

Owlient



The Andalusian

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Prologue

Turkey - Zacharias

Knowledge is priceless.

Clean-shaven and dressed in Western clothes, no one will recognise the new-and-improved Brother Zacharias, the humble Coptic monk...

Since my escape from Egypt, made possible thanks to the dollars stolen from Leyla, that stupid, ignorant archaeology student who still somehow managed to fool me, I haven't stopped brooding. I was blinded by greed, I took the money and left behind the object that was far more precious... Rage gnaws at me like a rat in my belly!

When I realised that the object I was supposed to bring to Hannibal was still in the hands of Leyla and her American friend, I knew that I would never be able to show my face to my patron without putting my life in danger. I had failed. Flight was my only option. I then found out from the media that there had been a mysterious theft from the safest place in Cairo, the National Museum. Hannibal had clearly managed to recover the precious metal fragment without my help. I want to understand why this man who already has everything, who has fortune, power and glory, is so obsessed with this wretched triangle of engraved metal.

I know what the metal fragment looks like because Hannibal sent me a photo of a similar fragment before entrusting me with the mission of taking it from Leyla. Now I feel as though I could earn back Hannibal's respect if I were to give him a piece of vital information that he is missing. And I'm about to retrieve this information...

When I was training to become a monk, I lived and studied in many monasteries throughout the world. After many years, I'm back in Anatolia in the eastern part of Turkey. Many peoples have crossed paths here: Semites, Turks, Romans, Hittites, Lydians, Greeks, Persians, Arabs, etc. It was the Persians who named this region Cappadocia, which means "the land of the beautiful horses". It could almost be a lunar landscape, it looks so supernatural. The memories of my first visit flood my brain, intermingling in my mind's eye. A valley studded with volcanic rock formations, basalt and tuff cones hollowed out by man and given the nickname "fairy chimneys". The slopes of the rocky mountain looming more than three thousand feet above Göreme, then a long, narrow canyon hidden between two cliffs packed with houses and churches hewn into the rock and painted in rich colours. I also remember a vast underground city and the feeling of claustrophobia I experienced. I take a deep breath, hoping to chase away this whirlwind of memories and focus on my goal. I need to reach the *Yüksek Kilise*, the highest sanctuary on the mountain where I stayed as a novice scribe...

I climb the worn stairs carved into the rock by the persecuted Christian hermits in the fourth century until I reach the natural cave perched on the steep mountainside. This refuge had once been a major Orthodox monastery before being abandoned in favour of lowland buildings due to the difficulty of reaching it. What happened to the tenacity of the

first monks, who dug into the mountain to create a canteen and ventilation ducts as well as the honeycomb of cells for their ever-expanding community? They also carved out escape tunnels to be used in the event of an attack. They created an incredible library by collecting and categorising the tablets and scrolls that had been carried off by the runaways. It is here, in this forgotten, out-of-sight library, that I hope to find what I'm looking for. My hands tremble slightly as I remove the safety barrier blocking the entrance to the cave.

I walk through the deserted hallways with only the echo of my footsteps to keep me company. Everything that was considered to be too heavy or useless has been left behind. I've made it to the library. I can remember sitting at this stone table, with a wax candle for a light, and feeling frustrated and greatly discouraged by the task in front of me. To test both my faith and self-denial, I had been assigned the task of copying out the minor writings. I didn't know the meaning of what I was copying, because the original parchment had crumbled over time and the Father Superior persisted in exhaustively preserving all the ancient writings. Through gritted teeth I copied the incomprehensible words which had struck me as bordering on madness.

A Greek who claimed to be a soldier at the end of the fourth century BC had recounted an incredible story of escape from over the borders of India. He talked about the curse brought on him by his secret mission, the obsession with the star of Zeus that gradually began to consume his liver and his brain. In the middle of the parchment was a drawing that I had copied out with great difficulty as it was almost indistinguishable, as though someone had scratched furiously away at the parchment to erase what had been drawn there. It took me all night to get a complete copy of the old parchment. At dawn, hoping for some form of recognition, I handed the fruit of my labours to my brother librarian who nodded absently before rolling up my parchment and archiving it at the very bottom of the rank of alcoves, in the minor writings section.

Just as I had hoped, only the writings of saints and the so-called major writings have been moved. My heart begins to race as I approach the archives at the bottom. Kneeling down, I search feverishly in the lower alcoves, opening then casting aside all of the unnecessary copies written out by the apprentices throughout the years. Here it is! My copy, still intact, the ink barely faded. I can feel the blood beating loudly in my temples as I stare at the drawing in the centre. It's a triangle with a broken base, covered with Greek letters and strange symbols, and remarkably similar to the triangle in the photo that Hannibal sent me!

I begin to laugh uncontrollably as I read my copy. The last sentence says that the soldier had entrusted the priests of Zeus with protecting that which belonged to Zeus. Men are so weak and fearful before the omnipotence with which they have invested their gods... And now I have power over Hannibal, since I now hold the key to a new fragment of the star of Zeus!

Knowledge is indeed priceless...

Basque Country, Nadja

I had never seen the ocean before. Perched on the cliff, I watch the waves turn white with foam and crash against the rocks. I listen to their stubborn roar, feeling the sea wind whipping my hair and tasting the salty droplets on my lips. I fling out my arms and give my body over to the power of the elements, laughing like the seagulls chattering away as they fly over the waves. Maybe I could fly away, soaring like the birds above, defying the wind before plunging down into the water to seize the unfortunate fish that is their prey in their beaks.

“Nadja! Come and help me!”

I lick my lips greedily before reluctantly moving away from the edge of the cliff. Father is glaring at me, his eyes seeming to say “we’re not here to enjoy ourselves”. But I really wanted to savour exploring the ocean, and to run along the top of the cliff, dance among the sky-blue gentians and the sunny daffodils, the mauve orchids and the radiant poppies, and chase the vibrantly coloured butterflies. I promise myself that I will use every spare moment of freedom to go and explore this incredible landscape. Then I walk back towards the tarmac and the private plane that transported us from Russia – me, my father and our horses.

A kind of golf cart has already been loaded with our luggage and the equipment that Father wanted to bring. I watch it move away along a winding path through the rocks before disappearing behind a thicket of oak trees that block the view inshore. I wonder where we will be staying. Two men, as stiff as poles, are standing in front of the aeroplane’s large metal door, ready to lower it on my father’s signal. My father hands me two tethers; I will take care of Mishka and Mysh’ and he will look after Zaldia. After the long flight, and despite the herbal “sedatives” we gave them before boarding the plane, the horses may react unpredictably upon finding themselves back on solid ground. On my father’s signal, the two men open the door which creates a ramp down to the ground. We climb up and head towards the padded boxes where the horses are waiting restlessly. I attach the leading reins to the halters and then lead Mishka and Mysh’, the “bear” and “mouse” twins, outside, whispering words of encouragement. They use their eyes, ears and nostrils to explore this new environment and then, not sensing any danger, begin to graze happily. Zaldia, however, requires more fussing. He needs my father’s assurances, and all of the words whispered in his ear, before he agrees to move onto the platform next to him. Every powerful muscle is trembling, his head turning every which way, scrutinising every detail warily. Seeing Mishka and Mysh’ acting calmly reassures him a little. Zaldia takes a few steps onto the tarmac and then onto the moor. He tosses his long wavy mane, revealing his massive neck. His coat, under which his powerful muscles ripple, shines in the sun like a king’s finery. His elegant gait emphasises the nobility of the Andalusian breed, proud and strong yet fragile all at once.

“Mr Tkachev, the plane has to leave,” interrupts one of the men. “We need to move the

horses. If you would like to follow us, we will guide you to the stables.”

Father nods and, holding Zaldia’s rein loosely, follows the two men who are still as stiff as boards. I follow behind with Mishka and Mysh’ along the path taken by the luggage cart. When we arrive at the oak grove, I hear the metallic clunk of the aeroplane’s side door which startles the horses. I reassure them and glance back behind me. The jet taxis along the tarmac and makes a U-turn before picking up speed, its engines roaring. It moves towards the ocean, faster and faster, taking off majestically just before reaching the edge of the cliff. The pilot retracts the wheels into the fuselage and the metal bird flies into the sky, disappearing from my field of vision in a matter of seconds. I feel my chest become tight and I take a few deep breaths. I’ve just realised that we have landed in this unknown land and that there is no turning back now. I hope that my father, who is always so secretive and silent and who only told me we were leaving moments before our departure, has a good reason for making us leave everything behind...

Wow... As soon as we passed the grove of oak trees, we were greeted with a view that seems so out of place in this wilderness. A neo-Gothic castle, the older of the two men tells us, looking out over the cliff and the ocean from where it perches on its rocky outcrop, with its proud towers reaching up as though defying the sky, the sea and the wind. There is a huge French formal garden in front, perfectly maintained, with flower-filled rotundas and quiet corners designed for discreet conversations as well as an impressive open-air theatre for public performances. A shiver runs down my spine. What kind of modern "lord" would live in such a strange castle?

"The stables are over here," says the younger of the men, pointing in the opposite direction to the castle.

I tear my gaze from this monumental castle to find a plaza enclosed by high, wrought iron gates, in the middle of which is a square riding arena and a riding school. Vast paddocks extend all the way to the bottom of the plaza where there are a number of stables surrounding a saddlery and a wooden barn. Everything looks so clean, polished and perfect... but I can't see any sign of horses around here!

As I get nearer to the stables, I notice that the entire property is protected by tall iron railings. It is impossible for anybody on foot or in a vehicle to enter. Or to leave... I shiver in spite of the mild spring weather, filled with a feeling of isolation and oppression that wouldn't be out of place in the Krasnokamensk penal colony in Siberia. Are we in a gilded prison? I hate feeling trapped almost as much as having no choice about something. Why can't my father, a Cossack who is proud and inflexible almost to the point of maintaining a wall of silence, talk to me? Why can't he share his thoughts and his plans, not to mention his feelings? How could my mother, who had died giving birth to me, accept somebody like this, somebody as hard as granite? I am furious. I have held myself back for so long. I want to scream, to leave this place immediately. But I don't have wings and can't fly away, and if I were to jump into the ocean then I would undoubtedly break to pieces against the rocks below. And then I would have gained nothing. I have no choice but to keep quiet, to go along with Father's wishes until I can leave the nest...

I will leave behind the world of the circus where I grew up, despite the deep affection I have for my Uncle Vassili and my Aunt Irina, who are as affectionate and happy as my father can be taciturn. After my mother died, Aunt Irina convinced her brother to give up his military duties to join her circus and raise me. Like the good Cossack he was, he devoted himself to the horses, eventually communicating with them alone. He honed his talents as a "horse whisperer" so much so that his reputation attracted more and more owners of "difficult" horses which he managed to calm and train.

I learned to juggle, to walk on a tightrope high above the ring, to launch myself from one trapeze to another and to somersault onto galloping horses while the audience applauded. All of this was down to hard work, discipline and confidence in my partners, particularly in our horses. I think that if I hadn't been so incredibly happy spending time with them, I

would have never had the strength to make my stage smile sparkle as brightly as the glitter on my costume...

I stroke Mishka's forelock, who has wandered over to bury his nose in my neck, his twin sister Mysh' following suit immediately. Twin pregnancies are incredibly rare in mares and very often only a single foal will survive. Mysh' means mouse; she was so small and fragile at birth that we didn't know if she would have the strength to live. But she grew and bulked up until she managed to catch up with her brother, Mishka the bear. The twins compete with each other in nibbling and snuffling against me, and I end up laughing as the two horses tickle me, insisting that I stroke them. I have a sudden rush of fondness for Aunt Irina, who said that with their golden chestnut manes and my wild tangle of red hair, it looked like squirrels fighting! I finally relax and hug each of my companions in turn. No matter what lies ahead, as long as they're by my side then everything will be fine, I'm sure of it!

Our horses have got their bearings in the paddock, and after putting away the equipment my father brought in the saddlery, we climb into one of the electric cars parked under an awning.

“It’s really easy to drive,” explains one of the men, pressing a large button on the dashboard to start it up. “This lever has three positions: forward, stop and backwards. We’ll come with you on your first trip and then you will be free to move around as you wish.”

I am very impressed by how quiet the electric vehicle is, and by the silence of our guides. So, despite wanting to ask a thousand questions I decide to focus on the journey to the castle where we’ll be soon be getting settled into our rooms.

We cross hectares of countryside that are anything but urban – high, jagged cliffs, moorland resplendent with heather and gorse, meadows, copses – until we reach the majestic castle of pinkish white stone. Built to face the ocean, it appears to consist of a central building with three wings, each crowned with a slate-topped tower. We drive around the first two wings and stop in front of the entrance of the main building, beneath an archway embellished with gargoyles and frightening monsters. I suppress a shudder and turn my gaze towards the car park filled with vehicles parked in neat rows.

“If you would like to follow us...”

We climb a staircase carved from the same stone as the walls and find ourselves in the main hall, the tall windows flooding it with sunlight.

“The chapel is to your left, Mr Hannibal’s library and private apartments are straight ahead, and the wing reserved for guests is to your right. I will take you to your rooms and show you where you can rest and eat.”

Ah. So we are the guests of a certain Mr Hannibal. I’ve never heard of him before. I hope that once we are all settled in, Father will finally tell me what’s going on! In the meantime I follow them along a wide corridor, glancing back at the impressive spiral staircase that leads to the private rooms, which take up three floors. The glass dome at the summit reflects the banisters and casts rays of evening sunlight over each step, streaking the family portraits lining the walls. It’s so mesmerising that I have to struggle to pull myself away from this spiral of light and shadow. Our host’s employees open the doors for us in perfect synchronisation and my father and I enter the area that has been reserved for us.

The first thing I notice is that the few clothes I had hastily stuffed in my backpack have already been carefully folded or hung on hangers in one of the wardrobes. I feel myself blushing as red as a tomato and quickly turn towards the window. I’m terribly embarrassed; someone has even folded and put away my underwear! I open the windows wide to hide my embarrassment and am greeted by the pleasant cry of seagulls over the singing of the ocean. I lean out through the window. It’s wonderful, my room is

suspended over the void, looking out onto the setting sun across the waves!

Having only ever known the comforts of the cosy but incredibly kitsch circus caravans, I may end up enjoying the unexpected luxury of sleeping in a castle after all!

“Nadja?”

Hmm... Who’s talking to me at such an early hour?

“Nadja, get up! Breakfast is served in the room you will find behind the fourth door to the right.”

Dang, I was having such a lovely dream... I kick off the thick quilt wrapped around me like a fur coat and stretch lazily. I slept like a log! I go over to the window to say good morning to the ocean before putting on an old pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, then walking barefoot to join my father.

Surprise! In the dining room, there is a man sitting to the left of my father, his back to the light flooding in through the windows all around us. He could have warned me! I’ve dressed like a total slob and my hair must look like a lava tornado!

“Ongi etorri Euskal Herria! Welcome to the Basque country,” translates our host.

What a striking voice, so serious and charismatic... I curtsy clumsily, half inspired by our circus performances, which causes our host to laugh in a voice completely devoid of joy.

“Please, have a seat, *Bosikom Printsessa.*”

Between looking like I’ve just been dragged out of bed and the “barefoot princess” remark from this man whom I assume to be Mr Hannibal, I have rarely felt so embarrassed!

“My, how you have grown since Moscow...” he continues with a touch of nostalgia.

I hide my face by drinking a huge mug of hot chocolate, which is just perfect as it’s thick and velvety. I wish I could just disappear into it forever when I feel Hannibal’s eyes piercing me, as though trying to probe my very soul. I can’t remember ever having met him! Fortunately, my father diverts his attention by asking,

“Are you ready?”

Ready? Ready for what? Am I finally going to be told why Father has brought us to this crazy castle, with its disturbing owner, and what he wants from us?

As I’m still looking down, I just hear the sound of a chair moving and the slight rustle of clothing. The sound of footsteps on the tiled marble floor tells me that Hannibal is leaving the dining room. Something causes me to look up; the sound of his shoes on the floor is slightly irregular. I understand as I peer through my hair at Hannibal’s legs as he walks; he has a slight limp. I quickly lower my gaze again as he stops and turns around at the door.

“I’ll meet you in the paddock in half an hour.”

The paddock? I wait until the sound of his footsteps have retreated far enough before scowling at my father and saying,

“I haven’t seen any horses on this property except for ours! And so there can’t be any ‘difficult’ horses that Sergei the horse whisperer needs to re-school! I hope that you haven’t brought us here to sell him our horses?!”

“No,” answers Father bluntly, getting up from the table.

“So why are we here? How do you know this man? Will you finally tell me what’s going on?”

“We are going to teach him how to ride a horse again. Hurry up and get ready, I’ll meet you at the car park.”

I barely have time to brush my teeth, tie my hair up and put on my trainers before the cart arrives to take us to the paddock. Our circus puts on a show in Moscow every year at Christmas, but I cannot recall ever seeing Hannibal there. I must have been really young if he remembers me but not the other way round. There are so many questions running through my head. Why does Hannibal need circus performers to “teach him once more” how to ride a horse? With all the means he seems to have at his disposal, he could get the best riding instructors in the world! How did he “forget” how to ride a horse? Is his limp due to a horse riding accident? A terrible accident that traumatised him?

Here we go. My imagination is going a mile a minute and I’m already picturing ten thousand possible scenarios. I find myself feeling sorry for this cold and forbidding man whom I actually know nothing about. It could be that horse riding is just the whim of a bored billionaire. Maybe he’ll change his mind instantly and decide to learn how to skydive or embroider instead! I shake my head and take a deep breath to rid myself of these wild ideas. If only my father would actually explain things to me, I would have far fewer worries giving me a headache!

Hannibal is already in front of the paddock, straight as a rod, a good distance from the gate. He’s wearing a full riding outfit, complete with riding hat, jacket, breeches and boots, all brand-new. I grimace at the sight of the whip he is tapping against his thigh and the spurs shining on the heels of his boots. Uh oh... if he expects to ride our horses then I hope that Father will make him take off these last two accessories. Otherwise I guarantee that I will myself!

I am surprised that Mishka and Mysh’ aren’t huddled together in front of the gate, begging for a pat on the head or a treat. They are all the way at the back of the paddock, standing behind Zaldia who seems to be holding them back and keeping guard, just as stiffly as Hannibal himself. It’s only when he notices Father and I that Zaldia lets out a whinny of recognition and relaxes. He trots towards us, quickly overtaken by the galloping twins, slowing down just before reaching the fence. I am so happy to see them. I can’t help myself. I duck under the barrier and walk over to greet them. I stroke them as they sniff in my pockets looking for carrots, as excitable as young puppies. I calm them down and call Zaldia over but I notice that he’s hanging back, watching Hannibal out of the corner of his eye, still wary of this unknown person. I turn towards my father, waiting for his instructions. I assume that he is going to get me to fetch a bridle and a saddle to start our lesson, but he walks towards the gate instead, telling Hannibal,

“Lose the whip and the spurs and follow me.”

Good. Father has completed mission “get rid of the instruments of torture”. Hannibal looks preoccupied, as though there’s a film playing in his head, but my father’s voice snaps him out of his daydream. He runs a hand through his hair nervously before doing as he is told and moving towards the gate, looking rather nervous. Once the paddock gate is closed my father walks slowly towards the horses, followed by Hannibal, who is almost

hidden behind him as though using him as a bodyguard. Zaldia takes a step backwards, flattening his ears and kicking out before cantering to the back of the paddock. More obligingly, the twins advance slowly towards my father.

“This is Mishka and Mysh’,” he says to Hannibal, pointing to the left and right twins respectively.

Father stops and nods at them. In response, the twins stop in unison and lower one knee to the ground, their way of bowing during a performance.

I almost want to applaud but can see how extremely tense Hannibal is. He is incredibly pale, with his jaw clenched, and I suspect he is struggling to control himself. Father does not pay him any attention. He strokes the horses’ necks before calling to Hannibal,

“Come here.”

But Hannibal is frozen like a statue. I finally realise that this man is afraid of horses, a fear that has him completely paralysed. I gesture to my father and after a moment he nods. I walk determinedly towards the horses, asking Mishka to move aside. Then I lean against Mysh’s shoulder, asking her to lie on her side. She does so graciously and I slip under her legs, lying against her stomach. I call to Mishka and he gets into the same position with his back to me.

“That’s good, my lovelies,” I thank them.

We stay still for some time – I almost start to get rather hot – then I hug Mishka’s neck and slide a leg over his back. Clicking my tongue, I command him to get up before sliding my other leg over his back. He gets up slowly and I squeeze him with my calves to get to him to walk and then canter around Mysh’, still lying on the floor. Then we jump over her. She doesn’t even flinch. I get Mishka to walk again, stroke his neck and slide onto the ground. I click my tongue and Mysh’ stands up. I stroke her as well before turning to Hannibal, the twins at my sides.

“These two won’t hurt you, sir. You can come closer, I promise.”

Has my demonstration reassured him? Will it convince him to take a step towards the horses?

After what feels like an interminable length of time, Hannibal takes a step towards us, then another, but stops short when Mishka tosses his head to chase away a fly. I think back to the first time I had to go up to a tiger at the circus. I was five years old, petrified at the sight of this jaw full of teeth yawning open in front of me, but my uncle knew how to handle me. He scratched the tiger behind the ears and got him to lie down so he looked less imposing before calling me over again,

“Come on, Nadja. He won’t hurt you! Tell yourself that he’s just a big cat who wants a cuddle.”

I overcame my fear and approached the tiger. I knelt down and stroked him gently. Just a few weeks later I was riding the tiger, jumping through flaming hoops without any fear at all. This memory makes me smile, although I can’t see myself telling Hannibal that our horses are just big cats who want a cuddle. But maybe my involuntary smile was enough to make Hannibal take a few steps closer.

“That’s good, now hold out your hands with your palms open.”

The horses slowly stretch out their necks, the tip of their noses moving towards his outstretched palms, and sniff them gently before standing to attention.

“You can stroke their necks if you like. They won’t move.”

Hannibal’s hands slowly fall to his sides. A nervous tic begins to twitch in his cheek, but the rest of his body remains motionless. I suddenly hear a faint humming noise that seems to snap Hannibal out of his trance. He pulls back the sleeve of his jacket and casts an irritated look at his wrist. I notice a large golden bracelet on it decorated with twinkling stones; could they be diamonds? This kind of vanity is a clear indication of character! Hannibal’s face transforms before our eyes. He frowns, his eyes narrow and he looks away. Then his face relaxes, his mouth widening into a wolf-like grin. The metamorphosis is so disturbing that I shudder involuntarily. The horses must feel my uneasiness as they start to stir. I quickly throw an arm over each of their necks and they calm down. I continue watching Hannibal who has taken a few steps back. I can see that he is incredibly excited as he says,

“I’m coming.”

He taps his index finger on his bracelet before turning to my father, his eyes shining feverishly.

“There’s... an emergency. I’ll be right back. Make yourselves at home until I return.”

And with that he ditches us, hurrying towards a four-by-four approaching at high speed. Maybe this bracelet is nothing to do with vanity after all, but actually some kind of high-tech communication device, like a watch that’s connected to the internet?

Father snaps me out of my musings, nodding his head.

“Your demonstration was a very good idea, Nadja. But I think we still have some way to go before this man will be able to trust a horse...”

“And vice versa. I’m not too worried about Mishka and Mysh’: they are kindhearted and while I’m with them, everything will be fine. But as for Zaldia, I have the feeling that he can sense the negative vibes coming from this man from a mile away! Do you think you will be able to make a pair out of these two one day?”

“That’s the challenge I’ve decided to take on...”

While waiting for Hannibal to return, the younger of Hannibal's employees, Filipe, offers to drive us "into town" to do some shopping, paid for by our host of course. Father declines his invitation, preferring to stay with the horses, but I jump at the chance to get out of this gilded prison. And I have to admit that the thought of going shopping, for myself instead of accompanying somebody just to help carry pounds of food for the circus team, would be a huge first!

I also make the most of the opportunity to grill Filipe during the journey.

"Have you been working for Mr Hannibal for long?"

I gather from his puzzled expression that he doesn't speak a word of Russian, so I repeat my question using some rather dodgy English. He responds in English, and his is even worse than mine.

"One year."

It's not very easy to talk, but nevertheless I manage to learn that the castle was empty for many years, and that Filipe and the other man were hired to drive the workers and gardeners who restored the property. But when I try to get some more personal information out of him about Hannibal, Filipe mumbles and waves his hand to show that he doesn't know anything, or rather that he cannot tell me anything. Disappointed, I sit back in my seat and decide to at least enjoy the scenery.

The Basque coast is so beautiful! I breathe in the wild scent of the grass and the ocean through the car's open window, my eyes filled with colours and new lights. And this stops me from taking too close a look at the incredibly considerate Filipe... I am happy that he's the one who came with me; the other guy with the unpronounceable name, Garbixo, is much older and much less... easy on the eye. That's enough! I'm not going to spend my time ogling Filipe's biceps, or his thighs that tense every time he changes gear, or his brown curls waving in the wind, or his profile with the perfectly straight nose, or... I'll be glad when we arrive in town!

All the traffic jams and dizzying crowds in this huge seaside resort almost make me miss my prison of calm and solitude! Filipe notices my apprehension faced with the hundreds of flashy boutiques lining the streets and, using a mixture of English, Basque and a few hand gestures, offers to take me to a quieter neighbourhood. I gratefully follow him through the zigzag of streets in the old quarter until we reach a cobbled square under the shade of some mulberry trees. Here he enters a quiet shop, has a brief discussion in Basque with the manager, Galéria, and leaves me with her, nodding encouragement. This lovely woman measures me from head to toe before inviting me to look through the shelves. I spot a low-cut, sapphire-blue dress made from a silky, lightweight material. I take it out and hold it against me in front of a mirror. I am... it's beautiful... except for the trainers at the bottom of my frayed jeans. Not very classy. I hurriedly put the dress back on the shelf, feeling my cheeks glow like a brazier; I would never dare wear such a thing. I

look instead at the T-shirts, choosing one in grey and one in black. I could alternate these with the two or three that I brought with me. Then Galéria comes back, her arms full of clothes on hangers that she hangs on a rail before beckoning me over. There are shoeboxes all over the floor, filled with slingbacks, ballet pumps, sandals and heels, all in different colours. It's enough to make your head spin! I do as Galéria asks and move nearer, running my fingers over the hangers, unable to choose from all these clothes that are far too feminine for me! I shake my head and hand her the two T-shirts I had held against my chest. I put my hand in my pocket to take out some money but she shakes her head vigorously. She sighs with a smile before putting the T-shirts in a bag and handing them to me. I feel so embarrassed and awkward as I leave the shop!

I feel completely lost. Filipe is waiting outside. He kindly takes the plastic bag from my hands and gives me a paper one in return.

“*Carise? Cherries?*”

The bag is overflowing with glossy, dark red cherries. They look perfectly ripe and normally I would wolf them down. But I feel completely nervous and shake my head. I can feel his disappointment. I am unable to look Filipe in the eye nor say anything to him as we walk back to the car. And then I pretend to be asleep for the entire journey back. Argh, I'm hopeless!

What? I actually did fall asleep? Are we already back at the castle? The driver's door is open and Filipe has disappeared. I rub my eyes vigorously and struggle out of my seat to find a small table under a parasol on the terrace. I look around me: there's no one here. I walk over to the table. A light meal for one has been laid out. I wonder where my father is? While I wait, I pour myself a large glass of water, and as there is no one there to tell me what to do, I pick at the cheeses and delicious fruit in front of me. Feeling better, I decide to go and see the horses. I have missed them!

I clearly must have missed something, as what I find leaves me totally dumbfounded. Hannibal has already come back and is riding Mishka bareback! And he's barefoot, wearing nothing but a polo shirt and riding breeches! I walk towards the paddock incredulously, but Father quietly motions to me that I should leave. Ah, am I disturbing them? I move away silently, watching Hannibal. He's sitting completely straight, hands clenched in Mishka's mane who is just as immobile as his rider. Hannibal is staring off into the distance, his chest rising and falling at a rate that makes it clear he is forcing himself to breathe very slowly. Father is speaking very softly. I don't know what he is saying, but I can just make out Hannibal nodding his head. Mishka begins to walk slowly. His rider's hands pull furiously on his mane as though it were the reins, but the placid Mishka does not seem irritated and continues to walk in circles around my father. Little by little, Hannibal's body relaxes. He lowers his hands and relaxes his pelvis, starting to move with the horse rather than against it. After a while, Father asks Mishka to turn round and walk in the other direction. Hannibal's legs are tense again, his hands and heels start to rise. But soothed by the horse's regular movement and my father's advice, he starts to relax. Father congratulates him, but it's not enough progress for him. He asks him to let go of the mane and put his hands on his head. He has to insist before Hannibal agrees, and when the tentative rider finally puts his hands on his head and realises that the horse does not react and continues to walk obediently, the fear on his face gives way to rather pleasant surprise. After a while, Father asks him to do something else. This clearly does not appeal to Hannibal who lowers his arms and shakes his head.

Father stops Mishka and walks towards him. He has a brief discussion with Hannibal who finally gives in. With Father holding one of his legs, he lowers his chest forward, a look of distrust and almost loathing on his face, and hugs the horse's neck. Mishka, good boy that he is, allows this and I notice Hannibal's back relax slightly. Then Father asks Mishka to start walking again, walking alongside him for a few paces before gradually letting go of Hannibal's leg. Hannibal is frozen at first, then gradually lets himself go, and finally even allows the horse to walk around with him on its back without resisting. But deliberately left without instructions by my father, Mishka, like all good horses, decides to start grazing, moving from one tuft of grass to the next. Hannibal doesn't dare move until Father begins to laugh, telling Hannibal that he can wake up and even get down from the horse if he wants.

I slip away quietly, hearing snatches of conversation in which the words stiff, breathing, confidence, persistence, goal and Zaldia are mentioned frequently. If the goal is for Hannibal to be able to ride and indeed master a horse like Zaldia soon, he'll really have to let his guard down...

I look around for Mysh' and Zaldia. Ah, they are in their own paddocks, as far away as possible from Mishka's. I guess that my father must have kept them away so that they don't distract the new Mishka-Hannibal partnership. Both are grazing quietly and it looks as though Zaldia is starting to relax in the new environment. This makes me really happy. He is stretching his powerful neck, sniffing the salty air, shaking his mane. I watch his muscles ripple as he walks a few steps towards the ocean. He is a mixture of strength and grace. He is truly magnificent. Who would recognise the wounded and emaciated wild stallion that we took in a few years ago and that used to be so crazy with anger?

We were on tour, performing a circus show in Western Siberia. We had been told that in the Kulunda Steppe, between the Ob, the Irtysh and Kazakhstan, there was a breeding farm for thoroughbred Spanish horses. Uncle Vassili had managed to convince Father to acquire some new horses, to make the equestrian shows even more spectacular. They had chosen the elegant Andalusian with its proud gait and natural talent for the piaffe and the passage. Their delicate mouths mean they become fine, obedient horses when they are broken in and ridden properly. They are also often used in films, where their attitude and good temperament are much appreciated. They are reliable and brave, they always have a pleasant temperament and, when given a taste for it, they love to strut around the circus ring to the delight of the audience.

We therefore made our way to this breeding farm, where the owner, a man named Vania with long greasy hair and a devious expression, offered a lot of four foals at a reasonable price. They were lined up narrow stalls in a dark, sheet metal hangar. My father had winced upon seeing how thin and subdued they were and was about to leave when Uncle Vassili, ever the diplomat, asked to see them in the light of day, moving about.

Father, scowling, shook his head as he watched them walk, clumsy, emaciated and frightened, Vania pulling them along by the tethers, jeering at them harshly. He muttered “nyet” to my uncle and had turned to leave when suddenly we heard a terrible din coming from the back of the hangar. Furious whinnying accompanied by blows to the sheet metal that made the whole building shake. Vania, looking extremely annoyed, handed the foals’ leading reins to Vassili before rushing towards the back of the building.

“Zaldia, you wretched stallion! I’ll teach you!”

Father followed and I ran behind him as fast as my little legs could carry me. Vania had grabbed a whip and was mercilessly lashing the grey stallion struggling inside a stall, kicking at the sheet metal walls and thrashing against the ropes holding him prisoner. The poor horse was covered in welts and bloody marks, eyes white with rage, spittle foaming in the corners of his mouth. Father threw himself on Vania and tore the whip from his hands before punching him full in the face. The man, stunned, lay in the dust and rubbed his nose, asking incredulously,

“But... how on earth am I going to sell this animal if I don’t tame him first?”

My father raised the whip, ready to inflict the same punishment Vania had been subjecting the poor stallion to, but I screamed out,

“No! Stop, stop, I beg you!”

Father stared at me as though I were an alien, his face as red as a beetroot and looking almost as crazy as the mistreated stallion. After what felt like an age he let go of the whip and rubbed his face vigorously, as though to rub away the last remnants of anger that had overwhelmed him. Then he pulled a roll of notes tied with an elastic band from his pocket

and flung it at Vania who raised his hands to protect his face, afraid of further blows.

“I’ll take the foals and the stallion for the same price. Pray to God that our paths never cross again.”

I have always felt a mixture of fear and respect for my father. I started to love him when I saw that he was capable of empathy for his horses, when I saw that he had infinite patience in caring for them and, most importantly, gaining their trust.

It wasn’t easy to get the horses into the trailer at the farm. The foals, after being given a drink and thanks to a mixture of gentle words, carrots and caresses, had finally climbed up the ramp into the trailer. All that remained was to coax Zaldia inside too.

Despite having raised tigers from cubs, Uncle Vassili was shocked at Zaldia’s fury and kept me well clear of the stall.

“Taking this animal is a mistake, Sergei. He’s a wild beast, impossible to tame. He’ll kill us before we can even get near him.”

The stallion, restrained by his ropes, watched us out of the corner of his eye, his body shivering nervously and his muscles taut as a drawn bow.

“I can’t leave him here,” said my father.

Then he walked over to the stallion, slowly but determinedly, palms open, speaking in a low voice,

“I’m not going to hurt you, Andalusian. Let me free you from your shackles.”

He continued to mutter reassuring words, the music of his voice hypnotising me like the hang played by my cousin Igor. That is a kind of round metal drum with a peak in the centre and five recesses around it like hand prints. It’s nothing like the bass drums that you hit with a drumstick. When Igor makes his fingers dance on the drum resting on his thighs, stroking it like a cat, the vibrations and sounds intermingle to create a haunting melody. When Igor plays his hang by the fire in the evenings, he stirs up a whirlwind of dreams, swirling with journeys of the imagination. You close your eyes and happy or nostalgic images begin to form behind your closed eyelids, your mind travels to the lapping waves of warm seas or it flies on the silky wings of a bird. The tigers growl softly, echoing this voice from the depths of time, from the secret womb of the earth.

Is this the voice Zaldia is listening to? Trembling and alert, he allows Father to approach, his ears dancing an anxious ballet, nostrils quivering. But when he thinks the human has come too close, he makes this clear, baring his teeth, ears flat. He becomes agitated and at each step he tries to flee the ropes that are restraining him and savagely cutting into his flanks, the taut leather halter attached to his forehead and his left and right cheeks, which chafes his head and throat. Father stops and stays motionless for a long time, continuing to talk. Then he slowly pulls a long knife from his belt, holding it towards the horse who begins to stamp anxiously, pounding the sheet metal walls with his flank again. The tone of my father’s voice changes slightly, becomes more guttural. I can’t hear the words, but I watch as the stallion tries to turn around and face him. He stops banging against the walls

and finally stands still. Father continues to approach him slowly. Then, with a quick, precise movement, he slices the rope restraining the horse's flanks. He steps back quickly as the stallion begins to thrash about, kicking out and jumping like a sheep, for lack of being able to rear up and escape. Father waits until the horse calms down, all the while continuing to chant his comforting words. Soon, Zaldia's chest, swelling and deflating like an accordion, begins to move at a slower tempo, his free legs stamp on the dirty bedding, uncertain about his partial freedom. He pulls on his head's fetters, but quickly understands that he won't be able to break them alone. So he stares at the human for a long moment before moving to the side to give him space to enter. My father enters, walks to the side of the horse, avoiding making any contact, then cuts the remaining fetters before backing into the corner of the stall. Zaldia, finally free, shakes his head and lets out a long whinny before rearing up in front of my father. My heart skips a beat. I feel Uncle Vassili's hand tense on my shoulder. Is his prediction about to come true? Will the stallion trample my father to punish him for being a human?

Zaldia remains upright for what feels like an age before falling back on all four hooves and finally leaving his metal prison. Drunk on his new-found freedom, he gallops off at full speed, spinning around, alternating between kicking out and rearing up, before running off into the steppe and disappearing around the corner of the hill. I look at my father, a smile creeping across his face, his eyes following a speck in the distance which is now invisible. It's like he's been transformed. And then, with a surreptitious gesture, he wipes his eyes.

Vassili pats me on the head. I look at him, his face a picture of pure joy mingled with relief. For my father, it was as though freeing this mistreated horse was like overcoming all the problems in the world, making up for every loss, restoring desire and hope to life.

The return trip over the bumpy roads in the empty Kulunda Steppe, with the four foals in the trailer, was carried out in silence, none of us wanting to break the emotional moment of freeing Zaldia. From time to time the foals, whose noses were out sniffing the wind, remarked on the scenery in their own way. They whinnied in surprise at the new smells and the murmuring of the wind through the grassy wheat sprouting forth from the black earth, calling up to the hawks soaring through the air and the saiga antelopes who were running through the chestnut trees and were now displaying their summer coats. Then all of a sudden, they began to neigh loudly together. Shrill, repetitive whinnies, as though they had seen a beautiful pasture or recognised a stablemate. Uncle Vassili looked in his rear-view mirror instinctively and I watched as the expression on his face turned to one of huge surprise. He slowed down and parked on the side of the road, looking at my father. My father was half dozing and couldn't understand why the van had stopped.

“Get out, Sergei! We have a visitor!”

Puzzled, my father scrubbed at his face to wake himself up and opened his door, grumbling. He stopped protesting as soon as he saw who our visitor was. It was Zaldia! He must have followed us. Could he have been the leader of the herd and wanted to protect the foals, or did he just need a bit of company?

“Nadja, grab that sack of carrots and come here,” he whispered.

Zaldia had hidden behind the trees, watching our movements. My father took a large carrot and walked up to the edge of the chestnut trees, stopping at a respectful distance from the stallion. He held out the carrot towards him, calling to him in a reassuring voice. With drawn-back lips and his nostrils flared, the stallion eagerly sniffed at the carrots. He snorted in greedy curiosity, stamping behind the line of trees, still unsure whether to move out of them or not. The foals in the van became excited, calling out to their friend in a fanfare of joyous neighing. But Zaldia continued to hold back. Then my father placed the carrot he was holding on the ground and took a few steps back, all the while continuing to call the stallion, his arms at his sides and palms facing out. After hesitating for a moment, Zaldia left the cover of the trees, dancing from one side to the other before deciding to move forward and snatch the carrot from the ground, after which he once again took refuge behind the trees. My father took another carrot from the sack I was carrying and took a few steps closer. The sack was very heavy so I decided to put it on the floor and sit next to it. Father continued talking to Zaldia, trying to charm him, to bring him closer. The horse danced, hesitated, then came to take half a carrot from my father's hand, then took a step back and danced again. When he had devoured the second half of the carrot, and retreated and danced, he trotted towards me. Well, towards the open sack of carrots in front of me.

“No sudden movements, Nadja,” my father instructed me, a hint of concern in his voice. I didn't move a muscle, letting Zaldia approach the sack, dance, and eat his fill of juicy,

sweet carrots. Was it because I was only a half-sized human that he only half feared me? Whatever it was, I was not afraid, feeling only compassion for this poor horse with his open wounds. I murmured softly to him and, despite the risk of scaring him away, I stretched out my hand towards him and stroked an area of his neck that wasn't injured. He trembled but didn't move away.

A sudden squeaking noise made us both jump and for a second I feared that Zaldia would flee. He took a step back, alert. Uncle Vassili had opened the door and was talking with my father.

“Very slowly walk towards the trailer with the bag,” said Father.

I got up slowly, feeling Zaldia tremble with anxiety, but he didn't run away. I walked back towards the trailer, instinctively placing a carrot behind me from time to time, like Hansel and Gretel with their breadcrumbs. Zaldia whinnied in frustration, refusing to follow me straight away. It was only when I had got back in the vehicle and we had set off again at a low speed that Zaldia decided to munch on the “carrot crumbs”. Accompanied by the encouraging sounds of the foals, he followed us back to the camp and joined the other horses in the paddock. And that's how we got a stallion and four foals who had to learn everything from scratch, starting with love...

My father devoted a huge amount of time and energy to raising Zaldia, speaking to him, training him bit by bit, earning his trust and his respect. I think that I sometimes felt jealous of the time my father spent with him at my expense. Their bond was so strong that there was little room for others. Watching them walk side by side, shoulders impeccably straight, I see a perfect couple, one who know each other so well that they can communicate without words. I wonder sometimes if it wasn't Zaldia who “healed” my father, a few years after my mother's death. Despite being a stallion, the role he'd earned as the undisputed king of the circus horses, he was in a way loyal to my father. No one would have believed that Zaldia would ever obey another human being; he had so many good reasons to hate them.

I got some consolation out of the distance my father put between us while he was taking care of Zaldia, because it meant I was suddenly in charge of training the new foals! They were so sweet, docile and playful, and such quick learners that it was not long before we had trained a few that delighted our audiences. Zaldia watched us intently when we rehearsed outside, learning from afar the relationship he could build with caring humans. Until the day when, to my father's great surprise, he leapt over the paddock fence and came to join us!

I have no desire to get up. Hannibal is making huge progress. He seems comfortable at all speeds, although he clearly prefers to ride Mishka and Mysh' with a saddle rather than bareback. I am useless as he only works with my father. And he's been in a foul mood for two days, ever since we found Hannibal in the arena in the early hours of the morning perched on Mysh', saddled and bridled, whipping her like a madman to get her to obey him.

"I forbid you to hit my horses! Have you learnt nothing?" thundered my father, rushing over to him and snatching the whip from his hands, forcing him to dismount. "You will never get a horse to obey you in the long term using violence. I'm leaving immediately and I'm taking my horses with me!"

I did not witness the rest of their altercation as I had rushed to get poor Mysh' out of the arena and away from this horrible guy. But Hannibal must have found a way to change my father's mind, because we are still stuck in this wretched castle. He is supposed to ride Zaldia today, but I think that it will have to be postponed due to the terrible weather that has just hit us. The sky has forgotten that it's meant to be blue, alternating between mournful shades of grey and black, the trees bending under the force of the wind and the rain that's inundating everything, starting with my morale.

I finally give in and get out from under the duvet to stretch my legs. I wanted to walk along the edge of the cliff in the sun, but I will have to take a rain check so I'll make the most of the opportunity to explore the inside of the castle instead. One of the employees, the one with the unpronounceable name, didn't he mention a library? As we are constantly on the move, we rarely have the opportunity to borrow books. And apart from old textbooks, worn down from generations of circus children, I've never really read much! I head towards the entrance hall without meeting a soul. I call out,

"Umm... Is someone there?"

The only response I get is my own voice echoing back at me. Ah well, never mind. I hesitate a moment before climbing the spiral staircase. This time the light coming from the glass dome does not reflect rays of light all around. Its grey and purple light dulls the family portraits, the eyes of the departed following me like ghosts. I'm beginning to regret intruding into Hannibal's world. I realise that the higher I climb, the more modern the outfits in the portraits are. What's this? The collection of portraits suddenly stops. I take a look at the final painting. It shows a family of four, wearing clothes from the seventies or eighties, I think. All of them are smiling apart from a boy with brown hair, who is six or seven years old. I take a closer look at his face; it looks like Hannibal. Maybe it's just because the picture has aged, but it looks like he has different coloured eyes, one blue and one brown. I thought that both of Hannibal's eyes were of a steely blue? The expression on his face disturbs me somewhat, so I look instead at the younger boy with light hair posing proudly next to him. Could it be his younger brother? Why does the portrait collection suddenly stop here?

Knowing I won't get any answers to these questions, I continue climbing till I reach the top of the staircase. I can hear the constant drumming of rain from under the glass dome. The clouds are scudding furiously, casting moving shadows on the walls and the impeccably waxed pale parquet floor. I close my eyes for a moment and breathe in the new smells of wax, wood and hints of leather. When I focus harder, I think I recognise the smell of paper, like our old textbooks. I smile and open my eyes: I have entered the kingdom of books!

The walls are lined with books, in shelves fifteen to twenty feet high. There is a narrow rail at the bottom of the shelves and a runner at the top allowing a wooden ladder to slide along. Fingers trembling slightly, I push the ladder to the side; it glides along perfectly without even a squeak. I tremble with excitement and climb the rungs of the ladder one by one, savouring the procession of golden letters engraved on the leather spines of the books, like a film in fast forward. It would take me a lifetime to read all of the works contained in this library! I reach the very top of the ladder and look all around at these paper treasures. I don't feel like the master of the world, more like the captain of a ship, standing on the poop deck and watching over my precious cargo: universal knowledge!

I gently take one of the books from the shelves and plunge my nose into the pages, the sweet smell intoxicating me. If I could freeze time then I would lock myself in here and devour all these books one by one, from bottom to top or perhaps leaving it to chance and seeing which ones call out to me! A sudden unexpected noise yanks me from my reverie and I almost fall off the ladder. Someone just shut the front door! I quickly put the book back in its place and climb down the ladder, trying to make as little noise as possible. I curl up in the far corner of the library, shrinking against the bottom of the shelves like a little girl waiting to be told off, listening out for approaching footsteps.

I recognise the voice of the older employee talking to himself. No, he must be responding to somebody on the telephone, judging by the gaps in the conversation.

“Very well, Mr Hannibal... Istanbul, immediately. Yes, sir, I'll take care of it... Tomorrow at ten am...”

The voice moves away, doors open and shut and silence reigns once more. Phew! Relieved, I slump back against the shelves. All of a sudden, the ground pivots and I fall backwards into darkness. Help!

Turkey - Zacharias

I had arranged to meet my old friend Yilmaz in the *Kapalıçarşı*, the Grand Bazaar, in Istanbul, the oldest covered market in the world. I sometimes did business with him, sold him some of the offerings from the Orthodox faithful who came to the monastery to exchange a worthless antique for the promise of an infinitesimal piece of paradise. Sometimes there were treasures of great market value amongst the junk. Only an expert eye could recognise them, and Yilmaz was always the one who offered the best price. His manners and discretion notwithstanding, can I really call someone a friend when our relationship boils down to mutual benefit? Still, he's one of the few people I can ask to carry out a service with complete discretion, such as receiving a stranger, whose identity I took great care not to reveal, in his back room.

I set the time of the meeting for a few minutes before the market closes at seven o'clock. He will be on time. He's not the sort of person to get lost in the maze of corridors, passages and courtyards of the fifty-eight streets beneath the succession of archways of blue, red and green tiles that contain over four thousand shops. He, Hannibal, will ignore the shouting rug merchants and will know to go directly to the "Old Bazaar", the oldest and principal caravanserai, which lies at the centre of all these corridors. In the antiques business, Yilmaz is known as the white wolf. He pushes aside the heavy damask curtain that conceals the back room and his accommodation from the eyes and clamour of the crowd. He nods to the visitor and directs him into the comfortable alcove where I am waiting for him.

I've rehearsed the meeting over and over. I will not try to apologise. I will not let my voice shake. I will not bow before him. The past is the past. In the here and now, we are equals in the eyes of the God of Business. But when the man sits opposite me, placing a leather briefcase much larger than the one I was supposed to deliver to Leyla on the table, I feel my stomach lurch and I gulp involuntarily. He is one of those people who can make the weak obey him with the power of his presence alone, one of those people whose eyes judge you like a guillotine. I look away and hand him the parchment containing the testimony of the Greek soldier with the drawing of the fragment of the Star of Zeus. He unfolds the parchment carefully and scans it without showing a hint of emotion. Then he folds it up again before piercing me with his gaze.

"So, Zacharias, this writing has not revealed to you the location of the Temple of Zeus whose priests this soldier apparently entrusted with the star fragment?"

"No."

But I did try to reconstruct the soldier's route, scouring the archives of Persian and Hellenistic archaeological discoveries, scrutinising the oldest Hindu, Persian and Greek topographical maps of the world. But I came to understand that I would not succeed within a reasonable amount of time – at least not by myself and not without knowing the

ins and outs of this whole Star of Zeus affair. So I decided to sell Hannibal the document that could lead him to the star fragment, forgoing a profit that would have been even higher, though much less certain.

Hannibal shakes his head at my negative response before standing up and slipping the parchment into a padded inside pocket within his jacket.

“Then you are no longer of any use to me,” he says, pointing a gun fitted with a silencer at me. “I would have spared you had you not betrayed me the first time.”

There’s a muffled hiss and I feel an excruciating pain spreading throughout my chest. I watch Hannibal’s cloaked figure disappear behind the curtain and hear him mutter,

“Keep the money for the cleaning costs, Yilmaz my friend.”

And as I realise I am dying in agony in a pool of my own blood, all alone in this alcove I borrowed from my “friend”, after making the mistake of believing that I was Hannibal’s equal in business, I call on the last of my strength to grab my mobile phone. I slide my increasingly stiff fingers over the screen, select the photo of the parchment I had taken so that I could continue studying it in secret, and send it to the last person I thought I would have wanted as an ally: Leyla the Egyptian. My final act accomplished, the phone falls from my numb fingers and as I drift out of consciousness I feel myself smiling at the demons who have come to get me. Hannibal, you will live to regret this...

Egypt - Leyla

“So, *habibti*, have you and John set a date for the wedding? Ouch!”

I pulled a bit too hard on the sugar wax strip stuck to Mrs Arfaoui’s thigh. It serves her right! Ever since my Aunt Wadiha let slip some information about my boyfriend, the clients at the *Sweet Kiss* beauty salon have been all over me like flies on honey. Couldn’t they find someone else to bother? Besides, marriage is out of the question. John hasn’t even introduced me to his parents yet... Well, they do live in Seattle, rather far away from Cairo, but that’s no excuse, and I would never go to live in the rainiest city in the US, and anyway... Oh shoot, I’ve left my smartphone switched on in my beautician’s smock.

“Excuse me for one moment, Mrs Arfaoui, I’ll be right back.”

“Ah, love waits for no one! Mwah mwah mwah!”

I’m going to wax every last hair, including the ones on her head. No, I’ll make her eat the entire pot of wax to shut her up! I hurry into the back room to check the message I just received.

When I see what it is I almost have a heart attack and feel my legs go weak. The message says: “Avenge me and find it before him”.

I open the attachment. I zoom in on the document that Brother Zacharias, Hannibal’s henchman, sent me, horrified when I recognise the drawing of a fragment of Alexander the Great’s star, a piece that we haven’t seen before. If Hannibal finds it, or if he already has it, he will have four out of five fragments of the star! No, Leyla, don’t panic. I try to regain my composure and send the document to the members of the Network, requesting an urgent video conference. Then I try to call Brother Zacharias to understand how he got hold of this document and why he sent it to me, but the phone rings on and on endlessly; there’s not even an answering machine. Oh dear, this doesn’t look good... Very well. I take off my smock, put on my jeans and trainers, grab my bike helmet and tell my Aunt Wadiha that I have to leave, indefinitely. Mrs Arfaoui’s thick leg hair will have to do without me!

I’m furious at how long it takes me to get to the university by scooter due to the mad traffic blocking Cairo’s roads twenty-four seven. Finally in the computer lab, I hurry to the far corner where there is a free machine. I connect to our network, put on a headset with a microphone and prepare for the news – good and bad.

Battushig is the first to join me. He waves hello on one of the split screens.

“Hello, Leyla. Not too hot in Cairo I hope?”

“Hello, everyone. How far have you got?”

“Professor Keusséoglou is deciphering the text in Athens. He has already put us onto the trail of one of the soldiers of Alexander the Great that General Ptolemy apparently

entrusted with the mission of hiding—

“The fourth piece of this cursed star! Does the drawing match?”

“Yes, Leyla,” says Professor Temudjin. “And all of the historians and geographers in the Network are working on the document. We are trying to reconstruct the route the soldier took from India, although the poor man’s story is a bit disjointed.”

“And how can I help?” pipes up my darling John who has just appeared on the screen. I guess he’s just woken up, judging by the pillow marks on his face and the fact his hair looks like an electrocuted duckling’s feathers.

“Once we have established a fairly accurate route of his journey,” continues Professor Temudjin, “Leyla, you and the archaeologists can look at the temples dedicated to Zeus that existed at the end of the fourth century BC.”

“Tell me, my little turtledove whom I love even more than Turkish delight, when are you coming back?”

“Um...” he says, turning as red as an extra-hot chili pepper, “Leyla, this isn’t a private conversation...”

“Oops!” I say, my eyes wide, mortified. “Sorry, I’ll let you all carry on with your work...”

Despite their obvious stress, the members of the Network say goodbye with a smile before ending the video conference. That’s me, Leyla the lummo!

Basque Country - Nadja

I've accidentally activated the door to a secret passageway and am now trapped in a padded room without any windows or doors, hidden behind the library. It could be a room from the twenty-second century, what with all the futuristic high-tech equipment in it. The walls are covered with screens, all of them switched off. In the middle of the room is a fairly tall, polished glass table, casting a blueish light around the dark room. There are a number of levers sticking out of the centre of the tabletop. The three levers remind me of the gear sticks in the castle's electric carts. I shake off this odd thought and focus on how to get back through the secret passageway. I'm already picturing myself starving to death in this soundproof prison, my throat sore from screaming for help, inaudible from the outside, while my father is tormented with grief at not finding me, turning over every pebble at the bottom of the cliffs, imploring the ocean to return the body of his lost little girl. Actually, I have just thought of an even worse situation. What if I'm discovered here by Hannibal, the only one who knows this secret passageway exists, when he returns here tomorrow at ten in the morning... In either case, I'm dead!

I push feverishly against the bookshelves behind me, hoping for a life-saving click. I try to remove them but they seem to be glued together and to the shelves. I tear at the floor, first standing and then on all fours, trying to drag it, slide it, but nothing happens, nothing at all. I run my hands over the bare walls of the room and then the smooth, soundproof padding covering them. But I can't feel any bumps, no handle or locking system. It's not possible. There has to be a way to open this stupid passageway from the other side! Unless the levers on the glass table are used to open and close this invisible door?

I walk with determination towards the table... before freezing in confusion when I look at what is in the middle. I feel at a total loss and completely at sea in front of the controls, which are as alien to me as the cabin of a space shuttle. I was hoping to find some kind of computer keyboard which, in addition to writing out my will, might have enabled me to get help from the outside world, even something as basic as email. But no, there's nothing but these three levers... I touch one and almost scream in surprise at the result.

The screens lining the walls suddenly light up. I'm besieged by moving images that make my head spin. It looks as though the screens are connected to cameras filming in real time almost everywhere throughout the world. I'm in a control tower that wouldn't be out of place in a covert intelligence agency! I take a few deep breaths to regain my composure before studying the screens. The first section shows the grounds of the castle, including the runway we arrived at and the area reserved for the horses. The second section shows... the inside of the castle, including the rooms given to me and my father! I am outraged at this violation of my privacy! Who is this guy, some kind of paranoid maniac? Come on, get a grip on yourself! I want to understand what Hannibal is after when he uses this control room.

Now there's a change of scenery, probably a different country. Images from inside an

ultramodern business premises. It's... Hannibal Corp in Massachusetts, according to the plaque at the entrance of the building. There are a number of laboratories inside that must be freezing cold seeing as how all of the laboratory technicians are wrapped up warm. Does this company make freezers or something? I continue exploring. This one shows a display case of antiques including old clothing, bladed weapons, shabby horse tack and a broken piece of jewellery. It looks like four triangular tines that have been broken off an ancient crown. And what's this? I can see the faces of a group of young people talking in front of their computer screens or on the telephone... Why is he spying on these particular people? And there's no sound, so it's impossible to understand anything. The final screen shows an incredible castle, like something out of a fairytale, right in the middle of a dark, narrow valley lined with a forest of tall black pines. It is even more impressive than the castle I'm in now in the heart of the Basque Country. Every black stone, every turret, every sculpture, every lake seems to have been designed by an architect haunted by the bloodthirsty legends of long-lost chivalry. Brrr! And then, in a sort of flattened clearing below the castle, I notice a stallion, who is almost adult and entirely black except for a white star on his forehead.

His appearance is formidable, with his developed musculature and the rare and majestic elegance of his movements. I've never seen this breed of horse before and I am fascinated by the power and determination emanating from this strange and beautiful stallion.

Then my gaze is drawn to some other, extremely disturbing images. I can see a building with a number of stables inside and a group of mares with swollen bellies lying in their stalls. They look as though they are sleeping under the influence of the drips they are connected to. When I look at the images showing the basement of the building, I am shocked at the sight of a room that could almost be Frankenstein's laboratory. There are tables and oversized surgical equipment everywhere, people in white coats and masks, test tubes, microscopes and computers. The walls are covered with diagrams of horse DNA and sketches of a black horse in its various stages of development. I don't understand. Then my eyes are drawn to a number of aquariums built into the other walls. First I think they contain strange fish, but then I realise they are floating and inert horses. They are foals in their embryonic stage. Stunned, I look back at the black horse prancing in the meadow. The indisputable similarity between the stallion and these floating specimens makes me cry out in horror,

"What a monster!"

Hannibal is genetically engineering horses! He's insane! I have to get out of here and warn my father. We need to get away from this dangerous madman as soon as possible! But I still haven't found a way out of this prison!

I begin shaking the levers one after another in a furious rage and suddenly am hit by a wave of dizziness as sounds explode from every screen, the languages of various countries mixing into a dizzying cacophony of noise. I cover my ears and try to find a way to turn off the power so I can stop this noise, a cable that I disconnect or something. Then I notice something that looks like a switch on the edge of the table. I push it and the sounds and images stop immediately. I'm surrounded by darkness again, apart from the blue light emanating from the table, like a block of ice. Calm down, Nadja. Think.

I have to be methodical: one thing at a time. I push the switch. The screens turn on but this time there is no sound. First lever: sound comes from the screen in the middle. The sound of traffic in an unfamiliar city. I move the lever to the left. The location changes and I can see young people working around tables littered with mechanical and electronic components, chatting in an incomprehensible language. In spite of myself, I look for a reassuring face to cling to. I use the lever to move from one screen to the next, whirlwinds of movement everywhere, people in action. Then I stop on a screen where the images are not moving so much. I see a middle-aged man with a rather dark complexion sitting at a desk covered with books. He is standing in front of a computer screen, his face looking rather anxious behind his round glasses, concentrating on a thick notebook in which he is scribbling some strange symbols. He looks like a scholar, a wise old man. If only I could communicate with him, he could alert someone, anyone who could help me get out of here!

Okay, I wonder what the other levers do.

The second one is used to zoom in and out of the selected screen. I can explore the scholar's office to see what he is writing in his notebook, but it is not of much use to me. Let's try moving the third lever. Ah, nothing's happened. Wait, yes, I can hear the pen scratching on the pages, I can even hear the old scholar breathing. Okay, I can spy on people from here, examine every sound and visual detail of their private lives, but is there a way that I can communicate with them??? My hand tightens on the lever in frustration. There is a sort of clicking sound and I begin to swear in very informal Russian. The old scholar suddenly jumps and looks around him. He asks a question aloud in a language that I don't understand and then repeats it in Russian,

"Is someone there? Are you Russian? Miss? Where are you?"

I start blathering at full speed.

"Sir! Sir! Please help me! My name is Nadja. I am locked in a... somewhere horrible, in Mr Hannibal's house. I don't know how to get out. He..."

"Hannibal? Did you say Hannibal?"

"Yes yes, it's a secret room in the castle. There are spy cameras and microphones everywhere. I opened the room by accident and I don't know how to get out. My father

doesn't know where I am. I..."

"Whoa, come down, breathe. We'll find a way out. I'll contact Battushig. He's our expert in IT, networks, cameras and all that. He'll know how to get you out of there."

I watch him tap the keyboard with his fingers at full speed, mumbling,

"If 'Big Brother' is watching us, that means we can watch him too..."

Then he lifts his head and tries to smile at me.

"Miss, I can't see you, but while we wait for Battushig, could you tell me who you are, where you are and why you're there? As for me, I am Professor Temudjin from the Ulan Bator Faculty of Sciences in Mongolia..."

I tell Professor Temudjin my story. He listens attentively, shaking his head and looking increasingly appalled, every now and again asking for details. He asks me to describe the screen showing the four triangles of the broken crown and when I do, his face darkens before whispering,

"So he already has one..."

He pulls himself together immediately and explains that the "Network" he belongs to is trying to prevent Hannibal from carrying out his terrible plans...

Then I hear a young boy's voice in the professor's office. He is speaking in the language they use in Mongolia, the professor interpreting it into Russian for me:

"Nadja, Battushig has managed to infiltrate Hannibal's system. He will open the secret passageway so you can escape. But Hannibal is bound to notice our intrusion. You and your father could be in danger. You need to get out of the castle as soon as possible. You can contact the network through the University of Ulan Bator. Good luck."

Then I hear a quiet hissing sound and the corner of the room through which I entered begins to rotate. I rush through it, finally leaving Hannibal's spy cave. Quick, I have to warn Father about everything that is happening and we need to get out of here!

I sprint down the stairs at lightning speed, the terrible information I received from Professor Temudjin ringing in my head. I don't dare shout for fear of being found, but I'm desperate to find my father. I run to the bedrooms and open my father's door: it's completely empty! Mine is the same, the sheets have been taken off and the wardrobes are empty. I open the door to the dining room as I run. Again, empty. My last chance to find him: with the horses. I rush out of the castle and am drenched by the cold rain. The stones from the main driveway graze my feet. Never mind, I'll jump into one of the electric carts and race towards the paddocks. Oh great, I can't see any cars parked nearby. Oh well, I'll just have to make do. I'll run like a marathon runner carrying a warning torch!

The rain saturating my body mixes with sweat as I press on, my breath becoming increasingly short. I can't even think with all the blood in my veins throbbing in my temples. I can't feel my flayed feet any more, I just know that they are pounding the ground as though of their own volition. As I approach the paddocks, I begin to scream my lungs out, calling for my father and the horses in turn. But only the wind and the rampaging elements answer my desperate calls.

I guess that everyone must have left the castle and all of the outbuildings while I was locked in the library. I'm overwhelmed with panic. They've all gone, they've left me all alone in this huge prison. The only way I can get out of here is if I jump into the ocean and swim to the coast or hope to be picked up by a boat out at sea. I need to find someone who can help me find my father. I walk to the edge of the cliff like a robot, eyes blinded by tears, rivers of sweat and rain. The wind shakes me, causing me to stumble. I struggle through the gorse branches blocking my path. I beg them to let me through, to give me a chance to reach the ocean, my voice hoarse from screaming, when suddenly I am distracted by bright lights and loud noises. I shield my eyes with my hands to look up at the sky. The lightning continues but there's no thunder, the storm is mute. What is this strange weather phenomenon?

All of a sudden I feel octopus tentacles grabbing me from behind, ripping me from the knotted gorse, dragging me away forcefully while strange sounds ring in my ears. I call on my remaining strength to free myself from these tentacles, to continue towards the ocean, but someone is saying my name over and over again in between the strange sounds and I am brought back to reality. I lower my guard for a moment and try to see who is calling my name. I turn around. Filipe is standing in front of me, soaked to the skin, his eyes shining with concern. I don't understand what he's trying to say to me. He drags me by the arm to get me to follow him, but my legs give out from underneath me and I feel myself slipping into unconsciousness. My will yields along with my body and as I fall I feel him grab me. Before passing out, I feel him hoist me into his arms, carrying me away from this treacherous cliff...

“Father!”

I open my eyes, shouting in a hoarse voice that I barely recognise. I struggle like a tiger

trying to escape from my shackles before recognising the face of Filipe, my saviour, leaning over me and making soothing noises. I calm down a little and find myself half reclining, nice and snug, on a comfortable sofa. But it's not a sofa in a living room, despite the steaming cup of tea Filipe is offering me, but a seat in a small plane, judging by the clouds I can see passing by the windows. I harangue Filipe, asking:

“Where are my father and the horses?”

But Filipe shakes his head; he really can't understand Russian nor I Basque. I am overwhelmed with anxiety again: Father, Mishka, Mysh', Zaldia, where are you? Filipe puts the cup of tea down and hands me a tablet, gesturing that I should press a button.

Hannibal's oily, charismatic voice emanates from the tablet.

“We couldn't wait for you to make up your mind and show yourself. But I want to reassure you that your father and the horses are safe with me. After your... decision to play hide and seek, shall we say, I'm sure you can understand that I'm not going to tell you where we are right now. The work I hired your father for will soon be over and then you will get your companions back in perfect health. Provided, of course, that you do not speak to anyone about your stay in the Basque Country. The plane will take you to Vladivostok where your aunt and uncle will come to fetch you. There are some presents for your family in your luggage in addition to the ones you are wearing. I would have liked to have got to know you better, *Bosikom Printsessa...*”

The message stops there, on “barefoot princess”. Mad with rage, I throw off the blankets covering me and look down at my feet to see a pair of sapphire-blue ballet pumps, the ones that matched the little blue dress that I was too shy to try on in the shop Filipe drove me to and which I am now wearing. I feel my entire face go red as I pull the covers back over me, noticing Filipe hastily looking away from me and staring at the clouds.

If I could, I would scream until the plane blew up, I would scream with shame and anger at this horrible guy who thinks he can buy everything, control everything. As soon as I set foot on solid ground, I will rescue my father and the horses from this madman's clutches. I will contact the Network and join forces with them to stop Hannibal from achieving his goal. We will never let him win!

*If you enjoyed this story, come to meet Zaldia and discover the other legendary horses
on www.howrse.com*