



JAGUAR'S REALM

M.G. HARRIS

 DARKWATER

First published in 2025 by Darkwater Books
An imprint of Harris Oxford Limited.
6-7 Citibase, New Barclay House, 234 Botley Road,
Oxford, England, OX2 0HP

Text copyright © M. G. Harris 2025

The right of M.G. Harris to be identified as author of
this work has been asserted by her.

ISBN 978-1-909072-70-1

All rights reserved.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of Harris Oxford Limited.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, incidents and dialogues are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

TheMGHarris.com

‘The Mind Game’ logo design copyright Gareth Stranks

*For Jacob, the first and most long-standing
reader of this story.*

ONE

THE FENCE

Sacha Montecristo looked at the fence. He'd never seen it quite so clearly before, never with so much fear. Soon, his friend Flycatcher would be on the other side, in the outside world. Most likely, he'd never see her again.

Eva, not 'Flycatcher,' he reminded himself, enjoying the sound of her real name in his head. She'd given him permission to use that private name when they were alone. And she'd agreed to call him 'Sacha' but sometimes she forgot and called him by his camp name instead: 'Blackbird.'

He'd woken early that morning, two weeks after his twelfth birthday, his belly hard with knots. The day had arrived. Eva had been sold to a controller. Everyone left the Foundation when they reached eighteen; you got used to it. But no one he ever *really* cared about.

He was as far out as you could be from the campus, right on the perimeter, the shouts of kids circling the softball court on their bikes only just audible. He took another step towards the fence, closer now, beyond the line of giant mango trees. Their dense, dark foliage was laden with heavy fruits that hung from their long stems. Viewed from within the grounds of the

Foundation, the trees obscured most of the fence's parallel wires. With the tip of his navy-blue cotton neckerchief he wiped a thin film of sweat from his upper lip. The sun was high now and the air was thick with heat, sweet with the scent of the pine forest beyond the perimeter.

There hadn't been enough food at breakfast, but Sacha hadn't dared to raid the pantry again. He'd sat with other kids, watching out of the corner of his eye. Across the room, Eva had been surrounded by friends close to her own age, five or six years older than him.

Quietly, without using the actual words, she was saying goodbye.

The tightness in his guts had worsened. He couldn't bear to watch. Hunger had driven him out to the edge of the grounds, to check if the mangoes were ready, licking his lips at the thought of that honey-sweet fruit. But although he looked hard he found nothing ripe enough to eat.

His stomach growling, he turned his gaze upon the electrified perimeter fence – the fence that loomed larger in his mind every time he heard one of those stories about escape.

He tried hard not to think about the kids that had died, trying to escape. He'd been to every funeral. Grim as the occasions were, they were compulsory. Six boxes he'd watched being put into the ground. Six teenagers – one of them only thirteen.

When kids ran, it was because they were close to reaching the age where they were put up for auction. Even though six were known to have died, rumors went round that escape was possible, that it had already been done. That in the end, it came down to the question of electricity.

How many seconds did the electrical current last?

Ten seconds and you were in with a chance, he figured. If the rumors could be believed, the current alternated: on and off for ten seconds at a time.

I could make it over in ten.

*Blackbird, stop! What if you can't? Then you're toast.
Well, pork crackling, more like.*

Sacha managed to drag his stare away from the fence. He scanned the wooded area for the source of the voice in his head.

You're thinking about those escape stories, aren't you? The stories about the kid they call the Rabbit.

Flycatcher? Eva... Where are you?

She came into view then, strolling between two mango trees, her ash-blond ponytail swinging behind her head. Like him and just over half of the young residents and *all* of the adults of the Krylov Foundation, Eva was white, her Slavic heritage obvious. It wasn't the only factor that made him wonder whether they were related, but it was probably one of the first that had triggered his curiosity.

One of the annoying things about not being told who your family were meant that everyone obsessed over details like that. But he already knew enough about how genetics worked to realize there was a chance that none of them were related. They were being bred for their talents but also and rather obviously, for their skin color and ethnic heritage.

Sacha had assumed it was so they'd blend in wherever they ended up. Yet Eva was heading to Singapore, an Asian country where white people were rare. So it couldn't just be about that – or they'd have picked one of the two-dubs with Asian heritage.

The early morning sun lit the trees behind her, framing the slender teenager in silhouette. Sacha held his breath for a second, startled by how grown-up she looked dressed in scarlet and black, the dress uniform of the Krylov Foundation.

Eva made him feel like a kid. Sometimes he liked that. But sometimes it made him feel irritated, uncomfortable. She was smiling but he didn't need to use his skills as an Empath to sense her true feelings.

The sadness was all there in her eyes.

When Eva reached him, he glanced around, unsure where to look. He was tall for his almost-thirteen years, but she, at almost eighteen, was still a good two inches taller.

Don't get obsessed about the fence, Blackbird. I don't want to bear your name on that list of dead kids.

The one you called 'the Rabbit' didn't die.

The Rabbit! I wish I'd never even told you about him.

If it makes you feel better – I already knew.

"So – you're going," Sacha said aloud, his voice so tense that he almost had to whisper to keep it from cracking.

Eva nodded. "Coming to see me off?"

He glanced downwards, shook his head. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't cry.

Okay, we'll say goodbye here, just the two of us.

He nodded, still unable to look her in the eye.

Give me a hug then.

He didn't move. If she hugged him he'd cry, he was sure of that.

Eva hesitated for another second, then wrapped her arms around him. He stood awkwardly, unsure what to do with his own arms. She planted a light kiss on his forehead.

Bye, Sacha. Take care. Don't forget me.

He said nothing, trembling from the effort to control his emotions.

And don't cut your hair. It's cute like this – scruffy and blond.

Eva ruffled his hair with one hand, until it was scrunched high up on his head. He pushed her away, pretended to be crosser than he really was.

I'm gonna cut it. I look like a girl!

Eva pouted in mock disappointment. "And drop the obsession with Arabic! If you have to study an extra language in your spare time, make it Mandarin!"

His heart fluttered. There could only be one

reason for her to say that. "They want me to learn Polish next."

"But try? At least *try*."

If Sacha didn't speak at least one Chinese language then the odds were that he and Eva would never see each other again. Her controller was in a place called *Singapore* and they spoke Mandarin there. Sacha had run the atlas program on a computer, when he'd heard.

Singapore, he wondered. *What goes on there?*

"Watch out for Cayman," Eva said. She was fidgeting with the gray metal buttons on her jacket now. Soft, long-lashed eyes were on his, sad and serious. Sacha could feel her reluctance to leave. She was holding back something stronger than a few tears. "When you move up to the seniors, I mean. Cayman doesn't really like being a sentinel. What he really likes is to hurt you younger kids."

Sacha gave a brief nod. Eva had already given him the heads up about Cayman, twenty-four years old, real name 'Anton Trinidad.' Right now Cayman didn't pay much attention to him, thank goodness, but he'd heard all the stories. Once he turned thirteen he'd be moved into Cayman's group. Then he'd really have to be careful.

Sacha, listen. Never tell them all the things you can do with your mind. Never! Just let them carry on believing that you're a regular two-dub, like me.

Sacha didn't respond. A strange numbness was descending over him. It seemed so unreal that this was the last time they would speak for years – maybe forever. His mind, his feelings just didn't want to accept it.

Stay out of trouble. And study hard so they find you a good controller. Most of all, forget that you ever heard about the Rabbit.

Finally, he looked right at Eva. She stared back. He tried hard not to notice the film of tears in her eyes. With his right hand, he reached out, tentatively and touched her arm. Eva's eyes followed his movement, an

instance of surprise. After a second, she smiled.

I'll miss you, little brother.

Sacha's breath stilled. If only it were literally true. Then he and Eva would be linked to each other for ever, joined by a shared, eternal ache; the parents they would never know.

I wish you weren't going.

Me too. Wish I could stay to watch out for you.

Sacha summoned all his nerve, steadied his gaze.

One day, it'll be me who watches out for you.

Eva grinned suddenly, touched a finger to his cheek. "I believe you."

At that moment, so did he.

Which meant that one way or another, Sacha was going over that fence.

TWO

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Eva was in Singapore, but it might as well have been Mars. Sacha was years away from being sold to a controller. Even then, with his languages, he wasn't likely to end up anywhere near Eva. Over the fence was his only chance to find her. The Rabbit had done it. That meant it could be done.

Even so, it took him three months to finally screw up the courage to have a go and it didn't go well. It turned out to be true, what they said about the Rabbit's escape. It wasn't just a matter of having a razor-sharp plan. You had to be lucky, too.

He made it to the perimeter fence without being noticed. He took a few minutes to breathe deep and slow until his heart no longer rattled the cage of his chest. He took a piece of raw flesh he'd scooped from the breast of a bird carcass he'd found, and skewered in with a dry twig. Then he jabbed the bird-flesh onto the electrified wire and watched it sizzle. The second the sound of cooking flesh stopped, Sacha took a leap and hopped onto the fence, counting.

Three, four. He was three wires from the top.

Six, seven. He was rolling over.

Eight; his fingers clutched at a wire midway down as he slid. *Nine,* he let go. He tumbled to the ground, inches away from the perimeter.

He scrambled to his feet. He absorbed the ease of his accomplishment with pure exhilaration. It never

occurred to him suspect to that anything was wrong. He began to run.

That's when the stun mines zapped him.

Stun mines? Who said anything about stun mines?

The moment Sacha stepped on one, he felt as though freezing cold, steel claws had grabbed hold of his ankle and were flapping his whole body, wringing him like a soaking towel. He'd fallen to the ground, gulping huge gobbets of air. One minute he was free, running for it, the next second he was captured again, gasping with pain and despair.

That was just the beginning.

He didn't pass out, but what happened next was a total blur. When they first dragged him into the compound he was shaking, violently.

He was aware of light; bright, dazzling light. He couldn't see the faces of the people in the room with him. He couldn't even concentrate on the thoughts he felt around him.

Sacha had heard that they flogged kids who tried to escape. The kind of treatment that left you unable to stand straight – that's what he'd heard. So he expected a beating. When they grabbed his arms roughly, held him tight and blindfolded him, that's what he thought was coming.

Be tough. It'll soon be over.

There was a mean-spirited snicker, "He's trying to be brave."

It was the voice of a young man, a voice Sacha didn't recognize, cold and toneless. A deeper, older voice said calmly, "He's practically wetting his pants."

Now that voice, he knew. Anton Trinidad, known to everyone as 'Cayman.' Even without seeing him, Sacha could picture the smug expression on the sentinel's tight lips under a thin mustache. He felt bony fingers on his arm, flexing around his bicep.

Cayman: the sentinel that even other sentinels seemed to fear.

Sacha couldn't resist. He pushed his mind into Cayman's, seeking the images that would let him see what was going on. He made the connection just in time to see a fist swinging towards his own head. Sacha ducked, avoided the worst of the blow which still caught his ear.

GET OUT OF MY HEAD YOU LAZY TRUANT!

Sacha cowered, terrified by the raw violence in Cayman's thoughts.

The other voice chimed in. "Did he try to read you?"

"Bastard tried to see with my eyes..." Cayman's voice trailed off, replaced by thoughts of barely restrained anger and revenge.

The second sentinel paused, apparently impressed. Sacha also detected what the man tried to hide – fear. "You let him off easy."

Cayman spat. "I was aiming for his *eye*."

Then Cayman grabbed Sacha's already throbbing ear, pinched hard until tears came to his eyes.

Now you're gonna get it.

Gasping, Sacha forced the pain out of his mind, squeezed his eyes shut. He imagined *Singapore*. A milky, turquoise-green sea lapping around white beaches. Streets lined with shiny trees clipped to perfection.

Don't think about you-know-who. Don't let them know you care.

But Sacha's Singapore was pale, colorless. It lacked bite, anything to sink his mind into. A beach, a tree-lined avenue; to him these were only concepts – things he'd read about but never seen. His concentration lapsed. He clenched his jaw, steeled himself for the beating.

It was the wrong approach. He should have held his breath.

The first time, Cayman and his associate held Sacha underwater for around ten seconds. It felt like eternity. It was as though the fear of drowning went

from being just an idea to a direct action of his muscles. His brain didn't even seem to be in control of his body. Violently, he thrashed about. He used up every drop of energy, panicked, almost ran out of air.

When they let him up, Sacha's two captors were laughing. Cayman said, "Comrade Montecristo; that was pathetic. You'd better make more effort than that, seriously. Or tonight, you're going to die."

Then, they stopped laughing. There was a tiny pause, a silence.

The second time was even more terrifying. He tried not to struggle but after around twenty seconds, he couldn't help it. Those final few seconds, he honestly thought his lungs were going to explode.

Cayman watched Sacha splutter then said, "He's thinking about Singapore. Why, jerk-face? Don't tell me you're still pining for Eva."

Talking to Cayman, the second voice took on a sudden note of interest, "Eva? Who's that, his girlfriend?"

"No – 'Eva' is the real name of Flycatcher. Oh, he was sweet on Flycatcher, weren't you, little comrade? I bet you even imagined she was your big sister."

"I didn't," Sacha mumbled. They were guessing.

They have to be guessing. I've never told anyone that.

Sacha trembled slightly, waiting in the darkness for Cayman to respond. But Cayman took his time, letting him sweat. "Well, all right," the sentinel said finally, in what was almost a good-natured voice, "If you insist."

The other voice said, "Maybe he's blocking?"

Cayman again; "This shit-weasel? Are you on crack? He's not a Blocker. He can't stop us reading his mind, the chronic loser. Can't even sense how much fun we're having with him."

Sacha just nodded, too terrified to speak. All he could think about was that they might do it again. He wasn't sure he could hold out much longer without crying, without begging them to stop.

His nod wasn't good enough; they wanted to hear his voice. Just for that, they put him in the water for a whole minute. When he surfaced, he was almost frozen with terror. He began to shake, couldn't stop his teeth chattering.

Cayman gave a brief sigh of satisfaction. "Finally. Now let's hope you're ready to listen to some advice."

A match was struck. He heard one of them light a cigarette.

Cayman sucked on his cigarette, sounding thoughtful. "So, this was about finding Eva. Is that it?"

Tears prickled behind his closed eyes. He hated when people made him think of Eva – he couldn't do it now without either crying or trying to run. He saw the blow in Cayman's mind just a fraction of a second before the slap stung his cheek.

"I said – *is that it?*"

Sacha managed a terrified nod. It seemed to calm Cayman down.

"Very bad move, comrade. Even for a moronic twelve-year-old like you. There's no way to leave this place." A sardonic laugh. "Trust me, I should know."

There was a long, weighty pause. "Well look, comrade. It's not for everyone, torturing people. I, however, enjoy it. I'd let our comrade, Trope here, give you a good kicking, if I only could, but you're such a precious commodity. Can't have your dear little bones being broken, can we?"

Sacha's couldn't keep the tremor out of his voice. "I was wrong to try to escape. But... Can I go now? I won't do it again. I promise."

Cayman laughed, this time in genuine disbelief. "We've barely gotten started. Tell me, comrade, how many successful escape attempts have you heard of?"

Sacha felt the blood drain from his face and hands.

Viciously, Cayman grabbed the back of Sacha's neck, digging his nails into the boy's skin until he

squealed. "I said, tell me."

Sacha cried out, "None!"

"What happened to them, you sniveling little shirker? Say it!"

"They died!"

Cayman pushed Sacha's face to the ground and held it there.

"Now we're talking. Yes, comrade. They. Died! You went to their funerals. Do you know *why* they died?"

Sacha whimpered, shaking his head.

"Because they were too old to believe in fairy stories. See? So now *you* listen. There is no such thing as this 'Rabbit.' No one has escaped the Krylov. Got that? Never!"

At that point, Sacha put up a fearsome struggle. He kicked and bit and thrashed around until they boxed his ears and pushed his head back into the water.

Cayman's thought pounded in Sacha's head; a final, chilling threat.

If you even think about begging for your mother, I WILL kill you.

By the time they finished with him, Sacha had swallowed water and thrown it back up, he'd choked and resigned himself to dying a few times over. Lying where they dropped him, exhausted and bruised from their merciless grip, he actually wondered if he might be dead.

THREE

MEMORIES

Sacha was in the pitch black of complete darkness; a cell, three yards square. The weight dropped off him as, he was gradually starved. The first couple of times they brought food he scoffed it down right away. Then he realized that days might go by between those pitiful plates of food. So he began saving it. A mouthful of rice was one meal, some beans the next. And the rest of the day, he stretched out on the floor conserving energy, trying not to think about his hunger.

Which was basically impossible.

As he lay, day after day in his dark cell, Sacha revisited the dream.

The dream was brief, little more than a montage of images that merged into each other with no context or story, just a strange, yearning sensation as silently, he observed. He couldn't remember the first time it happened, wasn't even certain that it *was* a dream. Maybe he'd seen all those things in real life: the fence, a cluster of royal palms, a black hawk circling the tree in lazy wheels.

But no, he reminded himself. *Not the river*. Some of it, he *couldn't* have seen with his own eyes – he'd never actually seen a river. It had to be a dream. But in the darkness, dreams and reality tended to get mashed together.

He focused on something he'd definitely seen for real, pictured the mango tree near the softball diamond.

He could visualize it perfectly, the bottle-green sheen of the leaves gleaming in the sun. They'd be ripe by now. If they let him live maybe he'd still get to eat one.

After what Cayman had said, Sacha had almost given up hope. When they began to starve him, the reality of his fate was like a punch to the eye.

Starvation. Of course. That's what they'll say happened to me; that I tried to run. That I starved to death. Then they'll bury me, just like the others.

After the water torture, it was a week before Sacha heard another human voice. The loneliness of a world empty of thoughts and words was almost as suffocating as the dunking.

But when contact did arrive, his hopes dimmed. He knew that voice: Irina, a sentinel, thirty-six years old. You couldn't trust any sentinel.

Irina spoke first. He could sense her leaning on the solid block of wood that stood between them. "Blackbird, isn't it? What a twerp. What were you thinking, trying to escape? Don't you know it's impossible?"

Sacha wondered why she was talking in such a casual manner, when beneath the facade waves of pity and fear were flooding from her.

"And the sad part is you're not even original. Everyone knows that you're trying to copy that kid they all talk about – the Rabbit."

Sacha said nothing, pushed his thoughts deep under and concentrated.

"Why are you thinking about a flying horse?" she asked.

Irina might as well have asked: *Are you blocking?*

"A story from the book I was studying in Arabic," he lied. "The *Book of One Thousand And One Nights*."

"Hmm. Arabic? You study Slavonic languages, don't you?"

"It's for fun."

A faint note of contempt entered her voice. "Ah.

You actually enjoy that stuff.”

Sacha ignored her tone, he was used to disdain. Enjoying the thing you were obliged to spend all your time doing struck him as nothing more than simple survival. “Could you get it for me? It’s so wonderful. I almost took it with me. Except of course that it’s so heavy.”

“*Almost took it with you?* Could you be more stupid? Sheesh. Now I’m all covered in stupid!”

Her fear subsided then. As she ripped into Sacha with her sarcasm, he sensed her grow calmer. “Wow, if they ever had someone not to worry about, it’s you. How do you even remember to breathe? Even *I’ve* heard that story they tell about the Rabbit. *You carry nothing*, isn’t that what he said? *Nothing, not even water*. You won’t die of thirst around here. There are rivers and waterfalls and fruit. Better to carry nothing, leave your hands free. But you? You had to carry stupid tins of food. What a dunderhead!”

Sacha heard Irina shuffle to the ground and settle on the other side of the door. His heart sank a bit. The tongue-lashing was set to continue, it seemed.

“You’re lucky the stun mines didn’t injure you. A kid broke their leg once with an awkward fall. They told us to leave them for three days, crawling through the forest in agony. When we picked them up they were almost mad from thirst and about to lose their leg to infection. Didn’t get punished apart from withholding painkillers. You could hear ‘em crying all night long on the hospital wing. Didn’t get a minute’s sleep from the pain.”

Sacha rubbed his own leg, remembering.

“I remember that girl.” He shifted his position, thinking. “I went to her funeral.”

Irina sniffed. “It was quite moving. Here on the South Wing they go by ‘Atlanta’ by the way. Atlanta watched too, naturally. We *always* watch the funerals.”

Sacha paused, processing Irina’s comment. The

person he'd known, who'd died, now *goes by* 'Atlanta'? Eventually he whispered, "You're saying that 'Atlanta' watched her own funeral? Like Tom Sawyer?"

Irina groaned. "Bookworm in your native language too, eh? No wonder you tried to escape, can't imagine you were all that popular on the North Wing."

He shook it off. Two-dubs were taught Standard American English as a native language and learned enough about American society and culture that he understood the concept of 'popular' – a social dominance game for mundanes but telepaths, not so much. Irina was teasing him, he realized, but he detected affection under the snarky tone.

When he didn't reply Irina feigned a disappointed sigh, as though he'd scored a point by not taking the bait. "Yeah, like Tom Sawyer. Of course! Everyone wants to see how their friends react to their death. And you should know, it was *'their'* funeral, Atlanta goes by *'them'* now."

It wasn't as jaw-dropping as Irina's prior announcement, but this too gave Sacha pause. He'd read about this fairly recently; in the outside world, some people were changing their pronouns, changing them to align better with how they felt, inside. This occurred more frequently in the West than in the Slavonic-speaking countries he focused on, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Serbia. But even there, apparently. A thrill went through him, to think that such modern ideas had penetrated even the Krylov Foundation. Maybe it really was going to be better on the South Wing, freer?"

Irina continued casually, "In a week or two, we'll watch your funeral, too. It'll be super-sad, I reckon. You being so young and everything."

"So... what gets buried? An empty box?"

There was a quiet chuckle. "You're all kinds of smart, aren't you?"

"And the Rabbit – he's alive too?"

"Ah, so you actually believe in the Rabbit?"

“Of course.”

“Then you’re even dumber than you look! There’s no Rabbit, never has been.”

Sacha stuttered, “But you... You were just...? You were talking about him.”

Irina squealed with derision. “I was *messing* with you, little comrade. They’re just stories made up by you idiot Generation Five kids. If we could track down who started it, we’d bring ‘em in to tell you that. Three kids have tried to escape in the last year. And us Gen Fours – we don’t relish having to deal out this punishment, I can tell you.”

“Cayman does.”

“Oh, Cayman.” Loudly, she sniffed. “He’s just peeved that he didn’t get picked up by a fancy controller. It kills him that he’s stuck at the Krylov, being a sentinel. Don’t tell him I said this, but he’s so lame at telepathy that he’s practically a mundane. But he does love to push you Gen-Fives around, so there’s that.”

In a low voice, Sacha said, “I’m not a baby, Irina. I know most of the controllers are *bad* news, whatever you sentinels say. Have you *ever* heard from anyone after they’ve left this place?”

There was a long silence, during which he heard Irina sigh deeply, like the wind. “You got me there, comrade,” she replied. “Maybe it’s so great out there with the controllers that they never look back?”

Sacha responded swiftly; too swiftly, he realized, with a jolt. “You don’t believe that.”

On the other side of the cell door, Sacha detected a shift. Like a geometric realignment of shapes, something clicked into space.

“You’re... You *can’t* be. *Are* you?” Irina’s thoughts were jumbling now, confused. More clearly, she managed to say, “Have you been holding out on us, Alexander Montecristo?”

For long minutes Sacha was very still, his thoughts as flat and featureless as a stagnant pond.

Then Irina was gone, leaving in his mind a discovery.

Irina... sometimes she's afraid to be around me.

She was getting too close. Irina could not find out about his special abilities. Eva had warned him, but Sacha was already careless; already allowing suspicion about him to grow.

FOUR

SOUTH WING

Irina brought the news. Sacha was so drained by then, so listless that he could barely even sit up when he heard her arrive on the other side of the cell door. Fingers resting lightly on his chest, he felt his ribs under the filthy fabric of the T-shirt he'd worn for the past two weeks.

"You're out today, kid."

Sacha trembled, held back tears of relief.

"Come on, now. Lesson learned, yes? No hard feelings, I hope. Sulking is for babies. Won't be trying to escape again, will you?"

He was not mistaken – there was actually some warmth to what Irina said.

"Hey, be a little more cheerful! It wasn't far back that you thought you were being starved to death."

He managed to chuckle in a dry throat. "You almost did."

"Stop griping. You'll be stuffing your face soon enough. In a way, you're getting what you wanted, aren't you? Escape from that life, and on to another."

"I didn't just want to escape. I wanted to find Eva."

Her reply was surprisingly soft and warm. "I know."

Sacha touched the door with all ten fingers, as though indirect touch could magnify what he could already detect. Irina kept her voice light, airy and

friendly, which on its own was a ground for worry. Her feelings, on the other hand, were conflicted. Sacha could sense that she was actually sad, yet curiously elated.

What does she care?

"Hey guess what, your pals on the North Wing were suitably mournful about your demise."

Sacha thought about this for a moment. It wasn't entirely unwelcome news, to know he was mourned. But then he remembered. "What about Eva? Does she think I'm dead, too?"

"I'm sorry, comrade. That bird has flown. Singapore? Where even is that?"

A sob choked up in Sacha's throat.

"You okay?"

Unable to speak, he nodded. He allowed Irina, whose thoughts Sacha could sense at the edge of his mind, to hear his own.

I'm still here.

"Okay. Good. Cover your eyes. I'm opening the door."

Light flooded in, a white so extreme that it blotted out everything. He clapped hands over his eyes. Sacha felt an urge to throw his arms around Irina just for letting him see the sunlight again. He cracked open his eyes, letting in just a sliver of light.

She stared at him with heavy-lidded, soft, gray-blue eyes that looked older than the rest of her face; like a kindly grandmother staring at him from behind the eyes of a woman in her thirties. She ran one hand through her short, spiky-bobbed, peroxide-yellow hair. It was slightly clingy, damp from the heat of the afternoon. In her other hand was a piece of soap and a towel, which she held out to him. In silence, he took them. He sniffed the soap. Lemons. The best thing he'd smelt in his life.

"Shampoo?" he said weakly, not really daring to hope.

Airily, she told him, "Use the soap, squirt." She

turned around, indicating that he should follow her. "You reek," she added, not unkindly.

The shower rooms were small compared to the ones Sacha was used to. In fact, there were only two. They were tiled in exactly the same style – all white with a deep blue ceiling and floor. He turned on the water, quivering from the joy of feeling hot water sluice away the grime of his ordeal. The lemon-scented soap lathered into clouds of foam, and he scrubbed himself again and again and again. His hair felt rough even after he'd washed it. Despite what Sacha had said to Eva, he still hadn't been able to cut his hair short.

Outside the shower-room, Irina had placed a freshly-pressed day uniform on a hanger. Sacha checked the name-tag. It was one of his. He dried himself and dressed in the light blue canvas shorts and white polo shirt. He tied the blue cotton neckerchief around his neck and muttered, "Light blue."

"Navy blue is for North Wing. Pale blue is for South. We like to be able to spot you Southies in the woods when we go hiking."

"The Southies go hiking, too?"

Irina smirked. "If you're good boys and girls, you do."

Sacha adjusted his neckerchief.

"You're going to eat something. And then you're going to meet your new comrades. Or should I say, your old comrades."

Sacha stared at her, mystified, hoping for more but she just turned away. Instinctively he reached out to listen to her thoughts. Irina whirled around, grabbed him by the throat and slammed him hard against the door of the shower-room. "Don't you dare."

He could feel her fury, but her voice gave away very little, sounding almost reasonable. "If you ever try to probe me again without asking, I'll get some of the other sentinels to take you out one night and get inside your head with pictures you'll wish you'd never seen and

which will *never* go away. Understood?”

Sacha was speechless, but not at all surprised to find her thoughts like long tendrils, reaching curiously into his own mind.

It's always this way with sentinels. One rule for them and another for us.

He concentrated hard, recreating in his mind the blackness of the room which had been his prison for two weeks. It was surprisingly easy to make the memory ooze with detail, the kind of detail which would be impossible to create unless you'd lived through it. He imagined the sounds he'd heard each morning; echoes of balls bouncing in the yard nearby, of the morning's flag ceremony, of children's voices raised in song.

This could be a terrific new way to block.

When she released him, Sacha muttered, “I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I'm not used to having another mind around.”

“Some excuse!” she said, gruffly. But the anger had vanished, replaced by something that Sacha realized to his astonishment, was *shame*.

In a bathroom with mildewed ceilings and faded, blue plastic floor tiles, Irina used a rusty set of electric clippers roughly to crop Sacha's hair. What remained was a smooth blond scrub. Irina made him pick up the hair that now littered the floor. When both his hands were full of the hair clippings, Irina closed her hands tightly around his fingers and turned him to face the cracked mirror in the corner of the room.

“See that face? That's the old Blackbird, the one who thinks it's smart to run away from here. The one who wants to find Eva, that boy is gone. Understood?”

Sacha nodded, his eyes dry. “All right.”

“Ah, but you don't believe it,”

“Course not, how could I?”

Irina used her toe to drag the waste basket closer. It was full of soiled tissues and plugs of hair. She opened her hands and prised open his fingers, turned

them over and made him watch his hair tumble into the bin.

“You miss Eva. We’ve all lost good friends when people leave. Maybe you’ll see her again when you finally go to a controller. That’s something to hold on to, okay? But think about this: you were born for one reason only; to help other two-dubs. Survival isn’t easy in a world that would like to kill us all. Our only chance is to stick to the rules. Which doesn’t include running away. Remember – two-dubs help each other. Alone you are *weak*.”

Sacha stared into the mirror. His deep blue eyes stood out now, in a face free of its former flop of hair. Despite the days of darkness, he still had the keen, alert look of a bird.

Alone you are weak.

He wasn’t convinced, but he was prepared to keep an open mind. This South Wing was a new horizon. Maybe things would be different here.

FIVE

BLACKBIRD

They passed a kitchen, from which the warm aroma of boiled chicken flooded. The cook looked up from stirring his soup. He gave Sacha only the most casual of glances, as though boys like him, exhausted, filthy and ravenous, were presented to him every day. He was almost passing out with hunger, and from the anticipation of food he wouldn't need to ration.

In a small dining room next to the kitchen, the sentinel sat him down at a table in front of a place laid with a soup plate. She took the seat opposite. "Eat slowly. Or you'll be sick."

She smiled, very slightly. With that smile, her face changed, completely. It was the first sign of compassion Sacha had seen for weeks. It was almost too much for him to bear and his lips began to quiver.

The cook appeared, holding a soup tureen and ladled warm noodle soup, with generous lumps of potato and chicken.

"Tuck in. I've got some pudding for you if you manage that. Vanilla custard, with coconut."

He felt weak with joy.

With a wry expression, Irina watched him pick up a spoon, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "Your comrades, by the way, will not answer to their old names."

Sacha swallowed a mouthful of soup and regretted it immediately. Lumps of potato and carrot

went un-chewed. When they landed in his stomach he felt an uncomfortable lurch. He took another spoon, this time careful to take only broth. "Comrades – you mean the ones I thought were dead?"

"Here on the 'South Wing' residents don't use their real names. It helps people to forget their past."

"But how? My real name is in my head. All the time. Anyone that wants to know it can find out in two seconds."

"Lesson one of living on the South Wing: bury your real name. Make it recede into the Deep Place."

Between mouthfuls, Sacha considered this. Irina named comrades that were not dead, after all, but now lived on the South Wing: Boa, Howler, Jaguar, Puma, Crox, Atlanta and Treefrog. He remembered some from before, not all.

Irina continued, "You might remember some of their real names. *Not* a good idea to remind anyone. Surefire way to catch a beating."

Seven kids, he thought. *None of them called 'Rabbit'. But only six tried to escape.*

Sacha glanced up to catch Irina smirking at him. The bliss of eating had thrown his concentration. Now he noticed the weariness in her blue eyes, the pale skin around them lightly grey, as though she hadn't slept well in a long time.

Bet my thoughts are leaking.

"That's right." She grinned. "Like a sieve! Thanks for the concern but you should worry more about yourself. Look kid, no one has ever escaped, or died trying. We grab everyone."

"You said seven names."

"Correct-o."

He hesitated. "I only remember six funerals."

"That's because we didn't give the first one a funeral."

"Why not?"

"We hadn't thought of it." Irina paused, as though

she wasn't sure whether she was allowed to say any more. "In fact... the funerals were *his* idea."

"Whose? Rabbit's?"

"Ho ho," Irina replied, deadpan. "No, but you're on the right track. A two-dub with the distinction of being the youngest person ever to attempt an escape. Although to be strictly accurate, he had help from an adult, that first time. We call him 'the Jaguar.'"

Above them, a ceiling fan turned slowly, barely moving the stifling air. It was the only sound, apart from the clinking of Sacha's spoon as it made frequent return visits to his pudding. He couldn't remember a better meal and he definitely couldn't remember being allowed to have second helpings. As Irina warned might happen, he felt sick.

It's worth it.

He sensed Irina's thoughts reaching out to him once again. He was prepared for the intrusion this time. In an imaginary boulevard of an imaginary Singapore, Eva sat on a bench eating ice cream.

Irina glanced at him, curious. "Why Singapore?"

He pretended to be distracted. "Hmm?"

"Eva? You were close to her?"

Sacha said nothing, acting embarrassed to be caught day-dreaming about Eva.

"You believe she's your sister, don't you?"

Now that *was* unexpected. His theory about Eva usually stayed deep, deep under cover. Then he remembered what Cayman had said. He must have leaked more than he thought when they tortured him.

"Yes," Irina said gently. "Cayman told me."

"She could be," said Sacha, defensively.

"Well, of course – any Gen Five could be your brother or sister. Doesn't mean that they *are*."

"I *feel* something when I'm around her."

"So you persuade yourself that she's your older sister to stop you feeling weird?"

He reddened. "It's not like that. I mean, *that's* not

how she makes me feel.”

“Then, how?”

Sacha struggled for words. He wished that Irina was an Empath so that he could just let her in to see for herself. The way Eva used to.

“I can’t explain it,” he said, giving up. Because it sounded just too ridiculous to admit the truth – that he wanted Eva to be his sister so that they’d always be connected, more than friends, a bond that time and distance couldn’t break. Because he wanted what none of them were allowed: family.

Of course – sentinels instructed two-dubs that they were *all* family, all related, descended from five, first generation – the ‘Tunguska Generation’ – children back in Siberia. Most of the time though, the Krylov Foundation didn’t feel like a family. It felt like a prison. With Eva, Sacha had felt different. With Eva, he’d felt like it could be *home*.

As his serving of vanilla custard disappeared, Sacha slowed down. The sweet, creamy dessert was so delicious that he wanted to prolong the pleasure, even though he could feel his stomach beginning to cramp with the new sensation of being stretched.

“What are the others like?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Are they nice?” He glanced at her, hopefully.

She considered. “I’d say that on the whole, no.”

“So they’re *mean*?”

“They’re careful. ‘Cautious,’ might be a better word.”

“Do they get beaten?”

“You mean, punishments, like on the North Wing?” Irina shook her head. “The kids on the South Wing have all endured the same punishment as you. It’s the last one they ever need. But some of them have a temper, it’s a fact. Can’t guarantee they won’t try to beat on you. So, watch yourself!”

But he refused to let her jokey tone distract him

from finding out as much as he could about these new camp-mates, who could either make his life hell, or just maybe, help turn it into a home. “No punishment beatings? What are they scared of, then?”

Irina didn’t answer for a moment. She watched Sacha scrape his bowl. He put the spoon down and gave her an expectant look. He repeated, “What?”

She smiled and looked suddenly sad. “Well, Blackbird, they’re scared of each other.”

And just like that, his hopes took a dive.

SIX

CLEAN SHEETS

The minute Sacha saw ‘Atlanta’ again, he recognized them. Atlanta – who he had known as Katya Camaguey – had made a run for it almost twelve months ago. As far as he knew, it was the first escape attempt obviously inspired by tales of the Rabbit. Sacha still couldn’t quite adjust to the idea that they were not dead.

After the softball game, Atlanta was the first out of the showers. Their hair was shorter than he remembered, a fuzzy, round Afro that framed their head, like a halo. It was in the eyes that he recognized the teenager he’d known, whose funeral he’d attended – light-brown, lazy with amusement and a tinge of recklessness.

With a hint of a grin Atlanta strolled over to where he was sitting in the dining room, head on one side, a towel tucked under one arm. “Hmm. You look familiar.”

They stared at each other for a moment in silence and Sacha’s spirits soared. To see a familiar face at last, was surprisingly moving.

“Pretty rough in the chokey, hey?” said Atlanta with a sympathetic grimace.

“Ka- Atlanta, I mean?” He reddened, ashamed to have stumbled at the first opportunity to ‘forget’ a real name. To his astonishment, Atlanta actually looked pretty cross.

“No dead-names here, Blackbird. And I’m ‘they’

or ‘them.’ Not ‘she.’” After long, even stare they added, “We clear?”

Sacha nodded and started to reply, but just then, five other residents came through the door. Atlanta introduced them as Boa, Treefrog, Crox, Puma and Howler. He recognized all five, including the girl, Puma, and Atlanta.

Even without being told, Sacha had seen at a glance that the one they called ‘the Jaguar’ wasn’t among them. ‘The’ was surely an honorary title, no other kids were known as ‘the anything,’ other than occasionally and in irritation, ‘the idiot,’ ‘the jerk’ and so on.

Sacha couldn’t help skimming their thoughts as he shook each hand in solemn sequence. None of the six teenagers in front of him gave off anything other than an air of curiosity, and caution. What he found were bland, smooth thoughts of food, softball and the comfort of clean sheets. These last thoughts came from Atlanta. They caught his eye with a grin. “It’s a good tip to keep your thoughts clean here,” they told him. “And what could be cleaner than clean sheets?”

His blush turned a fiery red. He wasn’t sure what they meant, but he sensed that it was something he’d find difficult to block.

Your block and empathy are unusually strong. Don’t tell anyone that, Sacha. People won’t like it. Eva’s advice rang in his mind so jarringly that Sacha was forced to throw up a block – the first thing that popped into his head – clean sheets, billowing in the breeze.

Atlanta’s eyes went round and they chuckled. “Yes, only not so obviously.”

“I can’t block,” he lied, but couldn’t resist qualifying it. “Not well, anyhow.”

Atlanta leaned close. When they breathed he could smell mint leaves and lime. The others stood watching, obviously amused.

“All two-dubs can read, broadcast, receive and block. It’s just a matter of practice.” A boy spoke, the

one named Boa, a stocky white boy. He stretched a chunky arm over his head and Sacha thought of his own thin arms, underfed and under-exercised. "The sentinels don't like the young 'uns to know about blocking," Boa said, scratching his ear. "They prefer to be able to read you."

Sacha nodded and pretended to look impressed.
Don't let them know you're different, humdrum two-dub.

It was sometimes hard to say nothing, especially when other two-dubs boasted about their abilities. But he'd trusted Eva for as long as he could remember. And he'd followed her advice.

They began to walk towards two wide open glazed doors which led to a sun-lit canteen with broad windows and a scratchy parquet floor. Three pinewood dining tables were arranged there, with metal seats. With a hand clapped to Sacha's shoulder, the girl called Puma pulled a sarcastic smile. "Well, Blackbird, you can fetch our tea and wait on us. We'll be eating your food too, so you can just add what you get to our plates."

Atlanta lowered their head as Puma gave them a heavy shove. "You too, Atlanta, or you'll be cleaning my toilets again."

Puma had changed a lot since he last saw her. She was one of a minority of residents whose Siberian ancestry – Yakutian in Puma's case – hadn't been diluted out by the introduction of other ethnic Russian traits in recent generations. Her previously short, bobbed hair was now long, glossy and straight. It made her look almost impossibly glamorous, like a Chinese movie star.

Of course, he remembered her real name – Sayaana's death had become a horrifying legend. It was hard to believe she'd tried to escape; he remembered her as the type to lie low and watch others take risks rather than take them herself. She had drowned, allegedly, after falling into a river during a hike.

I should have realized it was a lie. We never even saw a river.

The others scattered to two of the three dining tables. At the farthest table, a sole diner sat with his back to them, a fork in one hand and a book in the other. He'd barely looked up as the group entered the canteen.

In Atlanta's mind, Sacha saw clearly that this was 'the Jaguar.' He sensed around this boy an atmosphere of dread, even fear. He wondered how the boy himself didn't notice, but then maybe Jaguar wasn't an Empath. Or maybe he didn't care.

"What do I have to do?" Sacha asked, staring at the backs of Puma and Boa.

Atlanta picked up a battered aluminum tray from a small stack on the tables. "I'll show you."

Sacha was glad he'd eaten such a heavy meal with Irina. Smiling almost sweetly, Puma and Boa, stole his portions of bread, cheese and pickled beetroot, taunting him: "You weren't hungry, were you?"

Just as Atlanta had shown him, Sacha stood by patiently, topping up Puma's water glass when she emptied it, fetching more bread when she called for it and picking up the crumbs she accidentally-on-purpose dropped to the floor. He didn't protest or express discomfort of any kind.

"Make it look like you're not bothered," Atlanta had advised. "Those jerks want to make your life a misery. They'll get bored when they don't."

Sacha wasn't so sure. Puma seemed to enjoy watching his eyes stray back and forth from the food she took from his plate to her mouth. Every so often, Boa or Puma would steal anxious glances in Jaguar's direction.

Afterwards, in the relative privacy the room he shared with two others and sprawled in his bunk, Sacha asked of Atlanta and the slender and rather slight, dark-haired, olive-skinned boy known as Treefrog, "Why do the sentinels let them get away with it?"

Atlanta snorted. "Puma and Boa have the protection of the Jaguar. He does anything he wants

around here. Rumor is that two controllers are fighting it out for him right now – offering the most Krylov’s ever taken. Each time the general is about to accept an offer, the rival ups theirs.”

“What’s so special about him?”

“It’s simple,” she said. “He’s a Pluripotent. He has *all* the telepathy.”

Pluripotent. It was the first time that Sacha had ever heard the word applied to any other two-dub but himself, the first time he’d heard the word used openly. With him, the word had been whispered, a confidence exchanged between Sacha and Eva when he was no more than seven and had described to Eva the wondrous and mysterious tricks he’d found his mind could play.

Sacha struggled to keep his emotions from showing on his face. He grappled for a blocking image that wouldn’t give his excitement away.

The sunny boulevards of Singapore.

Atlanta was fooled by the block, took his silence and apparent distraction as ignorance as she began to explain; “‘Pluripotent’ means ‘many potentials.’ All the telepathies, see? We can all read and broadcast, yes? But not all of us can do it from a mile away or more, only some of us are Long Rangers. Well, Jaguar can. Not all of us can block so well, he *can*.”

He’s like me, Sacha thought.

From outside the door, they were interrupted by a short, derisive chuckle.

Atlanta sat up quickly. “Who’s there?”

There was movement in the corridor. The brief exchange of whispers. Then a shadow stepped forward. It was Puma, silhouetted in the light. “Blackbird,” she hissed. “The Jaguar wants to see you. Now!”

Sacha sat up, puzzled. Immediately he sensed the tension in the room increase. Atlanta whispered, “Go!”

“But it’s lights-out,” he pointed out.

“There’s a chance the sentinels won’t see you. But

if you disobey the Jaguar, we'll all be sorry."

Puma led Sacha to a dormitory with four bunks, only two of them in use. Jaguar was sitting on one of the lower two bunks, slowly brushing his teeth. When Sacha approached, he motioned him to the other bunk, where the slender boy known as 'Boa' was dozing with one eye open.

With a single nod, Jaguar dismissed Boa, who seemed almost happy to leave.

The Jaguar was fifteen years old, a handsome boy with strong cheekbones and deep, intelligent-looking dark brown eyes and long, thick lashes. His pale brown hair was thick and ruffled, slightly greasy and unkempt, his skin comparatively free of the acne that plagued many of the teenagers, light colored, as though he made a habit of avoiding the sun.

As he looked for the first time into the Jaguar's eyes, Sacha sensed a sudden coldness in the room, a vacuum. Tentatively he ventured into Jaguar's thoughts, probed his feelings. What he found shocked him – he felt nothing. Just a yawning void.

"You're trying to read me," the Jaguar said with a wry smile. He replaced his toothbrush in a blue plastic case. "Go ahead, don't be afraid."

Sacha stared into Jaguar's eyes, trying to discern his intent. Intentions were the easiest thing of all to read – almost impossible to block a really strong desire to do something coupled with the actual intention to carry it out.

But from Jaguar, he sensed nothing.

SEVEN

THE JAGUAR

What, Blackbird? You can't tell what I want to do?

A smile spread across Jaguar's face, but he wasn't being friendly. Even getting a telepathic reply from him startled Sacha. From a psi point of view, Jaguar appeared as active as a stone. Sacha tried harder, concentrating on the connection between them. He closed his eyes. It was useless – telepathy seemed to have deserted him. He started in surprise as unexpectedly, Jaguar gripped his left arm, hard. Snapping his eyes open, Sacha watched Jaguar gazing at him, bemused.

“Come on then, *Pluripotent!*”

Sacha reacted so quickly, it was too late to cover up his flinch.

“Takes one to know one,” Jaguar murmured, with a smile. “Go on, read me. I'll even let you try it with touch.”

It was useless. Sacha couldn't sense anything.

How are you doing this?

Releasing him, Jaguar just laughed.

“Why can't I sense anything?” Sacha asked, amazed and frustrated.

“Because I'm a Blocker, duh. I'm super-duper good at it.”

“But you weren't even blocking!”

No block was that good. There'd been no covering image, just *nothing*. But more remarkable was

the total lack of emotion. Merely standing next to Jaguar, Sacha felt a chill. Without his eyes and ears, he could hardly perceive Jaguar, at all.

Is this what it's like for the mundanes?

Yes, Blackbird, I imagine it is.

You're blocking your feelings? How?

Jaguar leaned back. "Maybe I don't have feelings."

"Everyone has feelings," Sacha said. "I know, I've felt them."

"Well, what do *you* know, comrade? *I don't.*"

"You're blocking," said Sacha. "I don't know how, but you are." He didn't quite understand how or why, but he wasn't afraid of this boy.

"Yes, I am," said Jaguar. "*Of course* I am. But unless I allow it, not even you can get underneath."

The boys stared at each other for a few seconds; Sacha waiting for the older boy to say something whilst Jaguar seemed happy to take his time.

"Why 'Blackbird'?"

"What?"

"Why did you pick that name?"

Sacha was thrown. They picked their names so young, who remembered why? "My mother, maybe? Yoselyn."

"Your surrogate, you mean. You don't remember your real mother; she left when you were little."

Sacha raised his chin a notch. "Yoselyn *is* my real mother."

Jaguar gave a dismissive chuckle. But his eyes reflected a sharp, unwavering intensity.

"You're half right. Your mother did pick that name. Do you know why?"

But Sacha wasn't ready to move past the cursory dismissal of Yoselyn as his mother. She'd birthed him, cared for him in the nursery until he was three. Whereas he'd never met his bio-mother, who'd been claimed for a price by a controller, as soon as she turned eighteen, very likely *after* she'd donated her eggs. Like everyone's

‘real’ mother in the camp. So why make such a big deal about an egg donor and a genetic legacy that you couldn’t ever truly understand?

“Yoselyn,” he said, more firmly. “She is my *real* mother.”

Jaguar guffawed. “*Da ladno*, Blackbird, you’re brainwashed! It’s a miracle you had the balls to try to escape! At your age, that’d be something, for sure. No, comrade; I know for sure it was your mother who picked that name, because she told me.”

That stopped Sacha in his tracks. “You knew my mother?”

“You ever dream about a black bird, circling above a mango tree near a river, and royal palms in the distance?”

Sacha’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You *saw* that. In my mind.” But he hadn’t been thinking about his dream. Not in Jaguar’s presence, anyway.

“Well, Masha didn’t pick that name from nowhere. And you didn’t get that dream from nowhere, either.”

He licked his lips rapidly. Jaguar’s barrage of astonishing claims was confusing him, when he only wanted to focus on what the boy was saying about his mother.

“My mother’s name is ‘Masha’? How’d you know?” His heart was beating a little faster now. He knew it was true. It was part of his clearest memory of Yoselyn.

He’d asked: *Are you my real mother?*

I’m your true mother, Sacha, but your ‘real’ mother is Masha.

“How do you *think* I know her name?” asked Jaguar. The smile dripped off his face, replaced by indifference. “I just wondered if *you* knew. You like the dream. Don’t you? At least, I hope so. The black bird that sweeps and whirls in the sky?”

Even as he remembered, Sacha admitted to himself that he had always liked that dream. He’d

imagined it was a hawk. After a moment, he nodded. "I like it, yes. Birds are *free*."

Jaguar rubbed his chin. "Birds are free.
Interesting."

Sacha had no clue what Jaguar was driving at and could sense nothing, no feeling at all, behind the words. He asked, "Why is everyone so afraid of you?"

"Because I'm prepared to do the unthinkable."

"Then, why don't you escape?"

Jaguar laughed. "And miss out on my future? Do you have any idea of the people I'll be mixing with when I leave this place?"

"Who?"

"The most powerful and dangerous people in the world," Jaguar replied. "And the best part of it is, they don't know what's coming. Well, you know what? They'll pay for that."

Sacha shrank slightly. Jaguar's feelings were beginning to leak slightly now, bleeding out from a cool mask of control. What Sacha was sensing was a rage and hatred such as he'd never experienced. Not even Cayman's filthy mind had come close.

"You feel it a bit now, don't you?" said Jaguar, with a hint of a smile. "Yeah. I can tell. You're good! That's closer than anyone's ever got."

Sacha just nodded, dumbly.

"You know why that is, don't you?"

Honestly, Sacha replied, "No." It felt flattering to be told he was good. But it also triggered deep curiosity. Jaguar seemed so sure of himself. What did *he* know that Sacha didn't?

"You can't guess? Think about it, really think. I know your mother's real name, I know she picked your name because of a dream she used to have."

Sacha interrupted. "A dream *she* used to have?"

"Masha first, then she passed it on. To you, with my help."

"You and I – we're brothers," Jaguar said, softly

and with no discernible emotion.

Sacha didn't move. He didn't know how he ought to react but initially, he felt a surge of disgust run through him. Quickly, he suppressed it. It was obviously too late.

Jaguar lay back on his bed. "I've always known, obviously, but you didn't seem all that interesting. When you were little, I mean. And I... I was..."

Here, Jaguar became guarded, as if he'd strayed into something dangerous, something that scared even him. He pushed back, deeper into the mattress and stretched, yawning. But Sacha had already glimpsed traces of fear behind whatever it was he'd stopped himself saying. Now languid, Jaguar said. "You and me, we're cut from the same cloth."

Sacha tried to shrug it off. "So?"

Jaguar mused. "I've always been able to tell my siblings. You're not the only other Pluripotent. There are others, half-sibs, too little to be aware of their powers yet, too young to have been tested. But I've sensed them, in the Outside Space." He paused and then added, deliberately, "You and me, though, we're full brothers. Same bio-mother; Masha. Same bio-father; Roman."

"How do you know our father's name?"

With a smug grin Jaguar answered, "Masha told me." He swiftly changed the subject.

"Hey, you know what I've wondered all this time? How did you hide it? The pluripotency, I mean. None of the sentinels knew."

"No clue," Sacha admitted. "They didn't spot it on the tests. And I've never told anyone."

"Should have kept it that way. Now you're going to find out what happens when they get their hands on a Pluripotent. Tomorrow they'll test you."

"Why?"

Jaguar seemed surprised by the question. "Because they're *looking* for something. And they'll only find it in a Pluripotent."

"Looking for *what?*" asked Sacha, genuinely curious.

"If you have to ask, I'll never tell. But if you're what they're looking for, you gotta know that you and I will never be friends."

"Why? We're brothers. You're the first one I've known about."

"Brother, schmother. You've just devalued my currency. I was unique. Now there's another. One day, I'll probably have to kill you."

In the empty silence that followed, the boys simply gazed at each other.

Softly, Jaguar said, "It's true. If you are what they're looking for, you're my competition. Ying to my yang. Maybe not today, maybe not soon, but one day for sure. And it won't end until one of us is dead."

Sacha stepped back.

"I should probably kill you now," admitted Jaguar. "Save myself a heap of trouble."

Sacha mumbled, "They wouldn't let you." Even as he spoke he realized he didn't believe it.

With this guy, anything is possible.

Jaguar stretched lazily on his bed. For a second it seemed as though he'd forgotten all about Sacha, who stood, still shaken, wondering what to do.

"Go on Blackbird, get out," the Jaguar said finally, staring up at the base of the bunk overhead. "*Last words are for fools who haven't said enough.*"

Sacha left without a word. Closing the door behind him, he was startled to see in the corridor a small, plump woman in her late thirties. She wore her dressing gown and carried a torch. Her eyes peered venomously at him from behind narrow, metal-rimmed glasses.

Sacha shrank back. Dread rose within him; a wave of nausea. More trouble was the last thing he needed.

"You must enjoy the dark," she said, angrily. "I'd have thought that two weeks was enough."

Her thoughts felt like tangled ivy and thorns; twisted and mean. Sacha understood exactly what she was saying. "Please," he said. "Don't."

"It's 'please *Sonya*, don't *Sonya*,'" she sneered, dragging him by the ear. "And the penalty for being around after lights-out is a night in chokey and no breakfast."

After all the practice he'd had, Sacha could have easily slept on the bare concrete floor. But he didn't. Meeting the Jaguar had stirred something deep inside him. He felt as though a creature had awakened within him; something which had lain dormant for as long as he could remember. He lay half-awake, groping for the ghostly remnants of distant memories and dreams.

Under Sacha's fingers, his mind on the verge of sleep, contours in the concrete seemed to take shape. Random scratches became images from his dreams. A fence, a river, a cluster of royal palms; things he'd seen in the forest beyond and things which he'd only ever dreamed. And soaring above them all, wings outstretched, a black bird.

EIGHT

PLURIPOTENT

In the morning, Sacha was released without breakfast, just as promised. They took him to a room with a standard computer terminal, brain monitoring equipment. The room was divided by an opaque, plastic screen. In the middle of the screen was an opening. Through this gap, the test subject could touch the arm of the person on the other side – the Co-Examiner.

Touching someone was a very effective way to amplify the psi-link, although it didn't work nearly as well when you didn't also look into the subject's eyes. Sacha remembered how he'd been tested, as a seven-year old. He'd tried to guess from the touch and thoughts, exactly who was on the other side of the screen.

Whoever had examined Sacha, they'd misread him. Even now, he didn't understand how it had happened. They'd underestimated the range of his psi abilities. Perhaps the equipment had been acting up. Or perhaps they'd lied?

He breathed slowly as Irina taped sticky electrodes to his chest, neck and head. This was all taking him back. In the corner of the room he saw a tiny red light. Beside it was a lens. He was being watched. Would it be Irina behind the camera? Or someone else?

"Do you remember how this goes?" Irina asked.

"Um, not really. I was seven."

"First we'll try you with blocking. What image will you use?"

Sacha didn't even need to think about it. "The story of Ala-ed-Din and the Wonderful Lamp," he replied.

Irina wrinkled her nose. "A fairy tale?"

He just smiled.

"You can use that to block whatever real thoughts you like. You must touch the Co-Examiner when you do this. Understood?"

He nodded.

"Then we'll try Reading. You will attempt to read the thoughts of the Co-Examiner. Then you'll tell the Examiner what you Read. Then we'll repeat that. But this time the Co-Examiner will block you. Got that?"

"Okay."

"We'll be monitoring you too, so we'll know if you're lying. Not using telepathy, but old-fashioned polygraph – a lie-detector. A bit crude but it does give us a nice graph."

Sacha watched as Irina taped moisture sensors to his palms and finger-tips.

"The final test is of Feeling. Without touching the Co-Examiner, you relate back exactly how you would describe those feelings. And that's it. All right?"

"Yes."

"It's not very precise," admitted Irina. "But we'll get an idea how good you are from this – we're putting you up against the best. Because I'm pretty sure you'll work it out in a minute, I'm going to tell you now; your Co-Examiner is the Jaguar."

Sacha was astonished. The last time, his Co-Examiner had been a young woman, either an older resident or possibly, a sentinel. Her mind had been filled with images of young toddlers playing in the nursery, her feelings ripe with a melancholy that had stabbed at Sacha's heart, even though he barely understood why.

"What is the Co-Examiner feeling?" he'd been asked over the intercom. "She's sad," he'd replied. "She wanted to stay with the babies. She doesn't like working

with the bigger kids.”

Now, behind the screen, Sacha heard a quiet laugh.

Irina closed the empty case from where she'd taken the electrodes. The wires went into a simple black box. Sacha guessed the wires sent the data to the Monitoring Room next door. “You are forbidden to address the Co-Examiner. Nor shall the Co-Examiner talk to you. Answer all questions truthfully. Don't bother to block or lie – the polygraph can't be fooled or manipulated. Now, get ready.”

With that, Irina left the room. A moment passed. Then Sacha heard a different voice on the intercom.

“Blackbird – touch and then block the Co-Examiner.”

Sacha stretched out his fingers to touch the arm behind the screen. He closed his eyes. He filled his mind with an image of Ala-ed-Din in the Treasury, walking among trees *“covered with precious stones instead of fruit, and each tree was of a different kind and had different jewels, of all colors, green and white and yellow and red and other colors, and the brilliance of these jewels paled the sun's rays at noontide.”*

From behind the screen, Sacha heard a slow, measured chuckle.

Oh you're very good, Sacha, said Jaguar, speaking directly into his mind. That's lovely detail, it's almost as if I'd read this story myself. It would fool most of the two-dubs at the Krylov. But you'll have to do better than that to fool me. You're thinking about the first time you took this test. And you're wondering who that Co-Examiner was, aren't you? You liked her. You liked to imagine it was that girl who went to Singapore, didn't you? Flycatcher. Or as you know her, Eva. Mmm. I remember Eva, I do. You like girls who like children. You want to be a father. Sacha, you're such a joke. You think the fathers ever get to see their kids, or have anything to do with them? Fathers are just studs, mothers are egg donors. You, me, all the two-dubs – we're livestock. Don't you get it?

Before Sacha could reply, Jaguar said aloud, “He's

thinking about the first time he took the test. He liked the sentinel who co-examined him. All these years Blackbird has wondered who she was. She thought about the babies. Blackbird likes babies. He wants to be a father. He tried to block me with his Arabian fairy tales. It wasn't bad. But like you said, Irina, I'm the best."

There was a long pause. Sacha tried to communicate a thought to Jaguar, but the voice on the intercom broke in and said firmly, "Blackbird, do not attempt to relay thoughts to the Co-Examiner. We can detect psi-activity. There's a bunch of it coming from both of you."

Quiet, Sacha. You think any idiot can do this without being detected? No. It takes skill and practice. You have to produce the thoughts from somewhere lower in the cerebral cortex. I could teach you.

Through the intercom Irina said, "Proceed to Reading test. Blackbird – remain in contact with the Co-Examiner's arm. And tell us – how does he feel about being a two-dub?"

Sacha concentrated hard on the presence on the other side of the screen.

Easy now, little brother. I've got some good news – I've decided not to kill you. Maybe there's a way you could be useful to me. And me to you. I need someone I can trust – it would make my plans easier. Perhaps we can be friends?

"The Co-Examiner is thinking that he won't kill me," Sacha said aloud. "He'd been thinking that he might. He enjoys the idea of killing people."

Whoa, that was just uncalled for!

Irina said calmly, "Blackbird, you're lying."

Tell them something concrete. I don't enjoy the idea of killing – that's your own way of understanding what I said. I embrace the possibilities it gives me.

Aloud Sacha said, "The Co-Examiner embraces the possibilities it gives him."

"But what does he feel?"

Ha! I thought they might try this. They want to see if you can read me more deeply than they've been able to. Tell them I like hurting people, always have. I'm going to enjoy my work as a spy – lots of stupid double agents to send to their deaths.

“He’s happy. He likes to hurt people,” Sacha said in an even voice. “He thinks he’s going to enjoy his work. Everything I hate about the idea of being a psi agent, he loves.”

Oh, that’s good! I wonder why I’m happy. Perhaps it’s seeing you pass this test. As for hurting people – that’s nothing. An irrelevance. Think I care about it one way or the other?

“Co-Examiner, attempt to block the test subject. Blackbird, attempt to read the Co-Examiner’s thoughts.”

Without warning, where Sacha had sensed the presence of another mind behind the screen, suddenly he felt nothing. Jaguar’s blocking skills were like nothing Sacha had ever encountered. He seemed to have shut down all brain activity. If he hadn’t known better, Sacha would have denied that there was anyone else in the room.

“I can’t sense him anymore.”

“Keep trying. Close your eyes, concentrate.”

Sacha concentrated. But the harder he tried, the more he sensed the depth of the emptiness in Jaguar’s mind. After several minutes, he began to notice that the emptiness itself had a kind of form. It was like an elemental blackness; a universe emptied of itself; a black hole where even debris ceased to exist. Thoughts like whispers rose from that primordial abyss, only to be rapidly vanquished by the depth. And Sacha noticed; there was a pattern. In that instant, he glimpsed the human mind hiding behind that artificial void.

You found me. Did you see the pattern? blocking images always feel constructed. Look hard enough and you can detect the pattern. See a pattern and you know for sure you’re being Blocked. But do you know how to look underneath?

No.

Want to learn?

“Blackbird, Jaguar, stop communicating!”

“You can relax,” Jaguar said aloud in a lazy voice.

“I only asked him if he wants to learn to see behind a block.”

The door opened, Irina entered and hurriedly strode over to Sacha. She removed the electrodes and moisture sensors.

I think I can teach you, little brother. If you'd like to learn. But there'd be a price. Come talk to me about it over lunch.

NINE

JAGUAR'S REALM

Sacha could actually sense Jaguar's excitement. Even though it was a positive feeling, there was something wrong about it. This was not the fresh, hopeful excitement that Sacha associated with special events like a softball game on a cool morning or ice-cream sandwiches for tea. It felt cold, the edges dulled, as exciting as fitting a jigsaw piece into an early-stage, one-thousand piece puzzle.

Irina pulled aside the plastic screen to reveal Jaguar, who sat shirtless just like Sacha, electrodes taped to his chest, head and hands. He grinned at Sacha, and gave Irina a sly smile. "Told you I'd behave."

Irina said nothing, but Sacha could feel her nervousness. She finished removing the electrodes. "Don't tell anyone," she said.

"Don't tell what?"

"That you're Pluripotent," she snapped. "Shut up about it."

"But..."

"*Shut up about it.* Okay? It's clear from these tests that you're a Pluripotent. That block, fr'instance, was *way* too good for a regular two-dub. No-one thinks of cake at a time of stress!" Irina's voice sounded increasingly strained. "How did you keep it secret so long?"

Sacha shrugged. "I just didn't tell anyone."

"No." She was shaking her head furiously, moving about the room skittishly, picking up pieces of paper,

replacing them. Jaguar sat quietly and watched her, bemused. "You must have had help. The person who tested you, for one. And Eva – I bet she knew too."

"Eva?" Sacha began to wake up to the possible danger.

"Yes, Eva. Even in Singapore, she's not safe. General Krylov's voice will carry, even that far." Irina sat down, red in the face and flustered.

"What will you do?" asked Jaguar, curiously.

She sighed, put her pen and clipboard down, and looked from one boy to the other. "Do you know how long we've been waiting for another Pluripotent? I know it's going to mean trouble. But I have to tell. Now, go to your lessons. And Jaguar, leave this boy alone."

The two boys walked to the language suites together.

Jaguar turned to him with a smirk. *It's like I told you, we're two of a kind, brother.*

How long have you known?

That I'm a Pluripotent? Long time.

But what does it mean?

Means we're worth ten of any of the rest.

Sacha blinked, still clueless. *But why?*

It means their breeding experiments are working. That you and me and maybe a few others are Generation Six. That Gen Six are pluripotent, maybe a whole lot more.

He was silent for a long moment. It was a common belief at the Foundation that new powers emerged in new generations. Could it be that he and Jaguar were from a new generation, with new powers, powers that only they'd have?

Are you saying we have new powers?

Eyebrows arched with skepticism, Jaguar flashed an enigmatic grin. *Well, if you have to ask...*

You're not going to tell me?

Another smirk. *When you know, you know.*

Sacha cast his mind back to their earlier conversation. *Is it something to do with the dream, the one you*

said you passed on to me?

With a happy groan, Jaguar said aloud, "Finally! Honestly? I was beginning to think you might be kind of dumb. I was embarrassed for you, truth be told."

It wasn't easy, but Sacha tried to ignore the obvious needling. "You said our mother could do it. Plant the dream, I mean. But she was a previous generation."

"Yeah, I'm guessing planting a dream is something some Gen Fives can do. At least, our mother, maybe her sibs, too. It's probably why they picked her to breed the sixth generation."

"You think I could do it?"

Jaguar shrugged. "You *are* pretty slow, so who knows? With the right instructor? Maybe."

Sacha fell back on telepathy, which felt so much more natural between them. The contemptuous tone he heard in Jaguar's voice was somehow gentler in his telepathic 'voice,' almost fond. *If you're really Gen Six, why haven't they sold you?*

Yeah, well. There's one test that I keep failing.

A test?

They call it the 'Hare Psychopathy Checklist'.

Didn't you study?

Jaguar laughed out loud. *It's not the kind of test you study for.*

Maybe I'll fail it, too.

Something tells me they won't be giving you that test.

Why not?

Jaguar peered at Sacha in a curious manner and didn't answer. Sacha took the chance to return to the question that really intrigued him.

You saw through my block. How did you do that?

It's not difficult.

And you got through to me without them knowing. How? Every time I Sent to you, Irina knew about it.

They can detect psi activity in the cortex. But you can learn to broadcast from another part of your brain.

Sacha was utterly bewildered. All he could respond with was: *How?*

Like I told you, I can teach you. How to do that and a ton more, too. If you'd like to learn, that is.

Sacha was instantly suspicious. *You said there'd be 'a price.'*

Sure, like, what's in it for me?

What do you want?

Loyalty.

Loyalty?

That's right, brother. I need to know I can count on you.

How?

Bring Treefrog. Or Atlanta. Get one of them to the perimeter fence after lunch. I've got some wires we can attach to the fence. You'll tie the arms and legs and we'll let Boa and Howler have some fun practicing their interrogation skills – using electrocution.

Sacha stopped in his tracks, turned, appalled to face Jaguar. The boy's amiable grin didn't crack for a second. Aloud he said, "You're joking, right? That's horrible."

But he saw in the cold depths of his brother's eyes that he wasn't. Slowly, Sacha shook his head. "No."

"Get a sense of proportion. We're just going to play around. Nothing serious. Good training for them, if anything. We'll all get it eventually, in specialized tradecraft training: resisting torture."

"I don't want to hurt anyone."

"I don't care what you want; I care about what you're prepared to do for me. Proof of loyalty is worth a million promises. If you're not with me, you're against me."

Sacha said nothing, holding his breath.

Jaguar leaned close. "Be my knife, little brother," he whispered against Sacha's ear, "my sacrificial blade. Spill me some blood."

Sacha felt something cold sweep through him then, like the first shiver of a fever. But he faced his

brother squarely. “No. *Never*.”

Jaguar gave him a final, appraising glance and then continued down the corridor. He didn’t look back. Sacha sensed a surge of anger wafting from the retreating boy, and disappointment, too.

Yet, no surprise.

In the morning, when Sacha awoke, he noticed Treefrog’s bed was empty. It was only five-fifty in the morning; too early for the hot water to have been turned on. It was unlikely that the boy had gone for a shower.

Sacha slid quietly out of his bunk. He went to Atlanta’s room. He woke them with a gentle tap to the shoulder. The two returned to Sacha’s own room, careful not to disturb Crox as they left. Then waited until it became unreasonable to expect that Treefrog had only gone to the toilet.

Atlanta sighed in resignation, stood up. “We should probably go.”

“Where?”

“It’s starting up again,” Atlanta stated, flatly. “They always start with Treefrog.”

Sacha was briefly stunned. Treefrog was one of the oldest South Wing residents – already promised to a controller, already receiving the specialized tradecraft training. If Jaguar was willing to mess with a 17-year-old resident on the verge of freedom from this horrible place, who *wouldn’t* he mess with?

The surrounding forest rippled with the early morning chatter of insects and small animals waking. Sacha followed Atlanta as they walked behind the dormitory block, across the softball field and towards the second basketball court, which had fallen into disrepair.

They found Treefrog taped to the basketball post, facing against the post. He was shirtless, his curly, light brown hair mussed and sweaty, his back smeared in what looked like dirt. When Sacha came closer, he realized that it wasn’t sand or dirt, but a crowd of tiny red ants,

which had been poured over the boy's back. They'd stuck to one patch, which Sacha guessed had been smeared with milk caramel or syrup of some kind. When he and Atlanta brushed the ants away, Sacha saw that they'd inflicted hundreds of little bites all over Treefrog's back. Each bite was beginning to swell, bright red points of pain.

Atlanta removed the tape slowly, carefully. Treefrog thanked them through swollen eyelids. There were some bruises around his forearms, where he'd been grabbed. The tape released some of his curls, which sprang back into shape around his face. He suddenly looked more like a boy and less like a wax figure of a torture victim.

No-one spoke throughout the entire process. As all three made to walk back to the dormitory block, Sacha finally exploded, "It was Jaguar, wasn't it?"

"It was Boa," Treefrog mumbled. "And Howler."

"But they did it for Jaguar," Atlanta added, bitterly.

Sacha asked, "Why don't the sentinels stop them?"

Atlanta and Treefrog exchanged sad glances.

"They're afraid."

"What can the Jaguar do to *them*?"

None of them knew, they explained. That question was so old, they'd tired of asking. The Jaguar had been there longer than any of the residents on the South Wing. No-one could remember a time when things were different. Very rarely, a sentinel shouted at Jaguar, or threatened to throw him in the chokey, but all that happened was that Jaguar was taken for a meeting with General Krylov. When he came out, everything had changed.

"The Jaguar's upset about something," Atlanta said. "He doesn't let them actually hurt us except when he's angry. You were with him last. Sacha. Any idea what's got his goat?"

"He asked me to be his friend," Sacha replied,

“and I said no.”

A shocked silence followed. The Outside Space – where two-dubs sensed the thoughts and feelings of other telepaths – filled with anxiety.

TEN

THE HIKE

Inside the South Wing, nobody said anything about what happened to Treefrog. He simply walked back, directly to the shower room.

Sacha touched his head to the door. He thought he heard the sound of sobbing under the falling water. Later though, Treefrog was unreadable. At the breakfast table Sacha watched him closely. He sensed the boy's emotions held tightly, as closed as a fist.

Boa and Howler ignored them both, for once sitting next to Jaguar. Although nobody objected when Howler took the whole basket of fruit to the Jaguar's table, Irina beckoned Atlanta and Sacha over to the sentinel's table.

"There isn't enough fruit," she said, as though it was news. "Go fetch some mangoes. Get at least ten."

They left, eager to have unsupervised time outside. She could have picked anyone – Irina was either trying to demonstrate trust, or else, giving them a treat. Either was good.

Outside, they wandered over to the enormous mango trees on the south perimeter of the Krylov. These were now dripping with ripe fruit, using a path of well-worn scrub grass which went around the pitch. As he reached into the branches, Sacha asked Atlanta, "You don't seem all that worried about the controllers. So, why did you try to escape?"

"You're wrong about that," they replied, scowling.

"I'm worried all right. I'm almost certain that the controllers are all *no good*. Do you remember a girl called Anastasia Cienfuegos? She left to go to a controller in a place called 'Cuba.'"

"Koo-ba? Never heard of it. Do we send people there? Where even is it?"

"Same, I mean, no clue. Never known of anyone going to Cuba. In fact, we all believed – Anastasia too – that she was going to Albania. But I overheard a conversation between General Krylov and a sentinel. Course, I didn't know who Krylov was, not then. I thought he was a gardenet."

Sacha nodded, quietly. The general didn't spend much time in the camp, never made announcements, never addressed them or even the sentinels. He'd only ever heard of people meeting him privately, in the general's office. And such meetings, only second or third-hand.

Continuing their anecdote, Atlanta said, "He said to the sentinel, 'So, who do you recommend for Castro?' And the sentinel said, 'There's a very pretty one, an excellent Empath.' Krylov said, 'Bring me the file. We'll see if we can't send her to... *Albania*.' Then they both laughed. Like it was an in-joke."

"What makes you think that she went to this 'Cuba' place?"

"Do you remember the name of the Cuban leader? From when we used to learn that old song about the Great Leaders?"

Sacha remembered the song, but Atlanta interrupted. "It's 'Raúl Castro.' Why do you think they told us that Anastasia went to Albania, but actually sent her to Cuba?"

"Maybe Cuba's a terrible place. And they wanted her to not to worry?"

Atlanta nodded. "I had the same idea. Actually looked up 'Cuba.'"

"And? Is it bad?"

Atlanta shrugged. "Maybe? It's an island in the Caribbean Sea. A lot like the Dominican Republic."

Sacha has heard of that place too but knew almost nothing about it. An exotic holiday spot, he imagined.

Atlanta continued. "What's odd about Cuba is that it was an ally of the Soviet Union"

"Why's that odd? Half the world was, wasn't it? And the other half was an enemy."

Now Atlanta became conspiratorial. "Not in the Americas. *Only Cuba*. It started me thinking – what if they always lie about the controller? They could send you anywhere, to anyone. You wouldn't know. You wouldn't have any say. You could be going somewhere really bad."

Sacha said nothing. The references to the Soviet Union were somewhat flying above his head, but he got the gist. As far as he was concerned, all controllers were bad.

"See, until then," Atlanta continued, "I'd thought that maybe I could work hard and go to Berlin, or Mexico City. One of the good places. And then I realized that really, I had no way of knowing where I'd end up."

"So you ran for it?"

Atlanta nodded. "I'd heard that story about the Rabbit, the one about the hideout. I thought if I could make it as far as his hideout, I could survive. I'm good at hiking, *and* I trained really hard for three months."

Sacha placed his mangoes on the ground. "I hadn't heard the story about the hideout."

Atlanta seemed astonished. "That's the best one! Why did you think he was called 'the Rabbit'? You've heard how he tried to escape, four times or something? Well, each time – before he was captured – he'd dig. Made a hideout somewhere. Each time, he'd make it bigger. Each time, he took some tins of food with him. Until it was big enough to stay in for days without leaving. When he finally escaped, that's how he did it.

They sent the helicopter and the sentinel scouts after him, but he stayed in the hideout. Until they gave up. And that's when he left the valley."

Sacha paused, thinking. "That's crazy talk. If it's true, how come I never heard that story? How could anyone know?"

"That's easy," Atlanta said, with a smile. "Someone found the hideout."

"Who?"

"He didn't tell you? The Jaguar, of course."

The next morning, someone had left a note in Sacha's dormitory. Taped to the back of the door, it read simply, 'Don't be alone with the Jaguar.'

Atlanta found it and read the note to Sacha and Treefrog as they returned after breakfast to change.

The question was; who was it for?

Atlanta paused, thinking. "It could be any of us."

Treefrog was silent. He had been staring out of the window all morning, hadn't touched his breakfast. Sacha watched, waiting for the boy to say something. But all Treefrog did was to touch a hand to his chest and sigh. No-one said anything. It was getting hard to be around him.

Eventually, Sacha confessed, "It's probably for me."

Atlanta rolled their eyes. "Why you? Just because you're new?"

Sacha chewed his lip, wondered whether he should speak up. If they knew that Jaguar was his brother, would they still want to be friends?

He sat on his bunk, began to strip off his uniform. "Maybe," he said, "it's something to do with the hike today."

The South Wing residents took their hikes later in the year than the North Wingers. It wasn't difficult to work out why – even reckless types would think twice about trying to escape in those steamy temperatures. Each group of three kids was accompanied by two

sentinels, who were armed as well as in radio contact with the other scouts and their base at the Krylov.

Sacha, Atlanta and Treefrog were due to join the sentinels, Irina and Ivan, to be escorted to the nearby peak. By the time they reached it – if they reached it – it would be around two in the afternoon. They'd rest for a few hours, picnic in the shade of the trees and return as the air cooled.

Escape was seriously unwise. The residents were allowed to carry just enough water to last the trip, whilst the sentinels were equipped with knives, guns and radios. Sacha couldn't help remembering what Irina had told him:

You carry nothing. Not even water. There are rivers and waterfalls and fruit.

How come Irina knew so much about the Rabbit, and why would she tell him in so much detail, if the stories were invented?

Sacha glanced at the little kit-bag he'd been issued. Three bottles of water, two sandwiches and a mango. Barely enough for the morning, as far as he was concerned.

The three groups of residents assembled near the front gates, each behind their assigned pair of sentinels. Sacha noticed that Jaguar's group, which was composed of just him and Howler, also had two sentinels. Sacha didn't recognize either. He noticed other sentinels that he'd never seen before. They weren't from the North Wing, he was pretty sure of that. Nor the South. Which meant that they had to be sentinel scouts – those trained in long-range tracking. The ones who would hunt you down all the way across the country, if they had to.

As Sacha stepped closer, he heard one of the scouts with the Jaguar call the other scout, 'Trope,' pronouncing it 'trop-eh.'

Sacha froze. He knew that voice.

Trope; Trope from the water torture.

ELEVEN

A FALL

During his interrogation, Sacha hadn't been able to see Trope, because of the blindfold. But he would recognize that steel-cold voice anywhere. He tried to inch closer. Irina noticed, grabbed his arm.

"Where d'you think you're going?"

He stared at her dumbly, thinking of cake; the one they made for Krylov's birthday – a juicy chocolate cake filled with apricot jam and coated with thick chocolate fondant.

Irina looked flabbergasted. "Cake – again?! Think I'm stupid or something? Stop blocking me!"

Silence fell over everyone in the vicinity who'd heard Irina's raised voice.

The whispering began. "Blackbird. He just *Blocked* Irina. A sentinel! Did you know he could block that well? They're supposed to *tell* us when someone can *really* block."

In the midst of it all, Sacha looked over at his brother. The Jaguar returned his gaze, laughing.

I told you, little brother. You need my help.

Trope and the second scout closed in around the Jaguar. They escorted him and Howler through the gate, onto the crumbled path beyond.

The sun beat down from a cloudless sky. The air was heavy, like a fine steam. The hikers blinked upwards, with some anxiety. The top part of the mountain was a cloud forest and there was no real 'dry' season. Today

there weren't even the usual clouds around the peak. In a few hours the heat would be relentless. Even in the shade, their clothes would be plastered against their skin, soaked by the sweat that would pour down their backs, drip into their eyes. Talking – even quietly – would be out of the question.

You had to ask: what was the point of hiking in these conditions? No-one enjoyed it, not like some tradecraft. The sneaky stuff, not the stamina training.

Sacha noticed that the route they took was completely different to the one he'd been used to as a North Winger. Then, they'd been packed into bench seats on a truck, driven to a spot about two miles hence and started the climb from there.

Each group was released ten minutes apart; presumably to keep the residents under close supervision in little units. Looking behind as his group began the walk, Sacha understood why the North Wingers began their hikes elsewhere, why he'd never before seen this view. From this vantage point, you could clearly see the South Wing of the Krylov Foundation.

The two-story blocks stretched to the north and south, with the softball diamond only just visible behind a giant mahogany tree. The Krylov looked as drab as Sacha's experience of life there – buildings decayed and neglected, salmon-pink painted-bricks peeling in the heat, broken windows and shutters, the grass worn flat, a yellow scrub. You couldn't fault the location, though. Nestled snugly into a valley, it gave the residents astonishing views of the velvet-green mountains that towered around them. That and the ever-present feeling of being hemmed in.

The gravel road narrowed to a trail as they began to walk among the pine trees and juniper shrubs. The insects in the forest enveloped them in a crinkling wall of sound. Above them, the peak loomed, wooded to the very top.

Sacha walked in silence for the first ten minutes, feeling the stretch in his hamstrings as the slope became steeper. He was painfully aware of the glances of his fellow residents. Atlanta, overcome by curiosity at Irina's outburst, as well as Ivan, their second sentinel, even tried to read him. Sacha let them see exactly what Irina had seen – the cake. He could think about that cake for ages. The Jaguar was right though – Sacha had yet to master the art of choosing the right thoughts to use as a mask. And he needed a bigger range; images that wouldn't seem out-of-place in his thoughts, and that might be conjured at a moment's notice.

The Jaguar didn't need to bother with such trickery. Everyone knew that he was a Pluripotent. That gave him the luxury to develop his trick of blankness.

He's invisible, Sacha thought with reluctant admiration. On the radar of a telepath, the Jaguar could disappear.

Two hours along the trail, their pace had slowed to a crawl. Every other group had overtaken Sacha's. Treefrog kept stopping; his face flushed a deep russet, breathing hard. His shirt was soaked through with sweat. Atlanta and Sacha tried to be sympathetic. They knew that Treefrog wouldn't complain unless he really felt terrible – he'd barely said a word over the red ant treatment. Yet they sensed the growing impatience of their two sentinels. If they fell much further behind, the whole group might be forced to return early to the Krylov.

Eventually Treefrog stumbled, staggered to the ground and didn't get back up. Irina's expression didn't change, but Sacha could feel her anger like a hot towel. He stood by as Irina ordered Atlanta to help her turn Treefrog over gently. Ivan stepped forward, pulling out his radio. Irina leaned over Treefrog, listened to his chest, took his pulse.

Whatever Irina heard, it transformed her. Sacha could sense that she was hearing her own heartbeat,

feeling the sweat on her head turn from a prickle to a rivulet. When finally she spoke, Irina couldn't hide the urgency in her voice; it bordered on panic. "He's having problems with breathing."

Ivan suggested "Heat stroke?" Irina shook her head, gazed into Ivan's eyes. Sacha watched, certain that they were exchanging telepathic messages. Irina hadn't even tried to block him just now, but he didn't dare listen in.

She thinks Treefrog is going to die.

Atlanta began to panic. "What's wrong with him? You know something! Don't you? Is he going to be okay?"

Ivan yelled, "Be quiet! We need to get him back to the Foundation. We're going to carry him."

Sacha repeated, "What's wrong with him?" A horrible feeling of guilt was beginning to wash through him.

I knew he wasn't all right. This morning, I should have tried to Feel what was wrong.

"He's hardly breathing," Irina said. "His pulse is practically non-existent. There's nothing we can do for him here – we need to get him back."

Between them, they managed to pull Treefrog's limp body onto Ivan's back. They had just started on the downwards trail when Irina's radio crackled into life. She listened for a few seconds. Sacha was close enough to hear "we need urgent assistance!"

Irina's emotions were laid open for Sacha to sense. She was confused, terrified; so much that even Sacha felt frightened. He glanced over at Treefrog, felt a wave of nausea.

Atlanta said, "What's going on?"

"There's trouble with the Jaguar. I have to go.

Atlanta, stay with Ivan. Help him to get Treefrog back to the camp." She turned to Sacha. "Blackbird, you're with me."

Sacha, dumbfounded, began to follow. *Why me?*

TWELVE

OUTNUMBERED

They'd scrambled twenty yards up the red earth of the trail, when from behind, Sacha heard Atlanta say breathlessly, "I don't trust the Jaguar. I'm coming with *you*."

If Ivan had objected, he'd obviously been unable to do anything about it. Irina threw Atlanta a despairing glance, but kept climbing the steep path. Whatever was happening up the mountain, it seemed more important than enforcing discipline in her group.

All three were gasping with the effort of racing up the slope, when they first heard the moans of agony coming from Trope. He lay on the ground, rolled onto his right side, one hand clutching his face, the other down at his side, grasping his right leg.

Trope's leg was bent at such a horrible angle that it hurt even to look. It was broken; the bone poking through a bloody gash in his shin. Trope was a pale as milk, shaking, occasionally letting out a sustained sob. The other sentinel scout was pointing his weapon at Jaguar, who sat on the ground, apparently submissive, hands on his head. Howler sat next to Trope, although it wasn't clear what use he was being to him.

Irina and Ivan, the second sentinel scout didn't speak, exchanging thoughts rapidly. Like all two-dubs, Sacha found it incredibly difficult to listen in on both sides of a telepathic conversation. With a sentinel scout in the mix, even tougher. Sentinel scouts were recruited

from two-dubs with the highest blocking ability. He had no option but to focus his attention on Irina and hope for the best.

But a clear, harsh thought cut across his mental landscape: *Don't waste your energy with them Sacha; why don't you just ask me?*

Sacha turned slowly to Jaguar: *You did this?*

Jaguar gave him a wink. When the scout saw this, he shoved a boot into Jaguar's chest, violently enough to throw him a meter backwards. But Jaguar merely picked himself up and with a snigger, dusted the seat of his trousers.

I switched the morpho. We outnumber them, little brother. Morpho? What's that? Does it even matter? Cos they've got the gun.

Ah that's right, you don't know about morpho.

So – another secret his older brother had been holding onto, waiting for the right time to use it to lord it over him. 'Switched the morpho' – what was he ranting about?

Sacha watched as Irina took the gun from the second scout, replaced him in standing guard over Jaguar, who was just picking himself up.

Ivan rushed over to Trope. "We've called for a stretcher," he said. "But you'll have to hang on." Trope managed a brief nod. He was shaking, uncontrollably.

Irina waved her gun at Jaguar. "Get up. We're going to walk back down to school."

Jaguar shook his head. Sacha could hear his thoughts as clearly as if they'd been directed at him.

Not me, sister.

"On your feet, low-life!" Irina shrieked. "And I'm not your sister."

Jaguar rose to his feet.

Sorry, I should have said 'Aunty.' Masha, Irina and Olga; the three sisters. I guess someone likes Chekhov! You're going to have to shoot me. If you've got the ovaries. But then who'll get me back to the Krylov? You and the kids?

"I'm not leaving you, idiot."

Jaguar said aloud, "Yeah, you are."

Ivan rose, slowly. But before he could advance on Jaguar, Howler stepped forward. He placed one hand on the scout's chest.

"You'll have to get past me."

Irina, the second scout, Howler and Jaguar stood immobile for several seconds. Sacha licked moisture from his upper lip. The crackling background noise of the forest was punctuated with occasional wincing of agony from Trope.

"You shouldn't trust Howler," Jaguar told Irina. He smirked. "Boy is vicious – I should know, I trained him. Once we're out of reach, he'll kill your pal and leave Trope wailing like a baby."

Irina hesitated. Sacha sensed strongly that she believed Jaguar. Confusion almost overwhelmed her; he felt her struggle to hang on to one good, solid decision.

Jaguar grinned. "I think we're going to leave now, Aunt Irina. Unless you're serious about shooting us."

Sacha and Atlanta shared a glance. He didn't need telepathy to know that his friend was as determined to escape as Jaguar.

This could be my last chance.

Irina spoke urgently. "Don't listen to him, Sacha. *This isn't your time.* You don't know what you're getting into. Remember what I told you? It's harder than you can imagine. Don't forget what I said."

Sacha stared at Irina, completely thrown. She sounded fiercely insistent. Yet behind the words, just as when she'd spoken to him through the wall, he sensed entirely different emotions.

If she's Jaguar's aunt then she's mine too, probably. Is that why she's been nice with me?

Confused, he glanced at Jaguar and Atlanta. They didn't seem to have noticed.

"There are four of us, *Aunty*," Jaguar was saying, his voice light yet conveying a definite sense of threat.

"Only two of you. If I were you, I'd save one man to guard the cripple. Face facts: it's the time of the Jaguar."

Irina gave Jaguar a last, baleful look. "We'll find you," she said, raising her gun. "You won't get away. Not all of you. When we find the stragglers, you'll pay."

"Guess I'd better get lost, then!" said Jaguar, jauntily.

Sacha and Atlanta stared at each other, then at Jaguar and Howler.

"Don't look at me," Jaguar shrugged. "Or him. It's every man for himself."

Sacha said, "We'd have a better chance of surviving if we stick together."

"Speak for yourself, runt. You're kind of slow on the uptake, truth be told. Probably slow me down. Now, get lost."

Jaguar chose a narrow trail which appeared to head into the thickest part of the forest, sloping diagonally down the mountain. They both watched him disappear into the vegetation. Atlanta frowned. "He's going to get stuck in there!"

Howler started to move, but Irina aimed her gun directly at his head.

Between gritted teeth she hissed, "Try it."

Howler froze. Sacha turned away, thinking fast. Irina couldn't aim at both Howler and them. This was their chance, maybe the only one they'd ever get.

Atlanta – we're doing this?

I will if you will.

They broke into a jog. The enraged shouts of the second scout followed them. There was no sound at all from Irina.

We should go on up the trail, Atlanta telepathed. There's a place where this trail cuts into the main one, the one the North Wingers use. We can go down that; we'll end up on a different side of the mountain.

But they'll find us, easy.

Not if we're quick. They won't send anyone after us for a

little bit – they can't leave all those other groups unguarded, can they? They'll have to regroup. We probably have half an hour.

Sacha kept running, bouncing lightly over tree roots, controlling his breathing.

Sacha, we could get lost in there for hours. We don't have machetes to cut our way through. My way, we get off the mountain in less than an hour.

They'll be waiting for us at the bottom.

Fine – then we detour right at the end, go into the forest. But once we're closer to that road. We need to stay by the road.

Why?

Don't you know anything? Roads lead to towns, to the sea. We need to get to one.

What about the Rabbit's hideout?

Atlanta scowled. *You've discovered where it is, all of a sudden?*

Sacha paused. *Won't they be watching the roads?*

I thought you wanted to escape. But maybe you're just another loser, a flake. Dreaming about getting out but not actually committed.

His face flushed with anger. What Atlanta said might be true, but he didn't enjoy being reminded of it.

We need to keep moving, Sacha. Hurry up – decide.

Sacha took one last look at the departing back of his brother. It was already hard to see him barely thirty yards away, through the dense scrub and woods.

Come on, urged Atlanta. Out of the forest, down to the coast.

He felt his old hopes bursting within him once again, as though he'd never really accepted his fate, as though they'd never really gone away. Everything Sacha knew told him that what he was about to do was reckless, insane. But he couldn't stop himself.

THIRTEEN

PURSUIT

Twenty minutes later, they still hadn't come across the trail from the other side of the mountain. Wrist watches were a privilege only for sentinels, so two-dub kids tended to develop strong internal clocks. Sacha and Atlanta didn't mention that time was running out. They both knew it, only too well.

As they progressed up the steep slope, they navigated gnarls of tree roots, their eyes glued to the ground. Their hamstrings ached from the relentless drive upwards. Atlanta's anxiety levels crept up, until Sacha wasn't sure which part of his fear came from Atlanta and which from himself.

After another five minutes, Sacha couldn't handle the tension any longer. He stopped, hands on his hips as he bent double, panting for air. "Where the hell is this trail then?"

Atlanta stopped running too, but looked annoyed. They started back up the trail, which had narrowed so much that they had to go in single file. "Where's the Jaguar?"

Sacha fell back on telepathy, too breathless to speak. *No idea.*

Can you reach him now? See how far he's got, if he's been captured or what?

I dunno.

Well what's your range?

Dunno. Never tested it.

Atlanta spoke aloud then, patiently, as if to a very young child. “Well, do you think you could you try?”

Sacha reached out with his mind, opened it to the whispers that always hovered at the edge of his consciousness. He’d long ago learned to tune out this background hum, so it was an effort to focus on it. The whispers could rarely be made to coalesce into any recognizable pattern; that’s what made them so annoying. Sacha had learned to avoid the temptation to investigate those murky corners of his telepathic gift – what the two-dubs called the ‘Outside Space.’

Running through the forest, brushing past thick shrubs, giant ferns and avoiding hidden gullies in the woods, Sacha couldn’t summon the mental clarity he needed to listen to his Outside Space. He was just about to say so when Atlanta gave a sudden cry of excitement.

“That’s it – the trail!”

About twenty yards ahead a deep gash in the red soil of the forest crossed with their own, much narrower trail. Atlanta reached it first, putting on an extra burst of speed the instant they spotted it.

Sacha stared at the trail. It didn’t exactly head down the mountain, as he’d expected – more across the mountain, parallel to the slope.

If Atlanta had doubts they weren’t obvious, nor could Sacha sense any. But he himself had plenty. The trail went straight, not down, for as far as the eye could see – which wasn’t very far given the thick cover of foliage. It was at least flat enough to sprint along, so they increased their pace.

Both made rapid progress for the next ten minutes. Then the trail turned sharply down the mountain and narrowed. They raced down the trail, grabbed passing branches to help their balance. Parts of the path were so steep that they slid down them, scraped along by their shorts. Atlanta was right on his heels.

There was no sign of any sentinel scout following them. They’d heard no whisper of activity. All the same,

at the back of his mind, Sacha had a sense of foreboding.

It can't be this easy. Something's wrong.

The tree coverage thinned out enough for them to realize that they were close to the foot of the mountain. In the distance ahead the path widened and forked towards a collection of low buildings that Sacha had often spied in the heart of the forest. It was an abandoned camp of some kind, as far as he knew. On previous hikes residents had asked about those wooden huts, but the answers were always vague. He only remembered that they had been used by some revolutionaries once, many years ago. They were preserved as a memorial. The two-dubs had never been allowed to see them, which he found strange.

Ahead of Atlanta, Sacha stopped moving for a moment, catching glimpses of the wooden huts through the trees. When he stared hard, for a second he sensed something in his Outside Space – something ominous, disturbing and vaguely familiar. He had the strongest impression that he was being warned off.

Jaguar – that's where he's hiding. He's warning us to stay away.

Then that's where the Rabbit's hideout is. We have to go!

Sacha grabbed Atlanta's arm, held them back.

No. The hideout isn't there. I don't know how I know, but I'm sure of it. Jaguar's inside. He'll kill us if we go in. Can't you sense him?

Atlanta stared into the abandoned camp. *I can't sense anyone. But there's something about that place. I really don't want to get closer.*

They turned, hurtled along the path down the mountain, away from the path to the old camp. Sacha was silent for another few seconds. The disturbance in his Outside Space changed subtly, grew more noticeable. Other two-dubs were communicating with each other.

They couldn't be far away – Sacha's range wasn't that strong, not when it came to intercepting thoughts.

The surge of fear that zipped through him spurred him even more. Atlanta looked astonished as they watched Sacha veer from the path and tear into the flanking thicket.

They're onto us. Practically on top of us!

What? Why can't we hear them?

I can.

And we can hear you.

A new voice joined Atlanta's in Sacha's head. He couldn't make out the shape of the thought, couldn't attach it to anyone he knew.

Stop running. We don't blame you. This is the Jaguar's fault. Stop now and you won't be punished.

Sacha glanced over at Atlanta to see if they reacted to this last thought. But they had eyes trained solidly on the leaves and branches that obstructed every step.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Sacha almost directly into Atlanta's ear. If their thoughts were giving them away then they'd have to rely on speech. "One of them must be a Long Ranger."

"Those really exist?"

You'll never get away. We already know where you are.

So why don't you come get us?

Don't be a pair of idiots. Stop running!

"You can stop, if you like," Atlanta replied through clenched teeth. "But not me. We won't get another chance."

Sacha stared into the dense undergrowth. Since leaving the trail, they were moving incredibly slowly. He looked behind in dismay, realized that their progress from the path was easily measured in broken twigs, branches and crushed foliage.

"I'm going to stop," Sacha said. "It's hopeless."

Atlanta stared at Sacha, eyes flashing anger and betrayal. "No," they said, bitterly. "*You're* hopeless." With that, Atlanta backed into a cluster of royal palms and continued onward.

Sacha could only watch, fear like a hammer in his chest, hope crumbling to dust, turning to tears of frustration.

I've stopped running.

Good decision.

He sank to the ground, exhausted. He wondered if Long Rangers could also detect emotions at a distance. Could they sense the guilt and desolation that was sweeping through him, right now?

They picked Atlanta up about ten minutes after they reached Sacha. It was impossible to hide tracks in that undergrowth. In the open-top truck that was parked at the bottom of the mountain, Sacha waited for Irina and the other sentinels. He sat hunched over, face buried in his hands so they wouldn't see his tears.

When Atlanta arrived, handcuffed and bruised around the face, Sacha couldn't hide his shock. Their nose was bleeding, above their right eye was a scarlet bruise. They glared at Sacha, still defiant as a sentinel scout shoved them into the truck.

Blackbird, you lousy peasant.

Sacha was silent. Atlanta was right. He'd been spineless. Too afraid to make a real run for it, like Atlanta or Jaguar.

Irina's thoughts broke across his own. *You were realistic. This is no way to escape.*

Is there a way?

Not as far as I know.

And the Rabbit?

Irina sighed. "You people! There's no Rabbit. Never was! Get that into your thick skulls!"

For the first time, Sacha really tried to believe her. Yet the hope he held onto, deep inside, simply would not die.

FOURTEEN

REVENGE

Back inside one of the solitary confinement cells, sleep was impossible. Sacha covered his ears to try to block out Atlanta's screams and cries. It must have gone on for at least an hour. Finally he heard the door close and the footsteps of the two sentinels – walking in the opposite direction.

Sacha breathed a huge sigh of relief. He listened out for Atlanta. There was no sound at all. Hesitantly, he reached out with his mind. He was more afraid of what he'd find within Atlanta's feelings, than within their thoughts. He wondered if there was a way to read someone without also Feeling. His brother would know, probably.

Atlanta, you still there?

There was a long, long silence.

I'm here.

You okay?

No.

Sacha didn't reply. He couldn't think of anything that might help his friend. To his amazement, what Atlanta was feeling was seething rage, not terror and self-pity, as he'd guessed.

You're not afraid?

I don't know where that jerk Jaguar is, I'd tell them if I did. They know that now.

So they're not coming back?

For you? Who knows?

Sacha sat up, more alert now. He sensed Atlanta drifting towards sleep.

Get some rest, Atlanta. Hang in there.

Shut your face, you peasant, you worthless slave. I won't forget what you did.

Atlanta's insult, even as the last whispered thought before they fell asleep, stung Sacha to his core. Sacha sat up, his back pressed against the corner of the cell, hands at his sides, outstretched against the floor. The concrete floor was scratched and scuffed, just as he remembered.

Not like the other cell.

And suddenly it struck Sacha, just how much of a difference that was. The first cell, where he'd spent two weeks, had a floor with few markings. He had grown to know each one in his sleep. It was almost entirely smooth, as though the concrete had been recently poured. But the floor in this second cell was heavily marked – at least to the touch. In the dark, Sacha couldn't tell whether the markings showed.

What if they don't?

Sacha's heart began to pound. If there were markings in the floor, which didn't show, then maybe they were a secret message – from one escapee to another.

From the Rabbit.

He dropped to the ground, rolled onto his belly. Exploring with his fingers, he felt the ridges and contours of the scratches. He'd made something of those shapes once, he remembered now. It had felt like a dream, so close to sleep.

But what if those images were real?

His fingers found the first image he remembered – the fence. It was represented by four horizontal lines. He followed the fence to the next image – a circle. Sacha had no idea what a circle might represent. He fumbled around, looking for another clue. Right next to the circle, he found it: a mass of overlapping, wavy lines.

A river?

At the end of the river, he found a fourth symbol. It took him just a few moments to work out that it was a cluster of five royal palms, arranged in a circle. He hunted around for more markings, but found none.

He sat back, deep in thought.

I didn't dream it. The fence, the circle, the river, the royal palms. They're real. It's a message from the Rabbit. Has to be!

It made sense now. Atlanta reckoned that the Jaguar knew where the hideout was. If there really was a hideout, that had to be where Jaguar was headed. But there was no river near the mountain where they'd been hiking.

Sacha knew that were he in Jaguar's place, the hope alone would be enough.

The idea that escape was possible, not just for the Rabbit but for someone Sacha actually knew – gave him a fresh glimmer of hope. But to get that chance, Jaguar had done serious violence. He felt queasy when he recalled the sight of Trope's broken leg. To do that to another person! He couldn't imagine it. And he remembered Jaguar's comment: 'I'm prepared to do the unthinkable'.

What Sacha couldn't understand was *why* Jaguar wanted to escape. Jaguar had seemed so confident that he'd get everything he wanted from his life as a spy – power and control over more people.

He tried to escape before. He found the hideout. Of course he wants to escape!

Slowly it dawned on Sacha that his brother might have been lying. Boasting, covering up his real feelings.

What if Jaguar is just as scared of the future as me?

He let his body slide to the ground. He *had* to get some sleep.

The cell door flung open a few hours later. He woke immediately, shielded his eyes from the dazzling sunlight. He could just about tell from her silhouette that Irina had come to the door.

"Silly boy. Good thing you stopped running, or

they'd have punished you like your friend."

"Is Atlanta okay?"

"She will be. I mean, *they*. They'll never forget last night, though."

Sacha's mind reached out instinctively to Atlanta's, but nothing. *They're asleep.*

"Is it true," he asked, abruptly. "What Jaguar said? That you're... *his*...aunt?"

He'd been about to say 'our aunt,' but corrected himself just in time. Did the sentinels know the boys were brothers? If Irina really was their aunt, she might. But he couldn't be sure, was losing track of who knew what.

But Irina stalled. "Don't you want to know about Treefrog?"

He hadn't thought about Treefrog since before he'd fallen asleep. Shaking his head he rubbed his eyes, adjusting to the light.

When he didn't reply Irina continued, nonchalantly, "Turns out the boy has severe asthma problems. Must have had symptoms for ages, didn't tell anyone."

Truthfully, Sacha didn't know what Irina meant by 'asthma problems.' He'd never heard of anyone having 'asthma problems.' It was obvious from Irina's manner that this was something bad.

Irina passed a critical eye over him. "Ugh, you really need a shower. Here's what's happening: you are out of here. Any day now. General Krylov called your prospective controller. They were going to wait for you to grow up a bit, bid for you when you reach sixteen, do it by the book. But after this drama, you're screwed. They've had eyes on you since you were a toddler: a shiny new replacement for Jaguar. Can't want to risk you bolting again, so they're sending someone for you.

Since I was a toddler? He blinked. *How come? And why?*

Excitement, dread and sorrow collided within

Sacha. Doors that had been prized open seemed to slam shut in his face. On the run in the mountainous forest the day before, he'd had a tiny taste of freedom. With longing, he recalled the rich, loamy aroma of the red soil, the clean, astringent tang of the pines. The world had stretched out before him, lush and inviting; the forest down to the beach, the Caspian Sea and the world beyond – a world that might even include Eva. An adventure redolent with the promise and excitement of the *One Thousand And One Nights*, it had given him a hunger for more.

He couldn't bear to accept that his dream was about to be crushed, forever. More than anything, Sacha longed to be free.

FIFTEEN

CONTROLLER

The following morning, they came for Sacha. Handed him a hanger draped in a fresh Krylov Foundation dress uniform; a short-sleeved white poplin shirt, scarlet blazer jacket and black shorts. Sent him back to the shower room with a bar of lemon-scented soap. When he was ready, Irina was waiting. Gone were the traces of warmth, the sympathy he'd observed when he'd first arrived in the South Wing. Now her emotions felt as though a broom had swept through her mind, clearing away all the messy cobwebs and complications. She was thunderously, coldly, disappointed.

"Looks like you're getting your wish," was all she said.

The starched collar scratched at his neck. Beneath the stiff fabric of the scarlet jacket he felt the first prickles of sweat. It wasn't just the heat of the day, which had already kicked in; he was nervous.

Irina stayed with him, staring straight ahead as they waited outside Krylov's office. Sacha couldn't resist the urge to scratch his nose. He'd never actually met Krylov or even heard him speak, only occasionally and at a distance, spied him strolling through the grounds of the Krylov. Beyond the grounds that were open to the Foundation children, a helicopter landing pad was Krylov's main point of exit and entry. Judging from how frequently Sacha had seen that chopper coming and going, he guessed Krylov was rarely around.

And now, he was actually going to meet not just Krylov, but the controller that Krylov had found for Sacha.

Irina said, quietly. "This day has been a long time coming. Ever since Masha took your brother, probably."

Sacha gazed at her in silence. This close to parting, she'd decided to be honest?

So it's true. You're our aunt, Masha is your sister?

Her eyes flashed a warning and barely audible, she hissed, 'Shhh.' But then finally she acknowledged his question with a brief, terse nod.

The door opened. General Anatoly Petrovich Krylov was standing by his desk. The man looked old; older than anyone Sacha had ever seen in real life.

Sixty-five, Sacha guessed, give or take a year.

The sentinels at the Krylov were in their twenties or thirties and had been there all their lives, so residents knew exactly how old they were. Consequently, Sacha was pretty good at estimating people's ages below forty. Over forty was more difficult – but sizing up strangers was one of the first things they were taught in basic tradecraft. Age and likely ethnicity – these were things they'd been trained to assess on sight. Languages spoken were next on the list, accents and suchlike, but that usually needed some interaction.

It was faintly exciting to meet someone this old in real life, it gave him a sense that his real life, a life outside of this *dump*, might actually be starting.

The room was spacious, smelt of fresh paint. A solitary window overlooked the velvet canopy of the forest as it dipped towards the valley. Sacha stood stiffly to attention until Krylov beckoned him forward. The general wore khaki-green fatigues and a peaked cap, like a field officer. Sacha straightened his jacket with a quick snap of his wrist. He stepped forward.

Krylov dismissed Irina with a curt nod, then turned to Sacha and nodded. "I gather you're known here as 'Blackbird'?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Now now, my boy, we’re practically family! You can call me ‘Anatoly Petrovich.’ And since you’re leaving us as an adult, I should address you as Alexander Romanovich.”

Krylov smiled broadly, showing a set of perfectly straight, nicotine-stained teeth as he watched this information sink in – one of the gems they’d withheld, the name of his bio-father.

Sacha hesitated. Even with the invitation to use the more friendly form of address for a fellow Russian – Christian name and patronymic – he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He used the silence to study the man who legally owned him. Even under the general’s cap his dark brown hair was slightly puffed up, had none of the traces of gray which he could see in his beard. Even though Krylov was tall and well-built, Sacha spotted that he was flabby around the middle. Probably hadn’t seen military action for years, if ever. The combat fatigues were a bit of a puzzle.

Well, Alexander Romanovich, are you ready to meet your future?

At first, Sacha could only gawp. There was no mistaking it. The telepathic broadcast had definitely come from the general.

Krylov was a two-dub? There had been rumors, but Sacha (and everyone he’d ever discussed it with) had always found it hard to believe that *one of their own* would keep the two-dubs locked up and then auctioned off.

With a nervous nod, he acknowledged the message.

Krylov continued, watching him with a shrewd gaze.

You’re surprised. For some reason, people always are, although if you think about it, it’s the only way this should happen. In time, maybe you’ll understand. We must take responsibility for our own. Or, mark my words, one day, the mundanes will hunt us down.

Before he could reply, the door opened. A slight, balding and portly man in a loose-fitting dark gray suit, white shirt and tidy, navy-blue neck-tie stood before him; the type of suit worn by men in photographs he'd seen in history books that depicted the signings of treaties. He appeared to be younger than General Krylov.

Not young. Just not as old.

The man's eyes were bloodshot and his nose slightly bulbous, as though he were extremely tired and somewhat unhealthy.

Sacha stared in amazement. It was the first time he'd seen any adult from outside the tiny world of the camp and the first one wearing a suit like this. The man had the palest skin he'd ever seen, a face that must never have felt the sun, his eyes were a blueish-gray.

So this is what a controller looks like.

Krylov cleared his throat. "Mikalai Yuryevich, may I present Alexander Romanovich Montecristo."

The man stared back at Sacha, eyes boring into his. There was a long pause. Finally, the man gave a slow nod. "Hello, Alexander. Or is it 'Sacha'? You may call me 'Mister Seredka.'"

Sacha looked from the man to Krylov.

Speak to him in Russian, Krylov telepathed. He wants proof that you know your languages.

Sacha bowed slightly, just as he'd read about in his beloved stories of the *One Thousand And One Nights*.

"Your name means 'Nicholas Middle,'" he observed, speaking in Russian. When he looked up, Sacha saw that the man was smiling slightly, amused. All residents of the Krylov Foundation were ultimately descended from Siberian Russians, but because infiltrating Mother Russia's enemies was their main purpose, they learned English as a native language, with Russian taught as a second. Sacha had been told that he spoke it with a slight American accent.

"It's good to know you haven't neglected your

studies,” Seredka replied in Russian. “Although, I understand you prefer Arabic? To our beautiful Slavonic languages, I mean.”

For a brief second, Sacha glanced at Krylov, but this time the general blanked him.

“No, Mister Seredka,” he replied, gazing levelly at the controller. “I taught myself some Arabic in my spare time, so I could read a story book.”

“You admire their stories?”

The comment seemed to be loaded with some underlying tension, but Sacha answered as directly as he knew how. “I like the magic. The djinn.”

Mikalai Seredka nodded. His face became serious again. Switching to Belarusian, he said, “You will continue to study Arabic, then. We have allies in that world. But from now, you will immerse yourself in the greatest culture ever known, that of *Russkij Mir* – the Russian world.” In Russian, he added, “I know you will be happy to discover your Russian roots, Sacha Montecristo.”

Krylov murmured approvingly, “I don’t doubt it at all.”

Sacha felt a wave of anger from Seredka, so potent that he didn’t need to focus his empathy skill to detect it. Yet when the man replied, his tone was perfectly smooth, entirely pleasant.

“That’s good to hear,” Seredka said, still staring at Sacha. He switched to Ukrainian. In a halting manner, as if reaching for every third word he said. “Your life now dedicated to a Third Russian Empire. Czar Ilyin with great plan for boy. Also brother Maxim. Together with *siloviki*, you serve him. Direct.”

With that, Seredka resumed his silence, looking Sacha over once again.

Sacha couldn’t help reacting with surprise. Jaguar’s name was Maxim! All the secrets seemed to be coming out now that he was leaving. Would they tell him where his bio-mother was, too? Somehow, he doubted it. He

glanced nervously at Krylov. Seredka was indeed testing him. Ukrainian obviously wasn't a language the man spoke well.

"Nothing to say? Or do you insult me by communicating with your minds in my presence?" Seredka asked. "I might not be able to do the same, but I can tell when it's happening."

Sacha sensed, quite easily, the barely controlled rage that flowed beneath Seredka words. Yet even if the man *had* been a two-dub, he wouldn't be able to detect a direct broadcast to Krylov. So basically, he was being ridiculous.

Studiously avoiding Krylov's eyes, Sacha broadcast, *Why is he angry?*

Krylov's reply was astonishing.

This man is dangerous. I wouldn't let him take you away if I had any choice, understand that. Be very, very careful.

Without warning, the man lashed out with his left hand, cracked a hard slap across his cheek with such force that Sacha actually staggered. As one hand went up to soothe his face, Seredka pushed Sacha's hand away.

Sacha's eyes snapped to Seredka, astonished. Without thinking, he reached out with his mind. *What did I do wrong?*

The man slapped him again, but this time it was more of a playful cuff. When he spoke, it was once again in his smooth Belarusian. "Speak to me with your voice, not mind."

This, thought Sacha. *This one is definitely his native language.*

In Belarusian Sacha answered, "But... You heard my thought?"

"Indeed. I can hear your thoughts if you direct the message at me. What you call 'broadcasting.'"

The controller pursed his lips for a moment, then continued more calmly, the effort it took to do so blatantly obvious to Sacha. "I'm what you people call a 'one-way' telepath. I can receive a direct broadcast."

His expression hardened, those blue-gray eyes flat and implacable. Whatever it was that so irked him about being a one-dub, he left unsaid. "Hear me well, boy. You are only ever to reach out to me with thoughts when I order you to. Only in the most secretive of interactions. Because you are still a child, I will be judicious in instructing you when such communication is allowable. Do you understand?"

Sacha nodded, his eyes wide.

"You may speak our languages, you may have Russian ancestry, but you are not yet one of us. Most unfortunately, the general neglected his duty to raise all of you as loyal Russian citizens, dedicated to spreading the glory of Russkiy Mir. No matter, in time we will correct this."

This, most assuredly, was a threat, Sacha decided. Directed at Krylov and taken as such, without a doubt.

Seredka switched from Belarusian to Serbo-Croat, which he spoke reasonably well if with a Russian accent. In the past few minutes, he'd cycled through all four Slavonic languages Sacha had studied.

"It will take time to earn our trust. Therefore, I advise you to be most careful in all you do. The empire requires your obedience. The *siloviki* demand privacy from your particular gift. If they ever learn that you've invaded the mind of one of them, you will be severely punished. Understand?"

Trembling, Sacha nodded again and replied in Serbo-Croat, "Yes, Mister Seredka." His curiosity intensified. The word *siloviki* meant literally 'strongmen.' What was their role in the Third Russian Empire? The Czar's inner circle? His bodyguards? Was Seredka a *silovik*? He referred to them oddly, as though he *wasn't* one of them.

"You will not be granted many opportunities to learn this lesson," Seredka continued, now switching back to Russian.

Given that the man was from Belarus, Sacha was

beginning to unravel this little mystery. Maybe Seredka *wasn't* his controller; but was picking up Sacha on behalf of them, the *siloviki*. The empire's 'strongmen.'

That's why Krylov fears Seredka, Sacha realized, with a chill. *He's working for someone close to the Czar.*

Seredka bared his teeth. "Invade the mind of a *silovik* without permission and you will be beaten. Do it again, a more severe beating. Do it a third time, Alexander Romanovich, and you will die."

Sacha was stunned into silence.

SIXTEEN

HELICOPTER

Moments later, Krylov dismissed Sacha, had Irina escort him to the dining hall to ‘say goodbye to your friends and pack your things.’

Not that he’d had time to make real friends on the South Wing, nor owned anything. The few meager possessions he’d managed to collect over the years, he’d left behind when he’d tried to escape the first time, from the North Wing. Most kids at the camp would never dare to escape, too afraid of losing what little they had. Handicrafts made over the years; paintings, wooden dolls, pottery fragments; useless bits of rubbish, truth be told. But at least they were theirs – nothing else was. Not the future, not even time.

But now, this lack of anything to leave behind made Sacha feel light, as he followed Irina down the corridor. He felt ready for anything. The only possession he’d really cared about was a small statue of ‘Our Lady’ made from cedar wood. Yoselyn had made it especially and given it to him the last time they’d been allowed to see each other, before she’d returned to...where?

Well, to wherever it was she’d originally come from, he’d assumed. Not that he knew where that was.

She’d pressed it into his hands that day, and departed with tears in her eyes, Sacha remembered. He’d have wept, too, if he’d known then that she was his mother, or that it was the last time he’d see her. But of course, they weren’t told the truth about the women

they remembered with such tender yearning. Not until many years later. He thought about that statue, and how he'd gripped it tightly whenever he missed Yoselyn and those blissful days in the kindergarten. He didn't even know who 'Our Lady' was, yet still admired the yellow and white colors of the figure's clothes and that the base was encrusted with a sparkly greenish-golden metal. Mostly, he enjoyed knowing that it was his, no-one else had one like it, that it had been made especially for him. When it had come to escaping, however, Sacha had been forced to trade his most treasured possession for three tins of food.

There was nothing left to keep him at the Krylov Foundation. Atlanta despised him, probably with good reason.

Sacha didn't belong at the South Wing. He'd shown himself to be a failure at escape. Leaving with Mikalai Seredka seemed to be his fate.

Maktub, he thought, in Arabic. *It is written.*

The remaining two-dub kids had gathered in the dining hall to see him off. Formally, he embraced each one, exchanged three kisses to the cheek.

Howler said, sarcastically, "Be good, Sacha. Have a good life."

After subdued farewells, Sacha joined Krylov and Seredka in the yard. Krylov escorted them to the rear gate, where a grimy white car was parked. At the wheel was Cayman, who gave him a nasty grin.

"Leaving so soon, comrade?" he whispered as Sacha slid onto the back seat, black plastic and already scalding hot.

Sacha didn't react, instead stared out of the window. Hit by a wave of despondency, he didn't want to listen to Seredka. So he didn't pay attention when the man started talking. He vaguely heard the man mention flying to the headquarters of his organization, finding a family for Sacha to stay with. "Good people, a nice family," he said, his voice serious. "The *siloviki* will care

for you as a brother.”

As a brother? Sacha didn’t understand. One moment Seredka was full of dark threats, the next he was trying to act like a kindly uncle.

Maybe he’s treacherous, like Aladdin’s ‘uncle.’

The car rode over pot-holes in the narrow lane, then turned a corner. Sacha felt a thrill when he realized they’d arrived at the airfield. He’d only seen helicopters at a distance, when they flew in bringing Krylov, or a controller to the Foundation. But finally, he could see one up close, and the sight of it made him forget the car and Cayman.

A shiny white helicopter, a red star on its tail, was waiting on the small helipad. Its motor was warming up, the rotor blades beginning to whirl. The day’s unexpected turn of events began to hit him. He was going to ride in a helicopter. To fly.

Whatever else happened, he’d have that.

Sacha noticed Seredka regarding him with a wry smile

“Boys love helicopters,” the man said. “Am I right?”

He gave a shy smile. “I guess so.”

“There will be helicopters where we’re going, *Aliaksandr*. Helicopters and guns and tanks and fighter planes.”

With evident relish Seredka said Sacha’s name in Belarusian. It was obvious he expected Sacha to feel the same. Yet behind his words, Sacha sensed the same undercurrent of violence he’d detected from the moment they’d first met.

Trembling, Sacha stepped into the helicopter. Seredka took the passenger seat next to him and then closed the door behind him. Ahead, from the cockpit, another man in khaki-green shirt and pants, fair-haired, muscular, and wearing shiny brown sunglasses turned and grinned at Seredka.

“Guys, time we got out of this shit-hole,” the man

joked, in Russian. His tone wasn't subservient yet also not aggressive, like a boss might be. As if the two men were associates, partners. In this together, for their own gain? Or both *siloviki*?

Seredka chuckled in agreement. "*Da*."

Sacha watched as Seredka fastened a seat belt and then helped him with his. Above – merely inches, so it seemed, the helicopter blades began to move even faster. Through the window, he glimpsed Cayman, who stood by the dirty white car, watching with arms folded. *Bye, loser*, the sentinel telepathed.

Amazingly, the craft lifted. It was as though a string were tugging it slowly into the air. Sacha stretched over to look through the window, at the ground. It was moving away, right underneath them. Within seconds they'd risen so far that he was staring ahead at the trees which blanketed the mountain slopes around the valley. The helicopter lifted even further, until they'd cleared the top of the mountains, leaving the valley and the Krylov Foundation behind.

Sacha's eyes seemed to be popping out of his head. All he could think of were the stories of the flying horse and of magic carpets.

To fly.

Sacha had only dreamed of such a thing. He stared ahead, watching as green mountains rippled beneath, their peaks disappearing into cloud forest. Outside, tiny droplets of water condensed on the helicopter's windows.

The pilot glanced over his shoulder, watched with some appreciation. "You like?"

Sacha nodded. "Can we fly lower? Get a better view?"

The pilot grinned suddenly, flashed gleaming white teeth. "Mikalai Yuryevich," he called out to Seredka. "I'm gonna fly lower, the kid wants to see everything clearly."

Sacha leaned forward in his seat as the helicopter

dropped. Ahead he caught sight of a glint of silver. The sun bounced off a lake, which turned milky green as they flew closer. Then he noticed a thick white stream of water falling down the mountain.

“Is that a waterfall?” he asked in wonder.

Seredka replied, “It is.”

Sacha hadn’t seen one in real life, and in photographs only up close. He hadn’t realized how motionless the falls looked from so far away. Like a white ribbon in the deep green of the forest, emerging from a pool of water that nestled in a dip between the mountains, the falls were at least thirty yards high.

He raised his voice, addressing the pilot. “Sir, can we fly closer? Please? I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

The pilot guffawed loudly. He turned and gave Sacha a wink. “Why not? First times are always special.”

The helicopter buzzed right up to the lake which fed the waterfall, circling above. The lake was round, almost circular, with the waterfall plunging off to the west.

The sight triggered something in Sacha; a memory.

A circle and a fast river.

In that instant, Sacha understood the symbol he’d discovered on the floor of the cell.

The fast river – is a waterfall! The first marker to the Rabbit’s hideout.

Sacha couldn’t take his eyes off the lake and its streak of tumbling foam. Furiously, he tried to think. This was it – probably the last chance he’d ever have to escape. He had to get them to take him down there. But how?

“We’re going right over the falls,” called out the pilot. He glanced over his shoulder, once again catching Sacha’s eye, “You like, sweet boy?”

For the first time, Sacha detected something weird about the pilot’s manner. It was overly friendly,

avuncular, even, a stark contrast with Seredka's cold-faced efficiency, yet felt somehow off. Underneath the camaraderie, he sensed that this man meant to harm him. He nodded, faked a smile, his mind racing. He doubled over to hide his hand as it fumbled with the seat belt, unfastening it silently.

The helicopter dropped to around twenty yards above the pool of water. Directly below, the opaque green water gleamed in the sunlight.

The Rabbit's hideout is nearby. Nothing else for it. I have to jump.

SEVENTEEN

THE PLUNGE

Sacha faced the twenty-yard drop. Somewhere to their left, he could hear the roar of the falls.

Jump, then swim to the edge. Do it.

Doubts began to surface, fear gripped him. It was too dangerous. He'd never make it. Even if he figured out a way to escape the helicopter, he wasn't a strong enough swimmer to escape the waterfall. Yet, as soon as the thought struck him, he pushed it away.

Abruptly, he stood up and shoved past Seredka.

For a split second, the man appeared too astonished to react. Then he grabbed Sacha's arm. But there was violence stored up inside Sacha, more than anyone might have guessed.

He bit down hard on the man's hand. He kicked him in the shins. The threat – *No, the promise* – of violence from Seredka was still with him.

That's what Seredka will do to me, eventually.

Sacha aimed a parting, right-handed punch at Seredka's eye.

Strapped into the seat, the blow was impossible to avoid. Seredka swung for the boy, reached for him, roaring. But Sacha was high on desperation and aggression. He leaned on the door handle and pushed.

It was like being in a dream. Sacha could scarcely believe his own actions. He felt like a caged animal. Pure instinct and rage drove him. The door swung open. He hung by the handle. A second dragged by. He swung

freely now, legs dangling, body twisting in powerful currents of air. Just a few feet above, helicopter blades thrummed loud and powerful.

Sacha hung, suspended over the pooled water. Seredka freed himself from the seat belt. In raging fury, he tried to yank the door closed.

Sacha swung harder, away from the body of the craft. Panic swamped him. A tide of blood inside his head, clouding his vision.

Why can't I just let go?

The helicopter tilted with his weight. Fear swept through him like wildfire. With each swing, he caught a glimpse over the edge of the falls. A long way down.

This is suicide.

"Don't be a fool!" yelled Seredka. "You'll drown!"

Sacha closed his eyes. The view was paralyzing him.

Last chance, you peasant, you slave.

Atlanta's insults echoed in Sacha's head. What about Atlanta, Jaguar, the Rabbit? They knew it took more than one attempt to escape – and hadn't given up.

Only a small effort of will was needed to take the next step. But he'd caught the scent of a death that waited for him, at the hands of the *siloviki*. Retreat meant death. Anything was better than that.

He opened his eyes. His fingers slackened. He dropped.

Legs flailing, he plunged through the air. The metallic sheen of water zoomed closer. He gasped for breath a millisecond before he crashed through the surface of the water, then kept going. Three yards down, he stopped falling. Eyes wide, Sacha released air though his nose and mouth. A funnel of bubbles rose alongside him.

He surfaced with a monumental gasp. The helicopter hovered directly above, like a gigantic insect. Then it hit him – the current had grabbed hold of him. He tried to swim to the shore. But it was no use. He was

being sucked towards the horizon of the lake. Then he heard the roar of the falls.

A fresh wave of despair smacked into him. That drop was pure terror. The shore was only ten yards away. He *had* to swim. With the first burst of nervous energy, it seemed to Sacha that he was making progress. The low palms and giant ferns by the bank appeared closer by the second. But the second he stopped struggling with every muscle, the current dragged him right back to where he'd started. Water currents like this were completely unknown, he'd only ever swum in a swimming pool. The sheer power of the elements against his puny strength was astonishing.

Dragged out for the fourth time, Sacha let himself turn in the water. He watched the lake's horizon approach. It seemed unstoppable. Did people actually *die* from going over waterfalls? He figured they might. Instinctively, he knew that if he survived the fall, he'd still need energy to swim.

If I make it, I'll be one step closer to freedom.

Every nerve in his body tingled with the rush of sensation. The pounding beat of helicopter blades blended with the thunder of tumbling water. Sacha was more excited, frightened and yet hopeful than he'd ever been in his whole life. As he approached the falls, his whole body tensed. Waiting.

The pool's end loomed closer. Treading water, Sacha marveled at the view of distant mountains. It was a relief, really, that he could no longer see over the edge. But finally, the edge rolled into view. Impossibly, sickeningly high.

Sacha fell.

Water pummeled his shoulders and head from above. Below, it formed an almost solid column through which he fell. Under the pressure of that water, Sacha tumbled head over heels. Like a torpedo, he sliced feet-first, straight to the bottom of the white, foaming pool. His ankles hit the bottom with a mercifully gentle thud

and ricocheted up. The pool under the waterfall rumbled with violent currents. They dragged him down, then propelled him forwards. Eyes screwed shut, he held his breath, amazed and relieved to be in one piece. But after another five seconds and still deep underwater, he began to panic.

The water rolled as if boiling. He opened his eyes, flipped his torso back and forth.

Which way is up?

His air was running out. Sacha reached towards the light, straining to swim. At every attempt, he was pushed down. The current dragged him deeper. Nothing but carbon dioxide left in his lungs. He resisted the urge to expel his last bit of air. Inside his chest, it stung. He felt himself hauled along the grit and sand at the bottom of the river. Finally, he couldn't stand the burning sensation any longer. He released the air and relaxed.

Sacha was finished. The river hauled his limp body to the surface. He rolled, lazily, with the current. His face turned upwards, out of the water. Greedily, he sucked at the air, let the current carry him.

Trees rose on each bank, almost closing above the river as it narrowed. He was vaguely aware of the helicopter high above. Over the tops of the trees, Sacha caught sight of palm fronds. Clustered royal palms were a common enough sight in the valley. Seeing them *there*, however, felt like a jolt of electricity that reanimated his corpse. He stuck out one hand, fingers grasping at empty air. Hoping.

The river ran swiftly, with occasionally overhanging branches. Eventually, one of them floated into view. He grabbed it. He pulled his chest to the branch and clung tightly. Hugging the branch, he inched along its length until he reached the riverbank.

Sacha was shattered, drained. He flopped against the muddy shore, like a fish in its final throes. But the air rattled with the helicopter's drone. He'd be easy to spot.

Even under streaks of mud, that scarlet uniform jacket gleamed like a jewel. From the air, he'd noticed there was nowhere for miles where the chopper could land. It was his only advantage. He'd managed to win himself an hour, maybe longer.

Sacha crawled, painfully slow as he inched away from the river. He had to find the Rabbit's hideout soon, or it would all be over. He could only hope that Jaguar hadn't reached it first and scarfed down everything in sight.

For the first time, it struck Sacha that if the hideout was close by, it was farther away than any of them had imagined. He guessed they were at least a day's hike from the camp. Without the helicopter, he could never have found the place.

Jaguar had been gone for seven days. If he hadn't found the hideout, by now, he'd be in trouble. Inside the Krylov, there was no way to learn how to survive in the wild. The kids had been kept hungry enough to forage for tree-fruit, but never desperate enough to try to catch or kill anything. Sacha's brother might *still* be inside the hideout. Or he might be lost, wandering, starving, maybe even dying of thirst, if he'd lost sight of the river.

The ground seemed to shift beneath his weight, as though reality itself had readjusted. There was something wrong here. Something that didn't fit with what Sacha had heard about the Rabbit.