summer, Repentance Day. You know that!”  
“He’s just kidding,” my twelve-year-old son put in. “Of course he knows. How could he forget.”  
“Why wouldn’t he?”  
“You’re too little to understand.”

“I’m not little either! Say it!”

“You are, too. You’re just a little squirt.”

“No I’m not. I’m big.”

I looked at my two children:

“Nicholas, don’t tease your brother.”

“Tell us about Repentance Day. Please? I’ve forgotten some stuff.”

“Well, okay.”

The children sat down on the floor at my feet and got ready to listen. Laying my newspaper aside, I thought back to my first time in the Arena twenty years ago.

I squinted in the bright light as I came out of the semidarkness of the corridor leading into the arena. My oiled body shone in the rays of the sun. Tanned, muscular, and glistening, I looked like an ancient Greek god to the spectators. A roar of welcome sounded from the bleachers. This was my first appearance, my test for the title of Gladiator. I’d dreamed of this day since I was a child, but it was only now, after completing twenty-nine full cycles, that my Master said I was ready. Half blinded by the light, I paused for a few seconds to let my eyes adjust. Once I was able to make out the people in the stands and saw my opponents standing in the group before me, I headed toward them.

In this, my first match, I had to defeat fifty young pupils fifteen or sixteen years old—they were practically children. For me, this was a test; for them, it was a weeding-out process. The ones that survived this match would have improved their chances of becoming gladiators. When they reached the age of eighteen or nineteen, they would be subjected to another weeding out: twenty would fight a candidate for the title of true gladiator. Those remaining alive after this second selection would receive many more years of training and then undergo their last test in a fight like the one I was facing now. After moving from candidate to Gladiator, I would fight a real gladiator one-on-one in my third match of the day. Many candidates were killed in the third match after winning the first two. Becoming a true gladiator was no simple matter. That’s why they were so highly valued and were cheered loudly when they entered the Arena.

I walked briskly towards the crowd of young people, intending to beat them to the attack. Several options for my attack flashed through my head.

But after taking a couple of steps, I stopped as though I had run into an invisible wall.

“Why am I doing this?” I suddenly asked myself.

It seemed for a moment that I knew what was to come. A vague image of the fight appeared at the edge of my consciousness. I would run forward, break through the crowd, and swing my arms, striking my opponents indiscriminately and knocking them aside like manikins. Block, punch, kick, punch. One opponent down. I would turn toward another and do the same thing again. Faces would flash before me, but I wouldn't look at them as I would concentrate on my attack and on striking vulnerable areas. A sea of arms and legs would surge toward me, but I would be quicker.

For me, they weren't children. They were my adversaries. But I was stronger, faster, better trained, and superior to them in every way. I had to strike them down and kill them.

“But why?” I asked myself again.

*Because that is what you were taught to do. This is the only way to become a gladiator,* I answered myself.

“Why?” I was puzzled and dissatisfied with my answer.

*Because honor is my life, the honor of a gladiator. Nothing is more important than honor. Nothing is more important than the title of gladiator. There is no greater honor than to appear in the Arena and fight someone like me for trophies and respect.*

“Why?” I insisted.

*Everyone wants to be rewarded! Everyone wants to receive a trophy after winning in the Arena.*

“Why?” I kept asking myself, dissatisfied with such unsophisticated responses.

But no other answer came. And truthfully speaking, why did I need a gold statuette of a gladiator? What would I do with it? I didn't even have a home of my own where I could keep it.

I froze, realizing that I didn't know why I had to fight. The fighters came close enough for me to see their childish faces and eyes. How could I attack and kill them? How could I possibly come to terms with the idea of becoming a killer? I looked into the blue, gray, green, hazel, brown, and black eyes and a chill of horror swept over me as I realized what I had been about to do. I had been like them once, full of confidence in my own

abilities and proud that I would be fighting a candidate. But now I was an adult who understood that the sacrifice was meaningless. Was it really necessary to fight without rules and shower the arena with innocent blood? Was there really no other way?

The children approached and surrounded me. They could attack at any second.

“I am not going to fight you!” I shouted, and my cry carried throughout the entire Arena. “I refuse to kill children!”

The children froze in indecision; their faces stared at me in surprise, not understanding what was happening.

“I will not fight!” I repeated.

“He’s just afraid,” came a cry from the group. “Attack!”

They rushed at me, trying to overwhelm me. Small fists flashed before me, but I wriggled, retreated, parried, jumped to the side, and did everything I could to avoid hitting, breaking their bones, and killing them. My training told me that if I had truly been fighting, eight children would already be dead, three would have broken arms, and one a broken leg. But I didn’t fight; I hit no one, simply blocked punches, retreated, dodged, and evaded them. They followed me, trying and failing time and again to knock me down. They came at me in waves and bounced off, like waves smashing against rocks.

Five minutes passed, and I was still surrounded by fifty boys. Several of them, the youngest, sat down on the ground to catch their breath after chasing me. None of them had even been injured. I continued fending them off and running, holding myself in check, keeping my murderous rage from hurting these foolish little boys. They believed that victory would be a great achievement for them and a disgrace for me, but weren’t seeing the complete picture; they didn’t understand the stupidity and foolishness of what was happening. Who needed a victory in this fight? The spectators? They didn’t care who won. All they wanted was a thrilling and interesting spectacle. So why should I sully my hands with blood and take the lives of these innocent children who were only doing what their masters had told them to do? I was like them myself not that long ago. It hadn’t been years or even weeks: just six minutes had passed since I suddenly and surprisingly grasped the entire absurdity of this farce.

I didn’t know what had come over me, what caused me to change and refuse to fight. I sensed that the answer was hidden somewhere in

the depths of my mind, but I would be unable to get at the truth without meditating. However, I was firmly convinced that I was doing the right thing; there wasn't even a shadow of doubt in my mind. I knew only that I was right, and that was enough to prevent me from killing, to keep me from mutilating these young boys who knew nothing about the true warrior's honor.

Five minutes passed, and nothing changed except that the number of boys needing a rest had tripled. I knew of course that this couldn't go on forever. I would tire also, and then I'd die. But I hoped that wouldn't happen anytime soon and I'd be able to treat the spectators in the stands to a fight without blood. All I needed to do was show the spectators that a fight could be bloodless, that they could enjoy a spectacle in which none of the participants died.

"Stop the fight!" a voice thundered suddenly.

My opponents hesitated, looking around in search of the owner of the voice. Some of them took advantage of the general confusion to continue trying to attack me, but I parried their blows with ease.

"Stop immediately!" The group in front of me parted, and I saw a gladiator running toward me.

The boys started whispering among themselves, admiring his muscular body. However, they had looked at me the same way before the fight. And although everybody froze, I remained alert and ready to repel any attack.

"I am Shard—Panther Fang," the gladiator said, bowing first in a mark of respect as a senior gladiator to a junior.

"I am Nik, no nickname," I introduced myself and bowed to the gladiator without taking my eyes off him.

For a moment, it felt as though I had faced Shard before. This was the first time I had been so close to him, but our upcoming fight flashed through my memory as though it had already happened. I even knew that he would defeat me. Was it *déjà vu*, or was my imagination playing tricks on me? I didn't know the answer, and now wasn't the time to dig into my memory.

"Nik No Nickname, why are you not fighting? I have been watching you for ten minutes, but I have not seen you hit even once. Is this some kind of trick?"

"No tricks, Shard. I refuse to kill these children."

“But why not? If you wish to become a gladiator, you must win this bout.”

“I do not want to be a gladiator who kills.”

Shard looked at me penetratingly. He stared at me as though he were digging into my brain, searching for an explanation for the strange game I was playing. But I wasn't playing; I was completely serious, and I believed Shard saw that in my eyes. He realized I wasn't joking.

“So you do not want to be a gladiator? Then why are you here? Why have you trained for seventeen years if you do not want to be in the Arena?”

“I did not say that I do not want to be a gladiator. I simply do not want to be a gladiator who kills or maims others.”

“But you will not win otherwise. Is something wrong with you? I will call a physician,” Shard said, deciding that the heat had affected my mind.

“I am healthy, Shard. My body obeys me perfectly. I am convinced that you are the sick one if you believe that blood and death are honorable,” I said, trying to convince the gladiator that he was wrong.

“No, honor is my life!”

“And what is your life? What are you doing to help society? What makes you think your life is more important than the lives of the people you kill without remorse and without thinking. A killer—that is what you are. A killer and nothing more. I saw you fight in the arena four years ago. How many did you kill then?”

“I fought for the title of gladiator.”

“You killed! You crushed your opponents! You ended their lives!”

“I had no choice.”

“There is always a choice. I have just fought for ten minutes without killing a single boy. You could have done the same. So why did you become a gladiator, Shard?”

The gladiator lowered his eyes in thought. He said nothing for three minutes, and the young pupils around us remained silent and attentive. The entire arena was quiet, waiting for Panther Fang's answer. It was so quiet that I could hear the hum of a mosquito several meters away. Finally, the gladiator raised his eyes; they sparkled in the sunlight. The lines in his face smoothed out and he looked as he had the first time he walked into the arena.

“I wanted people to admire me. I wanted to be strong and unbeatable, a role model for boys, the person I had wanted to become when I was a child.”

“And do you think people admire your kills? Do you think young boys should emulate you and kill others?”

“Of course not.”

“So what kind of role model are you? One of cruelty? Of savagery and brutality? I remember how you made short work of the boys in your first match. Look around you. These are just kids!”

Shard did as I asked and looked at them. The hard look in his eyes faded as he looked at the boys surrounding us. Like me, he saw children. Also like me, he looked into the faces of his opponents for the first time.

“But fighting to the death is the tradition. We have done it for a thousand years,” Shard tried to protest, but he was already realizing that it was a losing argument.

“Must our traditions remain unchanged? We are not the savages we were a thousand years ago, nor is our society the cruel one of a hundred years ago. It is time to change this tradition. How can a modern civilized society allow this slaughter? It is possible to fight without killing. I know it can be done. Is it a show that they want?” I said, pointing at the bleachers. “Let us give them a show featuring a nonlethal martial art. We can dance without killing and fight without shedding blood. Everyone will like it. Did you not hear how the spectators applauded my skill when I bloodlessly fought off each attacker? Did they not applaud and shout approval whenever I eluded my opponents?”

In addition to the spectators who had come to watch the fight and the youths who had come to die, we were also being observed by my Master. He couldn't hear what we were saying, but I hoped that in his heart he would approve of what I was doing. The tradition of the tournament would change radically if there were no killing in the Arena. I knew that old people resisted change, but in this case altering the rules would save my Master's life. I felt that he had specifically delayed this fight because he didn't want to die so young. Indeed, I had been ready to become a real gladiator several years ago. My Master finally gave his approval for this contest when delay was no longer possible, when I was approaching the age limit for becoming a gladiator.

Shard looked into my eyes again and thought for several seconds. He

sensed that I was telling the truth. And for a gladiator, honesty is an inseparable part of his martial honor.

“I thought you were afraid or were playing some kind of strange game, but now I see it is not so,” he finally said. “We are the same, you and I. We are of the same blood. What you are attempting requires much courage. More than I had, more than any gladiator before you. You are right—our tradition can be changed. Life is your honor. Follow where your honor leads.”

Shard extended his arm to me and I took it, grasping of my former opponent’s wrist firmly.

“Do not forget that I am a gladiator, and you are only a candidate. But I will wait impatiently until you are able to fight me.”

“Thank you, Shard.”

“Everyone listen!” Shard shouted, fixing his piercing eyes on the boys around us. “As the champion, I am changing the fight rules. From now on, anyone who maims another will be forever disqualified from fighting in the arena. There will be no more killing or serious injuries. Striking the head or neck, breaking bones, and employing other lethal techniques are prohibited.”

“But how can we fight then?” one of the boys shouted. “How can we win?”

“Nik—Wise Lion—will show you.”

I silently bowed to the gladiator, thanking him for my nickname.

Shard turned to me and softly said, “Now it is up to you to show how to fight without staining your honor.”

I bowed again, paying tribute to a senior gladiator.

“I will be paying close attention to make sure both sides obey the new rules,” the Gladiator announced in a loud voice as he left the field of battle.

I stood surrounded by my fifty opponents and smiled, greatly relieved that I wouldn’t have to break my word. Exactly what word that was, I didn’t know, because I’d forgotten promising myself I wouldn’t kill.

I rushed into the group of boys, hitting, bending, twisting like a snake, and executing leg sweeps. I continued striking, turning, blocking arms, crouching, allowing an opponent to advance, and retreating. Swinging my arms, I tried to grab hold of something, but my hands met only empty air. Leaping and twisting to the side, I looked around, took a breath, and again

ran into the group, fearlessly dispensing blows to the left and right because I knew they weren't fatal.

I was very familiar with the anatomical structure of the human body and the location of pressure points, and I did my best to strike the critical spots precisely without sufficient force to kill. That round took five times longer than it would have if I had killed my opponents, but I won it without shedding a single drop of an opponent's blood. The oil on my slippery body mingled with sweat. A master's assistant handed me a towel. My head was buzzing with fatigue, and sweat was getting into my eyes.

"Where is my Master?" I asked.

"I am here," Jin-Jo answered. "I am here, my pupil."

Jin-Jo came up to me and give me a powerful hug.

"What happened?" he asked. "What kind of fight is it when you are not trying to kill your opponents?"

"As it is his right as champion, Shard changed the rules, Master. The Arena has seen its last victim."

Jin-Jo shook his head.

"Is that why I am still alive?"

"Yes, Master. You need not die because of me. Shard has changed the rules of the competition forever."

"But how is it possible to fight without killing?"

"You just saw how it can be done for yourself. There are worlds where civilized people fight according to rules and win fights on points or by other scoring methods, without killing.

"What worlds?" Jin-Jo squinted at me, as though he were seeing me for the first time.

"Oh I am sorry, Master. I do not know why I said that."

"You are tired. Rest. The next round will be harder."

After taking a short rest and pulling myself together, I returned to the arena. I was facing a fight with twenty pupils trained in unarmed combat who possessed lightning-fast reactions almost equal to mine. I didn't wait for them to come to me but ran quickly forward. Just before reaching them, I swerved abruptly to the side. Avoiding several flying kicks, I mowed down the youths in front of me with my foot.

There was music playing in my soul as I fought, and I took pleasure in

being faster and more skillful than my opponents. I knew I'd win, knew that I'd fight Shard, Panther Fang, and no one would be able to stop me. Honor is my life. Glory is my victory.

"And that's what happened," I said, finishing the story for my children.

"But you didn't tell us about the most important thing, Papa!"

"Oh yes, I almost forgot. I fought Shard. He was a very good gladiator, but he was accustomed to killing and I wasn't. It was hard for him to avoid using lethal techniques. He was constantly on edge, holding himself back. But I didn't have to restrain myself, because I wasn't used to killing and won easily. So I beat him, too."

"Then what?"

"I became the champion. I ordered all gladiators to repent for the deaths they had caused. They did, and that's how this day came to be called Repentance Day. It didn't happen immediately. It took another ten years, after my idea of a bloodless contest became popular and spread around the world."

"But Papa, I've seen gladiators hit each other in the face! How can they do that?"

"Some of the rules Shard established twenty years ago have changed. Others have been improved. Striking the face is allowed if a gladiator is wearing special soft gloves. In matches where the gladiator doesn't kick with his legs, it's called boxing. We divided the original single martial art into several: boxing, kickboxing, karate, wrestling."

"Where did those names come from?"

"I don't know, Nicholas. I just came up with them, but I sometimes feel as though there was something mysterious about how I did that. Really mysterious..."

Suddenly, it was like I heard a voice in my head saying some words or urging me to do something. It was inside me, yet it sounded too distant for me to gather what it was saying. There was something strange about it. But after a few seconds it was gone quiet; the voice had faded away. I heard nothing other than the beating of my heart and my breathing.

"But that's no answer. For me, the answer is silence.

And that says a lot.

Why do we need light when we have darkness?

God has forgotten the answer," I muttered a poem that seemed appropriate for what I experienced just now, and picked up my paper.



## CHAPTER 18.

# The Pervert and Eve

“You touched my heart, you touched my soul.  
You changed my life and all my goals.  
And love is blind and that I knew when,  
My heart was blinded by you.

I know your fears and you know mine.  
We’ve had our doubts but now we’re fine,  
And I love you, I swear that’s true.  
I cannot live without you.

Goodbye my lover.  
Goodbye my friend.  
You have been the one.  
You have been the one for me.”

*(An excerpt from the song “Goodbye my lover” by James Blunt)*

Once the Gladiator’s consciousness had departed my body, my eyes rolled back in my head and I started to collapse. Eve grabbed me and tried to hold me up, but she only managed to slow my fall and prevent me from striking the asphalt as I passed out. Finding myself lying on the ground, I came to my senses and slid into control over my body.

“Are you okay?” Eve asked sympathetically as she bent over me.

“Yes, I’m better now.” I answered, opening my eyes. “The fight took a lot out of me. I need some time to recover my strength.”

My entire body hurt. I could feel my muscles twitching and my heart beating wildly. The Gladiator had regulated all my organs while he was in control and felt no fatigue, but I wasn’t him. I did not have such effective management of my muscles. All I wanted to do now was lie on my back and sleep for a few days. Eve gave me her hand and helped me stand up.

“You’re not hurt?”

I opened my fist and showed her the bloody cut on my palm.

“Just a scratch.”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes.”

The Assassin, the Pervert, and I held a short conversation as I was getting to my feet.

“Where’s the Gladiator?” we all three wondered.

“He left.”

“But how? And why?”

“I think he simply wanted to go back.”

“But he was killed in his own world.”

“That would mean he’s dead, but I think he went back into his own past. He refused to kill. Maybe he was given a second chance, a chance to change his fate,” I suggested.

“Get real. You only get a second chance in fairytales,” the Assassin chuckled.

“Think about it. Didn’t you get a second chance when you came to this body instead of dying?”

“Then he got a third chance. Lucky guy!”

“I wouldn’t wish luck like that on my friends.”

“Look, there’s no point in arguing. Our opinion is nothing more than a theory. We aren’t likely to ever know what happened. The question for us is what to do now.”

“Nothing. Let’s just keep on doing what we were doing and see what develops.”

“I don’t suppose we really have a choice.”

So we came to a consensus, and each of us was caught up in his own thoughts.

Eve looked around, checking to see whether the bikers wanted to resume the fight. But none of them had a burning desire to take it up again. Those who could stand got on their bikes and rode off without saying a word.

“Let’s go back to the station,” she suggested.

“You aren’t planning on putting me behind bars again, are you?” I asked, half joking.

Eve smiled in response.

“You didn’t start the fight, and beside that you were protecting a woman. You’re innocent in the eyes of the law. No, I simply want to get my gun, just in case. As you just saw, being a cop in this town has its dangers... And I’d like to know how you managed to deal with twenty guys all by yourself.”

“There were twenty-four of them, not including Richard who was knocked down before the big fight broke out, and it wasn’t me. It was the Gladiator. He studied the art of unarmed combat since he was twelve years old, and his training was nothing like the way we do it in this world. It’s much more exacting and grueling where he came from. He didn’t go to school, and he got no days off. For seventeen years, all he did was train. If he’d fought in his own body, he wouldn’t even be out of breath. This fight was like a morning workout for him.”

“Wow! Do you have a lot of personalities in you as interesting as him? Which one are you?”

“You’ve already spoken with the Assassin and the Pervert. Me... I’m the Ordinary Man, a software engineer. I don’t have any special talents. This is my body. I’m from this world, but I’m not from around here. I got in town from Canada a few days ago. This is where I grew up.”

“So how did all these people end up in your body?”

“All I remember is that I was walking down the street at night. Then I suddenly awoke, not knowing where I was or what was happening to me, and found myself inhabited by several other minds. I can only guess at how it came about. I have a theory, but as you might imagine it’s only a theory. I’ve never heard of this happening to anyone before.”

“Neither have I.”

“Eve, what do you know about perverts?”

I don't know why I asked her that. I told myself I was doing it for the Pervert, but in truth I suspected that I was doing it for myself. I saw similarities between the Pervert and myself, and that bothered me because I didn't want to be like him. The Pervert eventually repented of what he had done, but I had come close to the edge myself, and, although I hadn't crossed it, I'd been unable to see the harm in it. Therefore, my conscience didn't truly bother me, because it was basically clean, even though tarnished. The Beast in my soul demanded violence and sexual cruelty because it was its nature, but thus far I had gone no further than having indecent and immoral thoughts. Lust pushed me to the edge, but it can take a long time to reach the edge, especially if you're in no hurry. However, I decided it would have been better not to start down that road at all.

“What kind of perverts? Sexual?”

Eve pronounced the words “sexual” and “pervert” calmly, as though we had been talking about the subject for a long time. I blushed anyway, unsure whether I was ready to discuss this topic with a girl I barely knew. Seeing my embarrassment, Eve smiled slightly and reassured me.

“I've dealt with perverts before. We had one here several years ago. He liked attacking defenseless women at night. He would begin by asking them to have sex with him, and then when they refused, he'd try to take them by force. Fortunately, it was easy to fight him off, and nobody got raped. It's amazing the people you meet when you're a police detective.”

“What are they like, these perverts?”

“Most people think sexual perverts are suffering from a serious mental illness, schizophrenia, and there's nothing to be done for them. However, only about twenty-five percent of sexual perverts are actually mentally ill. Although the other seventy-five percent are mentally unstable, they're basically healthy and are very respectable people. The man I dealt with was completely normal. He was just a thrill seeker, and he was out to get his thrills wherever he could. He said in his confession that women struggling really turned him on.”

I was a little disappointed in Eve's answer. I've known without hearing her explanation that my urges were nowhere close to being crimes. My impulse to sleep with all of my female classmates was over the top, but only on moral and ethical grounds, though it had a solid mental and physio-

logical foundation. The violence I might commit wasn't illegal, because I wanted women to give themselves to me willingly.

Seeing that it was hard for me to talk about the subject, the Pervert asked to take control. I acquiesced immediately, while the Assassin kept silent, preferring to watch from the sidelines.

"Have you dealt with pedophiles very often?" the Pervert asked, taking the bull by the horns.

"No, not often," Eve answered, unsurprised by the question. "But statistics show that pedophiles commit about forty-nine percent of all sexual crimes. And twenty-eight percent of those that do so are mentally healthy. In fact, there's no clear profile of pedophiles. Anyone could be a pedophile. And they aren't all dangerous. Pedophilia manifests itself in a lot of people as a desire to look at child pornography, have sexual fantasies about children, or communicate with children on the Internet. If you're asking about sex offenders, child rape by a pedophile is the most common type of crime. These people usually exhibit low moral and ethical standards. They're frequently promiscuous and feel that they're above the law and can do anything they want. But it's hard to identify them, even with psychological tests."

"But it is possible?"

"I think so, yes. I recently read about research done by Ray Blanchard, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto. He writes that pedophiles are much more likely than others to have undergone traumatic brain injuries before reaching the age of thirteen. They're generally shorter, and their IQs are below average. Also, a higher percentage of pedophiles are left-handed or ambidextrous."

"Sorry, what do you mean by 'ambidextrous'?"

"An ambidextrous person can use their right and left hands equally well."

"So how would you define a pedophile?"

"According to the World Health Organization, pedophiles have unusual sexual impulses that cause them to be uncomfortable in public settings if they haven't given into their desires and acted on them for at least six months. They prefer prepubescent or pubescent children. They must be at least sixteen years of age and five years or more older than the object of their sexual desire."

“And if a person is attracted to both children and adults?”

“That’s called nonexclusive pedophilia and is common among people with pedophilic disorder. But why do you ask? Surely...”

“Yes,” the Pervert sighed, dropping his head slightly and avoiding Eve’s eyes. “One of our personalities is a sexual pervert. Me.”

Eve stopped walking and took our hand.

“Do you need help? How far have you gone?”

“The attraction is under control now. But in the other world, he... no, I... couldn’t resist. I want to know how I can get cured.”

“I’m no doctor, so I can’t advise you. And it’s my understanding that treatment isn’t very effective.”

“Still, what are some ways I can get rid of this obsession?”

“There’s behavioral therapy, which aims at reducing sexual attraction to children and increasing attraction to adult women.”

“How does it work?”

“The treatment is rather unconventional. First, the pedophile is asked to masturbate to his sexual fantasies involving children, and then, when he’s getting close to orgasm, he has to switch to images of adult women. It’s called orgasmic reorientation. Or the patient is asked to engage in masturbatory satiation, meaning he masturbates to images of adults in the first stage, and to images of children in the second stage, the refractory period. Masturbation the second time is usually more painful, which should theoretically reduce arousal by children. Then there’s aversion therapy, in which a patient is given an electrical shock when sexually aroused by children, or toxic substances that induce the gag reflex are used.”

“Somehow none of those treatments appeal to me.”

“Well, as I said, those methods are outdated and ineffective.”

We reached the police station.

“Wait for me here, I’ll be right back,” Eve said and went inside.

We stayed on the street, the Pervert wondering if he’d spooked her. Twenty minutes passed, and Eve still hadn’t come out. The Pervert was starting to think that, at best, she wouldn’t come at all, and, at worst, she would come out and arrest us.

“Don’t worry,” I said, trying to calm the Pervert. “You said yourself that you know her. Do you really think she could betray you?”

“No, my Eve isn’t like that. But this is a different world, and she’s never met anyone with so many different personalities. She might be calling a psychiatric hospital to consult with a doctor or assembling a SWAT team to arrest us.”

“No, she simply needs to freshen up after the brawl,” the Assassin interjected. “You don’t know women very well, do you?”

“I think I’m the one with the most experience with the female sex,” objected the Pervert.

“Do you mean those whores you slept with?”

“They weren’t all whores! Some of them were nice girls...”

“Whose trust you took advantage of.”

“Yeah? You’re one to talk! You and Jennifer...”

“In the first place, I’d known Jen for two years before we hooked up. And in the second place, you know very well how that turned out.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to remind you about that. I’m just nervous, and I can’t think straight. After all, Eve was my first love.”

“No, I should be the one to apologize to you. I hate it when girls have sex so freely with boys they barely know. There was a time when young people didn’t have sex before marriage, and that’s the way it should be.”

The Pervert wanted to say something, but feeling someone’s eyes on him, he turned to face the station entrance. Eve stood on the threshold with fresh lipstick, a neatly tucked blouse, and a holster at her side. The Assassin was right—all women were the same. Eve smiled broadly.

“I’m sorry it took so long. My boss wanted to talk, and I couldn’t say no.”

“Did you tell him about the fight?”

“Just that Rich was following me and looking for an opportunity to attack.”

“Did you say anything about me?”

“Not a word. Mind you, though, I’m only helping you because you’re such an interesting person.”

“Thanks.”

“I imagine you’re hungry again. Do you want to go back to the restaurant?”

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind getting something to eat. I’m always hungry after a fight.”

“And we forgot to pay for our lunch.”

“That’s right. Somehow that slipped my mind.”

“Incidentally, I’ve thought about your questions some more. What made you decide that you’re a pedophile?”

The Pervert hesitated as we started walking, not knowing how to tell her about the rape.

“I once got close to a fourteen-year-old girl,” he finally admitted and to remove all doubt added, “intimately close...”

“Well, psychologically speaking she wasn’t a child. According to the definition of pedophilia, a child is someone who is prepubescent or pubescent, that is, girls younger than fourteen. As I understand it, you weren’t attracted to her because she was a child, but because she already had a fully formed adult body.”

“I don’t know. Do you think so?”

“Are you attracted to ten- or eleven-year-old girls? Do you find them sexually attractive?”

“No! They’re still just children.”

“There, you see? You aren’t interested in children. You like young girls’ bodies, or you like being the first person they have sex with. But that’s true of all men. I don’t think you have pedophilia. Nor do you seem to be a run-of-the-mill sexual pervert. From the way you talk, I’m convinced that your IQ is above average. When you raped her, you knew her.”

“Huh? How do you know that?”

“That’s easy. If you hadn’t raped her, you wouldn’t consider yourself a pervert. And statistically most girls who’ve been raped knew their rapist. So you did know her before you raped her?”

“Yes, we’d met several months earlier.”

“And did you jump on her in the street after knowing her for several months?”

“No, I invited her to come home with me.”

Eve laughed. “So you simply didn’t restrain yourself. Not every man could wait months.”

“Is this funny to you?”

“I’m sorry, of course not. Your seduction of a young girl was, is, and will continue to be a crime. You shouldn’t have done it under any circumstances. You may have destroyed her psyche by causing her to have a chronic aversion to intimacy with a man. That’s definitely not funny and if I had any tangible proof of your crime, I’d arrest you. But what I find funny is that you blame yourself for having the feelings and instincts of a normal mature male. I can understand you from a purely human standpoint. I can’t condone what you did, but I understand. Do you remember my secret? You behaved like a man, so there was nothing strange or even immoral about it. You shouldn’t made her acquaintance at all, but once you did, you behaved like an ordinary man.

*What an amazing woman*, the Pervert thought. *Why did I break up with her?*

He felt now that breaking up with Eve had been a big mistake. Why had he done it? He had been driven to it by sordid and filthy instinct. For the possibility of sex with other women, he had dumped a woman who had been faithful and loyal to him for four years, who had cared for him without bounds, and who had always shown concern for his feelings and desires. He’d had many girls after Eve, but none of them had been loyal to him; none had loved him like Eve had. He’d been justified in calling them “bitches.” It was wrong and despicable of him to do so, but there was truth to it. And her love had truly been infinite. But instead of nourishing and cherishing her love, he had behaved like an asshole by ending the relationship without warning. And all for the sake of lust and sex. Like a consummate animal, he’d been unable to find the strength to say “no.” He had surrendered to the Beast and gone too far, crossing all bounds and exceeding all limits. And where had it led? To his murder? Others, of course, might think he regretted dying, but his murder had freed him of mental anguish. He wasn’t sorry. On the contrary, he was glad that someone had stopped him and prevented him from sinking even deeper into darkness. What he regretted was taking advantage of Doll—no, Ally—in the most obscene way by raping her and stealing her innocence. He had very probably ruined her life. He was in agony for not stopping sooner, at the very least when Eve caught him kissing a thirteen-year-old girl. Unfortunately, he couldn’t go back.

He was on the verge of tears. He felt a sharp physical pain in the chest. It became difficult to breathe. What was going on? Was it his soul? His heart? What could be causing this inner pain that made him groan in despair? The

Pervert didn't know—he was experiencing the sensation for the first time. He momentarily felt an odd sense of relief. He shook our head, rejecting the feeling, and it was gone instantly, as though it had never been.

“Don't be embarrassed,” Eve said gently and sympathetically, “if you feel like crying, go ahead.”

The Pervert wanted to hug her, to press her to himself and burst into tears on her shoulder. He wanted that very much, but he held himself back. It would be better for him to relentlessly and firmly restrain his lustful thoughts, his Beast, his unbridled inner rage that was striving to destroy everything human in him. Then, realizing there was no point in suppressing his natural impulse, the Pervert took Eve by the hand, turned her to face him, and hugged her. She responded by pressing our head to her and gently stroking our closely trimmed hair. Tears ran down our cheeks, falling onto her shoulder and soaking her white blouse. The Pervert wept like a child, driving out the mental pain that had been building in him. The pain in our chest diminished with each tear. He stood and cried until not even a shadow of the pain remained.

When he was done, the Pervert raised his head and looked Eve in the eye. He wanted to apologize, but he couldn't speak. However, she understood him anyway and remained in his arms.

We might have stood like that for hours had we not heard the sudden roar of engines and seen several motorcyclists rounding the corner at a high rate of speed. Eve stood with her back to them, but the Pervert instantly recognized their leader Richard in the pack. He had something black and threatening in his hand. Shots rang out. The Pervert threw Eve to the ground, covering her with his body. As he did so, he wrapped one arm around her head and the other around her waist to prevent her from striking the sidewalk. They managed to take cover behind a large black SUV that was parked at the curb. The girl kept her cool and, slipping out from under us, drew her pistol.

“Control, now!” shouted the Assassin.

Realizing that the Assassin had the most experience in situations like this, the Pervert surrendered control immediately, without an argument.

The bikers continued firing, not giving Eve a chance to look up and assess the situation. The Assassin put his head to the ground, looking under the SUV to try and determine the number of attackers by counting motorcycles.

“There’s eight or nine of them,” he said at last.

After a quick look, Eve fired several shots over the vehicle’s hood without aiming, hoping to scare the bikers off. They responded by firing back, forcing her to get down.

“Give me the pistol,” the Assassin said.

Eve shook her head no.

“Give it to me. I can handle this better than you.”

“No, I can’t.”

“I’m a professional...”

“No, it’s against regulations.”

“To hell with the regulations! Give it here!” the Assassin insisted, barely controlling his irritation.

He knew what needed to be done in situations like this, and Eve’s distrust offended him. He was used to having his partner Jennifer always do what she was told on jobs. And now a situation had arisen that he wasn’t prepared for. He was unaccustomed to being in a shootout without a weapon, although he had trained for it.

“Shut up, you’re distracting me,” Eve snapped, ignoring the Assassin’s disapproval and carefully looking around the front of the vehicle.

Eve shot sparingly, trying to save ammunition. *At least she’s been taught something*, the Assassin thought, pleased, realizing that she wasn’t going to give up the pistol. He could take it away from her, of course, but fighting with Eve in sight of the enemy wasn’t the best way to stay alive. However, the Assassin didn’t like the way Eve was shooting: she wasn’t trying to hit anyone; she was simply firing to hold the bikers off in hopes that backup would arrive soon. The bikers would need no more than a couple of minutes to deal with the girl, and then with us. That was sure to happen unless the cops back at the station heard the gunshots and responded promptly.

Taking cover behind their motorcycles, the bikers formed a semicircle around the SUV that Eve and we were behind. Recognizing the difficulty of the situation and understanding that the girl wasn’t going to give him her weapon, the Assassin decided to somehow split up the bikers. There was another vehicle—a white Toyota Camry—about six yards away. The Assassin waited for Eve to open fire and force the bikers to take cover, then ran to that car. Eve figured that the Assassin was running for help and stood to full height in order to provide covering fire for him. But not all the

bikers were hiding behind their motorcycles. Seizing the opportunity, they started shooting back. A bullet ricocheted off the hood and struck her. The girl gasped. Blood instantly turned her white blouse red over her stomach. Eve dropped to the ground with her back against the SUV's door. She clutched her stomach with her free hand in an effort to stop the bleeding.

The Pervert screamed in the back of my mind. He lost control of his emotions and that affected the Assassin and me.

“Calm down!” I shouted, not knowing how to ease the Pervert's pain.

“Eve! She's hit, she needs help!”

“She's still alive. Don't interfere with the Assassin! Get yourself under control! Give him a minute.”

The Pervert heeded my plea and calmed down. The bikers kept firing at the vehicle in hopes another bullet would strike the policewoman.

“Throw me the pistol!” the Assassin shouted pleadingly to Eve.

Eve looked at us and nodded. Overcoming the pain, she tossed the pistol to the Assassin and followed it with a spare magazine. The Assassin caught the pistol and ejected its magazine to see how many bullets remained: two. He quickly inserted the spare. He recognized the gun immediately—it was a .40 caliber Glock 22, which had been introduced in 1990. It was popular with law enforcement agencies around the world. The magazine held fifteen cartridges. That was more than enough for nine bikers.

The Pervert couldn't restrain himself for long. He, like the Beast, was seething with rage and his fury and frenzied emotions were affecting us. He was close to losing control. He struggled and roared, demanding that we check on the girl. I tried my best to calm him down, explaining that now wasn't the time, that first we needed to eliminate the threat. But the Pervert was inconsolable. He begged the Assassin to go to Eve.

“Your yelling is keeping me from concentrating. The quicker you shut up, the sooner I'll take out our enemies, and then you can help the girl.” The Assassin had enough of the Pervert's frenzy and forced him to quiet down.

The Assassin lay down on his back and kicked the car's side mirror until it came off and was hanging by a wire. Then he ripped it off and raised it above the car's trunk so he could observe the situation. Now he could clearly see that there were nine attackers. The bikers realized Eve was at least injured, but they weren't shooting at the Assassin for some reason.

Several of them stood up with the intention of getting closer. Using the mirror to locate them, the Assassin fired four times without raising up over the trunk lid. He had learned how to shoot using a mirror at the school for assassins, so he could shoot reasonably well that way. However, this body's hand wasn't as steady and dexterous as his own, which he had trained extensively, so his shots weren't very accurate. His bullets struck one biker in the left side rather than the heart and a second in the neck; he missed the third entirely, even though he fired twice. However, he still had eleven rounds in the magazine for seven bikers.

The Assassin didn't sense the Beast's presence, and he wasn't enraged. He was doing what he had to, what he had been taught to do in order to protect himself and others. He was calm and in control. This was routine for him, and killing was his only means of defense. He had been doing this his entire adult life. He understood the Gladiator a little—the man had refused to kill. With guns in his enemy's hands, however, the Assassin saw no other way out of the situation. He knew that he had to kill all of them or be killed himself.

The bikers still alive began firing wildly at the car, breaking the windows and puncturing the tires. The doors of the old Toyota were made of real metal, not like the doors of modern vehicles that were constructed of light alloy and plastic, so the bikers' bullets couldn't penetrate them. Raising the mirror over his head, the Assassin took aim at a motorcycle's fuel tank and fired three times. The first bullet punctured the tank and the second missed, but the third ignited the gasoline. By a happy circumstance, the tank was less than a quarter full, meaning there was sufficient air mixed with gasoline vapor in it for a spark to cause immediate ignition. The resulting explosion knocked another three bikers to the ground, stunning or killing them. Rich was one of them. The Assassin had very much wanted to leave him for last, but this was no time to beat around the bush. Only in movies is the leader last to die. In reality... in reality, the thing to do is to take the easy target first in order to remain alive, and to ignore a target's status or position in the gang's hierarchy.

That left four enemies and eight bullets. They abandoned their motorcycles, which hadn't provided reliable cover. Like the Assassin, they now took cover behind a car on the opposite side of the street. A professional assassin would be able to finish them off in a couple of seconds, and if he had been in his old body rather than this one, he could have done just that. However, realizing he couldn't waste time with Eve in desperate need of

medical attention, the Assassin decided to take a risk in order to make short work of his enemies.

“I give up!” he shouted, standing up and raising the hand holding the pistol over his head.

“Come out from behind the car!” came the answer.

The bikers wanted to deal with their enemy quickly, too: cops could arrive at any moment. When the Assassin announced that he was giving up, they glanced at one another happily and decided to kill him when he got close.

Slowly, making no sudden movements and not hiding the hand that held the pistol, the Assassin moved sideways and came around the car. The bikers also started moving out into the street while keeping their guns pointed at the Assassin.

“Where’s the girl?” one asked.

“There,” the Assassin said, nodding toward the black SUV that Eve was behind.

The bikers glanced at the vehicle, and at that moment the Assassin dropped the pistol from his upraised hand, caught it in his other hand, and instantly opened fire on his enemies. He had clearly caught them by surprise. Two were killed immediately. The others recoiled and started firing back. A second later, the Assassin was the only one on his feet. As had happened ten years ago when he became a killer, he escaped with only a minor wound to his left shoulder. Tossing aside the pistol he no longer needed, the Assassin ran to Eve.

“Eve, how are you doing?” he asked, but he needed no answer. The Assassin had looked death in the eyes so often that he couldn’t mistake it. The girl’s eyes were so sad and hopeless that even I knew what was coming. The Assassin hurriedly gave the Pervert control of our body.

“It was nice knowing you, Nick. Now I believe that there is an Assassin inside you. Only a pro could’ve dealt with nine armed bikers... Don’t forget my secret,” Eve whispered and closed her eyes.

“No! Wake up, Eve. Stay awake! Eve! No! I love you! Please, stay awake! Do you hear me? Don’t leave me! I love you, do you understand? I love you! Damn it, say something! Please, don’t leave! I can’t live without you!”

The words streamed from him, recognition mixed with profanity and the other absurd things people say in situations like this one. His words

poured over her but went unheard, because Eve had breathed her last. She was dead. Not understanding that it was over, the Pervert kept shaking the girl. Several passersby and gawkers gathered around him, sighing sympathetically and watching silently.

“She’s gone,” someone finally said.

“The girl’s dead,” went the whisper through the crowd.

“Killed,” one of the bystanders said.

“No!” shouted the Pervert.

How could she be dead? They had just been peacefully walking and talking, he had been sobbing on her chest, repenting of his sins. And this was all because of him. She would still be alive if he hadn’t shouted out her name in the police station, if he hadn’t taken her to the restaurant where they encountered the bikers. After meeting Eve, it had seemed to him that his life was beginning anew, that he was being given a second chance. And now... Now, he had nothing. Now, there was nothing he could do. Now, there was only darkness, and the Pervert felt worse than he had when the Assassin had tried to force him out of our body.

The Pervert wanted to return to his own world; he wanted to go back to where Eve was still alive. He felt dizzy, and his control over our body weakened. He felt as though he were at home and his front door was opening, beckoning him out into the open air. He felt that he could actually abandon this body, that it would take nothing more than a strong desire to do so.

The Pervert sat down on the ground and leaned back against the vehicle next to the girl. He took her still-warm right hand in his and gently squeezed it. He didn’t just want to return to his own world; he desired it with all his heart. At first, it seemed to him that he was wasting his energy, that nothing was happening, and that he would remain in this body forever. But suddenly a bright white light blinded him, encircled and surrounded him on all sides, and wove itself into a cocoon made of sunlight. The ground fell away from under him, but he didn’t have a sensation of flying: the cocoon protected him and prevented him from seeing or feeling anything. The Pervert sighed quietly, knowing he was speeding back to his own space, to his own universe, to his own flawed, mad world, where a beautiful girl named Eve still lived.



## CHAPTER 19.

# The Beast Restrained

“We need to pass through darkness to reach the light, and the sphere of darkness is much more terrifying than the region of light; when the beast in man is restrained, and his desires and instincts for blood suppressed, the light nourishes, illuminates, guides, and rewards the warrior who has survived the fight with his honor intact.”

*(An excerpt from the book “The Elixir of Life” by Vera I. Kryzhanovskaya)*

I was reading the newspaper when Nikki came and demanded my attention.

“What’s going on, Bunny?” I asked.

“I’m going to the beach with a girlfriend.”

“Isn’t in a little soon to be going alone, kiddo?”

“Daddy, I told you I’m not going alone. I’m going with a friend.”

“Okay, but don’t swim out too far.”

“Oh, thank you! You’re the best father in the world!” Nikki gave me a quick hug.

I knew from the way she spoke that she hadn’t expected me to give in so quickly. I sighed. Being the father of a thirteen-year-old girl isn’t easy. There’s no way I could raise her without my Brainiac of a wife. I lack

the patience. I've always wanted sons, but as they say, man proposes, but God disposes. I didn't stop trying, however. After some time had passed, I persuaded my wife to try again, and now my nine-year-old son, Nick, is trying my patience even more than my daughter. He doesn't need as much attention as she does though, thank God.

But I shouldn't be grumbling like an old man. I actually have a wonderful family: a loving wife and two children. They make me happy, something I once thought would never happen. My life took a sharp turn twenty-one years ago, when I was twenty-eight. Figuratively speaking, I reversed course at the very gates of hell. If I hadn't changed, the best I could have hoped for was life behind bars. And at worst... Well, at worst, I wouldn't have made it to thirty. For some reason I was sure of that. It's as though I knew how my life would have ended if I hadn't stopped what I was doing.

I continued looking at the paper, but I was thinking of the past, of the time when my life changed.

"Do it!" the Beast ordered.

Blinking in confusion, I looked at the girl. She was walking ahead of me, carefree and oblivious to my dirty thoughts.

*She's just a little girl*, I thought.

"Do it!" the Beast within me shouted, demanding that I jump her and take her by force.

"No, I can't."

"Do it!" roared the Beast, commanding me to overcome my reluctance and grab her.

I did want her, I really wanted her; I was attracted to her shapely but immature figure. I'd been near this school on several occasions, looking for someone whose inner innocence and outer beauty could satisfy me. But something was holding me back, as though a strong hand had taken hold of my belt. An inner voice was forcing me to think about what I was doing. The motives that had prompted me to hunt young girls had paled and were beginning to fade. What was happening to me? Had I really fallen so far that I was beginning to troll for children near schools? Something in me resisted the idea. I found what I was doing dirty and contemptible. I abruptly slowed down and let the girl walk on, suspecting nothing.

"You want this. You want her virginal young body!"

“No!” I squatted down and put my hands over my ears in an effort to somehow shut out that inner voice.

“Think about how much pleasure she could give you,” the Beast said persuasively.

“No!” I cried desperately.

The girl turned the corner, and I sighed in relief. That was it—I had missed my chance. I was glad that I’d let her get away, but at the same time I was sorry that I hadn’t caught up to her. No, that was the Beast still talking, instilling vile thoughts, changing my behavior, making me a monster. But knowing it was the Beast’s doing, I forbade myself to obey it. I harnessed all my will power to resist. I put up barriers that I thought it would be unable to overcome. The Beast, which I no longer wanted to obey, roared furiously. But the war wasn’t over. Could I keep on winning?

I tried to remember why I had begun hunting for little girls. Surely, there must have been a compelling reason! But what was it? What had made me suddenly want to seduce children when I was surrounded by so many mature, experienced, and beautiful girls who were much more interesting to talk to. I had to stop myself before it was too late. I told myself ‘no’ once again. The Beast howled.

No, it would never force me to take that step. Unfortunately, I really found them attractive and there was nothing I could do about that, but there was a line I wouldn’t cross. I refused to tempt innocents; I rejected the Beast. Anger seized me. The anger wasn’t caused by the Beast. It grew out of my soul. I knew what I had been planning was wrong, and I stopped myself with a clear conscience. I closed my eyes and mentally drew a white line, establishing a permanent mental block and forbidding myself from taking advantage of innocent young girls to satisfy my lust.

There was something in my thoughts that inspired calm, soaked up my anger, and silenced the Beast. I sensed that my emotions were in harmony; I felt tranquil and calm. The raging anger of a minute ago was replaced by silence. I had taken control of the Beast. I was master of my actions, not it. For the first time in many months, I knew I was doing the right thing. I opened my eyes and felt as though I had just been born and was seeing the world around me for the first time.

A shadow fell across me. I turned my head and saw Eve.

“Eve!” I exclaimed, jumping up.

“Hi, Nikolas,” she said calmly.

I hugged her. She resisted slightly, but I held her close. I felt an ache in my breast. I wanted to cry. I didn’t know why I had missed her, why I was so happy to see her alive. Alive? Yes, alive. That made me very happy.

“How are you? How are things going?” I asked, reluctantly letting her go.

“I’m doing fine. How about you?”

I looked into her eyes, and a warm, tender feeling swept over me. I was happy to see her and hear her. I was glad that she existed. Maybe I felt that way because I had only just now come to realize the insanity and folly of my plans. Or maybe it was because she had become infinitely dear to me over the four years we’d been together. So why had I broken up with her? I felt ashamed. I had parted with the most wonderful girl on Earth for the sake of empty sex devoid of true feelings and sincere affection. And not on this Earth alone, but in all parallel universes. I didn’t know what made me think about parallel worlds, but something brought the idea to my mind. What a fool I’d been for allowing my lust to have so much power over me. But here was Eve standing in front of me, and that meant not all was lost—we could be together.

“You want to go somewhere?” I asked, hoping deep in my heart she’d say yes.

“Okay,” Eve agreed unexpectedly.

There were several small restaurants nearby, and we found an empty table in one of them. The waitress came over with menus.

“Chardonnay?” I asked Eve, barely glancing at the menu. I knew she liked white wine.

“No thanks, no alcohol.”

“Uh... are you on duty?”

“No, that’s not it. I can’t drink right now. I’m pregnant.”

I choked on my saliva and broke into a fit of coughing.

“You’re pregnant? I couldn’t tell by looking at you,” I mumbled, trying to get past an awkward pause. “How far along are you?”

“Three months.”

I was overcome by mixed feelings. I was glad for her, but at the same

time I was angry that the child wasn't mine. The waitress was still there, looking at me questioningly.

"I'll have a light beer, and bring her a strawberry ice cream," I told the waitress so she'd leave.

"I see you haven't forgotten my favorite dessert," Eve said with a little smile.

"Of course not. I'll never forget your favorite dishes," I answered sadly. "So you're in the third month..."

"I'm sorry, Nikolas. I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's okay," I said with a start. "It's not your fault. It's mine. Everything could have turned out differently if I hadn't left you back then."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. What's done is done. But you didn't tell me the real reason you acted the way you did. I knew you loved me despite what you said that day. I thought you were happy with me..."

"I was in the beginning, but then I changed. Man is such an animal that he can quickly stop appreciating anything, especially something good. What I mean to say is, breaking up with you was a mistake."

"So why didn't you come back to me? I waited for several months."

"Because I didn't realize what I had lost until today. Eve, you're the only person I can be completely honest with, so I'm not going to deceive you. I simply wanted to have sex with other people. Which I did. I sank pretty low. Even then, there was probably still something decent about me, because I decided to break up with you rather than cheat on you. That freed us both from the vows of love we'd exchanged. But now I've gone so far that if I were to go just one step further I'd never be able to find my way back. But I stopped. I stopped at the very last second, not knowing why. My guardian angel must have helped me and prevented me from falling. Then, when I saw you just now, I experienced a feeling of tenderness toward you that I'd never felt before. It's been more than a year, but maybe it's not too late. Do you think we could get back together?"

"I'm pregnant, Nikolas."

"I don't care. Well, I do care a little. I just meant it wouldn't stop me. I'll raise your child as my own."

"Nikolas, I'm engaged to someone else."

I sighed.

“Do you love him?”

“Yes. I was very upset when we broke up, to put it mildly, and he helped me get through it. We worked together in the police department. He was with me every day. He cheered me up and kept me from getting depressed. After a few months, he asked me to have dinner with him. Everything happened very quickly after that. I didn’t expect anything of the sort, but now I’m pregnant. I’m expecting his child. I can’t dump him after everything that’s been between us.”

“Even if I swear I’ll be faithful and love you always?”

Eve suddenly laughed.

“Did I say something funny?” I said, a little confused.

“Nikolas, you’re a man. Moreover, you’re human, and anyone can screw up. Don’t make a promise you can’t keep. Can you really guarantee that you won’t want to sleep with someone else in a few years?”

Something about her saying I was human seemed vaguely familiar to me. I frowned, trying to understand where the feeling came from, but Eve was looking at me searchingly, and I had to give her some kind of answer.

“I wouldn’t break my word, Eve.”

“You swore eternal love to me once a long time ago...”

“But I was just a boy then. Now, I have a better understanding of what I need.”

“I don’t trust you anymore. I’m sorry, Nikolas.”

“Give me a chance and I’ll prove I can be faithful.”

“You’ve already broken my heart once. Do you want to hurt me again? I don’t want that. I’m sorry.”

“No! I should be the one begging your forgiveness. Eve, you don’t owe me anything... And... Well, I’m sorry...”

I wanted to slam my fist down on the table, get up, and take out my anger on something. But I especially didn’t want to hurt Eve in any way. I wanted to be with her, with her specifically, even though not all that long ago I’d wanted to sleep with every pretty girl in town. But if I could restrain my impulses toward them, I needed to do the same with this woman. She had decided her own future, and I had no right to stop her. *At least she’s alive*: that strange thought popped uninvited into my head again. Well

then, let her live as she wants. She deserved to be happy. And I needed to sort out my own feelings properly.

“Can we stay friends?” I offered Eve my hand.

She smiled, got up, and walked around the table to me. I stood also.

“Thanks for understanding,” she said quietly and hugged me. “You’re more mature now, I see.”

Her gentle voice and confident tone reassured me.

*I’ve grown*, I thought serenely.

*I’ve grown*—something in those words made me believe it was true.

*I’ve grown*, I repeated to myself like a stuck record.

Everything I had done for the past year seemed petty and stupid to me. I hadn’t needed the easy sex and the mindless pursuit of one skirt after another. I needed one person, a girl who could be my rock, someone I could trust as I trusted myself. A girl with whom I could build a real relationship, marry, start a family, and have children. I didn’t need a silly young girl, as I had thought until just recently, but a grown adult woman who would value me and be my life partner.

It was time to say goodbye to Eve. I wished her happiness and headed for home. I was in a good mood despite her refusal to renew our relationship. I had a goal—find a decent woman who would become my wife.

I felt that it had been easy for me to let Eve go without trying to fight for her. In my heart, though, I was reeling from the loss. I knew it was all my fault. Therefore, I decided to forgo reproaching and punishing myself. That was a road to nowhere. I needed to move on, to go forward into a future that I was convinced I could create for myself.

I cut off that train of thought and laid my newspaper aside. I sighed. Yes, I had failed with Eve, but we’ve remained friends, and that’s the main thing. Our families are on friendly terms now, and our children play together often. If I’d stayed with Eve, I might never have had children as wonderful as the ones Susan has given me. *My wife, Susan*—the very thought pleases me.

I smiled, remembering the first time we met.

Deep down, I was afraid my desire to be a serious person wouldn’t

last long, so I decided to consult a psychiatrist. I have to say that finding a psychiatric sex therapist wasn't easy: there were only three in the entire city. Two of them were men. For some reason, I was more open with women; I wasn't embarrassed about discussing intimate topics with them. Therefore, I chose the third doctor. I walked into her office and stopped, amazed. Behind the desk sat a young woman who looked to be about twenty.

"Please, have a seat," she said, pointing to a chair.

I sat down, regretting that I had come. I'd expected a doctor of about fifty.

"I'm Susan Gilligan. How can I help you?"

"I'm not sure you can... Excuse me, but I thought you'd be older."

She smiled.

"Maybe I just look younger than I am. In his book, *111 Tales for Psychotherapists*, a colleague of mine named Dmitri Kovpak wrote, 'Don't confuse seniority and experience. In human affairs, it isn't the person who has lived longer that understands better, rather it is the person who has observed more, analyzed, and drawn conclusions.' I've been in private practice for two years. That isn't a long time, but I've treated hundreds of patients. And I've been able to help many of them. So you can feel free to tell me about everything that's bothering you. If it falls outside my area of expertise, I'll send you to a different specialist. Nobody's going to force you to see me."

"I'm sorry, but you look younger than me, and I'm finding it hard to imagine that..."

"Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Close your eyes. Then you'll be able to imagine anything that suits you. I think I'll close my eyes, too, then the fact that you're such a young and attractive man won't affect me..."

"I'm sorry. I'm so embarrassed."

"No need to apologize. I'm completely serious. Now close your eyes. It'll help you relax. Imagine your appointment is with a woman old enough to be your mother. You have nothing to be embarrassed about. Things get discussed on the Internet nowadays that would make your problems seem trivial. Close your eyes and forget that there's a young woman sitting in front of you."

I obediently closed my eyes.

“Well, I’m listening,” the psychiatrist suddenly said in a raspy old woman’s voice.

I couldn’t help smiling, but I kept my eyes closed.

“The thing is, I want sex. All the time.”

“I don’t think that’s a problem for someone your age. Everybody wants sex. There’s even a joke in which a doctor asks a patient: ‘Tell me, are you visited by thoughts of sex?’ And the patient answers: ‘What do you mean visit, doctor? They live with me!’ So your desire for sex can hardly be considered a disease.”

“But with me, it’s more than just a desire. I’m attracted to all women. I walk down the street, see a girl, and I immediately want to be with her...”

“Do you have a regular sex partner?”

“Not now. I broke up with my girlfriend more than a year ago for just this reason. She didn’t satisfy me. Not physically and not psychologically. I wanted other girls. After I broke up with her, I started hooking up with lots of girls. I had a lot of short relationships, but the desire didn’t go away, it just got stronger. I started getting attracted to younger girls, to girls who had barely reached puberty. I’m never satisfied and I always want more. I don’t know how to fight it...”

“Do you have any children?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Would you like to have children?” the therapist asked, ignoring my question.

“I don’t know, I’ve never thought about it. I’d have to get married first, and I don’t know anyone who’s wife material.”

“There’s nothing surprising about your attraction to fifteen- or even fourteen-year-olds. If you watch TV, you know that girls nowadays are becoming sexually active as young as thirteen. At a subconscious level, you probably consider girls in early puberty especially attractive, because when you were that age you were attracted to them or they to you. You don’t see them as innocent young girls, but as mature women ready to accept your love.”

“So you don’t think I’m a pedophile?”

“Certainly not. Pedophilia is defined as sexual attraction to children. As I understand what you’re saying, you like girls who have reached puberty and are shapely.”

I sighed in relief. One mental illness less. I might be standing on the edge, but I hadn't crossed over.

"You have nothing to fear," she continued. "Your proclivity for young girls will disappear when your ego matures."

"What does that mean?"

"Humans age in three ways: physically, biologically and mentally—psychologically. Your mental age lags behind your biological and physical ages, but that's no cause for panic. It's common with young people. That's why I asked you about children. Children, or rather responsibility for children, is a great incentive to mature mentally. Once you have a son or a daughter, fifteen-year-old and even twenty-year-old girls will seem like children to you, and you won't find them interesting at all. You'll consider their wishes and aspirations so naïve that you won't want to have anything to do with them, least of all sex. So you'll be cured of your sexual attraction for women much younger than yourself."

"And what about my sexual appetite as a whole? Why is it that I'm not satisfied with one partner and am constantly craving sex with one after another?"

"That's entirely normal for men up to age forty. Sex is the way we procreate. It's a basic instinct that guarantees the preservation of humanity. It's difficult for me to make an accurate diagnosis based on one conversation, but it's entirely possible that this instinct is more strongly developed in you than in the average man. You're twenty-nine, you have no children, and on a subconscious level the part of your ego that's responsible for continuation of the species is demanding that you procreate. Simply put, the more women you inseminate, the more likely it is that your offspring will survive.

"And what about the Beast?"

"The what?"

"The Beast. I don't know what else to call it. When I begin to be attracted to a girl, a fury builds up in me, a kind of Beast that doesn't stop until it gets what it wants."

"You're evidently accustomed to repressing up your feelings, so they find an output at the subconscious level. This fury, as you call it, is simply a torrent of emotions that have built up over the course of many years. You have this Beast living inside you? Get it under control!"

“But how?”

“In psychology, there’s something we call sublimation. It’s a ‘good’ defense mechanism that involves transforming erotic feelings into creative activities. Sigmund Freud wrote about it. He believed that the sublimation mechanism is responsible for everything we call ‘civilization’.”

“How can I do that?”

“Take up drawing. Some of my colleagues believe representational art helps people deal with their erotic impulses. Alternatively, you could start writing a book. When you’re creating something, the energy that would otherwise be expended on your sexual desires gets redirected along creative lines. In his book, *The Fundamentals of Psychotherapy*, for example, Romanin wrote about Alexander Pushkin’s autumn in Boldino. Pushkin started out on a trip to Moscow to marry his fiancé Natalia, but a cordon sanitaire stopped him from leaving the city. Pushkin did some of his best work while he was trapped in Boldino, including *The Tales of Belkin*, *Eugene Onegin*, *Boris Godunov*, and a number of short poems. There was nothing and nobody to distract him there—no women, no gambling houses—so his creative output was amazing.

“But what if I’m a bad artist or a terrible writer?”

“It doesn’t matter. You don’t have to make money at it. And you can achieve all of your dreams on paper. Is there some girl you like? Write about her. Draw her. You may not produce a very good drawing, but you’ll know who it is. If you don’t like what you drew, you can sign up for art classes. And you don’t need to limit yourself to drawing and writing. You can find an outlet in a different creative field: carving animal figurines out of wood, for example. Couldn’t you do that, too? Don’t despair! See me and tell me about what’s going on with you, the things you like, your problems, and your achievements. That’ll give you relief from your sexual tensions, too.”

“And it’ll really help?”

“Certainly! You just need to be careful. Sexual energy doesn’t always translate into positive action. It can also develop into aggression. For example, someone who is overly aroused can commit rape. The term sublimation is widely understood now as the redirection of unacceptable impulses. Without that concept, people’s mental health would be at risk.”

“Thanks, Susan.” I opened my eyes. “I think you’ve been very helpful.”

“The main thing to remember is that you must never fight your Beast.

It needs an outlet, and you'll never be able to stop it. But you decide what the outlet will be. Harness your Beast. Subdue It. Make it work for you. That's how you'll curb your inner fury."

I thanked the psychiatrist again. I found what she told me helpful, and I decided to find some kind of hobby. I wasn't lying when I said I'm a bad artist and a lousy writer. I wasn't talented, although I considered myself smarter than average. Therefore, I decided to take my psychiatrist's advice and sign up for a second appointment. We still had a lot to discuss.

After three months, I felt that my desires had become less intense. I visited Susan once a week (we'd been on a first name basis for some time), listened to her advice, and told her about my thoughts. I wouldn't have believed it a year ago if someone had told me that I would be visiting a psychiatrist on a regular basis and baring my soul. However, I soon became convinced that the talks were beneficial. I got used to her youth, her quiet voice, self-confidence, and inner beauty, and I stopped closing my eyes during appointments. Most of our conversations were about me, so I knew little about Susan, but I wanted to know more. I felt that some kind of bond had developed between us; she became my friend, and I formed an attachment to her.

I stopped hooking up with girls. I became indifferent to them. I didn't want to waste time on easy affairs. I started wanting a long-term, serious relationship. After a time, I realized that I was only interested in Susan. By first becoming my friend, she set the foundation for our future relationship. I suppose that as a good therapist and psychologist, she could guess what I was feeling.

At my next appointment, I couldn't resist. I felt an overpowering desire to have Susan as my girlfriend. This wasn't one of the Beast's whims, and there was nothing dirty about it. It grew out of sound judgment combined with a feeling of sincere affection. Once I understood what love is, it became very difficult to again rely on hormonal emotions, because I knew that those feelings fade in time, whereas true friendship and mutual respect last forever.

"Susan, would you like to go out with me?" I asked, blushing like a boy although I had a lot of experience asking girls on dates.

"I'm sorry, Nikolas, but I don't date my patients," Susan calmly answered without batting an eye.

I had expected that response in the back of my mind. To protect

themselves from psychological harm, professional therapists never become involved with their patients. But exceptions do occur. Miracles happen! And I had a terrible longing for a small miracle. I wanted to hear her say, “Yes.”

I figured that if Susan didn't go out with patients, I needed to stop being one. So I decided to go for broke:

“My sexual addiction is gone. My sexual energy has been sublimated into other, creative areas. I've started writing poetry, so this is my last visit. At six in the evening next Saturday I'll no longer be your patient.”

Susan smiled.

“The answer is still no, Nick. I can't.”

I grew instantly sad and lowered my eyes. Susan noticed and tried to shift the conversation to a different topic.

“I'd very much like to hear your poetry.”

I had fibbed a little: I'd only written one poem. And when I wrote it in my notebook, I had a vague feeling that I'd heard the poem someplace and my subconscious had dredged it up. I stood up because it didn't seem right to read it while sitting down, took out the sheet of paper that had the poem on it, and began reading in a voice trembling slightly from emotion:

Why do we need light when there is darkness?

It beckons the unholy into its embrace.

The road to distant lands sparkles.

Cold hearts... Remnants of immortal souls.

“Why do we need light?” I shout into space.

I wave my hand before my eyes, sensing darkness.

Oh no, troubles don't come alone.

One trouble. Silly. They come in threes; it's true, I know!

Why do good when there is evil? I start down the road,

My footstep nervous, infinitely lonely.

I inhale fear. A bugle blows.

My skin turns icy at the distant tone.

But that's no answer. Silence replies,  
And it has a lot to say.  
Why do we need light when there is darkness?  
God has forgotten the response.

I look around me in the silence...  
My spirit remains immortal, even dauntless.  
It whispers: on Earth there is no happiness.  
In my unbelief fear turns me white...

Why do we need light when there is darkness?  
A final cry bursts forth:  
Because we have a soul!  
And then a light dispels the darkness.

I stand in shadow, blinded by the light.  
I ascend into oblivion, abandoning my body.  
And again, excited as a child,  
I boldly fly to meet God.

When I finished reading, I shivered. There was something mysterious and familiar in those verses, but I didn't know what it was even though I had written them. I looked Susan in the eye and saw tears.

"What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"I understand," Susan whispered wiping away her tears with a tissue.  
"Excuse me for crying."

"What do you understand?" I said surprised at her reaction.

"You knew?"

"Knew what?"

"That my older brother died two weeks ago..."

"No, how could I know that? You never say much about yourself... I'm sorry for your loss... How did he die?"

“In a car crash,” Susan sighed. “Sorry, I shouldn’t cry in front of patients. It’s not professional.”

“Nonsense,” I said walking around the desk and going up to Susan.

She got up and I embraced her. My heart began beating faster. This was the first time I had touched her. She was almost a head shorter than me. I’d thought Susan was taller for some reason. I pressed her head to my chest and gently stroked her back. I wanted to protect her and shield her from all bad things in life.

“You really didn’t know about it?” Susan asked again.

“No, I swear!”

She pulled away from me and smiled weakly.

“You know what? I will go out with you on Saturday, but there are some conditions.”

“Anything you want!” I exclaimed joyfully.

“First, you take me to a restaurant, not a bar.”

“Of course!”

“Second, you stop seeing me professionally.”

“No problem.”

“And third, you keep your Beast under control.”

“I think I’ve got that covered.”

The miracle happened, and my life changed forever. I found love, and a family. Although I was delighted with Susan’s agreement, I didn’t suspect that we’d marry within two years and she’d bear me a daughter soon after that and a son four years later. That was seventeen years ago. I was overjoyed that I had succeeded in ridding myself of the Beast, and it hasn’t bothered me since.



## CHAPTER 20.

# The Man and the Assassin

“Truth cannot insult:  
He who kills, is himself killed.  
He who gives up his coat in a storm, stays dry,  
And he who forgives, is himself forgiven.”  
*(An excerpt from the song “Heaven in a Hovel” by Spleen)*

**T**he Assassin took over after the Pervert was gone and stood up from Eve’s body. He tore off part of his sleeve and quickly bandaged his shoulder. I didn’t object. Unused to the sight of blood, violence, and death, I was a mute witness to her murder, unsure of what to do next. The Assassin looked at Eve one last time, turned, and walked away.

Someone tried to stop him: “Hey, you need to wait for the police!”

“The police know where to find me,” the Assassin muttered without stopping.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Does it really matter? We lost her.”

The Assassin took Eve’s death hard, much harder than I would have expected. I would’ve thought that, as accustomed to death as the Assassin was, he would be calmer, almost cold, and would regard a friend’s death with philosophical indifference. But I was wrong. The Assassin blamed himself for Eve’s death. Running through his head were thoughts that he

should have taken the gun away from her by force, tied her up, concealed and shielded her, and stayed by her side. I could read them easily. I'd never been that close to death before. I saw it happen, yet it all seemed somehow unreal. I'd been able to do nothing but observe; there was nothing I could have done to help. Only the echoes of emotions and feelings had reached me. It had been as though I was watching events unfold on television, unembellished by the odors of powder and death. Several minutes passed before it sank in that the shootout and Eve's death had actually taken place. Seeing that the Assassin was still mentally reproaching himself, I decided to try and explain to him that he wasn't to blame for what had happened.

"It's not your fault," I said, breaking the silence.

"Do you know how many shootouts I've been in? I never lost a partner. Never!"

"But Eve wasn't your partner. She wasn't trained for that kind of operation. She wasn't your subordinate. Therefore, you mustn't blame yourself. You did everything you could."

"That wasn't enough. I should've saved her. I should've told her not to provide covering fire for me."

"Then you'd both have been killed."

"What you know about tactics—"

"I know it's not your fault. Didn't you say before that everything that's happening to us today is happening for a reason, that there's a purpose to all this?"

"I didn't say that."

"Okay, maybe it wasn't you, but one of us did," I quickly agreed.

"How can it make sense for somebody to die?"

"It doesn't make any sense to us, but maybe we learned a lesson from losing the girl that'll prove useful."

"What kind of lesson is that, man?" the Assassin said, addressing me like that for the first time. "I've killed a lot of people, but I can't say it's made me a better person. So I ask again, why did Eve have to die?"

"I'm trying to explain, but you keep interrupting me. I remember something from a book I liked reading when I was a kid. It was written by a religious philosopher named Nikolai Berdyaev. He was born in Kiev, Ukraine at the end of the nineteenth century. He said: "Meaning of life is bound up with the end. If there were no end, i.e., if there were no death in

our world, life would be meaningless. Meaning lies beyond the confines of this limited world, and the discovery of meaning presupposes an end here.”

“I don’t get it.”

“What it means is that death is a reminder that we must live and... fight. We mustn’t ever rest on our laurels. We have to keep moving forward and overcome all obstacles in our way.”

“I don’t think that’s what Berdyaev had in mind...”

“Maybe he was trying to show that we can’t understand the meaning of life without dying. You, the Gladiator, and the Pervert died. So you have an opportunity to figure out the meaning of our lives and why personalities from parallel realities turned up in the same universe and the same body.”

“Now you’ve really got me confused. What does my death or the deaths of the Gladiator and the Pervert have to do with it? We’re talking about Eve’s death here, not trying to figure out why we all ended up in one body. So you’re saying that the girl’s death makes sense? That Eve’s death makes sense?”

“No, not exactly. To be honest, I don’t know the answer. But her death has forced me to think about the future... Look, there’s just the two of us now. The Gladiator and the Pervert are gone. That means you’re next. I don’t know if they did it of their own volition or if some higher power pulled them out of my body. So only you can solve this mystery.”

“Do you have any ideas? Why do you think two such different personalities vanished, and where did they go?”

“I think they left voluntarily. The Gladiator left when he set up a mental block and refused to kill. He went against his nature, against his killer instinct, against his seventeen years of training, and against his indoctrination to accept that it’s natural and honorable to kill in fights. And the Pervert left when Eve died.”

“Well, that’s understandable. He loved her and couldn’t come to terms with her death,” concluded the Assassin. “Yes, of course, Eve’s death is what prompted the Pervert to leave this world. He wouldn’t have left if someone else had died. He would’ve stayed with the girl he loved. She was keeping him here in this world and in this body. I understand now. Do you think they both left in order to change their lives?”

“Yes, that must be the answer. Tragic as it is, that’s what Eve’s death means. And this is just the kind of situation that Berdyaev was talking

about. He said meaning lies outside the world, and the discovery of meaning presupposes death. It's an obvious allusion to the fact that an answer can't be found in this world. So the Gladiator and the Pervert suddenly realized that? What if they intentionally killed themselves, ending their lives here in order to grasp the meaning of their existence there?"

"Where?"

"In those other realities. The other dimensions—which they couldn't get to any other way."

"But how could they do that? We're alive, and I haven't found any strange injuries on our body."

"But what if they did it internally, in their souls? What if they made their personalities leave this world."

"How would they do that? Didn't you just say the Gladiator left when he refused to kill, and the Pervert disappeared after the girl he loved died? Maybe the Pervert had reason to kill himself, but the Gladiator didn't. He was fine both mentally and physically. But if the departures were voluntary, I believe the Gladiator's iron self-control and excellent knowledge of his body's internal processes gave him a better chance of doing it. The Pervert, on the other hand, was spineless. "

"No, he didn't lack backbone where Eve was concerned. He was willing to do anything for her. Didn't you notice it? He really loved her."

The Assassin sighed and said bitterly:

"I'd turn the world upside down for her, too."

We fell silent, remembering the short time we had spent with her.

"About five years ago," the Assassin suddenly said, "I spent some of my free time studying death because of the nature of my unusual profession. Not how to kill, but specifically what death is. Like you, I became interested in philosophy. I was attracted by Carlos Castaneda's lectures on philosophy, first of all because he talked about death often, and second because he divided people into two categories: warriors and ordinary people. I thought of myself as a warrior, of course. He said, 'Destiny's coach will take all of us, without distinction. But there are two kinds of travelers: warriors who can leave with the totality of themselves, because they have fine-tuned every detail of their lives, and ordinary people, with boring existences, without creativity, whose only hope is in the repetition of their stereotypes until the end; people whose end won't make any difference, whether this end

happens today or in thirty years. We are all there, waiting on the platform of eternity, but not everyone knows it. Awareness of death is a great art.”

“That’s amazing. I’ve never heard of Castaneda, but I also believed that it doesn’t matter when a person dies. And I thought almost the same thing once, about death now as opposed to death in thirty years. Though, I didn’t believe in it as absolute truth. After all, as Castaneda said, a person can go from being ‘ordinary’ to a being ‘warrior’ by finding the higher meaning of existence. Creative people can affect the world around them. Therefore, *when* they die can be very important. But you misunderstood Castaneda. As an assassin, you were taking the lives of other people. You weren’t a creator, a warrior, in the same sense that Castaneda meant the word. Instead of creating, you destroyed. How could you consider yourself free?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. I always felt that as a warrior I was creating my own destiny. Or maybe I simply convinced myself that I was free. The sense of freedom filled me and made me feel omnipotent, even invulnerable. Anyway, it gave me confidence and helped me be good at my job. So I benefited from Castaneda’s words.”

“You considered yourself a free warrior and superior to other people. I can’t condemn you for that. Maybe this self-elevation was what kept you sane. In your eyes, you weren’t killing people, you were killing inferior beings—animals. You looked upon it as a sport, like hunting. That justified the things your profession called upon you to do. Do you remember what the Gladiator said? For him, his opponents were weaker and unworthy creatures. He never looked at their faces, never identified with them. For him, there was nothing but the dance of combat. He didn’t see that he was taking the lives of gladiators like himself. For him, they weren’t people.”

“Actually, I never thought about it. That means Castaneda’s philosophy affected me more than I thought. But that isn’t the only thing he said. Castaneda urged caution, and that’s very important for someone who looks death in the face every day. I memorized what he said: ‘Death lives beside us, an arm’s length away, permanently alert, looking at us, ready to jump at the smallest provocation. The warrior transforms his animal fear of extinction into an opportunity for joy, because he knows that all he has is this moment. For the warrior and for an ordinary man, the urgency of living is the same, because neither knows when they will take the last step. For that reason we have to be attentive to death, it can jump at us from any

corner.' I lived by his warning that death can jump at me at any time. So I was always on the alert."

"Always? Then how come you died?" I chuckled.

"Well, almost always. I didn't expect Jen to be a danger to me, especially after making love. We'd gone through a lot together. I let my guard down and relaxed after the mission, and that's unacceptable for a professional. And I paid for it with my life."

"I know, but it wasn't your fault."

"No, I don't blame myself. It wasn't my fault at all. Don't assume I'm sorry for what happened. If I could go back to that day, I'd do the same thing again. Letting her kill me was the right thing to do. She's too young and beautiful, and she's never known a real life."

"And you have?"

"Compared with Jen, yes. I was a warrior and was always ready to meet my end. I knew I could be killed from the very first day I entered the school of assassins. People in my profession rarely live long enough to retire. I understood that very well and knew what I was getting into."

"You knew it, but you still chose to become an assassin. Your life lost all meaning for you after witnessing the rape. 'The more valuable the life, the less the fear of death.'"

"Are those your words?"

"No, I used to read Immanuel Kant, who is a German philosopher from 18<sup>th</sup> century. It's something he said. That suggests your life is very important. You wouldn't be here now if it weren't."

"What makes you say that?"

"Doesn't your presence in another person's body tell you that you're an important and exceptional individual? How many people do you know of who've been in a parallel world?"

"None."

"Exactly. So you feel no regret?"

"For what?"

"Killing a lot of people."

"Of course I feel regret. But that's an egotistical feeling. If it hadn't been me, someone else from the school of assassins would've killed them. Although then, my hands would be clean. I would've lived my life without

suspecting what my government was up to. But I'm no egotist, so I take responsibility. I killed people, and I have to pay for it."

"Yes, you've always been like that... an altruist. So might that be the reason you can't go back?"

"What?"

"You just said you take responsibility on yourself for others. If you could return to any point in your life, you would walk the same path. Step-by-step. Nothing would change. Therefore, you won't go back. You *can't* go back. The Gladiator and the Pervert left when they wanted to change history, even though it was the history of their lives. You don't see any point in doing that."

"No, I don't."

"You're wrong! You can change your destiny. You always think about other people. Stop! You let Jennifer live instead of you, even when you were facing death. You excuse what you were doing by saying if it hadn't been you, it would've been someone else and the outcome would be the same. You thought, 'It might as well be me.' How noble of you!" I said, a little sarcastically. "Remember, your soul belongs to you alone. You're the only one who can or even should care about it. You aren't responsible for the actions of others, and you shouldn't feel you are. Everybody chooses his own path, and yours... your route should be clean, not contaminated by murder. You shouldn't blame yourself if someone else becomes an assassin instead of you. They chose the path they trod. You aren't responsible for the behavior of others. Everybody chooses their own way."

"But could it be that I simply don't want to go back? I'm perfectly comfortable in your body," the Assassin said. He was beginning to realize I was right but decided to play devil's advocate.

"You have to. This isn't your world. Who knows what might happen if you stay here."

"I think it's obvious. Katherine's boyfriend got punished, and she won't have to put up with physical and sexual abuse. There was a shootout with a local motorcycle gang that ended with nine of them being killed. And Eve died."

"More killing. Do you really think you came here just to kill people?"

"Why not? Maybe the Pervert and Gladiator disappeared because

they couldn't shed blood, because they couldn't do what a higher power intended."

"You don't really believe that."

"Does it matter what I think? Foolish people judge others by what they say, smart people by what they do. And our actions today speak for themselves very loudly."

"It isn't too late to stop killing."

"If I'd done that earlier today, Eve wouldn't have been the only one killed. They would've killed us, too. Do you really believe nothing like that will ever happen again? How can I choose between giving up and fighting to the end?"

"Why give up? Just stop killing."

"And be killed ourselves?"

"But with Jennifer, you did just that. You refused to kill her."

"And what did that lead to? I was the one killed."

"You were killed there, in your own world. Now, you're here. You're alive. Maybe it's some kind of test. If you change the way you are, you'll be given a second chance, like the Pervert and the Gladiator. They both sincerely regretted their actions. Didn't you see that?"

"Yes, I did. And to be honest, I do feel regret," the Assassin finally admitted. "If I had the Gladiator's iron self-control, I'd be like him and refuse to kill. But I can't stop doing what I do. What just happened proves that."

"Forget about that. You had no choice. I think there were times when even Jesus didn't submit completely and turn the other cheek. Blind submission never works out well. Only sheep are completely submissive, and a human can't and shouldn't be a sheep."

"Said a sheep," the Assassin said, smiling.

"You're right. I haven't been especially warlike and rebellious. And what has that led to? I wanted to use money, social status, and a false air of mystery to lure women to my bed. I wasn't capable of more and now I regret that, although my whims remained nothing more than fantasies. But you had it all figured out from the very beginning. All of your actions were carefully thought out and thoroughly considered. You didn't become an assassin because you liked killing. You did it because you had no other choice. Nor did you have another choice this time—you defended yourself.

But mightn't it be different in the future? And it actually is time to give up this way of life."

"No, where's the guarantee I won't get into a situation like that again? On the other hand, it's entirely possible that you're right: I'm not a god to be taking the lives of others. I could have avoided shooting the bikers."

"Right! There's always a choice, even if it's so small that it's hard to see with your naked eye. You could've surrendered."

"They would've killed us."

"Not necessarily. There were bystanders about, and they wouldn't want witnesses."

"I suppose that was a possibility. I know from personal experience that it's easy to kill someone in a shootout, but shooting an unarmed man who's surrendered is another matter. Believe me, it's hard to kill someone in cold blood when you're not angry or in a fight. You need a special kind of mentality to do that or, at least special training... I was listening just now, maybe, even arguing with you, but deep down I agree. I never wanted to kill. I'm a good shot, but shooting at a target and shooting a person are two different things. Even though I killed in self-defense, I could have avoided it. After all, who am I to decide whose life is more important? I could always have done the same thing I did with my partner when I put her life before mine. I would never have had to kill anyone then. And if I'd been killed myself, the lives of hundreds would've been saved. My life can't be more important than those of a hundred people."

"That's exactly what I wanted to tell you. You shouldn't have listened to the Beast."

"I tried to suppress my inner pain, but it was there and it tormented me whenever the Beast was on a rampage. I thought I could control it, but I was deceiving myself. It's impossible to keep the Beast in check. It gnaws at you continuously, taking away everything that's good and encouraging you to commit violence. Slowly, year by year, it grows more and more powerful without you noticing, until you can no longer tell where you end and the Beast begins. I tried talking to it at first. I tried calming it down, but it was useless. It couldn't be appeased, and it couldn't be placated. It would pretend to obey while quietly generating violent thoughts, making me believe they were my own. I realized that only now, when my last life flashed through my mind and faded away in the dark places of my memory.

I need to stop killing forever. If you're right and there's a reason for everything that happens to us, then by refusing to kill I'll bring about..."

"Hey man, you got a cigarette?" A guy with the bleary eyes of a drug addict approached us and interrupted our thoughts.

"I don't smoke," the Assassin shot back.

"Then gimme all your money," he said, producing a knife. There was a click, and a gleaming blade flashed out of its handle.

"Can you disarm him without killing?" I asked.

"Sure, but maybe violence of any kind is wrong. You mentioned Jesus, but I don't remember him putting up any resistance when they arrested and crucified him."

"This is different. Look at this guy, he's either drunk or stoned out of his mind."

"But what if this is a test? I agreed with you and gave up killing. Then at the very moment that we were so rudely interrupted, I was about to say fate will send us a new test to see if I'm sincere. And here it is. It came sooner than I expected, but it's obviously a test. Any resistance would be a violent act, so my hands are tied. You can take over, of course, if you want to do something."

"No, in situations like this I'd just give him my money."

"So let's do that now."

"No, we can't do that. You're no submissive sheep. But we can't fight back, either. So what do we do?"

"As you said, there's always a choice. I think I might try a psychological attack."

"How does that work?"

"Just watch."

The Assassin spread our arms wide.

"I'm glad you came along! You want to stick me with your knife? Go ahead! I'm ready."

"Hand it over, man!"

"I killed nine guys today, and God has sent you to be my executioner, right? I killed even more in my last life—a hundred people. Are you God's executioner sent down to administer justice? Well, here I am—a big sinner and a murderer. I stand before you unarmed, ready to accept God's

judgment. The time for my punishment is at hand. I place myself at your mercy. Well? Do it! Stab me! Kill me! Why are you just standing there with your eyes bulging out?”

“Are you crazy, dude? I don’t want to kill you. Give me your money and I’m outta here.”

“But who needs money? Money is the root of all evil. Better to just kill me and run. Come on, do it! I won’t resist.”

The man evidently figured he’d stumbled on a weirdo. His eyes widened a little when he noticed the blood on our hastily bandaged shoulder.

“Stab me. What are you waiting for!?”

“Screw you!” the drug addict said spat. “Crazy asshole.”

With that, he put his knife in his pocket, turned, and disappeared into the twilight.

“Did you really want him to kill you? Is that what you call a psychological attack?” I asked. “Seems to me, it was just the opposite... But it worked. Nobody got hurt.”

The Assassin didn’t reply. He was remembering my words that I said not too long ago. If he returned to his own world he’d follow the same path and make the same mistakes. He really had no other choice. For the last nine years, he’d only been carrying out his superiors’ orders. But if he could return to his past in his own world, he’d definitely try to follow a different course at a turning point in his life. He knew now that there’s always a choice, and a given situation can be handled in more than one way. A feeling of sadness came over him, and anger about what he had done gripped his chest in steel jaws. But was his anger for nothing? If he could return, it would have to be to a time when he could prevent himself from doing something that couldn’t be undone. Relief replaced his sadness, and he immediately sensed that he could return if only he wanted it badly enough.

“I want to return to my own world!” The Assassin shouted.

A shiver swept through him. Could he return, or was he just imagining it? Was it possible that he could not just return to his own world, but revert to a point many years in the past, to a time when it had not yet occurred to him that he would someday be killing people in cold blood. Neither the Gladiator nor the Pervert had made a journey into the past like that. Was he strong enough to do it? He awaited the answer, and the answer

was not long in coming. A white cloud of pure light that only he could see descended and enveloped him completely, enfolding him in infinite tenderness. He suddenly felt himself taking flight: he broke free of the earth and flew, flew to his own world, to a past that he could and must change.

## CHAPTER 21.

# Say No to Rape

“If you’re highly sensitive and you abhor violence in any form, then you may very well be an Earth Angel!”

*(from the book “Earth Angels” by Doreen Virtue)*

**W**iping away sweat with my sleeve, I stood another piece of wood on the chopping block. A swing of my ax split it into two equal halves. Nik, my son, ran over to me:

“Mom’s calling you, Dad. She said Uncle Max and Uncle Oscar will be here soon, and the table isn’t set yet.”

I ruffled my son’s hair.

“Why aren’t you helping your mom? You’re thirteen, almost a man.”

“Nikki’s helping her. Working in the kitchen’s no job for a man.”

“Who told you that?”

“Pete.”

“So you just do whatever your friend says...? Don’t you have a brain? A man’s more than just head of the family. He helps out, too. Are you going to dump everything on your Mom and your little sister? That’s not right. You need to protect them. And not just from enemies—from extra work, too, so they don’t get too tired. You’re a strong boy.”

“What enemies, Dad?”

“There’s all kinds of enemies,” I sighed. “Of course, it’s been a long time since I had to deal with that kind of thing.”

That was true; my life in this little town was a quiet one. I thought back twenty years, to the first time I stood up for Kate.

Lieutenant Lemmons shoved the girl at another soldier, who grabbed her immediately. The lieutenant looked at me, and I saw the cold eyes of a killer. At least, that’s the way they seemed. I reached for my rifle, but he was faster. He was the only one of us with a pistol, and he jerked it out of its holster and pointed it at my head.

“Drop your weapon,” he ordered. Since this was a training exercise, we weren’t carrying live ammo. Our weapons were loaded with blanks, however, and we all knew that at close range blanks could injure and even kill.

I hesitated for a few seconds, assessing the situation. I was a better shot than the lieutenant, but he had the drop on me. I wasn’t even sure my rifle was loaded, and there was nothing uncertain about the pistol pointed at my face. I wanted to drop my rifle, but my chest tightened up for some reason, and my hand refused to let go. I sensed that if I forced myself to drop the rifle, I would forever lose my chance to stop Lemmons and his buddies, and they would be able to do whatever they wanted to the girl. I couldn’t allow that: I’d hated violence since I was a kid. My hands refused to obey my head and held onto my weapon, saying to hell with my instinct for self-preservation. *I’m not going to let them rape her*, I told myself. I didn’t consider myself a fool and had always done the sensible thing, but now a quiet fury awoke in me and prevented me from obeying the lieutenant’s order. I knew what I was risking, but honor wouldn’t let me back down. At least, honor was how I perceived the quiet turmoil within me. For some reason, it seemed like I was standing at a fork in the road and the rest of my life depended on which way I turned. Life has its exceptions, but I didn’t want to live with the knowledge that these stupid bastards had raped and killed an innocent girl in front of me. I understood somehow that Kate wouldn’t live long once they were done with her. I don’t know why I was so sure of that. Had I just developed a sixth sense? So with an effort of will I disobeyed the lieutenant, raised my weapon and pointed it at my commanding officer.

“I won’t do it,” I said belatedly but firmly.

“You bastard, are you going against your friends?” Lemmons spat out.

“Let the girl go,” I said in a quiet voice, trying to look cool despite the pistol pointed at my head.

I had my finger on the trigger, ready to shoot first. José was standing nearby, pointing his rifle at me. It was me against everybody else. The situation had escalated quickly and was threatening to spin out of control. To say I was scared would be an understatement. I was shaking like a leaf. The lieutenant could fire at any moment and blind or even kill me. Terror gripped me. But what was my fear compared to what would the girl would suffer if I gave in? Straining my will and trying to maintain an outward appearance of calm, I decided to stand my ground.

*Could I beat the lieutenant to it if he decides to shoot?* I wondered, clutching my rifle, ready to fire at my enemy’s slightest movement. I was betting on my split-second reaction time. Lemmons apparently believed I had a chance and was in no hurry to act, waiting for the right moment. The deliberate carelessness in his voice couldn’t deceive me. He was obviously trying to distract me. I didn’t know what to expect from him, so I kept my finger on the trigger just in case.

“Asshole, do you think you can take us all?”

“Nobody has to get hurt here. Just let the girl go.”

“I could shoot you right now before you can make a move.”

“Go ahead and try. But I know you won’t shoot first.”

“What? You think I’m afraid?”

“No, but if you wanted to shoot me, you’d already have done it. You’re just drawing things out in hopes of disarming me without bloodshed. This Mexican standoff isn’t getting us anywhere. Let the girl go and I’ll put down my rifle. Then it’ll all be over.”

“You don’t get it, do you, soldier? I can take you out anytime I want. It’s just that it would be a shame to kill someone as naïve as you. Drop your weapon, and I won’t hurt you.”

“No.”

“What? Have you gone crazy? You’ll get a month on guard duty for this—if you survive.”

“I’m not going to do it. How would you explain my absence when you get back to the unit?”

“I’ll say you went crazy and pointed your weapon at your buddies.”

“Do you think they’ll believe you? Do you really think the commander won’t investigate and find out it didn’t really happen? If you kill me, you’ll have to kill the girl, too.”

“And me,” Max unexpectedly said, pointing his rifle at Lemmons. “Drop your pistol, Lieutenant.”

Lemmons looked at Max. His hand shook.

“Dennis, Sterling—disarm these troublemakers.”

They didn’t move.

“What did I say? That was an order.”

“The girl isn’t worth it,” Sterling said suddenly. “You guys are like two bulls who’ve locked horns over a cow. Let her go, Spears. Let’s get these bulls calmed down.”

“Don’t do it, Spears. Don’t listen to these idiots. Are you soldiers rebelling? Do you know what happens to sailors on a ship when they mutiny?”

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that if we got the lieutenant angry, he’d lose his nerve and start firing. There’d be no going back after that. I didn’t want to kill him, not because I was afraid of dying myself, but because the idea disgusted me. I was beginning to think joining the Army had been a mistake. I didn’t think an ordinary soldier would be in danger during peacetime. But I couldn’t let myself be distracted: this conflict wasn’t over yet.

“This is some mutiny!” I said, lowering the barrel of my rifle. “If you want to kill me, go ahead—shoot.”

“What?”

“Do it! I’m ready.”

“Have you completely lost your mind?”

“No. All I want is for you to let the girl go. She has nothing to do with this. But if you can’t do that, then kill me. Kill me and face the consequences.” I dropped my rifle. “I see the killer in your eyes. What are you waiting for? Shoot! Pull the trigger! It should be easy for you.”

The lieutenant looked at Max. He wasn’t lowering his weapon. Suddenly Cortez slipped his rifle from where it hung on its sling behind his back and pointed it at Lemmons. Now there were two people pointing

weapons at him, and only one soldier, José, had been on his side. Sterling was hesitating—clearly, he no longer saw any point in what they'd been about to do.

“Say something, Sterling. Whose side are you on?” Lemmons asked, hoping to get Sterling to back him up.

Sterling shrugged. Lemmons spat and swore. The soldier's indifference annoyed him. He realized that Spears, who was holding the girl would be no help, so his choices were limited.

“If you fire, I'll kill you,” Cortez said, taking the conflict to the limit.

The lieutenant's hand shook. He was starting to lose confidence. Bewildered as he now was, he might do anything. I had to stop him.

“Don't listen to them. Shoot!” I shouted at him.

The lieutenant stared at me in surprise for a second. His face turned red and his forehead creased in concentration as he tried to figure out what to do.

“Shoot? Are you crazy?” he finally asked. “If I shoot you, Cortez'll kill me.”

“Go ahead. Don't shoot him, Oscar,” I said to Cortez.

“All right,” he sighed and lowered his rifle.

“If you want to kill me, do it right now in front of these witnesses,” I said and pointed at the girl. Then you can kill her, too. Kill everybody. Nobody's going to put up a fight.”

“Why should I do that?”

“Because you wanted to have some fun with a defenseless girl. Because being a bully is more important to you than the lives of the soldiers under you. Because your need to satisfy your lust is bigger than your need to be an honorable soldier. Because your sordid desires are more important than the law. Isn't that right?”

“You can go to hell!” the lieutenant cried, reholstering his pistol. “You guys really made a mess of things! You've ruined the whole mood. But what kind of commander would I be if I killed my own soldiers? Let her go, Spears.”

Spears did as he was told, and the girl took to her heels without looking back and soon vanished into the bushes. Max and Vargas lowered their weapons without saying a word.

“We’re done here—move out!” the lieutenant said as though nothing had happened.

Drawing even with me, Lemmons whispered:

“I’ll get you for this.”

I just smiled. I was in an excellent mood: everybody was still alive, and that was the main thing. What’s done was done, so I figured the lieutenant’s threat was an empty bluff.

But I was wrong. The lieutenant was the sort to hold a grudge. At first, he did everything he could to conceal it, but when we returned to our unit a week later, he and Vargas became very adept at harassing me. They knew what they were doing, and they were very good at it. Everything they did was technically according to regulation. Sometimes I’d find my uniform all rumbled; at other times, my bunk would be made up wrong. The lieutenant put me on guard duty a few times. For a more exotic punishment, he would make me clean toilets with a toothbrush or spend all night peeling potatoes. But I suffered through it, realizing I could do nothing to rectify the situation and filing a complaint would only make things worse. Max and Oscar sometimes covered for me while I hid and took a nap. Then the lieutenant was transferred to a different unit six months later, and that was the last I saw of him. Thank God.

Life got better, but after everything that had happened I knew I’d have a hard time continuing as a soldier. The physical hardships of a soldier’s life didn’t bother me, but I was horrified that I might have to kill. I’d been trained as a sniper, a man whose mission is to kill from a great distance. Maybe they would’ve made me a radio operator if I’d been a worse shot. But it was obvious what an Army career would lead to. And I really didn’t want that to happen.

Therefore, I got out two years later when my tour was up. Thank God, I hadn’t been required to kill anyone. I had nowhere to go and no one to see except Kate. I’d thought about her constantly, glad I’d been able to save her. My memory of what she looked like was dim. I had only a vague recollection of her flowery dress, but I wanted very much to see her again although I seriously doubted she would remember me. Dressed alike in uniforms and with shaved heads, we’d probably all looked alike to her. Still, I decided to look her up; I wasn’t sure about the name of the town she lived in, but I remembered where it was located.

I drove into the remote West Virginia town of Ashwood a week later. It

was small: U.S. Route 220 was its main street; a dozen or so houses lined the highway on both sides. I stopped at a gas station just outside of town.

After filling up, I walked inside to pay in cash—I hadn't yet settled down anywhere and applied for a credit card. An older man of average height was behind the counter.

"Is there someplace around here where I could stay the night?" I asked as I handed him a couple of twenties. "I'm not particular—I could even sleep in a barn."

"Who sleeps in a barn nowadays?" he grinned. "There's a bed and breakfast down the road a piece. Did you think we're all a bunch of country hicks around here?"

I was embarrassed.

"Sorry, I didn't mean..."

"No problem, we're off the beaten track, but we do get a fair number of hunters and tourists who want a quiet vacation in the mountains. So what brings you to these parts?"

"I'm looking for a girl of about eighteen or nineteen who lives around here somewhere. Her name's Kate. Do you know anyone like that?"

"I sure do. There's only one Kate hereabouts. Why do you ask? Do you know her?"

"I met her just once."

"When was that?"

I gave him the short version of how we met.

He laughed.

"Yeah, I heard about that. So you're her guardian angel?"

"Her what?"

"Kate told us how she was found and caught by some men in green uniforms, but one of them suddenly lit up as bright as the sun. She told me it hurt her eyes to look at him. She said he ordered the others to let her go and they obeyed for fear of making the bright shining angel mad."

"I suppose it must have been sunlight reflecting off my bayonet," I laughed. I knew that couldn't have been it, though. We didn't walk around in the woods with fixed bayonets, and the blade was treated to reduce reflections anyway. "She was standing between me and the sun. Do I look like an angel?"

“That’s what I thought,” the man said, laughing along with me. He stuck out his hand: “I’m John.”

“Nicholas,” I replied, shaking his hand.

“Well, Nicholas. You probably can’t wait to see Kate. Keep on down this road. Hers is the seventh or eighth house on the right. You can’t miss it—it’s the one with a blue fence. That’s where your... girlfriend lives.”

I didn’t try and explain to John that Kate wasn’t my girlfriend. I just thanked him, got back in my car, and drove off in the direction he’d indicated. A few minutes later I saw a house with a low fence painted blue. The gate was open. Walking up to the house, I could feel my heart beating in my chest. I stepped up onto the porch, raised my hand to knock on the door and hesitated. I dropped my arm, suddenly having second thoughts. What could I say to her? Would she even remember me? A lot of time had passed, and she had her own life. Probably a boyfriend, too. But John had said the incident was engraved in her memory forever. So maybe my trip hadn’t been in vain.

I raised my hand again to knock and... the door opened. I saw Kate standing before me. *Ah, Kate! You’ve changed a lot in the past two years.*

“Hello, I’m...”

With a joyful cry, Kate threw her arms around my neck. I hadn’t been expecting a reception like that. It took me aback, and I just stood there like a statue. Kate pulled back after a minute, lowered her eyes, and quietly said:

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m just so happy to see you!”

“But how did you know it was me?”

“My uncle Johnny called and said you were coming. He runs the gas station you stopped at on the edge of town.”

It had never occurred to me that the guy would call ahead. But I was embarrassed to admit that, so I changed the subject.

“Did you really recognize me? I thought we probably all looked the same to you.”

“To tell the truth, I wouldn’t have known you if you’d just showed up out of the blue. But uncle Johnny warned me you were coming, and once I saw you, I knew it was you. Especially since it’s still light out. I didn’t open the door right away. I looked at you through the window first... But why

are we still standing at the front door? Come on in! Make yourself at home. I've lost my manners I'm so happy."

I followed her into the house and found myself in a simple but comfortable living room. Everything was clean and tidy.

"Are your parents home?" I asked.

"I don't have any parents—I live alone."

"Why's that?"

"My mother died in childbirth, so I never knew her, and a heart attack took Daddy a year ago."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, I'm used to being alone."

"How do you manage the property by yourself?"

"I've been pretty self-sufficient ever since I was a child, so I'm not afraid to work. And my neighbors lend a hand when I need help. Plus Uncle Johnny and Uncle Sam are always willing when I need a man's strong back. This is a small community, but the people here are friendly. We all help each other. But sit down for heaven's sake! Take a load off."

I sat down in the nearest chair. Well, not so much sat as plopped myself down in it with a bit of a swagger. It gave off a loud crack and collapsed under me, throwing me onto the floor.

"Oh my God! What a way to treat a guest!" Kate scurried over and helped me to my feet. "I forgot. That chair's had a loose leg for a while now. I just haven't gotten around to fixing it. Are you okay? Are you mad?"

Smiling bravely, I slowly and carefully sat in a different chair.

"I'll fix it for you. Let me have some tools, and I'll make it good as new."

"Oh no, no. You come to visit and you think I'd put you to work? That isn't how it works. You're my guest. Relax. I'll get you something to eat."

She rushed into the kitchen and soon returned with a slice of chocolate cake. It was her way of making me welcome. It moved me to tears that I couldn't hold back.

"You sure you're okay? Are you in pain?" Kate asked sympathetically. "Let me see."

I shook my head and tears flowed over my cheeks, leaving them moist.

“I’m okay. I didn’t land hard,” I said quietly and then added even more quietly: “It’s been a long time since I talked to a really nice person.”

Kate walked over to me, pressed my head to her chest, and gently stroked my hair. I could no longer restrain myself and broke out sobbing. I cried inconsolably for a long time, letting go of all the feelings I could no longer hold back. I finally calmed down and pulled back.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to... It just happened... I got your dress wet.”

“Now don’t you worry yourself about that. It’ll dry,” Kate smiled at me. “I cry once a month myself. Don’t know why. A soldier’s life can be tough. My Uncle Sam told me about his time in the Army.”

“Oh!” I suddenly remembered: “I haven’t introduced myself. My name’s Nicholas.”

“And I’m Kate,” she smiled. “Uncle Johnny told me your name when he phoned me. Is it okay if I call you Nicky?”

“You can call me anything you want.”

“Okay, Nicky. And you can call me anything you want—except Katherine. I don’t like it when people call me that.”

“Then that’s settled.”

“Now I’ll get you some milk and heat up some mushroom soup for you. It’ll just take a minute.”

Kate went into the kitchen and started rattling dishes. I took a bite of the cake and began slowly chewing it, savoring the chocolaty taste. My tears had dried, and a feeling of peace came over me. I felt at ease for the first time, as though I had come home. Kate seemed to be glowing with an inner light. I’d found the answer to a question I didn’t know I had. Strange words came into my mind. Their meaning escaped me, but I knew they were very important. Unable to refrain, I whispered them:

Why do we need light when there is darkness?

A final cry bursts forth:

Because we have a soul!

And then a light dispels the darkness.

And so began a new life for me. Darkness gave way to light. I bound my future to Kate and never regretted it. I needed her, and she me. She was a beam of light illuminating the way ahead for me. And soon there were more beams of light: she gave me children.

## CHAPTER 22.

# The Detective and the Man

“I’m stuck in parallel worlds, it’s something supernatural.”  
*(An excerpt from the song “Parallel Worlds” by Elliot Minor)*

I came to my senses on the ground and felt a sharp pain in my shoulder. I slowly stood up and leaned one shoulder against the wall while clutching the wound in my other shoulder.

“Assassin!” I called, just in case.

Nobody answered. I was alone. Finally alone. The absolute master of my own body. That didn’t make me happy, however. There was an oppressive silence in my head. It was boring. There was nobody to take the pain away. Nobody to give me encouragement.

I looked around to try and get my bearings. When I figured out where I was, I set off for Kat’s apartment. She was probably worrying, and I essentially had nowhere else to go.

If it weren’t for my messy appearance and the nagging and sometimes sharp pain, I would’ve thought it was all a dream. My day had been too bizarre and full of adventures. I hadn’t imagined I’d be spending my vacation like this when I arrived here from Canada. No one would have. Those unique memories of parallel worlds changed my life. I still remembered the lives the Gladiator, Pervert, and Assassin had lived. I was myself, yet I was them, too. I’d assimilated all of their experiences, their wisdom,

and their abilities to think and make decisions. Four men had actually joined to become one: I was one person, yet there were four of me. It's hard to put into words, but they left an indelible imprint on my mind.

After spending some time slowly and wearily wandering around the city, I finally arrived back at Kat's apartment. I went up to the seventh floor and rang the doorbell. Kat opened it almost immediately, as though she'd been standing by the door waiting for me.

"Oh," she exclaimed and blanched when she saw my bloody shoulder.

"Don't worry. It's not serious."

"Quick, come in. I... I'm not alone."

I looked at her questioningly.

"Detective Jefferson has been waiting for you."

"Who?"

"Have you forgotten me already?" the lead detective greeted me.

"Hello," I said politely and stopped.

"Let's go in the bathroom," Kat said, pulling me by the arm. "I need to dress your wound. You can talk to him later."

She addressed that last sentence to Jefferson, who opened his mouth to speak, then closed it.

In the bathroom, Kat set me down on the edge of the tub, carefully removed the cloth bandaging my wound, unbuttoned my shirt, and then, finding that she couldn't remove it without causing me pain, got a pair of scissors and cut it off.

"Take off your pants," Kat ordered.

"What?"

"I wouldn't argue if I were you," Jefferson said from the other side of the door.

"Do you want your pants to get wet? Get 'em off!"

I sighed, stood up, and started taking my pants off, trying not to look at Kat. Even though I'd slept with her the night before, I now felt shy for some reason. When I was undressed (my shorts had to come off, too, because she didn't want them to get wet, either), Kat had me lie down in the tub and started washing my shoulder with the shower hose attachment. She carefully covered my wound with her hand to keep the stream of water from striking it directly, but it was still painful. I was barely able to keep

from groaning. Only the knowledge that the Assassin and Gladiator would have born it in silence kept me from cursing wildly. Finally she was done, and I heaved a sigh of relief, but Kat had another surprise for me. She took a bottle of hydrogen peroxide and started dribbling some on my wound. I hissed in pain.

“Bear with me, I’m almost done,” Kat said in a firm tone. “Maybe next time you’ll know not to get into a gun battle with nine bikers.”

“How did you find out about that?” I asked, surprised.

“The detective told me.”

“Not everything, just the important stuff,” Jefferson said through the door.

“Stop eavesdropping!” Kat snapped playfully.

After drying me with a towel and bandaging my shoulder, she helped me get dressed.



“How did you find out about that?” Nick Glaude asks in surprise.

“The detective told me,” Katherine explains.

I can’t resist and say:

“Not everything, just the important stuff.”

“Stop eavesdropping!” the woman in the bathroom says.

It’s hard to stand by the door and wait when I have so many questions for Glaude, but I realize this is no time to argue. Katherine Grayson is a thoughtful girl, and the guy really needs to have his wound dressed. I don’t know why he was wounded; the witnesses to the gun fight were silent on that point.

I take out a cigarette to pass the time. I have no desire to smoke (I quit three years ago); I just want something to fiddle with. Playing with a cigarette distracts me and helps me relax. I walk into the living room and stand next to the window, looking out onto the street. It’s dark out, and the lights are on in neighboring buildings. I sigh and look at my watch—half past eight. My wife will be getting ready for bed. I need to call and tell her I’ll be late. I take out my cell phone and pull up my contacts, but then I hear the bathroom door open.

“I’m in here,” I call out, pocketing my phone.

Katherine and Glaude walk in. He looks a little better and more cheerful than he did a half hour ago. There’s a clean bandage on his shoulder. Katherine glances at me and says:

“I can see you two need to talk. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

With that, she leaves and quietly closes the door behind her.

“Take a seat,” I say to Glaude, pointing to a chair.

“After you, Detective.”

I smile and sit down at a small desk in the corner. Glaude sits also and begins looking at me anxiously. We stare at each other like that for about twenty seconds. I’m smiling, but Glaude is tense and having trouble hiding it. Finally, he gives in and asks:

“How did you know I’d be here?”

“Do you mind if I call you Nick?”

“Feel free.”

“Where else could you go, Nick? When you left the scene of the crime, you told people that I’d know where to find you. And Katherine’s apartment is the only address I have for you. By the way, I’ve been waiting for two hours.”

“Are you going to arrest me?”

“No,” I smile. “I wouldn’t have come alone if I was going to take you in. I just want to clear up some details.”

“Fair enough. Ask away.”

“Who shot first, Nick?”

“I’m not really sure. They came around the corner and immediately started shooting. I jumped at Eve to shield her from the bullets and we fell to the ground—behind a Nissan Pathfinder, I think it was.”

“Where did you get the pistol?”

“It wasn’t mine—it was Eve’s. I asked her to give it to me but she refused at first... She didn’t let me have it until after she was hit... I thought she was only wounded, and...”

I squeeze my eyes shut to stop the tears, remembering how her face looked as she lay dead on the ground. The poor girl. She had such a promising future. She was like a daughter to me. She would still be alive if only she had broken one rule. She always was a stickler for the rules. I

shouldn't have let her go out alone, especially after she told me about the encounter with the bikers in the restaurant. I must be getting old.

However, I need to get my mind back on the interview with Glaude. I can't understand how this guy managed to take out all those bikers and come away with just a light wound. Nor can I understand his fight in the jail cell, even after watching the video three times. It's too bad there was no sound.

"From an official standpoint," I slowly say, "Detective Aidan should not have parted with her weapon under any circumstances. Unofficially, though, it's a pity she didn't do so a little sooner... The witnesses said you dealt with the bikers by yourself. Is that true?"

"Yes, I killed all of them."

"Not all. Three are still alive."

As I tell Glaude that, I watch for his reaction. Would he be sorry three bikers survived, or would he be glad to hear it? Judging from his reaction, however, he doesn't care.

"That means it was meant to be," he says.

"There's something I still don't understand. How were you able to take out nine men? I ran a thorough background check on you: you've never even been in the military. I thought you just knew how to fight, but it turns out that unarmed combat isn't the only thing you're good at. Eve was a good shot and she could do nothing, but you handled nine armed opponents with no trouble at all."

"I wouldn't say I had no trouble," Glaude objected, glancing at his wounded shoulder.

"But still."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you..."

"Try me."

He tells me everything. I watch him closely as he talks, trying to determine if he's lying. During my many years as a detective, I've learned to tell when someone is hiding something or lying outright. But I can't get a read on this guy. What he told me is absolutely incredible; however, it would be difficult to make up a story like that. Then too, the facts speak for themselves. I saw for myself how easily he handled a man with double his strength. Also, there were a lot of witnesses to the shootout. They didn't see everything, but nine bikers with gunshot wounds from Eve's pistol are

strong evidence. However, three of them died from an explosion, and their wounds were different.

I try not to interrupt Glaude. He's obviously been wanting to tell someone about this. Hell, I'd probably check myself into a psychiatric hospital if it happened to me. However, he doesn't seem like your average crazy guy. Maybe he's a writer and simply thought the story up. That could be why he seems so sincere. I knew a writer once who could spin a yarn so well that everybody took fiction for fact. And then when he was done, he would grin and say he'd made it up on the spot.

"But don't make me prove I have other personalities. They're already gone. I'm just an ordinary man now," Nick said, concluding his story.

I waited a few seconds, expecting a grin or an admission that it was a joke. Then I gave in and asked:

"You're with the CIA, aren't you, Nick?"

"I'm a programmer. I develop Windows applications. That's all."

"You don't write fiction in your spare time by any chance, do you?"

"No, I've never written anything... I know how ridiculous my story sounds, but it's all true. I don't have a logical explanation for it myself. Well, if you believe in a higher power, us sharing a common soul is the only reasonable explanation I've been able to come up with."

"But you say you don't have people from other worlds in you now?"

"That's right. They're gone."

"They all left at the same time?"

"No, at different times. The Gladiator went first and then the Pervert. The Assassin was the last to go."

"So you don't have any proof?"

"You watched the video of what happened in the holding cell."

That gets my attention.

"How did you know that, Nick?"

"It wasn't hard to figure out. I saw the cameras and immediately understood why you put me in that particular cell."

I should have realized. Even someone less astute than Glaude could have figured that out. Then too, he spent half a day with Evelyn, and she could have told him everything. Thinking of Evelyn brought her pretty face to my mind. She was always so full of life, and her judgment was

usually sound. But not this time. I sigh, wishing I could turn back the clock. A tear forms in my left eye against my will.

Seeing my sadness, Glaude asks, “You’re thinking about Eve, aren’t you?”

I nod.

“She was a great girl. I... the Assassin, I mean, did everything he could to save her. Unfortunately, it all happened too fast.”

Something clicks in my head. A thought just occurred to me.

“Wait. You said the Assassin handled the shootout?”

“Yes. I told you about that.”

“So he had control of your body?”

“Yes.”

“Then how do you know what actually happened? Maybe he deceived you. You said that when you weren’t in control you couldn’t see, hear or even move a finger.”

“That’s true, but we learned to see in a different way. I really had no control, but the Assassin’s thoughts were an open book to me. I could see and hear through him, and even feel what was happening a little. It was like watching TV: I could see everything, but I couldn’t affect anything.”

“I think I understand. If you could read their thoughts, then they couldn’t hide anything from you.”

“I learned everything there was to know about them during the day we spent together. The experiences of four twenty-nine-year-old men live on in me now. I can’t fight like the Gladiator or shoot like the Assassin, but I know all about how they were trained to become experts in their own fields. But that isn’t the most important thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I know how to conquer the Beast.”

“The beast? I remember you mentioning the beast. Who is that, Nick.”

“It’s a ‘what,’ not a ‘who.’ It’s in all of us, pushing us to commit sins, do bad things. All criminals are people who’ve surrendered to the Beast, people who can’t overcome their base desires. But the Beast is also an elemental rage that resides within us, waiting for the chance to break free. The Beast is destruction, the devastation of all humanity. The Beast is primitive instinct that’s with us from birth. But we aren’t animals, we’re people, and

that means we need to fight and resist the Beast. We have to draw a line between what's okay and the taboo things that we should avoid, even in our thoughts. However, the Beast and the means of fighting it may differ for each person. I only know that if a person gives in to it, he embarks on a path that leads to self-destruction, to eternal darkness. He can make his way back from the dark, but it's very hard, because it drags him down and sucks him in like quicksand. The further a person travels down this road, the more difficult it is to return. Unfortunately, a person doesn't always realize that he has long since given in to the Beast."

"My job taught me that a long time ago. After all, I know a lot of criminals. I'm surprised you understand it, also."

"I have a lot of vicarious experience with that from the Gladiator, who confused honor and glory; the Assassin, whose nobility made him a professional instrument of death; and the Pervert, who surrendered to his sexual desires. Then there's me—I took my first step toward insanity when I forgot about true human values."

"Do you feel any regret for what they did?"

"It's complicated. I feel regret, because I understand that lust is vile and sinful. From the Pervert's example, I know that someone who surrenders to lust can never find satisfaction. It isn't just a bad feeling, it's completely unnecessary. Lust never makes a person happy... On the other hand, I'm not sorry that everything turned out the way it did. By letting the Beast take over, I helped Kat get free of an abusive boyfriend. Three personalities from other worlds took up residence in my body, and I got to know Eve as a result..."

"So even if you could change the past, you wouldn't?"

"No matter how deep we sink into the swamp, there's always the possibility of escape. The Gladiator, the Assassin, and the Pervert all managed to do it. Otherwise, they'd still be here. I didn't even realize I was headed down the wrong path. So no, I wouldn't want to change the past."

There came a soft knock on the door.

"Come in, Katherine," I say.

I look at my watch. It's almost midnight. My wife will be asleep. But that's okay. This isn't the first time I have come home late; she's used to it. I don't even call her. The door opens, and Katherine looks in.

“I’m sorry. We got a bit carried away,” I apologize for keeping her up so late.

“No problem. Stay as long as you want: I have the day off tomorrow. Would you like some coffee?”

Glaude winks at her. “Thanks, no sugar for me.”

“The same for me,” I say, turning to look at Katherine.

“Of course, I’ll bring it right out.”

“So you’re saying...” I turn back to face Glaude, and my words catch in my throat.

He’s gone. He was sitting there in the chair a moment ago, and now he’s not there. It’s as though he vanished into thin air. I look at the window—it’s closed. Anyway, he couldn’t have jumped out without my noticing. And we’re on the seventh floor.

“What the hell is going on? Nick, are you here?” I call out just in case. There’s no answer. He simply disappeared.

“Katherine! Come here, quick!” I shout.

She peeks into the room a second later.

“What is it, Detective?” She looks around the room. “Where’s Nick?”

“He’s not in the kitchen with you?”

“No, you were looking at me the whole time: I didn’t even open the door all the way.”

Katherine suddenly smiles:

“You’re kidding me, right?”

But her smile soon fades. Seeing me turn pale, she asks with concern in her voice:

“Are you all right, Detective? I’ll bring you a glass of water.”

Glancing around the room again, she goes back into the kitchen. And not a moment too soon, because I feel my heart pounding wildly.

*Take it easy... No need to get upset*, I tell myself.

If this is a joke, it’s a very bad one. But for some reason I’m sure that Glaude has actually disappeared. And not just from this room—from this world. He simply vanished, leaving nothing behind. It’s as though he was never here, never. The words of Elliott Minor’s “Parallel Worlds,” a song my daughter loves to listen to, flash into my mind:

The night's playing up again,  
and someone's there,  
The room is getting colder now,  
The light swings again  
And I'm scared,  
'cause someone's there,  
Stop messing with my mind 'cause now I'm...

I'm stuck in parallel worlds, it's something supernatural,  
It won't let me go,  
It's paranormal, and no one else believes me,  
I feel so alone again.

*Was there ever anyone else here?* I ask myself, feeling like I'm waking up from a deep sleep. I think back, trying to remember what just happened and why I'm in this apartment. Did I fall asleep? I've been working too hard; it's time to go home. I'll just thank the person who lives here for her hospitality and then head home to my wife and daughter...

## Epilogue

“For those who believe that a fantasy is simply a reality we do not suspect exists.”

*(The author)*

**G**loom reigned in a dark cavern. The only light came from glistening phosphorescent stalactites and stalagmites. At its center sat the Dune that, oddly, had created the purpose for the cavern. The walls of the cavern itself consisted mainly of small, black and white marble stones. How the golden sand, which bore no taint of the sea, got in the cave is a mystery. It had always been there, and the entity kneeling before the Dune gave no thought to it, nor had he ever. However, the cavern was not located on or under the Earth, or even on a planet. It existed in and of itself outside the universes. Its purpose was to protect the Holy Dune, and only those versed in the art of teleportation could find their way to it. The important thing here was the Dune; its guardian, like guardians throughout the world, interested those who came not at all. Therefore, no one and nothing attempted to penetrate the marble wall to discover what lay on the other side.

Small cold abrasive waves of sand driven by an excess of blue energy surrounding the Dune broke against it. From time to time, that energy would emit bluish-white bolts of lightning for no apparent reason. The source of this energy probably lay within the Dune itself, because there were no energy fields of any bandwidth in the cavern. No one dared pass through this energy barrier. If someone did, he would instantly appear

knee-deep in marble in the farthest corner of the cavern or, even worse if he was tall, with his head buried in the roof. But that had happened long ago. Now, that corner was clear of all detritus. Most likely, it was the only instance, when someone touched the guarding walls or tore them down.

A sensitive person approaching the entity on his knees would sense an energy flux and perhaps even see him glowing in the colors of the rainbow. He could identify the entity as the Overlord of People by his unique flux, because only he possessed that energy code combination. It is worth noting that people are nothing more than a concept that imbues a living being with a degree of intelligence. For example, such a being is capable of intentionally lighting a fire, not by employing its own biological functions (like a dragon), but by utilizing technology.

Now the Overload of People was called Namuh; in order that they, who know of him only by repute, do not forget whom he rules. People differ both inwardly and outwardly; they may be found in different locations: on planets and in universes. But they have a single overlord, even if they are unaware of his existence. That is an inviolable law of the universe.

Finishing his silent prayer, Namuh detected a surge of energy behind him and rose from his knees. He was approached by the Lord of Worlds, who could also be recognized by his own unique energy code. Suddenly, around his head shone the halo of Power, which enabled him to judge an infinite number of universes. Whereas Namuh had absolute power over people, Esrevi—the Overlord of Worlds—had power over the macrocosm itself as it is understood by sentient beings.

“It is time,” Esrevi said, laying his hand on Namuh’s shoulder and trying to sound reverent in the presence of the Dune. “They await only us.”

An ecumenical conclave of Overlords is a rare phenomenon. Rarity is an arbitrary quantity for those who have no concept of time, however, because eternity has no units of measure. The conclave was taking place in the Palace of Overlords, where the first of the first, as Supreme Overlord Merpus was called, sits in judgment over the others, having unlimited power in all manifestations and dimensions of existence.

Like the cavern containing the Dune, the Palace is located neither on a planet nor on any other space-time object. In order to visualize the Palace’s location, one must bring to mind the fundamental physics of the universe. Every schoolboy knows that planets revolve around stars, and stars revolve around the black hole at the center of the galaxy. The black hole’s attractive

force is so strong that it distorts space-time, allowing both wormholes and a hole in the four-dimensional continuum to exist, thereby opening a way beyond the borders of the universe. The black hole in turn rotates around absolute Light, which we simply are unable to perceive due to the nature of the black hole itself, where gravity is so great that it prevents even photons from escaping. The Palace of the Gods is located there, at the very center of this absolute Light, which exists outside time and space and is not subject to any of the physical laws valid in the universes.

“It is time. They await only us.”

Namuh turned to Esrevi, bowed, and vanished, much like an object in a video frame vanishes when it is edited out. The Overlord of Worlds did not delay long before following him. Only fine energy fluxes betrayed the Overlords’ recent presence in the cavern.

As Namuh and Esrevi were climbing the crystal staircase leading to the Palace’s main hall, they were joined by Taeh, the Overlord of Fire, who was not walking as the other two Overlords were, but was soaring above the steps, with beams of reddish-yellow light flashing out from the bottoms of his heels from time to time.

“You are late,” Taeh said, grinning.

Esrevi cast a scathing look upon him. Lower Overlords like the Overlord of Fire have a well-developed sense of time; indeed, that over which they rule is subject to the cycle of time. The same may be said for the Overlords of People, Animals, and Nature, which fall somewhere between the highest and the lowest in the hierarchy of overlords.

“When will you learn to think before you speak?” Namuh asked Taeh.

Taeh frowned, and flames blazed on the tips of his fingers hot enough to melt steel as though it were a tin spoon. Esrevi squeezed the Overlord of Fire’s hand with his own, and the flames were immediately extinguished.

“You have made a mistake. Apologize,” the Overlord of Worlds said in a didactic tone.

“I will not!” insisted Taeh, who was known for his temper.

“Child,” Namuh said, smiling.

“I do not live by mortal laws,” Taeh objected.

“As I was saying, you are a child.”

Taeh gave no answer. They had arrived.

The appearance of the three gods broke the silence in the hall where the Overlords had gathered.

“I see you finally found them, Taeh,” Merpus remarked from where he stood somewhere in the middle of the hall behind the other Overlords.

“It was not I. They have come of their own volition,” Taeh admitted, stepping to the side.

Merpus waved his hand to form a narrow channel of energy, which he directed in an arc around all obstacles toward Namuh and Esrevi. It caught them up and swept them toward Merpus, halting them abruptly after a few meters and holding them in the air by invisible tendrils resembling high-voltage electrical currents. Viewed from a different angle, it could be seen that every millimeter of their bodies was surrounded by an electromagnetic field that kept them suspended above the others. The Supreme Overlord’s power left Namuh and Esrevi feeling completely powerless. However, they did not attempt to escape the energy web that held them and continued dutifully hanging above the other overlords.

“We have come together to discuss a paradox my assistants detected. One hundred seventy-nine trillion to the fifth power parallel universes in the Epsi-76 district have been affected by an anomaly extending over closed and open connecting links in three adjacent universes. Does anyone else have knowledge of this paradox?” Merkus’ sonorous voice resounded throughout the hall.

Overlord Merpus knew who was responsible for the paradox, of course, but he needed to let the guilty party confess in full view of all the gods.

“I do,” Namuh said without flinching.

“I have frozen the worlds in question and separated them from the main branch,” Esrevi added.

“So, you are familiar with the anomaly. Then explain what happened. My assistants have been unable to determine the cause for this sudden deviation from the Plan. All calculations have shown that the anomaly resulted from a few key events in the three universes, but I have been unable to discover when they happened or why.”

“It was my idea,” the Overlord of People said, accepting all blame on himself. “I wanted to conduct an experiment with the goal of joining together personalities that were utterly worthless because of their hopeless darkness into a node of spatial-causal linkages,” the Overlord of People

admitted. “I wanted to learn if I could enable them to escape the Dark by reducing its influence without externally affecting reality and thus enable them to return to the Light.”

“A closed node? With no outlet?”

“Absolutely. A node with four ends, one in which three threads were extended to a fourth, forming a closed Hermes’ nodal loop. When the node was drawn tight, the main thread dramatically altered its behavior and ceased following its predetermined course, thereby drawing the other ends to itself. Instead of proceeding together to the absolute Light, the entire interface channel was quadrupled, and the test subjects remained in the universe.

“And did you consult the Overlord of Souls? As I understand it, this lies within his jurisdiction.”

“No, I did not speak with him. I was assisted only by Esrevi, who opened passages between the worlds. There, by extending the attachment thread, I was able to contain the four in a single channel.”

“However, the anomaly occurred in three of the universes, but not in the one where the fourth, the primary thread, was located. How did that happen?”

“They broke out.”

“What do you mean?”

“The node that held them together unraveled.”

“So they were able to open the node and travel to the Light separately?”

“Not exactly. To express it in visual terms, they were able to free three of the ends and return them by forming their own passages between universes, not to the initial rupture point, but off a little to the side.”

“How did they do that?”

“I do not know. I wished to consult with Luos on exactly that point.”

“If they had simply broken out, it would not have changed the course of so many universes. What else happened?”

“In creating the passages, they continued to exist by returning to the past and creating an alternate probability branch.”

“I can confirm what Namuh said,” the Overlord of Worlds said. “From a quantum standpoint, parallel worlds interact with each other. As they separate, they grow more dissimilar. When the Temporal Track in one

of the worlds changed, it affected the neighboring worlds and eventually caused a paradox in a limited number of universes—one hundred seventy-five trillion to the fifth power, as our Overlord correctly stated.”

The Supreme Overlord looked around in bewilderment, then focused his attention on Namuh:

“But are people truly able to travel in time freely?”

Namuh did not dare lie with Merpus’ gaze on him. However, he had no reason to deceive Merpus; he actually had not given people that capability.

“No. Humans are too immature to have that ability. That is what contributed to the anomaly. They somehow contrived to return to their own pasts and radically change them. If Esrevi had not frozen the damaged areas, it would have led to change throughout the entire time stream, and many more worlds would have suffered and passed into Darkness, where they would have been lost to us forever.

“What you did was unjustified. So many universes were ruined for the sake of a single experiment! Overlord of Souls, do you have any thoughts on this?”

“I must say that I would not have undertaken an experiment like this one myself,” Luos slowly said. “The source of souls is absolute Light, so theoretically they can transmit their physiological properties to their hosts.”

“Can you explain just what a soul is for those of us not versed in the fine details of the subject?”

“In short, a soul is a portal beyond the limits of the temporal axis or, as mortals refer to this axis, beyond the fourth dimension. The soul is a channel from outside the universe through which it is energized by absolute Light. It cannot exist by itself and must live in a host body—a living creature. As a result, it is fragmented across multiple parallel worlds, existing and not existing simultaneously in all universes. In other words, a soul is eternal in a world where absolutely everything is mortal. As Namuh correctly observed, he combined parts of four souls in a single body, thereby quadrupling the channel connected to the Light. Interference of this type can cause a variety of deviations that alter the host’s nature and inclinations. It does not happen instantly, because the object is within the temporal flux, but it will definitely occur. I am no expert on the subject, I know only that a soul can provide abilities a person did not previously possess. But the main thing is that a soul with a powerful supply channel

can absorb darkness. Namuh knows more about people than I do and should have foreseen such changes.”

“He seems as confused as you and I.”

Namuh’s eyes suddenly lit up and his emotions spilled out in the form of pure energy that rang out under the vault of the hall.

“Luos, do you mean to say that a soul takes a person on the scale of justice brought into proximity with the Light?”

“Exactly.”

“When these people returned to their own worlds, they changed their behavior and acted as people do when Light outweighs Darkness. If a soul has no concept of past or future, that would explain how it could affect them in the past.”

“The increased influence of Light caused these people to behave differently,” Luos agreed.

“But how did they return?”

“Perhaps their soul gave them the ability,” Jiff, the Guardian of Time, interjected. “I do not know much about souls, but the flow of time is easy to predict. However, they did not even need to seek the flow, because all of that information was imprinted in their soul. They only needed to have a desire to open a portal to a world that had been rewound several turns. They were able easily to travel to any point in their past life, up to their time of birth. Not their current birth, but their First Birth.”

“But a return to a being’s past with a positive coefficient of significance usually creates a predictable paradox by expanding a temporal loop.”

“Their soul was apparently able to do that without paradox by replacing one branch with another.”

“Permanently destroying the standard track?”

“Precisely. It is as though it never were. But we know better.”

“Still, I would like to know exactly what happened. Namuh, question these people,” the Supreme Overlord ordered.

“That is impossible. When they returned, they forgot everything that had happened to them.”

“As I understand it, only three threads returned. What about the fourth?”

“Yes, he remained, and his memory did not change. Do you want me to send a messenger to contact him?”

“Why? His world was frozen and can never return to its own branch. Summon him to you.”

“It shall be done.”

Merpus swept his gaze over all those present.

“Then the conclave is concluded.”

The Overlords began to disperse. Jiff, Esrevi, Luos, and Namuh remained to discuss what had just happened. An outside observer would find their conversation boring: they used too many technical terms mingled with jargon specific to the upper Overlords. Namuh spoke about the Scales of Good and Evil, Luos about the link between the soul and absolute Light, Esrevi about portals between worlds, and Jiff about time paradoxes. And somewhere far off, at a distance that could not be quantified by units of measure, Nicholas Glaude vanished as though he had never existed. He disappeared from that location and reappeared in the palace belonging to Overlord of People, a place inaccessible to mortals without a god’s special invitation.

## Instead of Afterword

I will break all of the classic literary conventions to reveal the full depth of evil within us. To achieve that goal, I will take you to places you haven't been even in your own imagination. I will describe objects that are believed to be nonexistent. You are wrong if you think the main characters in this book are heroes. They haven't yet become heroes; they have simply been helped by supernatural forces. This is not the end of the story. The real adventure begins in the second book: **The Black Diamond**.

*(The Author's Promise)*

Thank you for reading *The Beast*, the first book of *The Verge* series. If you enjoyed it, I'd appreciate it if you could take a moment to leave a short review and tell your friends about it. Word of mouth is an indie author's best friend. And visit my website at [www.TheBeast.info](http://www.TheBeast.info) for updates and news about *The Verge* series.

