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«Dreams Ltd»

Chapter 1: An evening Call.

A group of tall buildings standing on the right bank of the river Klendon had already absorbed most of the sun and now, only a scattering of orangey-red rays were beaming down the cottage roofs that spread out as far as the eye could see - from the bridge and up to the West Barton Avenue.

Cars, like restless insects were still ploughing the streets. Not as much as in the daytime now and traffic quietened down almost immediately after the Bank on the street corner had shut for the day. Most cars were parked by the "Lorian's" cafe ("Fresh pastry – Desserts – Live music") and near the three-story glass shopping mall "Somerset ". Doors of the mall's entrance were swinging open every now and then letting out the tardy shoppers with their colourful bags.

Somehow on lower floors music played softly.

I moved away from the window and sat on the sofa. I aimlessly gazed from one object to another. There is a clock on a shelf above the fireplace, its pendulum moving silently from side to side counting seconds as they disappear into nowhere. There is a tall vase decorated with bulging grapes, silver spoon, candle holder, porcelain hare...

What's the silver spoon doing there?

I tried to remember lazily but my eyes have already stumbled upon a photograph in a frame and the spoon was instantly forgotten. My feeling of restfulness has disappeared without a trace and tenacious and bitter sadness replaced it.

Alex, Alex. ... How long has it been?

I walked over to the fireplace and picked up the photo. My fingers gently caressed his familiar face frozen on a thin plate of a black and white image. The same face, the same smile, that mischievous expression of his dark eyes. I didn't even need to count how much time had passed since that day, I just knew - one month and eighteen days. Forty-eight days in total. Or fifty-two if you count from the day when Elmer received the letter. Thoughts instantly flooded my mind as my frozen memory tried to frantically scroll through everything that happened that night in April. I abruptly put the photo back on the shelf and walked away from the fireplace.

No! Not again.

It would make no sense to go through this nightmare for the umpteenth time.

It doesn't help. The ransom was paid. He hasn't come back. End of!

Perhaps it could all change again?

My inner voice sang timidly and I then realised that in a few seconds the nightmare will start all over again. My head will get torn apart by painful thoughts, tears will roll down my face and desperation will spread a net of iron threads over my mind causing me new pain.

No! Enough! Stop!

I frantically took a deep breath and held it. I need to calm down, get distracted, take a couple of Tylenol pills and go to bed. Tomorrow is a new day and something might change. I exhaled slowly and stood in the middle of the room for a few seconds trying to listen if insane voices would come back but it seemed they were gone - at least for now. I rubbed my face with the palms of my hands and headed for the bedroom.

I only made a few steps when the phone in the lounge rang.

Silver phone on a shelf made a second piercing noise and screen lit up in blue.

"Hello." I pushed the answer key and breathed wearily as I wistfully looked at the bedroom door.

“Shereen Moore?” enquired pleasant but unfamiliar female voice.

“Yes.”

“I am calling from the Dreams Ltd Corporation.”

I shivered and tensed up.

A-a-and the time has come ... the words sailed through my head.

The woman's voice continued:

“Order number 1839920 was filed on your behalf at the beginning of April. Is that correct?”

For a split second I fought a fugitive desire to lie and said:

“That’s correct.”

“We would like to meet up with you to discuss the details of repaying the debt.”

“OK. When?” I shivered trying to imagine what they would ask for in return.

“In one hour.”

“Today?” I was indignant but tried to compose myself. “I’m sorry, but isn’t it a bit late now?” The mantel clock showed 10pm. “Maybe I can come and see you in the morning? Say, tomorrow at nine or ten? Let me just write down the address...”

The unflappable voice interrupted me but I noticed a subtle change in her tone of voice and now it felt like I was talking to a robot-woman.

“The car will come for you in fifteen minutes. No ID is necessary, just a retina scan will be enough. Our signed Non-Disclosure Agreement will be breached if you make just one phone call after our conversation or before the car gets there. Hope to see you at the office in an hour. All the best, Miss Moore! ”

I heard the short beeps down the phone. I stood there staring dumbfounded at the phone.

What a polite young woman... What a pleasure to talk to you - Dreams Ltd!

Sarcastic thoughts swirled in my mind like a whole colony of bees but there was nobody to sting except for me. I could only hope that the conversation in the office is going to be with someone else as the mere thought of the robot-woman made me to feel repulsed.

I put the phone down on the shelf and went into the bedroom. There is only enough time only to have a quick shower and get changed. My comfortable bed beckoned more than ever but I went passed it without thinking, it might still be possible to sleep today but later. First I need to find out exactly how they will expect me to repay four hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Four hundred and fifty thousand - an incredible amount of money!

Image of Alex appeared before my eyes – the face on a black and white photograph.

The car was speeding through the night streets of the city but not a single speck of light would reach me through the tinted windows. No streetlights, no shop windows – only darkness. Car interior was lit by a few dimmed lights built into the doors and the ceiling.

I sneered.

Of course one shouldn’t expect to be shown the way to *the Corporation* building. How naïve was I to ask for their address and expect an answer! I could make out a vague silhouette of the driver through the partition that separated me from the front of the car but I could not see a thing of the surroundings. Nobody spoke to me. A short greeting was the end to the conversation that never happened. The only sign of the car moving was my seat that was somewhat shaking steadily. Some moments later I felt my body move forward and then go sideways. Car stopped for a bit but a few seconds it was speeding up again.

Traffic light, I noted automatically, looking at the panel with buttons for changing the temperature in the car and positioning of the seats. Window and door locks were missing.

Not surprising.

Not losing composure (escape was never an option) I continued to stare at the black impenetrable glass.

Corporation.... Recent conversation with the lady-robot went through my mind. So it's time to find out what their rules are. I knew from the very beginning who I was dealing with but I had no choice - adverts for Dreams Ltd. were everywhere: billboards, streets were full of beautiful slogans and titles. “Problems? Need help? Talk to us ... Our number is easy to remember.” Elegantly dressed people from TV screens sounded very convincing, telling us how easy and convenient their service is. However I have not heard or seen anybody who had actually benefited from this service. It wasn’t just strange it was scary. Something became more or less

clear after I signed the Non-Disclosure Agreement but how can it be that not even a single rumour reached me until then?

Don't people whisper between each other in bars? Don't best friends trust each other secrets? To me all this looked strange to say the least, if not suspicious.

But there was no choice.

When Elmer said that Alex was gone and then a few hours later he'd received a letter from his kidnappers – nobody could present me with the money needed. Nobody, except Dreams Ltd. After several futile attempts to get some answers from my friends. *Has anyone used it before? What could this Corporation ask for in return?* I had no other option but pick up the phone and try to reveal everything myself. I didn't want to think that my friends would betray me. But I still couldn't quite believe that no one else had used this service before me.

Well... It makes no difference now.

I recalled the day when I decided to make that call.

When I heard that *Corporation* lends money without asking to repay them in the same way – I made my final decision. I agreed. Money was transferred to my account very quickly, almost immediately and nobody mentioned the day of the repayment of that debt may come and what exactly I will be asked to do. Hopelessness of the situation did not allow me to debate. Having been a responsible person throughout my life I comprehended that it's too much of a burden having to agree to a provision of an unknown service in return. But what else could I have done? However, even now – if I was asked to betray or kill someone – I would seriously reconsider or even refuse conditions of the agreement. I was, therefore, hoping that everything will get settled without going to any extremes.

So, yes, I got the money. And I sent them to the kidnappers. But Alex never returned.

Well, that's not the *Corporation's* fault, I guess.

I kept on staring at the dark window gritting my teeth. They don't care if Alex came back home or not. They lent me the money and now they want to get it back. Or whatever it is they want back instead. It's their right.

I closed my eyes and sighed.

After a few minutes the car stopped. The driver's door slammed and then the door beside me opened.

"Mrs Moore? We have arrived."

"Arrived" I murmured to myself and got out of the car.

"Tea, coffee or maybe just water?" asked a tall and incredibly thin man, getting up from his desk to greet me, "Alcohol?"

"No, thanks"

He nodded. His face looked yellowish and kind of dry, perhaps, the reason for it was the lighting in the room or maybe a sand-coloured jacket that was creasing every time he moved, as though it was worn by a mop or a broom and not a by a man.

"My name is Mr Brahms", He introduced himself pulling out a pack of cigarettes and lighting one up, "Scott Brahms. And you, if I remember correctly, you are Shereen Moore."

"That's correct" I said frostily trying to make myself feel comfortable in the hard chair, "You know that."

"Mr Mop" smiled.

"Hopefully your trip here has not been too much of an inconvenience to you..."

I was starting to get irritated. His false politeness was completely unnecessary. We both knew why I was here but he knew more and that was making me feel rather nervous. My tired body was begging for some rest. The office was furnished quite primitively: one table, a couple of chairs and a wardrobe in the corner - simple and tasteless.

"That's enough Mr Brahms. Let's get down to business."

"Well, alright, if you wish so. Let me remind you that you are here because you have asked *the Corporation* to give you a certain amount of money which you had received immediately. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any complaints about the service, the actual money transfer or anything else?"

"No."

Brahms nodded in satisfaction.

“Then let’s get down to business. We hope that what *the Corporation* will ask you in return will not be regarded by you as too complicated or too time-consuming.”

“I can only answer your question when I hear about the nature of the task”

“Of course, Mrs Moore. We’d like to ask you to deliver this parcel to its final destination.”

From somewhere under the table appeared a cardboard box sealed in plastic. There was no text visible on it.

“If I understand correctly I’m not supposed to know what’s inside. Am I right?” I frowned staring at the box.

“You are absolutely right!” he confirmed brightly as though he just heard the most valuable and appropriate comment ever. “You cannot open the box under any circumstances and as you probably understand you also must not lose it”

“I hope it’s not something explosive?”

“No, the parcel isn’t dangerous for you at all.”

“OK. So where do I have to deliver it to?”

Brahms stopped looking at the box and looked at me.

“The City. You need to go there, find the right person and pass the parcel. After that your mission is accomplished.”

The simplicity of my future task made me want to exhale with relief. At least they are not asking me to kill someone. But this simplicity made it hard for me to believe that everything will go as easily as “Mr Mop” has described it.

“If everything is so simple, why would you not deliver it yourself?” Thin lips on Mr Brahms’s face stretched into some kind of a smile.

“We wouldn’t be called *the Corporation* if we did everything ourselves, would we?”

There is some logic to your words, you son of a bitch. You need someone like me to do the runs for you.

“Good. Tell me the name of the city, address and the name of the person this box is intended for.” I decided to get into the thick of it. The sooner I start the sooner I finish. Especially since it all looked more than doable.

“You see ...” Brahms cleared his throat. “In fact, the situation is not that simple. The city is called “Area 33” and it is a closed city. We also cannot provide you with a specific address. You’ll have to find this man yourself. But his name we’ll give you with pleasure...”

“Wait ...” I interrupted him. “What do you mean a “closed city”? If the city does not even have a normal name, just a number, and moreover, is considered to be a confined place, it is very likely to be dangerous! Am I Right?”

“I won’t be arguing with that” Brahms’s eyes narrowed. “But fifty thousand and four hundred is not a small amount, right?”

“I see-e-e-e...” I said, understanding perfectly well where he was going with this.

The man was silent for a few seconds, waiting for my new emotion to burst but as he realised that they won’t come he continued.

“So, the person’s name is Christopher Laroche. The only thing I’m certain about is that he is in that city. You’ll have to find him. Since it is not possible to enter the place without the necessary documentation this will be provided for you.”

“Can you give any more information about this the place? What is going on there? Are they conducting some sort of experiments there?”

“No, as far as I know, no experiments are conducted there. And this is not a military site. The rest you’ll have to find out yourself.”

It seemed to me like Brahms was trying to move on from the unwanted subject as quickly as possible and I was trying my hardest to keep the conversation going

“So, where is it located this “Area 33”, show me on the map, please.” I pointed to the map hanging on the wall.

“OK”, he paused for a moment and then reluctantly got up and went to the map. “There it is. Here.”

His hooked finger slipped somewhere in the neighbourhood of the south-west of Klendon City.

"Maybe two hundred miles, two hundred and fifty..." I figured in my head. "Not too far but not too close either"

"It looks like there is not a lot but mountains"

"What do you expect a closed area to look like?" Brahms grunted and returned to the table. "Maybe we should draw some castles to attract tourists?"

I did not acknowledge his sarcasm.

Now this whole task did not seem so easy but it still seemed achievable. Of course it will take some time and I'll have to ask Linda to look after the shop, but she knows what to do. No wonder - we have worked side by side for nearly three years.

I sighed and tried to stretch out my numb legs. My head was buzzing with fatigue and the lack of information made my thoughts go randomly round in circles. However as the difficulty of the task increased I felt a relief. Possibly it was irrational but the simplicity of the mission scared me a lot more than its complexity. If this area was open, like any normal city my suspicious mind would begin to search for a trick or hidden agenda. But now... Maybe they just do not want to get their hands dirty with any sort of closed areas? It is unpleasant that this has now been entrusted to me but at least there was an explanation.

"When will I be able to read the documents that you provide to enter the territory?"

"You will get them directly at the entrance of the border. Any other questions?" Brahms, oddly enough, also looked tired.

"I would like to familiarise myself with them now."

"I cannot provide you with this opportunity. Documents are being prepared by another department. They will be given to you at the entrance to the city."

Damn! I can't get a lot out of you.

"When will I need to go there?"

"At dawn."

I almost didn't feel surprised. I just stretched out my hands in front of me and rubbed my tired face. On one hand it is bad - I have no time for packing, on another hand - it's good. As I said before, the sooner I start the sooner I finish. If it's not going to take more than a few days I'd prefer to go there as soon as possible. Yes, get it over with and come back with no debts and no liabilities.

"Do you have any further questions, Mrs Moore?" Brahms asked indifferently, reaching for another cigarette.

"I have plenty of questions. It's just hard to think where to ask"

"Get some rest" He obviously noticed the signs of fatigue on my face and it was to his advantage as I had no energy to concentrate or insist or argue about anything. "Decide what to ask later. You'll be given a room on the fifth floor where you can sleep. You will be also provided with food and you will have access to the bathroom should you wish to refresh yourself."

All that sounded damn nice, especially the idea of a cushy bed. And I was forced to give in.

"Alright" I rubbed my eyes wearily. "I guess I really should get some sleep. But I still have many questions. Do not forget that."

"Of course" Said Brahms softly. "We won't forget."

He picked up an internal intercom and pressed the button:

"Lee, please escort Mrs Moore to her room. We are done for today."

As I was leaving the office and followed the woman in red skirt I was still thinking about everything that Brahms said. *The City... I must not forget to pick up the box and write down the name of this Laroche.*

I forgot to pick up the box from the table. I remembered suddenly and as I was going to turn around when another thought came. They won't let me leave this place without it, no worries. And after I get some sleep and have some food - I'll ask my other bunch of questions.

At least, those were my thoughts at that very moment.

Tossing and turning in bed, I tried to find a comfortable position which would allow me to fall asleep quicker. The room I was taken to was unpretentious but comfortable. The lay out of the room reminded me of a hotel: a wide double bed, bedside table, lamp, three chairs and a couple of paintings on walls. To complete the

resemblance there should be a TV but it was missing. The windows were tightly draped; I tried to open the curtains to look outside but they were pinned to the walls. I backed off without putting in too much effort into pulling them off. If they don't want to show where we are – it's their choice. I washed my face, turned off the lights and went to bed. Impenetrable darkness surrounded me.

My head was spinning from all that has happened today. A new collection of accessories came to the shop in the morning - Linda and I sifted through the various items and added the new stock to the database. I sleepily thought I should give her a call in the morning and warn of my temporary absence. I opened a women's clothing boutique three years ago and during this time it began to bring a small but steady income. A business like this was not difficult to run and I only hired four employees, yet I enjoyed being there every day, looking after employees, ordering new collections, thinking of strategies to attract new customers. Overall everything was going quite well and I was thinking about opening a second shop but perhaps bit closer to my apartment. Even though Alex used to pick me up after work every night I still wanted a chance to walk there and back to enjoy the warm summer air.

I didn't notice how my thoughts returned to Alex. I remembered the smile on his face and his mischievous eyes. But lately he'd not been his usual happy self as before he'd disappeared. He completely stopped smiling and he was always frowning. Something had changed. How could I have missed that moment? Looking at him I saw this intense, even frightened look on his face. I tried not to press him with too many questions but support and take care of him, but nothing seemed to bring him back to his usual self. Alex turned from a very eloquent guy into a withdrawn and alienated man. What was it that he knew? Was he aware of the troubles that were about to start or was it just because of his misunderstanding with Elmer?

Elmer was the one who received the kidnappers' ransom demand, and the one who refused to pay it.

What a great business partner he is! Bastard... flashed through my head but I had no energy for any real anger. *OK, we'll deal with you later.*

I heard someone's footsteps and muffled voices in a hall. And as soon as they faded away I fell asleep.

I was woken up at 7am. I could tell the time by the digital clock that was standing on the bedside cabinet. The room, because of the dense curtains, was just like the night before, plunged into darkness. Wincing painfully from the loud sounds I reached for the lamp, turned on the light and yawned.

A trolley laden with plates was delivered into the room.

"Breakfast, Mrs Moore" alerted me the same woman who accompanied me into the room last night.

What was her name? Oh, yes – Lee.

"Thanks, Lee!"

But as soon as I threw my blanket out of bed I had to pick it up quickly and cover up my semi-naked body again – two men entered the room.

"Hey!" I said indignantly, at the same time trying to wrap myself up in sheets. "May I at least get dressed please?"

"Sorry, Mrs Moore but we must inform you that you have just twenty minutes for breakfast and dressing up. The car is already waiting, and we must go as soon as possible."

I instantly thought about Brahms.

"What about my morning meeting with Mr Scott Brahms? He promised to answer my questions!"

I didn't even have time to think about the questions I was going to ask but my hasty departure would deprive me of any possibility to ask them!

The two men exchanged cautious looks.

"Mr Brahms has not arrived at the office yet. And he probably will not appear until later this afternoon. We must make sure that you catch today's bus that's going to "Area 33". The bus only goes there once every few days so it would be quite unfortunate if you missed today's one."

That would be quite unfortunate... I thought angrily, regretting the absence of Brahms at the office.

"Leave the room, please" I said coldly. "I need to get dressed."

"You have only twenty min..."

"I remember. And I'll be ready by then."

Men disappeared. Before leaving the room Lee asked if I there was anything else I needed but there wasn't.

As my guests left me alone I sighed, unwrapped myself from the sheets and sat on the bed.

Is it worth trying to argue or try to make them find someone else who can give me more information I need? I pondered for a second. But those two men will force me into the car in twenty minutes anyway. If the bus really does go to "Area 33" once every few days, maybe it's not such a bad idea to catch it then? Who needs delays? Alright... To hell with all the questions. I'll manage..

Twenty minutes later I stepped into the corridor. The two men that came into the room earlier were now waiting right outside the door. One of them was impatiently glancing at his watch.

"I'm right on time. Do not even think to reproach me." I growled.

"Let's go."

They walked down the hallway and I followed them.

The car was waiting inside the underground garage. It was the same black colour as the one that brought me to *the Corporation*. I sat on a back seat and regretfully noticed that it's not possible to see a thing through the tinted windows again.

What a conspiracy!

From the entertaining point of view I only had two things to do: change the temperature and move my leather seat back and forth. I got tired quickly of such a great diversity so I leaned back and closed my eyes. Meanwhile the car was speeding up. After a while the cabin of the car filled up with a smell of last year's wet foliage.

It must be raining outside. Shame I can't see it.

I felt sad thinking that instead of going in an unknown direction I could stroll down the street, go to a small and cosy café, buy some fresh buns and continue the way to my shop.

Oh, my God! I forgot!

I leaned forward and knocked on the partition that separated me from the driver. Little window lowered immediately.

"Could I borrow your mobile, please? I must warn my staff that I won't be around for some time"

There was a silence for a few seconds, and then a hand with mobile phone appeared.

"Thank you."

"Don't say too much" the man warned me.

"As if I don't know"

The little window went up and I started dialling Linda's number.

She answered after a few long rings.

"Linda? Hi, this is Shereen. I wanted to warn you that I have an urgent trip now and won't be able to come in today. In fact, I don't even know when exactly I'm coming back. No, I didn't have time to warn the others. So, you are in control now and in charge of the new collection as well. No, I don't know when I'll be back, perhaps in a few days... Please call "Divuee" and try to get a discount for us. Also Mr Oliver should call today. Arrange a meeting with him and pass the documents from the top drawer to him, alright?"

I was certain that Linda won't forget a thing. Her punctuality and precision were borderline tedious at times, but it was much easier to put up with qualities like hers than deal with forgetfulness or even worse - negligence.

It's a huge luck to have an employee like that. I thought while answering a thousand questions Linda was asking. *At least I don't have to worry about the store while I am away. A nice bonus for her won't hurt when I get back.*

"Linda, thank you for helping me with this and I'm sorry I couldn't warn you earlier. I know you will take care of everything the best you can... What?" Her last question made me feel sad again. "No, there is no news about Alex. Yes, I'm sorry too."

We were silent for a moment.

"Okay, I have to go now. I don't have my phone on me now, but I'll give you my new number as soon as I have it. Thank you, sweetie. Good luck to you too. Bye!"

I've pressed the "end call" button and looked at the tinted window. The conversation made me feel sad and I felt strong desire to get back home, make a cup of coffee, flick through some new magazines, enjoy the

birds singing outside my apartment and walk down familiar streets. It's been always interesting for me to see how other owners decorate their own displays.

Chin up! This trip has already started which means the end is now closer.

Comforted by this simple thought I leaned back and closed my eyes. I might even be able to get some sleep, recharge my battery before my ordeal continues? Yet again I thought that life can be exhausting sometimes. Many things have lost their meaning since Alex had disappeared. What am I fighting for? So many efforts, so many sleepless nights but so far nothing has come from that. Life has become dim and faded like an old photograph. Fragrances have lost their smells and all the sounds have got similar to a monotonous drone of an off-tuned musical band. What a miserable life. Who cares if I will miss couple of days in my shop? And what difference does it make where I am going now? The debt will be paid back. It probably won't make me happy but at least one less load off my mind. Comforted by these thoughts I calmed down.

The bus stop looked grim.

A one-story stone building was painted in white and an old paint cracked was peeling off the wall. Maybe that was because of humidity or because of time. A few unwashed dusty windows that have not been washed for a long time were located on the perimeter but the lack of light bulb made it impossible to see the interior inside.

Where the entrance should be there was no door, only a hole. The door itself – lone and rusty - was lying on the ground in the puddle next to the building.

The scenery around the bus stop wasn't pleasant for the eye as either: rare shrubs on the sides of the concreted area, muddy ditches where rainwater would flow, grey mountains half hidden in the mist were rising in the distance on the horizon.

Carrying the envelope and squelching through the puddles in water soaked shoes I approached the station. My luggage bag was dragging behind me; its two little wheels were making constant noise "sh-sh-sh-sh". All the new items that I was given by the car driver were in there. He also told me that there was some money in my luggage bag as well as the package for Laroche and the envelope to be shown to the bus driver later. That was it. All my attempts to get any additional information such as "What kind of place is this and how can I find my bus" were cut with short answer, "This is the station you need and there will only be one bus. You can't confuse it with anything else"

A group of people, most of which sat on their bags similar to mine - there was about thirty or forty of them, men and women – some older, some younger. Almost all of them kept quiet, waiting for the bus. Nobody paid any attention to me.

I stood there a bit further away from everyone else. I hid the envelope in the inside pocket of my jacket (after scrutinizing it I found out that it's completely sealed) and started staring at the only road to the mountains on which I guessed, the bus should arrive.

To my right, covering the cigarette from the rain a man was smoking. He was the only one who gave me quick and unfriendly look and then turned away.

Trying not to turn my head too much I looked at people cautiously. Casual clothing - nothing bright or fancy: trousers, jackets, simple but comfortable shoes with no heels and mostly trainers. Almost everyone had a bag or a backpack. *Who are these people? Are they the staff of "Area 33"?* If it wasn't for the pressing silence hanging over the place I'd think that they are employees of that closed city and now they are getting back there from a short break away. Judging by their faces they must really hate their job.

"Why is everybody so quiet?" I asked the man nearby.

He rewarded me with a strange look but didn't reply.

Confused and a little annoyed - *if he doesn't want to talk I won't force him* - I turned away.

"I'd rather work there than anywhere else ..." Suddenly I heard his voice "Don't you think?"

Not really knowing what is he talking about I nodded vaguely and for some stupid reason added "yep".

You'd rather discover what kind of job he is talking about before you agree to who knows what, I told myself.

"I also think that it's better there" added another man and then went completely silent.

I've lost any desire to continue our dialog as well – who knows what kind of weird stuff I'll tell him next? And what all this might turn into later? I don't need any problems just yet, I just need to pass this bloody package to Laroche and be done with it.

I started rummaging through my bag pretending to be busy.

I'll be alright without asking any question. Everything will become clear when I see the city.

At last - the bus, yellowish-brown with constantly creaking brakes pulls up at the bus stop.

People started hurrying and getting up from their seats to queue in front of the hardly opening snorting doors. But there was no rush visible in people's movements. Envelopes just like the one I had in my pocket appeared in everyone's hands. My neighbour threw his half-smoked cigarette into the puddle and reached for the bag to find the envelope; then shuffling with his old shoes, went to the bus.

I think it's time for me as well; I followed his lanky figure with my eyes.

At this moment driver's bold head showed out of the doors.

"Come here, folks – one by one, show me the bar-codes on your envelopes and get inside. And hurry up people!"

Those people who were still sitting on their bags rushed to get up. I followed their lead, found the envelope in my pocket and wheeled the bag to the end of the line. There were about five other people separating me from the guy I had a conversation with. One after another men and women were disappearing into the cabin of the bus – not very quickly, but not very slowly either. About ten seconds per person. Making small steps with my wet shoes and wheeling my bag behind me, I was approaching the doors. When the woman standing in front of me went inside it was my time to show the envelope to the fat bus driver.

"With the bar codes up, I told you!" barked the bald man at me.

I quickly turned the envelope upside-down and yes, there really were interlocking black and white lines on the other side. Driver scanned the code, pressed some button on an attached to the dashboard screen and nodded.

"Get in."

"How long is the ride is going to take?" I asked trying to pull my bulky bag onto the steps.

"Are you in a rush to get there or what? Can't wait?" he laughed so loudly as if he heard some rude joke.

"Get in, I said! Don't hold the line!"

Feeling griped by such a reaction of the driver and kicking myself for the stupid questions I began to nervously squeeze inside. It would have been a good idea to get into the line quicker – now almost all seats were taken. Ah, to hell with them... Passing those who already took their seats from both sides of the aisle, I went almost to the end of the cabin.

Ah, there is one free seat left! Just for me.

I angrily pulled my bag towards me trying to roll it over someone's belongings that were standing in the middle of the aisle, snuck to my seat and rolled my eyes for a second.

I'm so bloody lucky, aren't I?

My recent acquaintance found himself a space to the left of a free seat.

Least of all I needed silly conversations during this trip.

Suppressing my disappointment I manage to fit my bag between other bags next to my feet and plopped down on the seat. Maybe if I pretend to be asleep a dialog won't even start? It's a pity I won't be able to see the scenery from the window with my eyes closed but do I really need to see it?

Almost everyone from outside got on the bus. Some of them, who were behind me in the line, were now standing in the aisle trying to find a space free of luggage to put their feet. When the last passenger passed the driver the engine started. Bus, as heavy as a bloated whale, slowly turned around and with creaking springs crawled down the road up the hill.

For a while I sat there with my eyes shut. None of the neighbours tried to engage into any conversations with me, passengers travelled in silence. From time to time the strained sneezing of the engine was heard as if due to the excessive load the bus was ready to give up and stop completely.

If this happens, we'll have to push it up the hill all together-in the mud.

But to my surprise the bus was still crawling up the hill slowly and inexorably; after a few minutes I stopped listening to the engine.

To my left I heard someone's jacket's make a swishing noise. My curiosity compelled me to open my eyes. The man leaned over to his bag and took out a big red apple - glossy and ripe. He bit a juicy chunk out of it and began to savour it with great pleasure. My stomach responded straight away with a joyful rumble as

though it was me who was about to get a piece of that apple. My neighbour stopped chewing and looked at me. I immediately turned away and closed my eyes.

What stopped me from having my breakfast? - "I don't want it... I don't want it". So be hungry then.

His jacket swished again and after a second I heard a cautious "Hey".

I turned my head towards the sound – the man was holding another apple in his hand – the first one was lying on his lap.

"Take it."

I hesitantly looked at the apple.

"It's washed." added the neighbour.

I took the apple, said "thank you" and then sank my teeth into its sweet skin. The man turned away and continued looking out of the window. For some time we enjoyed our meals in silence. I glanced occasionally at the back of his head adorned with sand-coloured patchy hair. My militant antagonistic attitude that became apparent after the conversation with this man while we were waiting for a bus, cooled down slightly. The apple was sweet and shamelessly tasty.

My neighbour finished with his fruit, pulled out a piece of paper out of the bag and placed his apple stub in there. He then looked at me. I added my apple stub to his.

"Tasty, eh? I grew them myself." he said proudly.

"Tasty."

"I'm Ted." the man suddenly introduced himself and his brown eyes under the bushy sandy-coloured eye brows glistened.

"I'm Shereen."

I watched him as he skilfully stuffed the paper with apple stubs back into the bag.

"What is this?"

He followed my gaze back to his bag and fixed his eyes at the bunch of small colourful paper envelopes.

"Oh, these! These are seeds. I love gardening. And I thought that maybe if I am given a small patch of land I could grow something there. I always loved to potter around in the soil... you know grow flowers, shrubs, berries, vegetables, of course."

"I see." I replied feeling surprised by his hobby. But why did I think that a man like him wouldn't like gardening? And it's always possible to find a piece of land, I think.

"I'd like to grow trees as well. But I'm not sure if they allow me..."

"Why wouldn't they?" I hardly had a clue about who "they" were though.

"How would I know? I've never been to Tally before".

"Tally?"

"Yes, the city we are going to is called Tally."

I nodded as if I knew that. Looks like he is going there for the first time too so he is not a good source of information for me then.

"I heard the conditions there are not very good - a lot of work to do, but maybe if you get some spare time..."

Our conversation made Ted more agile and lively, he obviously enjoyed talking to someone. Even his long wrinkled face transformed. But because I had nothing to say I was listening to him without interrupting. It's no harm if he speaks for a while, is it? My silence didn't seem to bother him at all - he took it for a hidden interest and I was hoping to get a few precious droplets of information about Tally while listening about the flowers and plants he grew in his life.

Our ride continued like that for another forty minutes. The mountains were surrounding us all around now. People began to shift, mumble anxiously and stretch their necks out like geese in an attempt to see more. Is it the first time for everybody here? Ted went completely silent. The reason for this liveliness became evident when the big rusty gates jammed in between the mountains appeared in front of the bus. The sign on the gates read "Authorised Staff of Area 33 and Official Vehicles Only". The driver leaned out of the window, exchanged a few words with a man in the uniform and then handed something over to him. The soldier took the item - either a paper or flat box – I couldn't see it properly from where I was sitting. He nodded to a colleague who was sitting in a glass booth and then the gate slowly slid to one side.

“So here we are.” a woman standing to my right said. She looked at me with sad eyes and sighed. “And when will we get to go home?”

I couldn't find what to say.

We all sat in a spacious room which I in my mind I named “The border”: worn out marble floor tiles, dull white walls, plastic chairs. People sat on them, nervously tugging on their clothes or bag handles. A white plastic table was located in the distance where the officer in a cap was admitting “visitors” - one at a time. I couldn't hear what they were talking about but I could see how deftly the officer rips each envelope with a knife, gives a visitor a package and then lets them go. After passing “The border” table people were disappearing into a narrow corridor at the far end of the hall. I was going to find out where it was leading to after another five people that were sitting in front of me in the queue. From time to time other military workers were passing the line, looking at people with interest and then disappearing into various doors. The sound of their hard-soled shoes was echoing on the marble floor.

I fidgeted on the chair impatiently – I had an urge to pee and discover if they would check what's in our luggage. Not knowing what was inside of mine made me feel very nervous. But according to my observations nobody touched the bags, at least not until the end of narrow corridor and that somewhat comforted me. Only a fortune teller, a prophet or Ted, who'd already passed that table, could tell me what was waiting for me at the end of the corridor. But neither of those was available at that moment.

I was twisting and turning in my chair until the moment when my name was shouted out by the officer and I hurried to the table.

“Good day. “ I greeted him cautiously and sat on the chair – a soft chair this time.

“Good day, good day...” the officer laughed briefly into his bushy moustache and his reaction reminded me of the fat bus driver.

What is so funny about my phrases?

“Give me your envelope.”

I handed the envelope over to him. I read the officer's name on his badge – Carlos Brodsky. *Wow, what an interesting name!* Meanwhile Carlos ripped my envelope with a knife and took out a thin sheet of paper.

I wish I could have read it before you.

Brodsky quickly scanned the text with his eyes and looked at me with, what I thought, was respect.

“Wow! Not bad, not bad! It wouldn't have been possible to predict your talent judging by your appearance.”

I barely stopped myself from raising my nose up. *The Corporation* has obviously given me a good recommendation! Well, at least nothing to be ashamed of. Great!

“Well, so you are a hacker! Wow!” continued the officer and I nearly choked.

A hacker? You must be kidding me!

“This kind of activity is highly intelligent and it would be a shame not to appreciate that.”

I couldn't understand if Brodsky was mocking me or if he really had an admiration for computer geniuses.

“But, unfortunately, there is only one way after playing games like that – straight to this place - in the best case scenario.” he concluded proudly looking at me in my frozen state.

“Don't be so worried” he tried to comfort me, taking my bewilderment for something else. “Anyone could make such a mistake playing games like that, but this place is nice and the people are friendly. Yes, the rules are strict, but I have to say they are fair.”

“I didn't play any games...” I said before I could think.

What am I doing?! Who cares what abilities the Corporation has awarded me with – what matters is that they will allow me to enter the God damn territory. So I have to stop denying this! Otherwise I'll ruin the whole operation trying to protect my honour”

“Of course nobody wants to admit their faults.” Brodsky looked disappointed. “Nobody wants to say that they are guilty”.

“Alright, alright! I'm guilty!” I changed the strategy before it was too late and tried to relax my body on the chair as if I really was the Queen of the Binary Dimension.

Whether I admit my guilt or not nobody will let me out of here anyway. So why bother with the honour? But it felt like a frank confession could change the officer's attitude which could possibly mean a better outcome in the long run. Who knows what Brodsky is responsible for?

"There. Now we are talking! Good girl!" the man in a cap cheered up. "Why would you deny such a talent? I very much respect those who can do more than just send an email."

Yeap, me too.

"Do you think if I had your talents I would be sitting here all day long?"

You'd be sitting inside the Tally... I think.

"And I would be getting much bigger money" Brodsky switched into a "dream" mode. "And unlike you, I'd be thinking ahead about how not to be caught."

Right... Don't get carried away, you, smart arse.

I made a sour face as if to show him "not everybody is as smart as you!" and sighed. He leaned towards me and tapped my hand with his.

"That's alright girl, you are still young. So don't feel too bad, I'll find good accommodation for you. There is a cute vacant room in a nice location. Not very close to the centre though but the air is much cleaner this way, don't you think? I don't meet many talented people like you are very often and your face is pretty..."

I screwed up my face - thank God Brodsky didn't seem to notice it.

"There." A few objects appeared on the table. His sausage finger pointed to the one on the left. "There is a key to an apartment in this envelope. The address is written here. Show it at the bus stop so someone can tell you which bus to take or show it to a taxi driver. Now then..." the officer pointed to the next item - a wide metal bracelet.

"Put it on your wrist before leaving the building and never try to take it off until you gain one thousand points."

"What do you mean "one thousand points"?"

"Please don't interrupt me. This bracelet is your ID, your credit card and your life. All additional information you need is in this book. Now another thing is..." he knocked on the surface of a strange square object - a box with a screen and a "zero" showing on it - with the tip of his finger. "This is a static score counter. You have to keep it at home. Whenever we need to check how many points you've got - there is a small screen on your bracelet. Just in case - the bracelet is small - God forbid you break it."

I can't say that I understood much of what he was talking about but I tried my hardest to absorb everything. The items that I was presented with were given to every person and obviously it was an important part of the local system which was starting to remind me more and more of a prison. I still had to learn what their purpose was and how to use each of these in the future. Meanwhile Brodsky was singing like a bird:

"This book might be very useful. Don't even think about throwing it away."

I glanced briefly at the cover of the book - there was one word written proudly in big font and it read "The Constitution". In a smaller font there was another line: "The Rules and Regulations of Tally".

"That is it, I think. The officer pondered for a second. "Oh, yes - you still don't have any points credited to you, so here are your coupons. Each coupon is equal to one point. Use them to pay for a bus or taxi ride and get some food until you find a job."

Five pink paper coupons emerged in front of me on the table.

"Thank you" I said politely - because it felt like it was necessary to say something.

"You're welcome! It's not very often I see criminals like you - hackers. More often they are killers or rapists... That's the big difference with you, I think."

Even though I was not guilty of anything at all I felt some kind of gratitude towards this officer.

"Is it hard to live here?" I asked him at the moment when he was being in a nice and talkative mood.

"It depends on the person. It's easier for some and harder for others. Get your belongings and proceed to the corridor. I've already spent too much time on you and there is a long line still waiting. So, bye-bye."

"Bye."

I grabbed my things from the table, put them into the paper bag I was given and nodded politely to the officer with the moustache.

"Good luck to you!" he said as I was on my way out. "Next! Gasher Green? Come here!"

As I was walking down the narrow corridor I was thinking if Tally would become my “home” - even if it’s just for a short while. But something was telling me that it won’t happen. Too many strange things were in my bag and the “The Rules and Regulations book of Tally” seemed a bit too thick for my liking. If I’m lucky I’ll leave this place before I read the last page. In the case that I ever need to read it at all.

After I had a chance to visit a small rundown toilet I went past two more men in uniforms and then headed towards the exit. Now the rain has stopped and the sun was beaming down from the sky. Suddenly I stopped recalling the officer’s words about putting the bracelet on my wrist before leaving the building; I put my paper bag on top of the luggage and begun to rummage through it trying to find this gratuitous accessory. At first the bracelet felt too loose but when I pressed both ends together it beeped and locked in. Now it fits.

The wonders of modern technology...

After admiring my bracelet for a while - not that it looked that good but not too bad either - I twisted and turned my hand couple of times, grabbed my bag and continued on my way to the exit. To my joy there was nobody checking the luggage. I was dying to have a look myself but I knew it wasn’t a good idea to do this in the toilet so I decided to wait until I get to the apartment. When I passed the glass doors I found myself standing on a sun-drenched street of a real city. The building of “The border” was towering behind me and the road to the main part of the city unfolded before me. A few bright yellow cars with “Tazi” signs on them - the spelling of the word seemed a little strange but understandable - were chilling by the curb. I looked around trying to figure out if I should get a taxi (sorry a “Tazi”) right away or I should try and find a bus stop first? I could not see it from where I was standing. A feel of summer was all around me: green bushes and grass, buzzing bees and the birds were whirling around in carefree pirouettes.

Maybe this place isn’t as bad as I expected? I rejoiced squinting at the sun. Despite the fatigue and the desire to take a nap for an hour or two, I decided to take a little walk and check out at the surroundings. It would be nice to get to know this city - what it’s like?

I passed some shouting taxi drivers - aren’t they the same as everywhere else? They really do try to lure you in with their “hey, lady! Do you need a Tazi? It’s cheap! Just tell me where you wanna go...” I made a turn on the road that lead to the city. It was hard to fail with the directions as there was only one single concrete path that could take me there.

My feet were moving fast and my eyes were marvelling at the flowers growing on the side of the road. As I reached the top of the hill I stopped blown away by the view. And that was some view: in the valley below the mountains the city resembled a cat curled in a basket.

A haze from the heat was rising above the roofs and roads; hot air was quivering over the abundantly growing greenery which there was plenty of in this lost world of mountains. The city seemed asleep under the sun. I could see some small cars moving along the roads - from the distance they seemed tiny and slow, and I could even detect a few pedestrians.

Tally. Midday.

I took my eyes away from the view and felt the sweat rolling down my forehead. I wiped it off and continued with my journey. It was a lot easier to walk down the hill and I felt more positive. The wheels of my bag were bouncing on small rocks and excitement replaced the tiredness.

Not long now. Not long.

At last after walking for another thirty minutes I found myself standing on one of the streets of the mystical Tally.

Strangely enough, from a closer look the city didn’t look as bright and attractive as it did from the top of the hill: the plastering on the walls was peeling off, store signs - pale and bland - as though they’d been hanging there since the last century; some lonely people were hurrying into the shade - all of this gave me a strong sense of gloom and emptiness.

Near the traffic lights I turned right and walked along the Alpine Avenue - at least that’s the name that was written on a pinned to a pole plate. This avenue was slightly wider than the street I was on before and yet had the same feeling of abandonment. A few times I saw some people walking past me - three men and one woman. They all looked at me with a surprise and even dread; furthermore - the woman made a big detour to avoid me as if she was afraid of catching a disease. Such behaviour from the others didn’t make me feel

optimistic and I paused to have a look around. Am I missing something? For a few seconds I was scrutinising the surroundings: two-storey houses, an old and forsaken cafe with dusty windows and creaky door but nothing seemed particularly suspicious or dangerous and so I carried on. As I passed two more streets and three more pedestrians - all of which had the same expression of their faces as if to say "Is there anybody home, you, dummy?" I came to a decision not to pay attention to the things I don't understand. But right at this very second I heard a piercing sound of a whistle.

I turned around.

A man looking like a local policeman rushed towards me. His shoulders were squeezed into the blue uniform, a shiny buckle pressed tightly into his huge belly that was wobbling as he ran. The policeman was waving a dark baton and constantly wiping away the sweat running down his blue cap.

"Aren't you familiar with the rules?" he was breathing heavily and his bushy eye brows frowning.

"My apologies. But what did I do wrong?"

"This is a one way street!" he growled at me.

I involuntarily looked down the road but it was completely empty.

"Good. But what does it have to do with me?" I was surprised and irritated about being stopped for a ludicrous reason.

"Don't you see this sign?" the policeman waved in the direction of the sign by the curb.

I glanced at a white arrow painted on a blue square background. I looked again at the empty road. There was another pedestrian within my sight who rushed to a hide as he saw the blue cap.

"Yes, I do see the sign. But I don't even have a steering wheel on me and the sign is for road users only."

"This sign is for pedestrians!" the policeman shouted. His face went an unpleasant purple colour - perhaps not too many people risked arguing with him in the past and he allowed himself to get angry. "This is a one way street for pedestrians!"

I was so amazed that I let go of the bag handle and it swayed backwards. Is it possible to have one way street for pedestrians? Isn't it ridiculous? I suddenly recalled all the people that I saw on the street earlier. Did they know? Actually I didn't find it strange that nobody passed me the same direction - I walked quite fast.

Meanwhile the policeman got out an unfamiliar to me gadget, moved it to my bracelet and watched the screen. The gadget made a short sound and flashed green.

"Ah, I see!" the policeman seemed to calm down a little. "So it's your first day in Tally."

"That's correct."

"So this time you were lucky. Should this happen tomorrow - you get half of a point."

I frowned. What are these points about? Why do they measure everything by points? Is it good or bad for me? A half of one point - is it a lot?

"Go then. Consider yourself lucky." the way he said it made me feel he was disappointed. The man wiped the sweat off his forehead again and hid the scanner back behind the belt. "Don't forget to read the 'The Rules and Regulations of Tally'".

He walked away and left me standing alone in the middle of the street. I watched him go but this incident ruined my good mood. Which direction should I go in now? If I continue as before it's very likely the policeman will stop me again. And then another one will stop me, and another. But there was no point to go back. My hope that a sign on the opposite side of the road will point me in the right direction disappeared as I glanced on it - the arrow was pointing in the same direction.

Damn you, people! Who made this bloody system? I swore to myself.

For the next few minutes I stood on the same spot not knowing what to do. And then I saw a bright yellow "Tazi" driving up the road.

"Hey!" I ran to the curb waving a free hand. "Stop! Please!"

Won't I get fined for shouting?

A quick thought flashed at the back of my mind but there wasn't time to think. The car stopped.

"Where would you like to go?" the driver's head popped out of the window.

I wasn't sure whether the sun was the reason or that nature had given him such an odd gift but the skin on the man's face was very dark while his hair was short and pale, rather than some black curls that you would expect to see on a skin tone like his.

"I need to get to... Just a moment..." I managed to fish out my envelope with a key and read out the address. "To Bell-Oak Park."

I showed the address to the driver.

"I see. It's pretty much the other end of the city. That's a very long drive. Get in." he nodded at the back seat.

"How much is going to cost?"

"One and a half points."

"Isn't that a bit too much?" I tried to complain when I heard the price. "I only have five coupons which I still need to get some food with."

"Why are you asking me?" the driver retorted. "I'm not responsible for the prices."

My irritation faded away.

"Ok. Let's make it one and a half points then."

I pushed my bag on the back seat and got into the car. Now my curiosity was tearing me apart.

"And who is responsible for the prices?"

"The City."

"So all Tazi use the same fairs?"

"Uhuh."

"Do you get some sort of percentage of the fare to yourself?"

"Nope. I'm paid two points a day and that's the whole of my salary" he muttered whilst driving away from the Alpine Avenue. "And it doesn't matter if I get no work all day. Are you new here or what?"

"Yes, it's my first day here."

The driver gave me a quick glance.

"You'll learn quickly."

A new wave of tiredness came over me again and instead of looking at the streets of the new city I leaned my head against a cool window and dozed off. Sometime later an unfriendly "Hey!" woke me up.

I flinched and opened my eyes.

"We have arrived. This is Bell-Oak Park."

Huffing and puffing at the driver, his creaky taxi, the heat and the lack of sleep, I got out of the car. I counted two coupons and accepted some change in return - *this must be half of a coupon. Oh, so they do have "notes" like this as well.* The car turned around and drove away. I stood there all alone, breathing in the dust the car left behind and observed the surroundings. This place could be called all sorts of things: a hostel, a suburban village or even "the last frontier" but not at a "Park". Yes, true - there was a crooked wooden plank in the middle of the flowerbed that said "The Bell-Oak Park" - but that flowerbed was the only object of interest around I could see so far.

I recalled what Brodsky said about this city. This was a good place in his opinion. So, what would be a bad place then? I thought that the answer to this question won't take me long to find out. I sighed and rolled my bag towards a three-story building with rows of dusty windows. It seemed that the sun whitened the peeled paint on the walls. Some stumpy bushes didn't appear dead despite the heat - someone must water them once or twice a day.

I didn't see anybody on my way to the building nor as I stepped inside a cool and shady staircase. Standing in a sunlight coming through the window, I found my envelope and discovered that the number of my room is 314 - must be the third floor. After a few futile attempts to find a lift I headed up the stairs.

The corridor itself and stairs looked neat. There was even a carpet on the floor the colour of which could not be defined with one word. I was hoping there would be air-conditioning and a shower in my room. The sweat that was running down my back started to bother me.

Just remember this is not a hotel. Just be grateful there is at least a bed and stove.

A bed and stove were indeed in my room. There was also a little kitchen and a fridge separated from the living room by a partition; a wardrobe, two armchairs, one chair, small bathroom with a sink, toilet and a shower; and even a TV which was quite unexpected. The TV remote control was in a holder secured straight to the wall.

I squeaked in surprised - not bad at all for a start. I concluded that this room was fine to live in; of course this was not a five star hotel but not a Spartan cell either. I discovered the air con as well which gave me a sense of a relief. It was old and noisy but it was bringing some cool air into the room. There was no heating control on its remote but something was telling me that the citizens of Tally would never have such a need in this city.

After this quick inspection I felt satisfied with my room and feeling in a good mood I decided to open my bag. As I was half way through of unzipping my luggage I suddenly paused. No, the first task is to take a shower and then I see what's inside my bag. Now I've got plenty of time - there is no need to go anywhere and therefore I can refresh myself before exploring the content of it.

After checking that the door is locked I headed for the bathroom.

The cool shower helped me to fight my tiredness. In the kitchen I found a glass, filled it up with cold tap water and stepped out on a little balcony which lurked behind some peach-coloured curtains. As soon as I opened the glass doors I went numb - the mountains. A real mountain range which consisted of red boulders, was covered in hot incandescent air and rising distantly on the horizon. I covered my eyes with the palms of my hands protecting them from the bright sun and whistled. How high should these mountains be if they look so impressive from this balcony? And the local sunsets must look incredible in this heavenly beautiful place.

Right... Don't you dare to think you found a paradise. You wanna go and find something to do.

I went back in the room, put the glass on the table and headed towards my luggage bag. It is time to find out what *the Corporation* has provided me with. I checked that the door is locked once again, then sat on the bed and opened the bag.

Right on top there was a pile of summer clothes: a few t-shirts, pair of shorts, two tops and one blouse.

How about a cocktail dress? I murmured moving the clothes to a side.

Underneath the t-shirts there were a pack of knickers (with days of the week written on them), a few pairs of socks and a hairbrush.

Fabulous! Which one of you measured my size and when did you do that? I continued muttering as I picked one sock from the pile and tried to put it on. The sock fitted nicely. I guess it was safe to assume that the underwear would fit me as well. I moved the socks and knickers to one side and eventually discovered the parcel for Mr Laroche and a pile of bank notes.

Wow! I was staring at five bundles of the bank notes, tightly wrapped with a paper band. *How much is in there?*

I quickly counted the money and determined that I am now an owner of fifty thousand dollars. Is it much for this place? Possibly *the Corporation* decided that this amount is enough to cover expenses while I look for Laroche and cover my return trip home. Maybe if there is anything left I can keep it for my own needs? I still needed to clarify that.

Suddenly I heard a knock on the door and rushed to throw everything back into the bag.

Where can I hide it? Where?

Since I couldn't find a better place for the bag I kicked it under the bed; straightened the bed cover and went to answer the door.

There was no peephole on the door. I plucked up all my courage and unlocked it. On the other side of the door there was a young girl - around twenty years old. She stood there intensively scratching the sides of her body. She had fair hair, and was wearing a scruffy t-shirt and a pair of grey shorts over her bandy legs.

"Hi!" she said and stopped scratching, her eyes glued to my face. "Are you new here? I saw you with your bag from my window."

"Yes." I confirmed not knowing what to expect from this visitor.

"These nasty gnats bite wherever they want." the girl said angrily as she scratched her t-shirt with dirty finger nails. Then she stretched her hand and smiled openly. "I am Jennifer. Or Jenny. I'm your neighbour from room three hundred and twelve"

I shook her warm and moist hand.

"I'm Shereen." and since I didn't know what else to say, I added. "Welcome in."

Jenny walked straight into my room slapping with her bare feet on the floor.

“Listen, you must have just moved in which means that your fridge is still full. May I borrow some jam from you? I am dying for something sweet.”

I closed my jaw that dropped to the floor from such a nerve but after a second I decided that relationship with my new neighbours might be more useful than food and waved my hand towards the kitchen

“Feel free to take it.”

Jenny immediately jumped to the fridge and began to rummage through the shelves.

“Mmmm... Here it is! My favourite! Thank you, err..”

“Shereen.” I reminded to her politely.

“Oh, yeah, right... Shereen. You can knock on my door any time you want to talk or anything.”

She waved “goodbye” with the jam jar in her hand and flew out of the door like a happy dragonfly.

Five minutes later I forgot all about Jenny and the jam and carried on sorting out the clothes in the wardrobe. I piled the knickers, socks and t-shirts neatly on the shelves. The money was hidden behind them - not the best place to keep it, but I couldn't think of a better one. The TV was muttering on a background. I stopped sorting out my stuff and started listening to it. A pleasant female's voice was informing the citizens about the latest news.

“... the rebellion on a ranch to the south of Tally was suppressed today by its owner – Hulk Conrad. The allegedly unfairly treated people rose up against the owner who, according to the rebels, was paying them very low wages. Mr Conrad claimed that nobody was injured but each rebel will be fined fifty to one hundred points”

What a stupid system with these points! I snorted taking the hairbrush to the bathroom.

As I finished sorting things and sat on the bed thinking if it's a good idea to have some rest, I noticed a paper bag in the corner.

I completely forgot about it.

There was a static point counter in the bag and now as I finished with other things I really wanted to have a closer look at it.

The counter looked like a normal black alarm clock but with no buttons. The surface was made of plastic, the dark screen had a bright blue zero in the middle of it. I carefully tapped the screen with the tip of my index finger but nothing changed.

What does this zero mean? What do I have to do to change it to a different number and my main question is: what is it for? Some answers could possibly be found in the book I got at the border, but I had no desire to read it now. More than anything I just wanted to sleep.

I put the paper bag to a side, found the TV remote and muted the sound. I then closed the curtains and got into bed. My head was buzzing from exhaustion. All the answers can wait for a couple of hours as well as Mr Laroche with his parcel. Nothing will happen to them while I am asleep.

But something definitely will happen to me if I don't get any rest.

For a while I was staring at the bright zero on the counter's screen and eventually I drifted off.

In my dream I saw Alex at the time when nothing bad had happened yet and the shadow of misery had not touched our house with its pestilential wings; when we still believed that our new family will become a hearth and home to two loving people with roast turkey and cakes for special occasions; and a woolly blanket for two during the cold winter days.

My dream was so vivid and felt almost real. I wanted to stretch out my arm into this colourful fantasy so I could touch Alex's face with my fingers and he would hold my hand and kiss it as he did many times before.

“I don't want to let you go.” his voice was so close yet so far. “We'll live together and you will be mine forever. Tomorrow we'll move your things to my apartment. Do you mind?”

He is sitting in a café in front of me. After a fast drive in his favourite sports car his dark hair is dishevelled and his hazel eyes are twinkling with love and wickedness.

“Do you mind?”

“No, I don't mind.” I whisper and wipe away a lonely tear in the corner of my eye.

“No, I don't mind...” I whispered again half asleep, touched my wet cheek with my finger and then I wake up in shivers.

The image was fading away so quickly that it made me want to cry with desperation.

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