

Guardians of the Lantern / WIP translation

Book #1

Written by

Radostina Nikolova

Illustrated by

Boyan 'Bossilek' Yordanov

Translated from Bulgarian by

Alexander 'Sancho' Marinov

This is what our haunt looked like. The Lantern.

Then the Lantern burned down and now nothing will ever be the same.

I

'Welcome back, dear students!'

We are greeted by balloons and flowers, while behind us, mere metres from our backs, a black skeleton rises in the place where the most beautiful building in the city stood a few days ago.

The Lantern was the first home of our school before they built the new building. Then it was abandoned, and stayed so for years. There were rumours of plans to renovate it, turning it into a youth centre. It never happened. We would gather there every day – tagging, sliding, chatting or simply being there, together. It was our haunt. And then, WHOOSH. It was gone!

Back in the school yard, the headmaster still chatters on the mike. The Lantern burned down a week ago, and he just babbles on and on about the new school year, as if the fire never happened...

'...so I've decided to make a few changes this year. The new attendance regulation scheme is my idea. It has been approved by the Ministry of Bons, so now I have full control over

your bons, heh heh! You all know that during your stay in school you can get as much as 500 bons, or lose whatever you have. More bons mean a better chance at a better job, right? Take me for an example! Today I'm a headmaster but tomorrow... who knows, I might even become a politician! Because I work hard and my bons keep piling up.'

By my side, Jandaya rolls her eyes. She can't stand the man, Overdoo. And who *would* stand him, with his sleazy smile and his posh suits? His immaculate white fur seems to glow, its black spots glossy like a puppy's. We suspect he dyes his fur to make himself look younger. He's stuck one of his paws in his pocket, as if he keeps something there, and he waves his other paw around as if he's holding a conductor's baton. He's a dog that believes the world revolves around bons. From a very young age, we've been indoctrinated that bons are 'the key to a better future'. And whose idea was this system anyway? Dogs earning points to get to a certain rank, and then using that rank to apply for jobs, for a better salary, to get the respect of others – or not. How many bons will I have upon graduation? Getting all the way to 500 upon graduation and getting a Rank 2 so that you can apply for a better job is not easy. Who knows how many bons Overdoo will take away from me, if this year the system is under his control. I'm a pain in his behind as it is. I cannot picture myself amassing 2000 and becoming the big deal. It's mindboggling how some dogs can collect 2500 bons, achieve Rank 4 and be eligible for the City Council!

We call the new school 'the Cylinder'. It's white, round and dull. Infoscreens glow on its mirror façade. They are mounted on every new building and are used for advertising. And for showing important news, along with the barkmedia. The old buildings don't have infoscreens. They can't be mounted there because the façades are not flat enough.

I turn back to look at the Lantern. It was such an awesome building. Rubie has told us so much about the time when it was built, when everything used to be much more beautiful. He's always exploring things from the past on the barknet. He must have surfed the entire net for inspiration. He's really into this stuff, architecture and so on. What has happened to his art on the walls of the Lantern, I wonder? We all write but his graffiti have their own retro style. Rubie, by the way, is my best friend. Right now, he's staring at his screen. Only Clutch pretends to listen with attention to the boring welcome speech and Overdoo's bragging. Jandaya, Rubie, and Clutch – this is my pack.

Suddenly, a strange-looking sphere rolls over by my feet. It's slightly bigger than a golf ball. I bend down and I pick it up to examine it more closely. What a strange thing! It's green-blue, quite hefty. Its surface is covered with fine grooves, and there's an opening on one side – for charging, perhaps? I've never seen anything like it! What is this?

'Don't stick your muzzle into toys for grown-ups, puppy! Or you'll end up yelping for Mommy!'

I turn to see Brutus leaning over me. I leap back, ready for a squabble. Brutus simply tilts his head sideways, as if taking my measure. Then he reaches his paw out and opens it expectantly. 'This belongs to me.'

'Says who?' I retort in defiance.

'You know, we can do this the easy way or the hard way...' he hisses.

I bare my teeth and I drop my backpack to the ground. The sphere is still in my paw. His muzzle touches mine. The hairs on my neck bristle up. We stare into each other's eyes, and then a paw grabs me by the hoodie and pulls me away.

'Stop it! You're on the brink of being expelled as it is.'

Jandaya. She signals to me that Overdoo has turned to look in our direction. With a snarl, I shove the sphere into Brutus's paw. I hate this guy! Every time we squabble, the headmaster takes his side and holds me responsible. Brutus comes from the Home for Mongrels. So what? Does this mean that he can get away with anything? I find the fountain pen in my pocket and I squeeze it hard. This always calms me. The pen is a keepsake from Mom.

On the stage, the headmaster is finishing up. '...and as for the future, I assure you that it is bright, shiny and well-planned. Not only by me, of course. Our dear friend and generous benefactor, Mr Granitsky, personally guarantees that this school year will be packed with... nice surprises. And we are so impatient, aren't we! Because we know that he is a dog of his word.'

'Yeah, sure. And I'm still chasing my own tail like a small pup!'

'Hey! Is that Harry over there?' Clutch says, pointing to the fence of the schoolyard.

It *is* Harry, surrounded by a few patrol cars and several fat uniforms.

'Are they trying to take him away?' Jandaya says, shocked.

'They can't think he's to blame for the fire! We must help him!' Rubie joins in.

We struggle through the crowd in Harry's direction. By the time we reach the fence, however, the patrol cars are already on their way. We look at each other. Have they arrested him? We rush to the Cylinder and we dash up the stairs to Harry's room. We have to be in class soon but this is urgent. Quite a start of the school year, no doubt about it.

II

'What a mess!'

The room looks like a cabin in a wrecked ship. Harry's three-legged stool lies upside down on the floor in the middle, and his drawings and painting materials are scattered around it. As I look around, I hear some noise.

Rubie makes a sign that we should be quiet and points at the barkradio which is barely audible. Harry is among the very few that still use it. Rubie turns up the volume.

According to the initial information, the fire that devoured the old building of Barcus Aurelius School is intentional. It started on the second floor and quickly spread towards the lower levels of the building. No dogs were harmed because the building has long been abandoned. However, despite the efforts of the firefighters the material damage is significant. Most probably access to the building will be banned and for now its future remains uncertain.

Bottles of turpentine have been found in the building. Being an inflammable substance, the turpentine has increased the fire's power. Prime suspect for the incident is the security of the school, Harry Scribtag.

I jump up and the hairs on my neck erect. 'What a pile of crap!'

Not much is known about Scribtag. His father was a painter but he was never recognized in his lifetime. Harry is a painter himself. He's worked as security for the school for years, and has been living on the top floor of the school's new building.

Scribtag was taken in by the police early this morning after footage from nearby CCTV led to suspicions about his involvement in the incident. The investigation is ongoing. The police are looking to establish all the circumstances surrounding the fire.

Rubie turns the barkradio off. We say nothing, looking at each other. Harry? Whose only passion is drawing? And who lives *in* the school? All he's got are his materials, his drawings and this small room! Why would he set the Lantern on fire?

'What do you make of this?' Jandaya asks.

'What can I make?' I bark. 'We all know Harry since we were little. He's as meek as a lamb!'

Rubie picks up several paintbrushes and arranges them with care into a leather case. He blows the dust off and combs their hairs. He knows that the brushes that now lie scattered on the floor are Harry's favorite. He shakes his head. His eyes sadly travel around the room, from one end to the other. We are all close with Harry but the connection between him and Rubie is stronger. Art has always been the link between them. Sometimes we would go to the Lantern, and the two of them would remain here, talking for hours.

'We need to tidy up' Rubie says quietly.

'No!' I protest. 'We need to find out what has really happened...'

As he looks up at me, I realize that he fears losing his friend. Jandaya steps on my toes. I look at her and she makes that face, the one she makes when I've overreacted. She keeps telling me that I have the bad habit of not letting go once I sink my teeth into something.

'We'll come back after school, all right?' she suggests.

With an automatic nod, Rubie walks on, and I follow him. Something in the corner of the room catches my attention. A drawing. I point at it.

'What's this?'

Jandaya shrugs. I reach down and pick it up.

'It looks like the strange sphere that I saw this morning during the ceremony. The one Brutus grabbed away. Obviously, Harry has seen it too. If the sketch is his...'

‘Again with this Brutus crap. Aren’t you bored of obsessing with him?’ Jandaya asks with a frown.

‘And aren’t you bored of always taking his side?’ I snap back.

‘His side?!’ She jerks her head around so violently that her ears flap.

‘We all know that you’ve grown up together but that doesn’t make him a better dog! He’s still the same nasty mutt!’

‘Oscar, Jay, that’s enough! Let’s go, or we’re going to be late for class’ Clutch says.

Jandaya shakes her head and walks away. I fold the sheet of paper, putting it in my pocket. And we head to our classroom, split in two. No problem, we’ll get over it. After all, it’s not the first time that I and Jay have squabbled over Brutus.

III

I still muse on what the connection between the strange sphere, Brutus and Harry might be, as I fiddle with the fountain pen in my paws. Examining it closely when I need to focus better has become my habit. I look at the old lacquer, the beautiful symbol on top, the blunt tip of the nib. It’s been long since it last worked. It must’ve broken down back when Mom was still alive. However, she kept it in her desk drawer and wouldn’t allow Dad to throw it away during his regular ‘getting rid of junk’ fits every spring and every autumn. My obsession to keep everything tidy must have come from him.

When Mom passed away, something got into him and he decided to give all her belongings away. Even her camera! And it wasn’t even spring or autumn, it was during the summer – a few months after the fire that took her life away and left my sister Fara scarred forever. I took the pen to salvage it because I feared he would throw it away along with her desk. Then I got used to having it with me all the time.

Mom also left me her red folder of newspaper clippings. She gave it to me as a present when I grew up because she knew I loved the stories she’d been collecting for years. For me, they were not mere newspaper articles, they were the most exciting good-night stories. Even now, when I read them today, I imagine myself looking for solutions to the issues they describe. I picture

myself finding out who the culprits are and punishing them. Fighting the imminent evil, although it always finds a way to slip away. Like a true superhero. Sometimes I wonder if I could have saved Mom too... I doubt it. I was too young, and it was a stupid incident. Anyway. What was I talking about? Oh, yes, Dad. As the last piece of furniture was brought out of Mom's study and the last piece of clothing cleared from her wardrobe, his compulsion to keep things tidy vanished too. From then on it is me and my sister that take care of that. Naturally, I'm much better at it than her. As for Dad, he's absorbed in his own world where he cares about nothing but his work—

A deep voice interrupts my thoughts. 'Nice pen. I thought they didn't exist anymore.'

I look up. A stranger is staring at me. He leans on the desk, scrutinizing me. Behind him, our history teacher rummages through his bag. Is this guy a new teacher or something?

'Ahem... No? At least mine is still here' I manage, then I look away before my surprise shows.

And my surprise is mostly due to his style – corduroy trousers, jacket, polo neck jumper, shabby beret and small round glasses. The retro attire brings about a feeling of warmth and comfort. The newcomer looks as if he's teleported from the last century. Could he be an actor?

'Attention, please!' our history teacher calls. 'Today I've invited a good friend of mine to visit us. He rarely stays in one place for long because he has a lot of things going on but today, he has spared some of his time for us. It's an honour for me to introduce him to you. For now, I'd rather not give away what he does for a living. I challenge you to make a guess at the end of our meeting.'

A smile dances on the stranger's muzzle. How old is he? He looks a tad older than Dad but he emanates calm and confidence. He takes a step forward and turns to face the class. The room is silent. His eyes travel across the rows of desks. And then, he asks, 'What's the time?'

'It's two pm' somebody replies.

'Do you all agree it *is* two pm?'

A few of us nod with vague smiles. Others look at each other.

'So, we agree that it is day outside, don't we? Now, imagine that your teacher insists that it's night. That you cannot read the clock and you have to believe that what *he* says is true.'

A few students burst out laughing.

‘You must wonder what has all this got to do with me’ the stranger continues as he starts pacing among the desks. ‘What if I, too, were to tell you that it was nighttime? And I repeated it a hundred times? And what if your headmaster also insisted it was dark? And then the news presenter on the barkmedia? And your parents? Would you start doubting yourselves then?’

‘Well, if everybody said it was so...’ somebody tries hesitantly.

‘This is what I do for a living’ the stranger goes on. ‘I protest when somebody tries to present a lie as the truth.’

‘Even when everybody else believes it *is* the truth?’ a student asks.

The stranger nods.

‘Like in that old tale, about the emperor’s new clothes’ another suggests.

‘Yes!’ Rubie agrees, raising his paw. ‘And then the child points out that the emperor is nude!’

‘Exactly. Young puppies always dare tell the truth. But many grown-ups often forget this story’ our guest agrees with a smile.

‘But you don’t?’

‘I don’t because often I too, like the fore-said child, need to shout that the emperor’s nude at the top of my voice. Once I heard that a bigwig–’

‘What does ‘bigwig’ mean?’ Clutch interrupts.

‘By ‘bigwigs’ I mean all those grown-ups who believe themselves so important because they’ve got power, bons and influence’ the stranger explains.

What a strange way he’s got with words... Archaic. Same as his appearance.

‘So, I was saying, once I heard that a bigwig wanted to show everyone what a beautiful bridge he had built. I went there along with others like me to see it with my own eyes. He chattered on and on about how this bridge would be the connection between the two banks of the wild river. I had to interrupt him. “Why are you lying to us?” I asked.’

‘You mean that there was no bridge there?’ I ask, tilting my head. This guy is intriguing.

‘Not only there was no bridge, there was no river either! Just an old, dried-up river bed. The bigwig had directed the money for the bridge to the piggy banks of his friends and into his own safe. The bridge existed only on paper.’

‘And what happened when you accused him of lying?’ somebody wants to know.

‘He snapped at me that I didn’t understand a thing and that I was the only one so blind that I couldn’t see. Then he complained about me to the other bigwigs. Since then, they do their best to keep me away from events where one of them intends to brag about something. So that I don’t ruin it for them. However, there are more important things than how they feel.’

‘If we said our teacher was lying, we would get scolded’ somebody shouts from the back rows.

We all laugh and nod in agreement. The last-century visitor also smiles and he goes on with his story.

‘Dogs sometimes tell me that I’m ill-mannered. But asking questions and looking for evidence is not a sign of ill manners.’

‘And why would you do that?’ one of my classmates asks.

‘Eeeeh, why would I indeed... Let me give you another example.’ He leans against the wall, and looks around the room before continuing. ‘Imagine that some friends of yours suddenly discover that on paper they’ve been treated for some awful illness. But *not one of them* has actually been ill and they’ve never set foot in a hospital. Still, they’re on a list with fake patients along with many others. Why would somebody want to make up such a list, you may wonder. Well, because this is quite an easy way to steal money. To get funding meant for medicine, for surgery, for examinations...’

‘This is awful’ Jandaya exclaims.

‘And what’s even more awful is that it’s *true*. In this particular case, we managed to get some of the money back. And it was used to treat somebody who really needed it. It provided the funds needed for the treatment of a child. There’s a lesson in this story, and I would like you to remember it: when the bigwigs steal, it affects us all.’

He’s got our attention now. We all listen, not uttering a word.

‘I do what I do because it does matter where the money goes, and it’s my firm belief that we should all live a better life, not just the bigwigs...’

He pauses for another look around the classroom. A smile still dances on his lips. He knows how to tell a story. I’m not sure how much I’ve understood from his stories but it’s nice to

listen to him talk. He has an air of kindness and calm about him. I have the feeling that I've seen him before somewhere, that I know him.

Our history teacher interrupts us. 'So, can you guess what our guest does for a living?'

'Is he a writer?' somebody tries.

The last-century gentleman shakes his head.

'A judge?' Another guess.

Another shake of the head.

'A clown!' a third classmate says. Everybody starts laughing.

'Do you surrender?' our teacher asks.

'NOOO!' We want to keep guessing.

'Okay but my friend has to leave, and we have to start our class.'

'I'm sorry, puppies. It often happens that I'm interrupted or sent away just when things get really heated or interesting' the man says with a shrug. 'I'm an investigative journalist.'

'An investigative journalist?' I gape at him. 'Really? I thought this profession didn't exist anymore.'

'Well, if something kept gnawing at you, you wouldn't just quit sniffing around, would you?' he says.

He really does seem like somebody from the last century. But... Hang on! If he's... Then... Okay, now I see why he seems so familiar! I get goosebumps.

'Pleased to meet you' he says, lifting his hat and then returning it back on his head. Then he gives us his name, as I whisper it along – I've guessed it already. 'Ned Noxville. And now I really have to go. But before I do, I have some presents for you! So that you can start writing down questions whose answers might make the world a better place.'

He reaches into his tote bag and takes out a bunch of small notepads, bound in brown leather. Wow!

'Do you know him?' Rubie asks me quietly but I simply wave a paw at him.

Ned Noxville! My ears are on fire! Mom has collected almost all his cases in her clippings folder! The two of them used to work for the same newspaper. She adored him. I adore him. I feel like howling out with excitement. I must draw his attention to me! He's a walking legend. Well...

for me and for Mom at least. And now here he is, in the flesh, leaning against my history teacher's desk! He smooths the lapel of his jacket, waves us a 'goodbye' and starts towards the door. I suddenly realize that I'm shouting.

'And how can we learn to recognize what's true and what's not?'

He stops and turns to me. I have stood up by my desk.

'Oh, the boy with the fountain pen' he says with a smile. Then he turns to the whole class once again and I diligently sit back down. 'Speak out and expose the bigwigs when you catch them lying. Approach everything with curiosity and keep your sense of humour alive.'

As he says that, he returns to my desk and puts a business card on it. Then he leaves. I feel that this won't be the last time we meet.

IV

Here I am, amidst all the stories that Mom had been collecting for years in her red folder, the one she left me. Is it afternoon already? I feel like my meeting with Ned Noxville in the flesh was seconds, not hours ago. As if with a snap of my fingers I've either fast-forwarded time or simply teleported myself directly at home. Snap! And here I am. Engulfed by the relaxing scent of the yellowing clippings, I slowly start coming to my senses. My eyes shift from one clipping to the next, from one article to the other. The ones which Ned wrote are my favorite. Just look at the headings!

Poison under our feet:

The story nobody wants to tell

The Clockmaker's umbrella:

Who keeps his dirty secrets?

Investigation under pressure

or who fears the truth?

Reporter Thunders remains in custody without any evidence

Corruption – the silent enemy of the city

And so many more... enough to get all your fur to stand with excitement!

And today I've seen Ned Noxville, my childhood's superhero, in the flesh, with my own eyes. I still can't believe he's real! And not only has he given me a notepad as a gift, he's left his business card too! I look at the two magical tokens and I slowly put them down onto the pile of clippings. As my paw touches the paper, something draws my attention. Oh! It's my favorite article from *The Voice of the City*.

Old Auntie Silky's bench: how a bench can turn into a form of protest
by Ned Noxville

Every morning, at 7:15 sharp, Silky Sweetsoul appears with a crocheted pawbag, a newspaper and a flask of sweet-scented herbal infusion. She passes through the entrance to the Fetch That Stick Park and stops by the third bench on the right. She puts a pillow on it, sits down, spreads her newspaper, takes a sip from her infusion and as she starts reading, she bids every passer-by good day. She knows almost everyone both by name and by their gait...

I turn around with a gasp. My sister is standing over by my side, reading along.

'Where did *you* spring up from?' I ask.

'It's been a while since you've taken out her collection' she observes and takes a seat next to me.

'Do you remember how Mom used to read them to me?' The memory makes me smile.

'I do! And I joined you just this once, and then I had nightmares.'

'But look how brave you are now!' I say and I pat her on her back.

'I don't know if I'm brave but I can certainly scare the wits out of dogs. I look terrible.'

She sighs.

'So true! You're as ugly as a monster' I say with a dramatical sigh.

'You moron!' Fara scoffs.

'Okay, let me have a better look...'

'Get lost!' she shouts and turns away.

Most of her face is hidden behind her fringe – the burnt part. It's bare, furless skin, soft and streaked with fine lines.

'May I? This one doesn't seem so scary...' She smiles, reaching out for the clipping.

I nod. *The Bench Story*, this is how I used to call it. Fara picks up the piece of paper and goes on reading aloud, while I lie down on my back and relax. I close my eyes and I let myself sink into the story. Fara's melodical voice lulls me to sleep. The memory of me cuddling against Mom, the tips of her ears tickling my nose, weaves its way through the words, upsetting their order and breaking up the sentences.

“...Auntie Silky doesn't have access to her favorite bench for three months now...”

“A chair appears from somewhere...”

“Every morning, she comes back, sitting down directly opposites to where her old bench used to be, staring at the fence, the tall fence that now blocks the view towards all the greenery...”

“...until one day a small pup with a paper poster shows up. It reads: “Bring back Auntie Silky's park!””

“The protest for Auntie Silky grows stronger with every passing day.”

“As grows the number of questions about this so-called renovation, dear readers. How much longer will the park remain fenced off? Who is responsible for this delay? How big is the budget for this project? Will there be a park here at all, and when?”

Fara stops reading and turns to me. 'Do you know what happened with this park in the end?'

'Nothing. Mom told me that eventually they took down the fence because of the protesters. It turned out that nothing had been done, and the park was ruined after they left it

unattended for so long. And nobody wanted to do the renovations despite all the promises. Then they sold it. It was where the big roundabout is today.'

'So sad... And what about Silky?' Fara asks.

'She must be long gone. It was a long time ago. As far as I know, it's one of Ned Noxville's first stories. Just look at the clipping, it's yellow with time.' I take the clipping from her paws.

'Why doesn't anyone write like this anymore? It puts a lump in my throat even now!' she says.

'It does, doesn't it! I ask myself the same. As a young pup I dreamed of meeting him but I didn't believe he was a real person. And today I saw him, Fara. At school. Can you imagine? I've always wanted... to be like him!'

'Well... A fire has burned down a building: isn't this good reason for some investigative journalism? You have friends who can help you. And you have a sister who can kick your tail base if you want to quit. Doesn't it sound like a plan?'

'Well... I wouldn't be so sure about having friends...' I mumble.

'Oh? What did you do this time?'

'I had a quarrel with Jandaya. Guess what about...'

'Brutus' my sister says with a sigh.

I nod. 'I can't stand this mutt. And I can't stand the fact that she always finds a way to vindicate him and keeps defending him!'

'It's only normal, Oscar! They've grown up together in the Home. Is it so hard for you to see that? They don't have parents, they live in an orphanage... Dogs there learn to watch each other's backs, nobody else would do it for them. And they must've been close as puppies, scuffling about, playing games... All this leaves a trace. And even if they have their differences today, their past has marked them and they are still loyal to each other. Do I really need to explain to you how dog nature works?'

'You know everything, don't you?' I stick my tongue out at her.

'Can't you see she cares about everyone? About Rubie, Clutch, about me. Why shouldn't she care about Brutus too? It's the way she is! And the only thing you'll achieve if you try to set

her against Brutus, is have ever more serious quarrels with her until she stops caring for you eventually.'

'She's not my mother! She doesn't need to care for me!' I bark.

Fara falls silent. Sulking, I start collecting the articles.

'Sometimes you can be quite the baby, you know. Go to Jandaya and apologize. She may not be your mother but if you lose her, you'll miss her no less than you do Mom.'

Her words echo in my head as I gather the clippings and put them back in the folder.

Can I be like Noxville? I *want* to be like him! And now I've even got my own notepad. I can smell something's off in the story with the fire. And I have my pack too. I need Jay. Fara is right. If we don't make it up and I lose her, I'll miss her terribly. Terribly.

[text in illustration]

LAST ISSUE

THE VOICE OF THE CITY

LAST ISSUE

CORRUPTION

THE SILENT ENEMY OF THE CITY

IT IS TIME FOR THE TRUTH.

EVEN IF IT IS THE LAST THING WE HEAR.

Our city is being devoured by a disease. Not one that is treated in the hospital but a more insidious one, one that lurks in the shadows, behind the closed doors of luxury offices, in the paws that hold briefcases with money 'for somebody's troubles'. And this disease has a name. Its name is *corruption*. And it has won this battle. But it hasn't won the war.

The Voice of the City is out for the last time today. There was too much pressure, the threats were too obvious, the slander lawsuits too many. Truth is not welcome in this city. The investigations that we carried out revealed more than the authorities were willing to disclose. And now, when we are up against the wall, we have to choose between remaining silent or telling the truth for one last time before we are silenced forever.

WHO DOESN'T WANT *THE VOICE OF THE CITY* TO BE HEARD?

Corruption is not a singular occurrence. It corrupts everything it touches. For a long time, we have been signaling that the city has become a puppet in the paws of powerful dogs. That sometimes, the police are biased when it comes to whom to defend and whom not to. That in our city government there are... (continued on p. 5)

[partial]

INVESTIGATION UNDER PRESSURE

OR WHO FEARS THE TRUTH?

REPORTER THUNDERS REMAINS IN CUSTODY WITHOUT ANY EVIDENCE

V

Tap! Tap! TAP!

The pebbles bounce off the pane of the second window to the left on the second floor of the Home for Mongrels. There is a feeble light inside. Jandaya must be lying on her bed, listening to music. She didn't pick up when I tried to call her earlier. So, I have no other choice but come here and try to get her attention somehow – hidden in the shadows, throwing pebbles at her window. The place is sinister. It gives me the creeps. The *Bright Future* Home for Mongrels. For most of the dogs here, the future is quite glum but this is not the point now. Dogs of all ages live here, all abandoned. Most don't have a breed. Jandaya, for example, has long ears and a pointy muzzle, with big, wet, warm eyes – quite like those rare Afghan hounds, only her hair is shorter. Somebody found her and brought her here years ago. She and Brutus were the youngest. They grew up together. She has told us a lot about him and if her stories are to be believed, he used to be the funniest pup in the world. No way! Imagine that! But I'm wandering off. What I meant to

tell you was about the building. I don't want to present myself as a coward or anything but the place is super creepy. The façade is quite battered, and inside, the ceilings are really high. The place reminds me of some mansion from the last century, of the scariest type, the ones which are haunted and their stairs creak. The garden is overgrown with thick bushes and trees, and a light flickers above the imposing entrance door. The lamp case is packed with the bodies of dozens of dead moths and other insects, drawn there by the light only to find their death. Whoa! This last bit came out quite poetic, wouldn't you say? I'm good.

Tap! TAP!

Oh, come on, Jay! Take off your headphones! A little harder and I'll break the window. There! She's heard me, finally. A silhouette appears at the window, peering outside. I come out of the shadows and grin at her. I wave my paw vigorously, prompting her to join me downstairs. And if she thinks I can't see her rolling her eyes when she recognizes me, she's mistaken. I wrap myself in my hoodie and wait quietly, listening to her feet pat down the stairs.

She arrives, her lips pursed.

'How you doin', Jay?' I say.

My attempt at spontaneity isn't appreciated. I try a different approach.

'Ahem. Are you ready with your project for tomorrow?'

She frowns. 'Really? You've come here to talk about my project?'

'Not really. Ahem... well, I've come to apologize.'

'Mhmmm' she grunts.

'I mean, it was stupid, what happened this morning, and then there was Harry, and then Noxville, and then...' I twaddle foolishly.

She says nothing. She wraps herself in her coat and turns away. Her profile is so gracious. I've always thought that she is pure-bred but they've carried out tests that reveal traces of several breeds in her blood. However, she's not embarrassed by that, the way many other mongrels are. She always walks with her muzzle held high but she doesn't seem haughty – because of her eyes. The same eyes which keep avoiding me stubbornly right now. I sigh.

‘Okay, fine. I’m sorry that I got so angry with that... with Brutus.’

She’s still silent.

‘I’m sorry. I mean it! I don’t want us to fight because of him. And I promise you that I’ll try to control myself. I know that there’s a connection between you two. It’s just that sometimes... Well, my vision blurs and... I wanted to apologize earlier, in the school but... I was really excited to see Noxville and I wanted to get back home as soon as possible, to take out the red folder and succumb to the emotion. Imagine how you’d feel if you met with that activist girl, Vega, the one you like so much.’

I blurt it all out in one go, and I weave in that pleading note in my voice, which is going to melt her heart, I know it. She turns and looks at me. Good job, Oscar!

‘And also... I need you!’ I add.

‘Let’s say apology accepted’ she says eventually.

‘Great! Gimme five!’ I jump up and reach a paw out in the air but by the way she looks at me, I can tell that I’m pushing it a bit too far. ‘Ahem... So, let me get to the point.

‘Something’s bothering me. I want to go back to Harry’s room. We couldn’t examine it properly last time. We might find some evidence that we can use to defend him and... I can’t explain it, I feel like there’s some invisible trace that I’m picking up. Harry is such a sweet person, he would never do something like this. Besides, I think that the spheres are part of the puzzle too. I’ve never seen anything like them before! I feel like my intuition is trying to tell me something.’

I take out the piece of paper that I found in Harry’s lair and I unfold it. Jandaya takes it in her paws and examines the drawing.

‘I haven’t seen anything like them either’ she says. ‘Perhaps it’s some new technology. Harry must have known about them, if he’s made drawings. And it seems that Noxville really did mess up your head’ she finishes with laughter and passes me back the drawing.

‘You have no idea! Mom had collected all his articles. She has read them all to me a million times when I was little... And I think she treasured the articles even more after *The Voice* was shut down. I must’ve gotten it from her.’

‘And why was it shut down? Because of the barknet? Was it too old-fashioned?’

‘I don’t know. I was still young and many things were still unclear. The only thing Mom said was that some powerful dogs interfered with the journalists’ work.’

I pause and my thoughts rush back to the past again. One of my favorite memories is how Mom is sitting on the floor amidst the yellowing clippings spread under her paws. She calls me over to show me something. ‘This is important, look!’ she says, and she points out some detail, somebody’s gesture on a picture, a glance, or something that seems insignificant at first sight. She always insisted that I should try and see beyond dogs’ faces because sometimes ‘the devil is in the details.’ This was how she used to take her pictures, always looking for something that had remained hidden from everybody else.

‘This is weird. I didn’t know that you could be banned from writing’ says Jandaya, interrupting my memories.

I nod. Indeed. How could somebody forbid you to write? Back then, Mom didn’t make much sense to me. But I remember that a friend of hers went to prison because of what he had written in *The Voice of the City*... And Mom got a job offer from the barkmedia after the newspaper was shut down but she declined. She said it felt like she would be working for the same dogs she fought against. So, she stayed unemployed all the way until the end. She would still take pictures but she did it just for the fun of it. And she was a master photographer!

‘You know, she always told me that I mustn’t trust anyone, not even those who were exceptionally kind to me. Because sometimes it’s all just for show.’

Jandaya falls into thought.

‘Like when dogs are being nice to you only because they want something? Is that what you mean?’

‘Maybe. Do you think that Harry could have just pretended to be nice? And in fact, it really *was* him who set the Lantern on fire?’ I ask.

‘Absolutely not’ Jandaya says, shaking her head. ‘And why would he want to burn it down anyway? Think about it!’

‘I *am* thinking. I’m thinking so hard that soon my brains will overheat. That’s why I want to go back there. How about we go tomorrow, during break time? This way, we’ll have time to share our plan with the others beforehand.’

Instead of replying, Jandaya hushes me quietly and focuses on something behind me. I hear footsteps and I turn around. I can't make out the face yet, it's just a shapeless mass that grows bigger and bigger until I get the feeling it's about to crush me. I stand in front of Jandaya. Then I see a muzzle, and the muzzle... smiles, almost friendly. The mass reaches out a paw and pats me on the shoulder.

'I scared the wits out of you, didn't I?' it asks.

Goodness! It's Granitsky! Wow! This is the first time I see him in person, and not on the barkmedia. He's quite bulky!

'Well... yeah, no, we're just talking' I say, looking back at Jandaya and taking a step back.

'Ahaaa, with Jandaya!' He grins.

They should call him Gigantsky, not Granitsky. He takes up as much space as three average grown-up dogs. Now he puts one paw on my shoulder and one on Jandaya's. I don't like it when strangers touch me but his paw seems to weigh more than my whole self and I can't bring myself to shake it off.

'And how is my favorite girl doing?' he asks and his huge belly shakes with laughter.

'Bom-ba-stic! As always!' Jandaya replies.

'Who's your friend?' Granitsky turns to look at me.

'He's from school. We are discussing a project we're working on together, it's due tomorrow' Jandaya mumbles.

'It's not what I asked, though, is it?' says Granitsky and this time there's a steely note in his voice, as if he doesn't tolerate disobedience.

'I'm Oscar, milord!'

"Milord"? What the heck?! I'm surprised by my own words. I was this close to even saluting the guy...

Jandaya and Granitsky are amused. "'Milord"?' They start laughing.

'Now that's something I haven't been called. I like it. I like you, boy!' He pats me on the shoulder so hard that I lose my balance. I look at Jandaya.

'So, see you tomorrow, Oscar!' she says. 'We know what to do about the project, right? We'll go and research on the spot so that we can show photographs too!' She winks at me.

‘Er, okay. Yes. See you tomorrow!’

I stand, paws in pockets, and watch them as they disappear into the building. Granitsky’s put his paw on her shoulder in a familiar way. He walks behind her, as if he’s guiding her. It’s his place, after all. He’s a benefactor to the Home and Jandaya has been told about it since she was little. He even bought her a new pair of blades for her birthday... Come to think of it, I don’t care. What matters is that we made up and tomorrow we’re going back to Harry’s room. A gust of cold wind pierces through me. I cuddle inside my hoodie. As I leave, I pass by a black car, at least ten metres long. The engine’s on but the headlights are off. It’s Granitsky’s carriage.

I let out a whistle.

What does it feel like to live in such luxury, I wonder. The word ‘bigwig’ materializes in my mind and I remember our meeting with Noxville. Is Granitsky a bigwig? I should ask Ned if I saw him again. Then I remember Harry and his small, stuffy room. Will we discover something new there tomorrow?

VI

He hasn’t uttered a word since he told us to sit down. Clutch has stuck her paws under her legs. Jandaya has crossed hers on her chest. Rubie’s are in his lap, picking at the fur between his fingers. All three are staring at the floor. My eyes are fixed on the walls of the room and I do my best to avoid the headmaster’s stare. But from the corner of my eye, I can feel that we are under scrutiny. It’s hardly my first visit to the headmaster’s office, yet every time I’m dumbfounded by its appearance. It doesn’t feel like a school office but rather like a room in a super luxurious flat. Everything is fancy – the desk, the furniture, the rugs. Even the sofa we’re sat on is posh, leather, so soft that we’ve sunk almost to the ground. The walls are adorned with photos of the headmaster with important dogs, diplomas, paintings. They are all huge, in gilded frames with ornaments. When will he say something? The silence is driving me mad.

‘So, what were you thinking, breaking in like this into Scribtag’s room? It is out of bounds.’ His claws rap on the desktop.

‘It’s my fault, headmaster. I made them do it’ I say.

‘I’ll deal with you individually, Oscar. But right now, I’m asking all of you, what did you expect to happen when you entered the room, fully aware that Scribtag has been arrested.’

‘This is exactly why we did it!’ Rubie says, leaping up. ‘They shouldn’t have arrested him. He is so nice. We know him. It’s not fair to put him in prison!’

‘Students...’ the headmaster starts with a sigh. ‘I hope you’re not presuming to be better investigators than the police? You’re asking for trouble—’

‘But yesterday on the news they said that the police believe he’s guilty’ I cut in again.

‘Listen! I also liked Harry but I don’t go sniffing in places I shouldn’t be, do I? I mind my school and my classes. And I advise you to do the same. If I’m to be honest with you, I don’t like it at all that I need to report you now.’

We all look up at him. Report us? Really?

‘Will they take away our bons?’ Clutch asks meekly.

‘What do you think? They won’t be scratching you behind the ears, that’s certain.’ Suddenly he seems vexed. ‘You see police tape stretched across the door. It doesn’t stop you. You move past it and you break into the room where an arson suspect lives. And you stay there for dog knows how long! You might’ve destroyed some evidence before you were caught!’ He stands up behind his desk, then he sits back down heavily and breathes out loudly. His eyes dart between us.

‘We didn’t destroy anything. We wanted to help’ I say.

‘Oh, you did, did you? I could be demoted myself. And I’m this close to...’

He shuts up, interlocking his fingers on the desk, then he jerks them away under the desk again. One of his paws is bandaged. I haven’t noticed until now. *This close* to what?

‘Thank goodness that we already have new security! Otherwise, you might still be in there!’ he goes on.

‘And how can you be so certain that this new security won’t destroy some evidence?’ I mumble softly. The guy looked suspicious, not like your average school security, more like a private bouncer. Where did they get *him* from?

‘Did you say something, Oscar?’ Overdoo turns to me and his blue eyes pierce through me. Jandaya pinches my thigh.

‘No, headmaster. I hope that the police find the real culprit and Harry is released.’

I’m not *that* stupid, you know. I won’t pick a fight with him, adding fuel to the flames.

Overdoo comes over to the front of his desk and leans against it. His bandaged paw is already in his pocket. He sends the others away, leaving me alone in his office. Jandaya gives me a worried look before the door closes after her. It’s just the two of us now, me and Overdoo, like every time we end up here with Brutus after a squabble. First, he scolds us both, then he lets Brutus walk, keeping me behind so he can preach to me personally. Every time he warns me that I make trouble all the time and that he would have had me expelled were it not for my father.

‘Oscar...’

Here we go. First, he’ll say how unpleasant it is that we are in the same situation again, then he’ll mention Dad and he’ll add that he doesn’t want to bother him. Not that Dad is too bothered with what’s going on with me. Still, when Overdoo calls him after yet another incident, he does try to talk to me, although ‘talk’ might be a bit far-fetched. It’s more like shaking his head in disappointment, and grumbling, as I listen, nod and promise that I’ll behave from now on. I don’t want to become a burden, after all. He roams around the house like a zombie as it is.

Overdoo continues. ‘It’s been a while since your mother passed away and I think I’ve been quite patient with regards to all your offences.’

I nod. I breathe in, I breathe out. Jandaya has taught me to count to ten when the preaching starts, then be quiet and take deep breaths. It also helps if I stare down at the floor.

‘If we find ourselves in the same situation one more time, there will be a *real* punishment, more serious than a reprimand and a few bons less.’

What does he mean? I frown and I cross my paws on my chest. Is he threatening me? What could he do to me?

‘Now I need to go back to my class. I suggest you do the same, so that we don’t start the year with absences. You do want to finish school, don’t you?’

His supposedly concerned tone actually feels the contrary. Should I trust him when he says he’s worried about me? I don’t know. And if he is, why is it always me who’s left holding the bag? Regardless, I look up and nod. I leave his office, then I leave the school too. I have no intention of going to class. I play back the morning in my head. There were bottles of turpentine in Harry’s

room indeed, but he is a painter, after all. It's normal to have a lot of them around. He uses the turpentine for thinning his paints, not for setting old buildings on fire. But it all just fits together so well, doesn't it? He fits in so well, doesn't he? However, who would want to set him up? I don't know what I hoped to find there... Perhaps one of those spheres? I won't settle down until I find out what they are used for. I need to think. So, I go to the place where I can think best.

VII

I prop my head against the tree and I look around. Where to from here? Home? No, it would be too suspicious if I came home at that time of the day. I wonder if Harry has family, friends, acquaintances? Somebody whom I could meet with and talk to. He's never mentioned anyone... Perhaps I should go to Harry himself? Yes! Why not? But how? Suddenly, I notice something. Or someone, rather.

Oh, it's Brutus! He's sneaking out of the schoolyard, with furtive looks around.

He stops on the pavement and checks his screen anxiously, then he starts swiveling his head around in all directions. I stand up so I can see better but I press my body against the tree trunk to avoid being seen. A car pulls over. It's black, Granitsky's trade mark. Brutus takes a step towards it, looks around for one last time and then gets in hastily.

I'm dumbfounded. What, for my tail's sake, is Brutus doing getting into one of Granitsky's cars? Without thinking, I jump on my board and I follow them.

They weave along streets with bumpy cobbles, surrounded by battered buildings with Gothic elements, suspicious bars and dogs who'd rather stay out of sight. This place makes the hairs on my neck stand. It's mostly mutts here. Purebreds would be out of place. They... *We* belong to the central area and our parents have been warning us since an early age not to come to the Old Town. I, however, know it well. The shortest route to the Industrial Zone where we go to write with Rubie passes through here.

And what brings Brutus to this part of town? After a while the car stops in front of a small shop. I sneak behind a nearby tree. I'm still confused. Brutus in Granitsky's car... My, my! True, they must know each other from the Home but... Jandaya has never been in one of his cars. She

would have told me otherwise, wouldn't she? And why would Granitsky want to give this prick a lift anyway? My mind is buzzing with questions. The car door opens and Brutus gets out.

He pauses for a moment in front of the shop and looks around before entering...

Nonchalantly, I pass by the shop window, glancing inside – just in time to see the shop assistant pass something to Brutus... something round which flashes in blue-green for a second. Oh! It's a sphere! It's the same sphere as the one I saw during the opening ceremony! And the one on Harry's drawing. Brutus puts it into his backpack and turns to leave. I rush forward and turn around the corner. Then I peek out cautiously from the shadows.

Brutus leaves the shop and reaches into his backpack. There it is again! The same sphere! He turns it over in his paws, examining it as if for the last time, then he simply chucks it into the nearest bin. Maybe this is an old sphere and he's just taken a brand new one?

I wait for him to walk away, then I approach the bin. My heart is thumping wildly. I reach inside and take out the sphere. Now I can examine it better. Its surface is covered in fine grooves. Perhaps they open up when you activate it, and the sphere pops open? It has a small lens on one side. I peer into it but I can't see a thing. The sphere looks old and battered. Would we be able to find out what it is?

Brutus hasn't seen me. He wouldn't expect to find me here. He opens the door of the car and slithers in... Then, he suddenly jumps out again. He leans on the door and starts scanning his surroundings.

Could the driver have seen me pick up the sphere?

I stick to the shadows but I don't have time to contemplate. Brutus starts walking in my direction so I decide I won't wait any longer – I jump on my board and I whoosh away towards the police station. I have a purpose – Harry. Then I can wonder about Brutus and whether he has recognized me or not. But even if he has, he can't say a thing because he'll betray himself too. Something's off here, I know it for certain now.

VIII

'Are you lost, little beagle?' somebody shouts.

‘You’d better watch your back! We don’t see such nice boards around here often. Be careful or you might trip over something!’

‘Shall we see how fast the puppy can run, eh? Howl! Hooowl! Hooooooooowwwl!’

The voices and the laughter fade away behind my back. They are teasing me but they wouldn’t dare jump me. The station is just two blocks away.

At last, I get to Justice Square. The exterior of the police station reminds me of a huge concrete cube – clearcut shape which doesn’t fit it with the Gothic architecture I’ve seen on my way here. I know it’s Gothic because Rubie has told me so. He’s constantly on about such things and even though I don’t normally listen, some of his chattering must’ve gotten through.

Traces of a coat of arms are still visible on the wall; part of it has fallen off and the rest looks more like a dark splotch. I stop on the stairs in front of the massive steel door. I try to pull it open but it’s awfully heavy.

Then somebody leans on it from the inside and with our combined efforts the door shifts. A police officer sneaks through the gap. His belly doesn’t look happy with the pressure. The officer is so busy huffing, puffing and cussing at the door that at first, he doesn’t even notice me. I wait patiently and when his eyes finally land on me, I smile and I greet him cheerfully.

‘And where do *you* think you’re going?’ he inquires.

‘Visitation’ I reply.

He eyes me over. He pats his pocket, takes a crumpled pack of cigarettes out and waves at me to go in. On the doorstep, I’m hit by the smell of something... unidentifiable. A mixture between old paper, ink, cheap soap and a broken air-conditioner.

The front desk area is small and packed with furniture which seems to have been intended for another building but somehow ended here. In one end there is a massive, imposing desk, with an old fan on top. The fan whizzes on, with occasional pauses. Sheets of paper and food wrappings are scattered on the desk.

Directly opposites me there is a counter with a window. Behind it, a middle-aged woman stares at a computer monitor from the last century. I can see the reflection of the screen in her eyeglasses – she’s moving playing cards around. Seriously? The only other person that I’ve seen doing that is Clutch’s mother. When I asked her what she was doing, she just said, playing patience.

In my opinion this is utterly boring but it seems to go paw in paw with old computer monitors. You won't be able to play it on the modern screens, I bet.

I clear my throat. 'Good afternoon!'

No reply.

'Excuse me?' I say, a bit louder.

She unglues her eyes from the screen, takes a look at me and points at a piece of paper without a word. It's a note scribbled in ugly letters: "This is not an information desk".

'Er, I'm here for a visitation' I persist.

'There are no visitations here' she snarls.

'But I need to—' My voice picks up a notch.

'Well, I "need to", too. I need to finish work, and I have just one hour, sixteen minutes until my shift ends.' She taps the monitor. 'Off you go!'

I put my paws in my pockets and look around. The walls are now pale yellow but in places the original colour shows, light beige. There's a sign on one of them. Yes! 'Important ...rmation', it says. Some of the words have faded away but the part concerning visitations is still legible.

Every day 9 to 11 am and 3 to 5 pm, as long as this doesn't disturb the break schedule of the staff or the inmates.

I return to the patience woman. Tap the glass.

'It says "every day from 3 to 5 pm" there' I point at the sign, 'and now it's quarter to four!'

The woman turns to the sign. She squints, trying to make out the words from where she's sitting.

'Are you a relative?' she asks, looking at me above the rims of her glasses.

'I'm his nephew' I lie.

'Have you got an ID? Or something?'

'Well, I have my school pass.'

'It's not good enough.' The woman frowns. 'How can I be certain that he's your uncle, huh? You're not even the same breed. He's been put down as 'spaniel', and you... you are something else, I can see that.'

‘Yes, because he was adopted and my mother is something like a stepsister to him’ I say quickly.

‘Okay, let’s say that I’m willing to let you in... We need to think of something...’ The woman smacks her lips and sits back in her chair.

I’m baffled. ‘Think of something... What do you mean?’

‘Listen, pup, don’t play dumb with me. We need to think of something that you can give me as an expression of your gratitude for the fact that I’ve stopped what I’m doing in order to help you’ she replies without batting an eye.

‘Well, um...’ I reach into my pocket and I can feel the sphere and an old biscuit there. I take the biscuit out. I look at it and then I look to the woman. ‘This is all I’ve got.’

‘Perfect. Will go down well with me tea!’ She leans over, slides her paw on the counter and opens it up.

I can’t tell if she’s for real or she’s joking. Anyhow, I drop the biscuit into her paw, she closes it and hides it under the counter. In this moment, I hear a familiar puffing behind me. The fat police officer has come back inside.

‘Oh, you still here, lad?’ he asks. ‘And what were you passing to her under the counter, huh?’

‘He was kind enough to offer me a treat, what’s you fussing about!’ the woman snaps at him.

‘As soon as I turn my back on you, treats start coming your way’ the officer says and starts laughing loudly. ‘A great way to bribe someone, lad, I give you that.’

Bribe... I’ve heard the word just once before. When Dad told Mom that somebody promised to give him *bons* if he said he hadn’t seen some documents signed by his boss. Dad didn’t mention the documents to anyone but he didn’t take the *bons* either. Mom was furious. This was the only time when they were so mad at each other that they didn’t speak for an entire week. Actually, it was Mom who was mad, and he just kept going to work every day, as usual. He doesn’t like to fight. He doesn’t want any trouble. When I asked Mom why they weren’t talking to each other, she told me everything and she explained that this was an attempt to *bribe* him and he should have gone to the police. And now? I’m the one bribing a police clerk with biscuits. Well

done, Oscar! I've put myself in quite the pickle... Do they have cameras here? What if they arrest me now? I look around.

'He wants to go on visitation.' The woman's voice interrupts my thoughts. She's already dunking the biscuit in a bowl of tea. 'He says it says there he can.'

'Well, let him, then.' The officer shrugs.

'Whose idea was this, anyway? Visitation in the end of the working day?! In the busiest of times!' She doesn't sound too happy.

I look at the biscuit, then I look at my watch. Ten minutes gone, and for what? At least, it seems that nobody cares about my edible bribe.

'Whom do you want to see?' the police officer asks and winks at me.

'Harry Scribtag' I reply quickly.

'Oh, the newbie?' He's aware of him, obviously. 'Come on, I'll take you there.'

I turn to the woman anxiously. Could I end up in a trap because of the goddamned biscuit? But she waves angrily in my direction as if trying to chase away a fly. I follow the officer cautiously. On his way, he stops by a vending machine. He pushes a button and the machine squirts some pâté in a paper bowl. He shoves it in front of my muzzle and asks, 'You want some? It's chicken.'

I shake my head. We continue down the hallway. Some of the lights work, others don't. On our way we pass by two other officers. They greet each other, touching their caps. The other two disappear in some side hallway, and we walk on, straight forward. Eventually, we stop in front of a narrow room with a desk and a couple of old chairs inside. It has big windows looking out to the hallway. The officer invites me in, instructs me to wait there and a few moments later he brings Harry over. Wow! Harry looks at least two years older! He comes in with his head hung low, his ears drooping sadly. He looks at me wearily, with a vague smile.

'You've got five minutes' The officer spreads his paw, then he slams the door closed.

Harry sits down on the chair next to me.

'Harry! How are you? They don't... harass you, do they?' My questions sound stupid but I'm worried by his ravaged looks and I want to make sure he is treated well. 'We'll get you out, don't worry!'

He looks at me with dull eyes. Doesn't say anything.

'Listen, we haven't got much time. Please, tell me what you remember about that night. Anything' I whisper, my ears pricked for noises coming from the hallway.

'It was me there! On a leash. I thought I was losing my mind.' He reaches out and takes me by the elbow. He looks as if he's on the brink of insanity.

'What?! It was you where?' I put my paw on his fingers which still clutch my elbow in the hope that my gesture will help him calm down.

'On the wall! On the Cylinder, where the infoscreen is. There was a graffiti with me. First, it wasn't there, then it was, and then it wasn't again...'

'Harry, you're not making much sense...'

'It must've been about midnight. Then I saw the bomb and my room got bright as a day.'

'*The bomb*? What bomb?'

'This is what I call it because it was as if it exploded. I went out to see what was going on. And when I got there, I saw myself. Me on a leash, and somebody walking me. I rushed back to take some rags and a bucket. I thought I could wash it away. It... it... looked like paint. I was scared they would accuse me of vandalism. Because it was my muzzle on the screen, you see?'

'So, this *bomb*, as you call it, changed the image on the infoscreen, did it?'

'Yes. But when I got back to clean it up with the mop and the bucket, it was gone. As if it had never been there. I thought I was going crazy but then I saw it.'

He's still not making much sense.

'You saw what, Harry?'

'The bomb. I think it did it. It must have. It's like a ball... I've never seen anything like it before. I picked it up to examine it but then I smelled the smoke and saw the flames. I dropped it back on the ground and rushed to the Lantern.'

I gasp. 'Like a ball? Was it... this?' I take out the sphere from my pocket and I show it to him. Now it's his turn to gasp.

'Yes! I even made a sketch on a piece of paper by memory because when I went back to look for it the next day, it was gone' he says, pointing at the orb frenetically.

'So, to summarize, this ball, or sphere, or bomb, somehow 'exploded', as you call it, and it changed the image on the infoscreen, then the new image disappeared and the old one returned. Is that it?'

Harry nods. 'Yes. Just one or two pixels had burned out.'

'This is the first time I hear about something like this' I say.

'Me too. And when I told the police, they thought that I was making it all up. Said no such bombs existed. I didn't tell them that it was me on the picture. Who would want to have my portrait of all dogs, Oscar?' He is genuinely puzzled.

'Yes, speaking of the graffiti... Was there a tag? Was it signed? Anything?' My questions keep coming.

'There was some sort of a leash, a collar. I didn't see it too well' he mumbles.

I jump on my feet.

'Are you sure?'

'About what?' Harry asks, his eyes still frenzied.

'About this... collar?'

'Yes, I think so. Why?'

'Because if it was a collar, I think I know who made it.'

He turns to me with a gasp.

'And he'll get what he deserves!' I finish through my teeth and I clench my fists.

'How... Who... ' Harry is excited but suddenly the door opens and the officer on duty comes in.

'Time's up, boys!'

I furtively return the sphere to my pocket and I give Harry a nod. I won't stop until I uncover the whole truth. When I leave the station, dusk has settled outside already. I slide on my board without a sound.

Thousand owls! The black car is there again. Is it my imagination, or is it the same car that I saw Brutus get into earlier? Could he have followed me all the way to here? The car lurks in the shadows, motionless, as if waiting in ambush. I turn around a corner and watch it cautiously

from there. A silhouette approaches. It's the police officer, from the station! Great, he'll check who this is and what they are doing here! It's about to get interesting!

But instead of stopping by the driver's door, the officer takes off his cap, opens the back door and... gets in. The car pulls away with a low hum, and leaves me gaping.

The picture gets more and more complicated. And I feel that the more I sniff about, the deeper I get into something I shouldn't meddle with. I can't wait to tell the others!

IX

I'm back in the yard of the Lantern. In our place. I'm alone but I feel closer to the truth. I know I am – after everything I learned yesterday. What a day... I smile. Mom would have been proud with me. I open my notepad and I start scribbling ideas and questions.

arson – sphere – Brutus – black car

black car – police

arson – Harry – ???

Questions:

Why Harry?

What part does Granitsky play?

What does Brutus want/get?

I look up and I try to focus.

Think! You're missing something!

It's not "something" you're missing... You're missing a lot of things!

Think! Think!

I turn to the Lantern, as if the answer is hidden there.

What am I missing?

The yellow police tape around the building stands out against the dark background of the interior.

‘Hey, poooooch!’

Out of the blue, Rubie jumps on my back.

‘You scared the wits out of me, dog!’ I say, turning.

‘Let’s see! You have a drawing for me?’ he asks, peeking over my shoulder at my notepad.

‘Show some patience and I’ll tell you about it. Where are the girls?’

‘They are coming. Slowly.’ He points behind his back.

‘This hat again?’ I ask and I flick the owl feather on his hat.

‘I got it from my father and he got it from his father. And if he wasn’t afraid of owls, then I’m not afraid either!’ Rubie says and I start laughing.

‘Dog, I doubt that an owl would dare face your grandfather. You are all muscle. Now, if it was Clutch’s grandfather, he would’ve had more reason to be afraid. Big owls would be tempted by a small-sized dog.’

‘We outsmart them’ Clutch cuts in, tapping the goggles she always has on the top of her head.

‘Well, I think this style suits him. It brings out the absentminded dreamer that he is’ Jandaya adds with a shrug.

‘I’m forever in your debt, milady!’ Rubie says with a slight bow.

Eventually, we stop laughing and I tell them about Brutus, Granitsky’s black cars, the bomb, the police station, Harry, even about my dog-biscuit bribe. I still mourn for it because it was my favorite kind, with peanut butter.

‘Give me it!’ Clutch says and reaches out her open paw.

I look at her in confusion.

‘This sphere, or bomb that you mentioned.’

I give it to her and she examines it thoroughly. She pushes a button I’ve overlooked but nothing happens.

‘Can I keep it?’ she asks.

‘Wouldn’t it be easier to just go and buy one?’ Jandaya suggests.

‘Yes, and yes’ I say. ‘You can keep it, and we can go to the shop too. But it’s over in the Old Town.’

‘I don’t have a problem with that, I’m a mongrel’ Jandaya says, looking important.

‘And I have my hoodie.’ Clutch hides under her hood.

‘And I...’ Rubie starts, sticking out his chest, ‘I have an owl’s feather won in a deadly fight. There’s no better proof for my bravery!’

I don’t miss the opportunity to tease him. After all, Rubie is my best friend, and everybody knows that best friends are the dogs you can mock wholeheartedly. So, I do that all the way to the Cylinder.

‘Is this the place?’ Jandaya asks as we stop in front of the shop.

‘It’s just a snack shop’ Clutch realizes with a frown. ‘Are you sure?’

I open the door and we get in. It’s true that I wasn’t able to have a proper look yesterday when I passed by the window. The shelves are packed with all sorts of snacks, packaged food, there is a vending machine for drinks... The place is quite similar to the snack shops near schools and in shopping malls.

‘Yes?’ The shop assistant wears heavy make-up. Her fluffy fur is dyed red.

‘Well...’ I start. ‘Do you have these... I don’t know what they’re called, these round spheres which are used for showing pictures on the infosccreens?’

‘Used for what?’ the assistant asks, putting her paws on the counter. Her fingers are *laden* with gold rings!

‘For graffiti... Of sorts, special graffiti for the infosccreens’ Rubie repeats.

‘No’ she says curtly.

‘But yesterday I saw that they bought it from here!’ I raise my voice.

The red-haired lady frowns. ‘Who bought what, and from whom?’

‘This.’ Clutch takes the sphere out of her pocket and shows it to the lady.

‘This is the first time I see something like this. I don’t know where you got the idea that I sell it here. The most recent thing in my shop are these ‘energy boosters’. They are on promotion. You wanna try them?’

'Isn't selling them to pups forbidden?' Jandaya asks with a frown and the woman simply grunts in reply.

'Could it have been another of your employees yesterday?' Clutch makes another suggestion.

'Employees? Honey, this is not your purebred centre! We don't have "employees" here. This is a shop, and this' she points at herself 'is a shop assistant. And a shop owner too. Now, take this... ball of yours and scram!'

She makes a gesture to send us away. She even mutters something like *shoo! shoo!*, and her rings flash against the light that seeps through the shop window.

'What a hag!' Clutch says with indignation when we go back outside.

'And are you certain that—' Jandaya starts but her voice trails off when I look at her.

'This is the bin where Brutus threw away the old sphere.' I show them. 'And the car stopped here. And this is the corner where I hid to watch them, and this is the street down which I ran away to get to the police station. I remember *everything*! And yes, *I am certain* that this is the shop where I saw Brutus take the same sphere, put it in his pocket and then get into Granitsky's car.'

'Okay but this is mostly guesswork, isn't it? We can't be a hundred percent sure that the car belongs to Granitsky, or that it was a sphere that Brutus picked up...' Jandaya says.

Clutch narrows her eyes. 'Nobody else in the city travels in these black cars.'

'And what would Brutus buy? An energy booster? Or a dog biscuit?' I add.

'Hey! You're not going to fight each other again, are you?' Rubie interferes.

'No, we're not. I just... know what I saw!' I say curtly.

'I have an idea' Clutch says.

We turn to her.

'Let's keep an eye on the shop for a few hours every day to see if we'll notice something unusual.'

'Good idea. If these spheres are some sort of a secret, they wouldn't sell them openly...' Jandaya agrees. 'A snack shop is a good front for something like that.'

'There's a camera over there.' Clutch points. 'There's public access to these.'

‘Meaning that you can log on and we can just watch the feed? Do you mind if we crash your place?’ I ask her.

She gives me an automatic thumbs-up. In her language this translates to ‘Not a problem at all.’

‘Why don’t you go with Clutch, and I and Jandaya’ll keep an eye on Brutus?’ Rubie suggests.

‘Good thinking, Rubie! Nothing good would come out of me following Brutus around.’ I sneak a glance at Jandaya. She nods.

So, what do we have so far? We have a trail, and we have a plan. I feel a pleasant tickle in my tummy. If my sixth sense is right, soon we’ll have evidence, too!

X

Clutch lives in one of the tall blocks of flats whose last floors fade into the clouds. They are thin and tall like pretzel sticks and since their construction started, the city looks like a grid. Some are connected to each other by contraptions similar to the airbridges on an airport. The justification for the buildings’ existence is that this is the cheapest construction method. I flinch at the thought that someone could decide to demolish our lovely house in the outskirts in order to erect such a monstrosity in its place. Our neighbourhood is one of the few left where this type of construction hasn’t spread its tentacles yet. Clutch’s family, however, moved into one of these blocks straight away. They bought a flat on the 18th floor. I can’t imagine living there but Clutch is stuck to her screens most of the time anyway, so it must be all the same to her. I hate the elevator which goes up fast, with a sinister whizzing sound. When I get in, my stomach tightens in a ball and it feels like it’s bouncing up and down.

‘Are you feeling sick again?’ Clutch asks just to break the silence that we’ve kept on the way here.

As I nod, I’m relieved to hear the ping announcing our arrival. A metallic voice informs us: ‘Floor eighteen’. The doors open and we are met with bright aggressive lights and the acrid smell of a cleaning agent.

‘It feels like a hospital here’ I say.

Clutch walks down the long hallway, leading the way to her flat. As she unlocks the door, we can hear her mother’s gentle voice inside.

‘Is that you, honey?’

‘Yep’ Clutch replies.

Her mother peeks through a door, and her eyes brighten and she claps her paws as she sees me.

‘Aww! Oscar has come to visit too! How lovely! Clutch, could you please check on an order I’ve made from a shop?’

‘What did you order?’

‘Oh, just a small thing, really. A bottle of drops for attracting good energy. It said that they are produced locally and the producers infuse avens flowers in pure rainwater. But it’s been ten days and—’

‘Well, call them, then?’ Clutch shrugs.

‘They don’t have a phone number on their website. I looked but...’

‘Did you pay them?’ Clutch asks with a sigh.

‘Of course I did. Why?’ her mother replies.

‘Mum, we’ve been through this a million times. You can’t just go on the barknet and start shopping from unreliable sites...’ Her mother opens her mouth to say something but Clutch doesn’t let her. ‘No, it doesn’t matter what it said on the ad, and how many reviews there were. All this can be fabricated.’

‘But you’ll fix it, right?’ her mother chirrups.

Clutch nods. I can barely keep myself from laughing out loud. Her mother constantly falls into such online traps. To Clutch’s horror, she shops for her too, stuff that she doesn’t know what to do with afterwards. Her last order was ‘aromatic sticks for good mood’. She insisted that Clutch lit one before she went to bed which definitely made her mood WORSE.

‘Come on, let’s go!’ she says to me.

Her room is like the whole flat – small, and neat like a space ship. Screens glowing, a desk covered with desk boards, cables and other gadgets. I have seen them all before but I have no

idea what they serve for. Clutch jumps into her chair in the centre of this information hub and starts tapping away on her keyboard. As I sit down next to her, she starts entering a series of commands. A list of links opens.

‘We’re in. These links open all the cameras in the city’ she announces, pleased with herself.

‘You *are* good!’ I gasp in disbelief.

‘Well, it’s a piece of cake. These cameras have public access to them, after all. Let’s see... Search, Old Town, Justice Square, four cameras in the area. Quite a few, maybe it’s because of the police station. We need the one on Barking Thunder Street... There. Access, yes, real time. There!’

The entrance of the shop with the section of the street in front of it appears on the screen.

‘Now what?’ I ask.

‘Now we sit and watch.’

‘And what is this here?’ I ask, pointing at the other screen which shows a crowd of dogs in some kind of a vast room packed with desks and computers.

‘This is my future working place’ Clutch replies simply.

‘Meaning?’ I insist.

‘The best pack that has put the entire barknet on edge – the Cardinals. White-hat hackers. The best in cybersecurity. One day I’m going to work for them! On this video they crack a site that drains bons using personal data. They upload all their operations online.’

I want to know more but something else attracts my attention.

‘Look!’

There is movement in front of the shop. Two cars pull over and three purebred grown-ups get out. They enter the shop. Soon a fourth person arrives on foot, a mongrel. He looks around, then he slips into the shop too. We keep watching but they never come out. Instead, two police officers also open the door and get in. Hold on... the shop must have become quite crowded already. There was barely any room inside for *us four* before. There’s no way so many grown-ups could fit together.

‘It’s getting quite cozy in there’ Clutch remarks.

‘This is strange. Definitely. Look, the shop assistant has come out.’

‘She’s left them alone inside?’

Entranced, we watch by for some more time. In a while, everybody sneaks out of the shop, getting into their cars and taking off in different directions. The police officers hang about with the shop assistant for a moment, they laugh about something but we can’t hear what they’re saying. Then they too disappear.

‘I knew that there was something fishy!’ I shout in triumph.

Clutch nods. ‘I’ll set it to record. Now let’s see what *this* has to show us.’ She plugs a cable to the sphere, draws her keyboard closer and is lost in her world.

While she tries to break into the sphere, I go to the window. The city looks quite ugly from up here – grey and glum.

‘Now, this is something!’ Clutch exclaims after some time. ‘It penetrates the infoscreen settings directly. It’s the first time I’ve seen such a technology.’

‘Meaning?’ I turn to her and lean against the windowsill.

‘Meaning that it doesn’t ‘draw’ *on top of* the infoscreen but inside it. It directly resets the signal so that the infoscreen displays the new graffiti.’

‘Gibberish. I couldn’t understand a word, I’m sorry’ I say with a shrug.

‘When I draw it for you, you’ll understand. Later. And now... are you ready?’ She smiles wickedly.

‘You are quick!’ I stand behind her.

I hold my breath as she opens the restored file, then I gasp. It’s the graffiti of Harry! Or his caricature rather – somebody has depicted him on a leash, with his tongue stuck out as if he’s a pet, his eyes vacant, a drool hanging from his mouth. Then I see the tag under the image. Paw prints with a collar. I know it all too well. Brutus.

‘I knew it!’ I laugh and I rub my paws together.

We sit on a rusty bench, and Jandaya and Rubie look exhausted after stalking Brutus. No grown-ups ever come into the yard of the Lantern now, so we could spend the entire day talking if we wanted to. I can't wait to tell them what Clutch and I have found out but I want to hear about their day first.

'We didn't discover much' Jandaya summarizes with a shrug. 'Brutus simply roamed around the city.'

'But he did meet with Granitsky twice' Rubie adds.

'He meets with him regularly. There's nothing unusual about that' Jandaya says.

'And you never thought it strange?' I ask. 'Don't you wonder what has somebody like Granitsky got to discuss with Brutus?'

'I don't know. I can't eavesdrop, can I? But I've noticed how he changes when they are together. He becomes more distant, more serious... like a grown-up, somehow. I don't know if this makes sense to you, you don't know him as well as I do. And how did it go with you?'

'We got access to the cameras... and into the sphere!' I announce.

'And guess what we found inside' Clutch joins in and slowly unfolds the sheet of paper we've printed out – the graffiti from the sphere. She sets it in front of Jay and the latter gasps. She turns to me.

'Thousand owls! So, Harry is right! He did see a drawing of himself. Who would do this? And why?' She frowns.

With a nod, I continue my story and I see their fur bristle up with the excitement. I'm aware that we've only got a few pieces of a very big jigsaw and it's too early to try to put it all together but I'm sure that the more we sniff around, the more new pieces we'll find.

'So, this means that Brutus has got something to do with the fire, does it?' Rubie asks eventually.

'It seems so. We have it on paper already. The question is who else is involved, and why?' I reply.

'And what about the shop in the Old Town where the purebred, the mongrel and the police officers met?' Rubie continues.

‘I don’t think they have anything to do with the fire’ Clutch says, shaking her head. ‘It feels more like a secret meeting spot.’

‘Or a place where you buy things that allegedly don’t exist, like the spheres’ Jandaya joins in.

‘Okay, let’s make a summary of what we’ve discovered so far! We have a new secret technology – spheres which are somehow able to interfere with the infoscreens. This explains the graffiti with Harry. Which means that he hasn’t made it all up, the story with the bright light that night.’ I make a fist, ready to count, and I raise my thumb.

‘Then, we have Brutus, and his tag which we can recognize from his other graffiti’ Rubie joins in and I raise my index finger.

‘But why would Brutus do something like that?’ Jandaya is puzzled. ‘That’s the thing I can’t wrap my head around.’

‘Because he hates the Lantern. He’s constantly mocking us for going there. He calls it ‘kindergarten’ and the like. Maybe he got the sphere from Granitsky to distract Harry, and then he set the Lantern on fire. Or maybe Harry stands in his way for something and he wants to set him up.’ These are all guesses and I drop my paw on my lap.

‘Why would he set up Harry?’ Clutch asks. ‘It doesn’t make sense. And another thing that bothers me... What business has Brutus got with Granitsky, being around him so much—’

Jandaya interrupts her. ‘Maybe I should talk to him...’

‘Our top priority now is getting Harry out. Let’s share what we’ve found out so far with Overdoo and see his reaction. Maybe he can help us put the pieces together. After all, he knows Granitsky better than we do. Who knows, he might see something we don’t. What do you think?’ Rubie suggests.

‘I don’t trust him...’ I say curtly.

‘But if this can help us save Harry...’ he insists.

‘I agree’ Clutch says.

I turn to Jandaya. She shakes her head. I can’t come to a decision, so I share my thoughts with the pack.

'I hate the idea of going back to him. On the other hand, this way we can take him down a peg or two, show him that we've been right all along. And that his *precious* Brutus is not the angel he takes him for...'

'I still can't fathom why Brutus would do something like this...' Jandaya shakes her head. 'He might be a pain in the butt but he simply isn't an... arsonist. Go to the headmaster, if you like... But I can't be the one pointing fingers at Brutus. I'm sorry.'

Nobody says anything. I don't want to start another fight with Jandaya. And this time it feels different. I don't want to push her. I know that she cares about us, about Harry, but in some way, she cares about Brutus too. I can only hope that sooner or later she'll realize the truth about him on her own.

XII

This time I'm confident. The thought that I haven't broken any rules and I'm not about to be scolded calms me down. Rubie and Clutch are calm, too. We are back on the leather sofa but this time our backs are straight and we exchange glances, as we wait for the headmaster to finish his call. Somebody called him right after he called us into his office, and listening to him talk on his screen makes me want to laugh. He's such a groveler. I have no idea how the person on the other end can stand him! While he has his back to us, I turn to Clutch and Rubie and I put my finger in my mouth, mimicking the impulse to throw up. They chuckle quietly which provokes him to turn around and scrutinize us one by one. We straighten our backs, playing the innocent angels that we are (not). He scowls, finishes his call, sits back on his chair and fixes his eyes on us.

'So? What's happened to bring you all back here?'

'We have new evidence that Harry is innocent' Rubie announces.

'And we have our suspicions as to who might be involved' I add.

'Do you now?' The headmaster seems surprised.

'Look...' Clutch hands him the page with Harry's caricature, signed by Brutus.

'And what should I be looking at here?' Overdoo asks.

'We got this graffiti off this thing here' Clutch replies concisely and takes out the sphere.

The headmaster takes it in his paw and starts turning it around.

‘Do you know what it does?’ I ask him.

‘I guess you’ll tell me that, Oscar?’

‘It’s some kind of new technology. You paint a graffiti, you upload it to the sphere as a file, then bring the sphere to an infoscreen and activate it. It starts glowing and somehow interferes with the image on the screen, emitting strong light in the process. The same light that attracted Harry’s attention. At least this is what he told me—’

‘You went to see Harry?’ the headmaster interrupts me.

‘Well, yes, I went to the station and then I...’ I stammer.

‘What?!’ He bristles up. ‘He’s a suspect and he can tell you all sorts of things! Is this why you came up with this story?’

I feel a hot wave wash over my body. I take a deep breath and I exhale slowly.

‘We haven’t *come up* with anything, headmaster’ Clutch says softly. ‘Brutus had the sphere. He threw it away, we picked it up and we restored the file that was on it.’

‘And where is this mysterious graffiti that you claim has come out of the sphere and did... what did it do?’

‘It was on the façade of the school, on the infoscreen’ I explain slowly, trying to control my anger.

‘“It was”?’ Overdoo frowns. ‘But it isn’t any more?’

‘Yes, it was there for a while only, just as long as it caught Harry’s attention. Perhaps this is why Brutus used the sphere – because it’s active for a short period only. We don’t know. But we are convinced that Harry left his room because of the light, the cameras caught him and thus he became a suspect. When in reality he simply went to check what was going on... And he saw this graffiti. Of him. As a caricature.’ I try to recount the events in chronological order.

‘Can’t you ask Brutus too? After all, it’s his sphere and his tag under the graffiti’ Rubie insists.

The headmaster lets out a deep sigh.

‘A drawing that any one of you could have drawn. What do you want me to do?’

‘We hoped that you might help us put the pieces together.’ Clutch stares at the floor and stammers, as if talking to her right shoe. ‘We’re simply trying to make sense of all this. Besides, Brutus meets with Mr Granitsky several times a day... Every day. In different places and—’

‘Granitsky?’ the headmaster interrupts her. ‘You expect me to doubt Mr Granitsky, because some...’ He takes his paw out of his pocket to wave dismissively at us, making an arch in the air. ‘Because some puppies have decided to play journalists!’

As he speaks, his tone changes. His voice becomes louder, more annoyed, even angry. And his paw is still bandaged up but this time the bandages seem fresh, as if they were changed recently. What’s the reason for him to have them?

‘Mr Granitsky cares very much about our school and I will not let you drag me into such ugly speculations! One of our students and our patron to have something to do with a deed so wrong! You must be ashamed of yourselves, coming here and spreading such ridiculous fabrications!’

‘But—’ Rubie starts.

‘They are not fabrications! These are the facts!’ I bristle up too. ‘And Brutus got a new sphere! I saw him with my own eyes!’

Clutch tugs me by the sleeve and I growl quietly. Coming here was a mistake. I was right to doubt that Overdoo would help us... Ha! How could I have been so stupid! He is far too concerned about Granitsky’s benevolence. This was a horrendously stupid move on our side!

‘Come on, poochie!’ Rubie says softly. ‘We’d better go, we have classes.’

‘The others can go’ Overdoo orders. ‘Oscar, you stay.’

Great! The old song to a new tune. The others leave silently, and I cross my paws. I’m still furious. I try to take deep breaths.

‘Oscar... I think that last time I was quite explicit when I warned you. Besides, I found out that you’ve skipped class again. Therefore, I won’t indulge you anymore. You leave me no other choice. I must suspend you from the school for a while.’

I try to take a deep brea...

‘WHAT?!’ I jump to my feet. ‘You can’t do that! A suspension for me means a lower rank for Dad! And a lower salary!’

‘I’m sorry, Oscar.’

I crash onto the sofa. My breathing speeds up. I can feel my heart thumping and my ears start ringing. *Suspended, suspended, suspended.* The word echoes in my mind like a bell.

The headmaster comes over and sits by me, putting a paw on my back. I shiver in disgust.

‘I’m sorry. Tonight, I’ll speak to your father to discuss options.’

So, this is how dogs repay you when you want to be of use and do good! When you want to prove that something is wrong! When you want to get to the truth! They punish you. I bite my lips. I stand up brusquely and I put my hood on. I don’t want him to see my eyes. I don’t want him to look at me anymore. As I leave his office, I can hear him sit back on the sofa. As if he’s offloaded a great burden off his back.

XIII

Suspended, suspended, suspended. The word still echoes in my head. I need to get away from the Cylinder. The school suffocates me with its white walls and round shapes. And its stupid rules. I feel sick. I feel as if I’m in a hospital. “I’m sorry.” Well, tug my tail, dog! I saw how eager he was to wrap this up, as if it was some tedious chore from his daily list before the class started. One problem less. He could easily not do this. But it was simply more convenient for him this way, wasn’t it!

As I leave, I head towards the yard of the Lantern, feeling the cold air on my fur. I know what will happen now. Tonight, Overdoo will call home. Dad will be sick – not with worry over me but with fear that he’s going to lose his job. He liked his job even when Mom was still alive but now, he’s obsessed with it. There’s nothing else he cares about. Why else would he put up with his boss, that poodle who has his fur straightened? He tucks his tail in and he endures whatever he has to endure as long as his job is secure. He won’t protect me, he won’t take responsibility with his muzzle held high. Before, Mom always encouraged him to be more self-confident because despite him being one of the best accountants in the municipality, the promotions always went to somebody else. I really hope they don’t send him to do another job! I pray they don’t! This will deflate him completely.

And all of this because of me and the stupid bons system. It's clear that he'll never get to 2500 and be accepted in the City Council! The seats there are reserved for the best professionals in their fields, the city's finest, as the grown-ups would put it. The mayor has 4000 bons and a ranking of 5! The way things are going, I'll be lucky if I ever get to 500. Harry had 450, and that's why he's worked as security his whole life. Dad cherishes the raise of 10 bons he gets every year. But how many will they take away now...?

I reach the yard and I sit at the base of the tree that grows by the fence. I lean back and I turn to the Lantern. Here I feel at home. All the good memories we've had here! And what a beautiful building it was, with its high ceilings and wide hallways. It's hard to think that we'll never get inside again, making art on the walls, sliding down the rails. Pity. I miss it so much. I wipe my eyes on my sleeve. I cannot go home. Not now. We just wanted to help... What would Mom do in my place? She is the one who taught me to be like this, to sniff, be inquisitive. She would have understood. No. Enough. The cold bites but it has a refreshing effect. I look away. Random sunrays dance on the ground. Din comes from the distance. Students, in the yard of the Cylinder. But here it's quiet. Nobody comes to this yard since the Lantern burned down. No one but us. Where should I go now? Who would understand me? Whom should I turn to? If I was Ned Noxville, whom would I call? Hold on... Ned Noxville... Yes! His business card...

And then I see them running towards me. My pack – Jandaya, Clutch and Rubie.

XIV

'There you are!' Jandaya props herself on her knees, panting. 'The others told me that he insisted that you stay behind at the end?'

'What happened?' Rubie asks, patting me on the shoulder. 'Another detention?'

'I'm suspended' I utter softly. 'Temporarily.'

Jandaya gasps.

'But my father losing bons won't be temporarily' I add with a sigh, tossing a twig to the ground as I turn away. I can't look them in the eye.

'What?! But... How? What are you going to do now?' Jandaya's on the verge of crying.

‘What do you mean, *suspended*?’ Clutch erupts. ‘It’s not fair! What a pile of crap!’

‘We need to do something!’ Rubie barks. ‘He can’t just kick you out like that!’

‘Well, it seems he can. And he did too’ I reply flatly.

Rubie clenches his fists and keeps repeating, ‘We need to do something! We need to talk to somebody, to—’

‘Whom can we talk to?’ Clutch interrupts. ‘Overdoo wouldn’t have any of it. You saw what happened the last time, and we had evidence!’

‘Ha!’ I laugh out.

‘We need to be rational about this, keep our tails low instead of recklessly getting into another scandal’ Jandaya says, crossing her arms.

‘It’s so unfair!’ Clutch repeats and kicks at a rock on the ground.

‘Yes, first Harry, and now Oscar too. We can’t just sit by and look on—’ Rubie picks up speed.

‘I never said this is what we’d do!’ I state.

They turn to look at me.

‘You have something in mind?’ Jay asks.

‘I have *somebody* in mind.’ I take out Ned Noxville’s business card and pass it to Rubie.

‘Do you think he’d remember you?’ he asks.

‘Well, I’m about to find out. And you should go back to class. I wouldn’t want you getting detention because of me.’

Jandaya gives me a concerned look, then she squeezes my paw for a moment. Nobody feels like going but I’m not the best of company at the moment. I feel Rubie’s paw on my back. Clutch is staring at her feet. She rarely looks me in the eye but I know that she is no less upset about the whole kerfuffle. I wonder if I should say something. For a while we remain like this, silent, everyone deep in their thoughts. Then I lean back and I try to smile.

‘Come on, scram! I’ll talk to you in the afternoon.’

Rubie hands back the business card. The three of them walk away reluctantly, taking turns to look back to me. I see them from the corner of my eye but I focus on the small card in my paws. It has only a landline number written on it, without a quicklink. Who uses landline phones

nowadays? Obviously, you need to be very motivated in order to get in touch with him. Or very desperate... like me.

XV

The sun has almost set behind the high rises and they cast their long shadows on the streets below. In front of me, some puppies have organized a competition, jumping from shadow to shadow. We, too, used to play the game, 'shadow'. We'd jump from one shadow to the next and whoever landed on a sunlit spot, would drop from the game. My friends insisted I was so good at it because of my breed. But it wasn't true, Dad and my sister always dropped first when we played with Mom. She beat us all with ease but one day I managed to jump across to a shadow which was almost on the other side of the street, and she couldn't do it. One of her paws remained in the sun. 'You're burned!' I shouted in triumph. And then she really was... Anyways. This was the last time I played 'shadow'.

'I win!' a pup shouts next to me.

Then he looks at me with complacency. 'Did you see me? Jumping all the way here, from over there?'

I nod with a smile. 'I did. Listen, have you seen... a phone booth around here?' I blunder the words, as if uttering them itself feels awkward, strange.

Most probably, the pup has never even heard of a phone booth, let alone know where there could be one. But I'm desperate, I've been wondering about the Old Town for hours already and I've found nothing. And according to the barknet, there should be two of them around here. I hope at least one is working. The pup looks at me with curiosity, then he waves a paw.

'It's behind that block there.'

I must've put on quite a face because he grins at me.

'We use it when we play war. We pretend to eavesdrop on the enemy through the receiver. The receiver has a signal, did you know that? It goes like, *two-twoo two-twoo*. Before you push the buttons. We've tried pushing them but nothing happens. Just sounds. Why do you need it? Is it for some game?'

‘It’s for school’ is the best I can come up with. I thank the pup and I start walking in the direction he’s pointed me in.

I find the booth where he said it would be. I’ve seen a phone like that in my school books. I get inside and I dial the number on the card. My initial shock at even finding a working landline is replaced by an even greater surprise when somebody picks up at the other end.

‘Hullo?’

What now? Suddenly, all my confidence vanishes. My heart races. What should I say? Does he remember me? Great job, Oscar! When coming up with your plan, you should’ve thought about what you’d say if Ned picked up... Perhaps I never believed I would get through to him.

‘Who is it?’ he says.

‘I... ahem... I’d like to speak with Ned Noxville.’

The voice softens. ‘This is him speaking.’

XVI

For some reason I’ve imagined that we would have to go to some secret, mystical place, like a superhero’s cave – I don’t know why. Instead, we’re standing in front of a completely normal door in a completely normal block of flats. So normal that I’m disappointed. There’s no bell, no door-knocker. I tap on the door with my paw and I take a step back. Rubie is by my side, and Jandaya and Clutch wait behind us, quietly.

In a moment, we can hear several latches open, and then a key turns in the lock. The door opens and Ned Noxville smiles at us.

‘Oh, four of you!’ He scrutinizes us and then pierces me with his eyes.

‘We are a pack’ I say.

He nods, opening the door wider and inviting us in. A heavy curtain blocks the view. Ned locks the door behind us and opens the curtain. I gasp. A spacious room is revealed, looking like a huge and very untidy study. But it’s exactly this mess of documents and papers that give the place a cozy feel. There’s a desk, a table covered with sheets of paper, the walls are lined with cabinets,

and between them – hung boards, covered in notes, photos, clippings and maps. The shelves can barely sustain the weight of the books and the colour-coded folders on them. It's marvelous!

'This... this is what you call a proper lair!' I whisper.

'It's nothing much' Ned says, waving a paw.

'And it looked so... boring on the outside' Jandaya adds.

'Sometimes the best way to hide is just being inconspicuous. I'm just an ordinary well-mannered, kind and peaceful tenant.' Ned smiles.

'And what are these?' I ask, pointing to the maps and photos on the wall.

'Old cases' he replies. 'I keep them as a token from the past.'

'So... This is what Ned Noxville's lair looks like.' Rubie looks around. 'I don't know why but I thought that investigative journalists were a species which faced extinction.'

Ned smiles again, shaking his head as he walks over to the stove in the other end of the room. 'Would you like some tea?'

We nod and we sit around the wooden table while he makes us tea.

'Journalists will never go extinct, no matter how hard the bigwigs try to silence us' he announces. 'I'll always keep looking for the truth. It's in my blood. I'm not a cop so I cannot arrest the bad guys, and I'm not a judge to send them behind bars. But what I *can* do is ask questions, dig up information, cast light where the shadows are the darkest.'

'And when you come across something significant or when you suspect somebody of committing a crime? Do you alert the police?' Jandaya asks.

'My most important task is to tell the story so that those who don't suspect a thing can learn about the problem. As for the police, not necessarily. Sometimes the police turn to us. Then we share what we've uncovered and whatever it is that we've already published. This can help their investigation. But sometimes they pretend that nothing bad has happened. The truth, no matter how important it is, can be silenced. Especially if it affects powerful, greedy dogs. They have their ways of covering things up, twisting the truth, turning it into something else.'

'So not fair!' Clutch exclaims. 'How can it be that somebody can alter the truth and everything can go on as if nothing has happened?'

‘This is where we come in’ Ned replies softly. ‘The truth needs allies. Dogs who are not afraid. We don’t have guns like the police, we’re not soldiers. We’ve only got our pen and a forum where we can inform everyone about what we’ve sniffed out, how and why. And, most importantly, we can ask questions there. Even if we don’t get an answer. As I said, our most important job is casting light in the darkness.’

He puts the cups of tea on the table in front of us. The clouds of hot steam seem to dissolve the suspicions I might’ve had before. I feel like I belong here.

‘We also want to cast light on the case with our haunt, and save Harry too! As I explained on the phone, he’s the security guy who was accused of setting the place on fire’ I say. ‘The problem is that nobody believes us.’

‘And if we start asking questions, we end up neck deep in trouble’ Jandaya adds.

‘Sometimes this is a sign that you’re on the right track’ Ned says with a nod. ‘Those who have something to hide fear dogs who ask questions. They are the tentacles of the Great Evil.’

‘Are dogs who avoid questions always bad?’ I ask.

‘Not necessarily. Sometimes a question might make you feel insecure, vulnerable. In itself, this doesn’t make you a bad dog. But if somebody gets angry or panics when they’re asked a question, especially when it’s a logical and honest question... then you should ask yourself, what is this person hiding? Do they fear that something will escape their lips? Or that they’ll be caught? Or simply that they cannot come up with a lie which is convincing enough?’ He smiles. ‘In reality, villains do not run around shouting, ‘I’m the bad guy’ with sinister laughter. Most are polite, they smile, they look like nice dogs. But it’s all just for show, a disguise. Always keep your eye on those who get nervous, who change the subject, who try to leave. Sometimes the answers come by themselves, you just need to be persistent about it and stay alert.’

‘As long as you’ve got whom to ask’ I say.

‘There’ll always be somebody whom you can ask. And regardless of whether you get your answers and what these answers are, you must keep looking. The truth may be hidden but it cannot disappear altogether. This is what we used to do in the newspaper, in the old days. We were *The Voice of the City*. The united voice of everyone which spoke up when some preferred to be silent.’

Oh! *The Voice of the City*!

'I... I have all your articles at home. My mother gave them to me. She worked as a photographer for *The Voice* and... she collected them.' I blurt out, unable to contain myself. 'But she passed away a couple of years ago.'

He gives a barely visible nod. 'I'm sorry for your loss.'

He says nothing more and silence fills the space between us. Obviously now is not the time to inquire about her. What if he doesn't remember her at all? I have no idea if they were close or not. After all, it's been ages since the newspaper was shut down... What was he saying? Oh, I remember. I make an effort to turn back to the current topic.

'So, is this enough? Asking questions?' I frown.

Ned sips at his tea and gently puts his cup back on the table.

'Do you know how we started *The Voice of the City*? At first, we had no idea what we were doing... But I remember how angry we were at the events that occurred all around us. We wanted to point the spotlights at all the injustice, to tell everyone what we'd seen and found out. We asked a lot of questions. But once you start collecting answers to your questions, a responsibility arises, to tell dogs about what you learned. A newspaper isn't just a paper. It's a forum. Today, there are many other ways to be heard – vlogs, videos, podcasts. Ask questions, yes. But pick your weapon too. And do not use it rashly. Your story needs to be like an anchor – heavy, robust, genuine. And you need to dig deeper because sometimes the truth is buried right at the bottom. Or in the past. And it's not always safe when you start getting closer.'

'I'm not afraid!' I say and I stick my muzzle up.

'Neither am I!' Rubie joins in.

Jandaya and Clutch nod eagerly.

'Now all we need to do is find a place from where we can lead our investigation' I say and I rub my paws together.

'You've just found it. I have to go away for a few days but I can leave you a key to my lair. If you meet the neighbours, tell them that you're my nephews.'

He gets up and hands me a bunch of keys. Then he grabs his hat from the wooden coat hanger and grins at our dumbfounded faces.

‘All I ask is that you water my plants!’ he says and vanishes behind the curtain, leaving us staring at each other over our cups.

XVII

I’m restless. Isn’t it amazing? For a few days now I’m involved in something that I’ve only dreamed of. Not that we’ve made a lot of progress. Mostly, we hang around, digging into notes, eating pizza, and watching the feed from the CCTV in front of the snack shop. I’ve read Ned Noxville’s articles and investigations so many times. And now here I am, in his own flat, full of determination to do the same thing as he does. Will I cope? Harry is innocent, I know it, but I still haven’t the slightest clue as to how to prove it. We are stuck in a maze of questions. *How do we conduct an investigation? How do we prove that somebody is innocent if we’re not the police? How does somebody like Ned look for the truth and find it?* His words echo in my mind. *Sometimes the truth is buried right at the bottom. Or in the past.* So, if we’re looking for the truth today, first we need to go back, is that it? To the past? But why? It seems that Noxville has tossed the stick for me on purpose, just to make me chase after it...

So, my clippings are a treasure, then? Ha! Eat your tails! *What do you need all these clippings for? This stuff is not for puppies...* dogs kept telling me as I ran around, holding Mom’s folder close to my chest. But my... our red folder remembers the past. And this is where I need to go back to first if I want to find the truth about here and now.

I slam the folder dramatically on the table and I put my paws on my hips. Rubie chews on a slice of pizza with indifference, Jandaya and Clutch tear their eyes away from the screen and look at me, and I grin at them. My heart drums in my chest. I am hot, I feel more alive and more confident than ever.

‘I know where to start! Come on! It’s time to start sniffing back in the past!’ I urge my packmates.

XVIII

‘What are we looking for?’ Jandaya asks me.

‘Anything to do with fires that took place in the city...’ I gulp at the thought that invades my mind. I guess the word ‘fire’ will haunt me for life.

Clutch’s interruption is a welcome distraction. ‘Yes, do you remember the old building of the municipality which burned down several years ago?’

‘Of course I do’ Rubie says. ‘There was no better specimen of Baroque architecture in the whole city. I’ve spent so much time as a young pup trying to transfer the game of light and shadow on its façade on paper. And then they built that ugly restaurant in its place... *Muzzle Refined*.’

‘And the old house where writer Thalia Reczinska used to live. It was a monument of the city’s architectural heritage but it also burned down, without explanation’ Jandaya says, tapping on the desk.

‘And now a skyscraper rises in its place’ I say angrily.

‘A soulless shopping mall! With nothing beautiful about it!’ Rubie adds.

Here comes his passion for old things again. Occasionally, as we walk the streets, he would stop and stare, be it at a decorated wall, be it at something more awkward. And he would start discussing art, in this haughty language, as if I’m listening to a broken barkradio.

We continue to list old buildings which have burned down, and I briskly rummage through the pile of articles. I pick those which deal with fires. At first sight, they don’t reveal much.

‘Here, this is also written by Ned.’ I stick my finger into one of the clippings.

‘Ha! This used to stand where my block is now’ Clutch realizes with a start.

‘I don’t remember it at all’ Rubie says and stares at the picture. ‘It’s something ancient. Ruins of... an arena, or a theatre?’

‘It’s beautiful’ Jandaya points out, looking at the clipping. ‘It does look like a stage, something like an open-air theatre.’

‘It must’ve been hundreds of years old!’ Rubie is outraged.

‘Look. They blamed a homeless mongrel’ I say.

‘So, history repeats itself. Fires engulfing beautiful old buildings. Why just them?’ Rubie frowns.

‘Here it says that if a building catches fire or falls down, it’s no longer considered part of the city’s cultural heritage, so the municipality could either repair it or sell it’ Clutch reads aloud.

‘Hmm. Perhaps somebody wanted to build something right in their spot but they couldn’t buy the buildings because they were property of the municipality?’ Jandaya suggests.

‘Yes! So they set them on fire, and then the buildings, which are part of the architectural heritage too, lose their value’ I summarize.

‘Which means... Do you think that the fires were no accident?’ Clutch says doubtfully.

‘Ned does, that’s for certain’ I say and I point to another article, about another fire in a historical building. ‘And guess what... The culprit is another homeless dog! According to Ned, there’s a pattern there. See here; he writes that for every building there was a rejection of a construction project. But then all the buildings burn down mysteriously and the projects are resubmitted for reviewing. And then, they are realized.’

‘And this takes place right under our noses!’ Jandaya is outraged.

‘But all the articles, the investigations, the questions that Ned posed... they seem to lead nowhere. There’s always a random dog to be blamed. And the fires are always ‘an accident’ I say and I start reading aloud.

What I was told by the police sounded like a joke. ‘It is not our fault that it happened. Local authorities cannot control where a fire could break out.’ But isn’t it strange that Granitsky wants to develop the plots after the buildings burned down? Of course, we cannot prove that it was him. His name does not appear anywhere, does it?

Jandaya raises an eyebrow. ‘Granitsky? What has he got to do with all this?’

If we agree that there’s a pattern here, we should ask ourselves, why wasn’t a proper investigation conducted for the fires? Why didn’t anyone find Roman Granitsky’s allegedly well-meaning intentions suspicious? Instead, we welcome him like the prince on his white horse who has come to save the city from degradation, prepared to invest millions so that it puts on a new,

modern appearance? Well, pardon me but this is all rubbish, dear readers. When will we open our eyes?

‘I wasn’t aware that Granitsky is the owner of Muzzle Refined Restaurant!’ Clutch says.

‘Not exactly. As Ned himself writes here, it’s owned by other dogs but they are all close to him. Ned calls them proxies’ Rubie explains, scratching himself.

‘So, Granitsky is the owners’ owner’ I say. This is something new. And we should definitely bury our noses into it.

While everybody laughs, Jandaya summarizes. ‘If Ned is right, then Granitsky owns the skyscraper, and the petrol station, *and* the residential block complex where you live, Clutch!’

‘But the barkmedia always present him like everyone’s favorite tycoon. If he does have something to do with all this, he must have somebody who does his dirty work for him’ Clutch adds.

‘Somebody like Brutus!’ I jump in.

‘All roads lead to Brutus...’ Rubie says, rising a finger theatrically.

‘Indeed, we constantly see him with Granitsky, and one of his graffiti was loaded onto the sphere...’ Clutch says.

‘We’ll prove it! I feel... Call me crazy but I have a feeling that we need to finish what Ned started. It seems like our meeting in the classroom was not chance. We need to do some digging and find out what will happen now, after the Lantern burned down. We need to find out whether there are plans for developing the spot already, and what they are.’

‘And if there is a connection between Brutus and Granitsky. And if Brutus was there that night... Then it’s highly probable that it really is Granitsky who wants the spot in his clutches! All we have to do is prove it!’ Rubie says.

The answer seems a breath away but it’s as immaterial too. Will all this remain mere suspicions, or will we be able to prove something?

The flames are everywhere. The books are burning and the smoke suffocates me. I see Mom and Fara running down a corridor. They are trying to reach the exit, and Fara is coughing. A beam breaks off with a terrifying cracking sound and crashes down on Mom. It pins down her leg, mere metres away from the salvation. "Run, Fara!" "Fara, listen to me, just go on! I'll be fine!" "Fara, please, go!" Somebody lifts Fara up and I see her trying to reach out to Mom. I hear her screams. And I'm there, and not there at the same time. Books fly, their pages burning and turning to ashes...

'Wake up, sleepyhead!'

I wake up with a start, as if I've just fallen asleep. It's the same nightmare again. It started haunting me right after the accident, as if I'd been there with them, in the old library... I blink at the familiar face looming over me.

'My my, you're soaking wet!'

'Jay? What are you doing here? What's the time?'

'There's something you need to see.'

I rub my eyes but my exhaustion refuses to leave. I feel like my head weighs as much as a herd of elephants. Jandaya sits down next to me and takes out her screen.

'It's from this morning.'

I prop myself up on my elbows and I try to chase away the echo of the nightmarish screams from my mind. On her screen, I read: "Harry Scribtag has been charged with the arson of the old building of Barcus Aurelius School." A video has been uploaded which shows Harry. The video is edited, showing just the moments when Harry leaves the Cylinder, then returns, then leaves again. Then, footage from another camera starts playing, showing the Lantern. A silhouette jumps out of the building; it's hooded but under the cloak a security uniform is visible. The silhouette runs away from the Lantern, as smoke starts billowing from the building's windows. The article claims that the silhouette from the second footage belongs to Harry, seen on the first footage. And the footage is the actual incriminating evidence. Plus the fact that he has access to turpentine – the agent that has led to the speedy breakout of the fire. I rewind the footage and I pause it. I examine the silhouette leaving the building more closely.

‘This is not Harry. You can tell from miles away! This guy is taller, and more stooping.’

‘But he’s wearing the same overalls’ Jandaya points out.

‘There’s nothing easier than picking up a school security uniform. They leave them in the storage room at school. It’s not rocket science!’ I’m outraged.

‘Exactly. Somebody *deliberately* set Harry up. This is not a coincidence, not a chance occurrence, this is a carefully planned operation’ Jandaya says, adding, ‘And the turpentine fits perfectly too.’

‘What do the others think?’

‘Clutch wants to examine the footage. Rubie is furious. You know how much he cares about Harry, so he’s nearly lost it. We don’t have time to lose. We need to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible.’

XX

We’ve spent hours in Clutch’s room and I swivel idly on the chair. It’s a day off at Barcus Aurelius School today and we don’t have classes. Everybody’s in the park instead. The youngest pups are required to take part in the sports events but we are older and my pack have managed to sneak out without any trouble. Clutch rewinds the footage from the two cameras once again, probably for the hundredth time. Jandaya and Rubie have gone to sniff around in the municipality, in an attempt to find out what fate lies in store for the Lantern now. The public digital database stated only: “Planned construction”, and nothing else. It wasn’t clear who would be constructing what. This shouts ‘suspicious’. We’ve found another article by Ned where he describes in detail the procedure in such cases – first, they must announce that the plot is for sale. Then whoever wants to buy it or rent it and build something on it, has to come up with a quote. The plot goes to whoever offers the best price. It’s called ‘auctioning’. And here there has been no auction, and there are no hints at the fate of our haunt online. *Planned construction*, nothing else. So, we decided we had to send a party to the municipality in person and see what we can find.

But would Jandaya and Rubie being there *in person* make any difference? It wouldn’t be enough by itself. Here is where Rubie came in useful. Yesterday, when we were in Ned’s lair, he

found a list of contacts in a pile of notes on Ned's desk. And there it was, inside: *Mrs Butter-Cupping, municipality. Loves to chat about her grandchildren. Desk #18, 8 am to 3 pm.*

We agreed that Rubie and Jandaya are the best choice for going there and meeting this Butter-Cupping woman. They have an affable manner about them, and, unlike me or Clutch, they can feign a smile. They would easily get on the right side of Butter-Cupping by telling her how much the old school building meant for them and how all they wanted was to find out what its fate would be now. Mere youthful curiosity – there wouldn't be anything suspicious about it, right?

So, we split into two teams again – they were off, and we came over to Clutch's, where, I must admit, I don't feel too helpful...

'How can dogs not see this?! It's clear as day that the silhouettes belong to two different dogs, and this one here is obviously not Harry!'

Clutch opens one screenshot from each camera and lines them up on her screen. The second silhouette has turned their back to the camera, with the hood on, but it's evident that they are at least five inches taller. And they are holding one of their paws in the other in an unnatural way.

'I'm a hundred percent certain that this is Brutus! See how tall he is!' I say.

Clutch shrugs, then she points at the screen. 'His paw seems to be white too.'

'He's holding it very weirdly. As if he's hurt.' I take a mental note to check out his paw when I see him next. 'Can you follow him from 11:45 pm onwards?'

'How many times more? This is what I've been doing for the last hour. You can't see anything. His face remains hidden under the hood. My head is bursting...'

She sighs heavily but then rewinds the footage and plays it again.

For the hundredth time, we see the silhouette sneak out of the shadows around the Lantern, look around and run away from the building as the first tell-tale tongues of fire lick its window frames. Then, the silhouette darts among the shadows, turns around the Cylinder and leaves the range of vision of the cameras.

The screen starts flashing persistently. Clutch answers and we see Rubie and Jandaya's grinning faces.

'Mission accomplished! We have the contractor's name' Jandaya announces with satisfaction.

'I wish you could see Jandaya with the clerk! In no time at all, she put her under her spell and we got everything we needed to know.'

'Which is?' I urge him impatiently.

'Which is that they're building a shopping mall there! And by *them* I mean—'

'Guess who! Granitsky's driver!' Jandaya interrupts.

'His driver?!'

'Yes. Wolfie Breakerson. I used to call him 'the big good wolf' when I was little.'

'A mall! Just by the school! This is awful' Clutch jumps in. 'Before, they promised that they would renovate the building and turn it into a youth centre, where pups could go after school.'

'And it's not only that. The project was approved a month ago! A whole month!' Jandaya adds.

'Hold on, this is well before the fire...' I frown.

Rubie nods. 'Exactly! We checked the documentation of the project and it said that it couldn't be realized because the building is part of the city's architectural heritage and so on. But then Butter-Cupping, the old lady, explained that now that the building has burned down, the project will be renewed automatically.'

'Long story short, quite soon they'll demolish the whole thing and they'll start construction for the mall' Jandaya summarizes.

'Just perfect! And what do we do now?' I mumble.

'Now you wait for us to join you. Clutch, do you happen to have some of that delicious bone soup? We deserve a reward for our hard work, don't we?' Rubie says but then whimpers as Jandaya glares at him.

The connection breaks. Clutch does go to the kitchen, to ask her mother to make us something to eat. While I'm alone, I go over everything we've got so far – a number of fires,

followed by a number of construction projects, all on spots where buildings that shouldn't have been demolished stood. And Granitsky's finger in all of it. Well, not his finger personally but that of his proxies. According to our calculations the Lantern is the seventh such building. The only difference here is that while in the case of the buildings from earlier the dogs accused are homeless, nameless mongrels without background, unknown to anyone, this time it's Harry. Why him exactly? Was he the easiest choice? Or was he in Granitsky's way somehow? We are certain that it wasn't him who set the Lantern on fire. We've seen with our own eyes Brutus's tag under the graffiti we downloaded off the sphere. It all fits together, doesn't it? But this is not enough for them to set Harry free. And we are not police officers, so collecting evidence will be hard. What shall we do then? How can we help Harry, stop the construction works and make sure that that ruffian, Brutus, gets what he deserves?

Something on the screen catches my attention. Clutch is still monitoring the cameras in the Old Town. I recognize the fatso from the police station; he's just left the snack shop, carrying a bag along. The bag seems hefty, for he's literally bent under it. I call Clutch over and we both stare at the screen as we laugh and discuss the police officer. What is he carrying? Clutch mentions that there's been more bustle at the snack shop over the last few days but nothing of interest. The usual fancy cars, secretive meetings, and then silence. One end of the bag is bulging worryingly and it looks as if it would...

'It'll tear!' Clutch shouts and slaps her forehead. 'I feel sorry for this dog!'

As she says it, the bag doesn't simply tear, it *bursts* open, releasing a pile of... spheres! Dozens of them! They start rolling down the street. The officer runs about, trying to collect them. He rushes back into the shop and the shop assistant comes out. She grabs her head, then disappears back into the shop and reappears with a couple of empty bags. They shuffle around the street, chasing the spheres, until they finally get them all. Then she starts scolding him. We can't hear her but judging from her gestures and his low-hung head it's more than clear that she's quite pissed off.

'Did you see how many there were?' Clutch asks me.

I nod.

'Why do the police need them? What do you think?'

‘I don’t have a clue. Can you follow the fatso on the other cameras?’

Clutch types in a few commands and five more feeds from street cameras appear on the screen. Soon, the officer appears on one, lugging down the street. Then he moves on to the next image and thus we are able to follow him all the way back to the police station. Now we know where the spheres go. Is this information worthy? I don’t know yet but I ask Clutch to keep watching the snack shop. These spheres might turn out to be useful somehow. We know where they go, we have some idea what they do (at least Clutch does), now we just need to find out where they come from and why do the police need them in such amounts. I write down *Spheres?* in my notepad. Perhaps it's time for another performance.

XXII

Our suspicions so far? That Brutus and Granitsky are the culprits for the fire. We also know that Brutus has used the sphere to lure Harry outside. And that the sphere and its likes are being used by the police, although a big question still stands there. This is why the pack decided that we need to sniff about this clue too. I couldn’t wait for them to finish their school for the day so that I and Jandaya get to perform as “the dangerous pups”. We get to the police station under a grey clouded sky.

As I stare into the camera which is pointed directly at the entrance of the station, I grin and I wave eagerly at Clutch who should be watching us on the other side. I imagine her grunting in front of the screen in her version of laughing. I struggle to pull the heavy door open and we find ourselves face to face with the same clerk that took my biscuit the last time. I figure this should grant me some affection on her side but I’m mistaken. Obviously, she has no recollection of me.

‘D’you know what time it is?’ she asks.

‘Well, ahem... It’s half past four?’ I say. I hesitate, and for good reason. What a way to start a conversation!

‘Exactly. Half past four’ the clerk confirms and adjusts her glasses without moving her eyes away from the screen. ‘Which means you’ve no business here.’

Now she looks at us and waves her paw, shooping us away. And she emphasizes it with a *fshshsh, fshshsh* sound, in case we haven't got her meaning. I look at Jandaya before I reply to that.

'Most kind madam!'

I hear Jandaya grunt as she tries to suppress her laughter. The clerk frowns and tries to bore a hole into me with her eyes.

'You may not remember me but I gave you a present a few days ago, a peanut-butter biscuit.'

Now it's the clerk's turn to be confused.

'Many dogs give me presents, young pup. You don't expect me to remember each and every one of them, do you?'

'Well, they are bribing you, and you work for the police...' I know I'm playing with fire.

She pulls a wry face. Well done, Oscar! I've only made her even angrier.

'This is not something you discuss, son. These things happen but actually they don't.'

I hear somebody laughing behind me. I turn and I recognize the fat police officer.

'I remember you! You came to visit the new one, that security guy. Today I cannot let you in, though. Come tomorrow, after 3 pm!' he says.

'Oh, this is too bad' I say, pretending to be upset about it, and then I decide to go full steam ahead, to Jandaya's utter horror. 'But there's another reason for our visit too. A friend told me that here I can get one of those new spheres.'

'What spheres, pup?' the officer asks.

'The spheres, you know? The ones that can splash a graffiti right on top of an infoscreen.'

'Splash a graffiti? A friend told you, huh?' the fatso repeats suspiciously.

'Yes, he works with Mr Granitsky, the businessman. Do you know him?'

At the mention of Granitsky's name the officer straightens up immediately.

'Of course I know him. And this friend of yours... is he close to Mr Granitsky?'

'Oh, yes, he is. He's like his right paw or something. His name is Brutus. You must've heard of him. He's a mongrel, like her' I say, nodding at Jandaya.

‘We know each other from the Home’ Jandaya adds casually. ‘We’ve grown up together since we were little puppies.’

‘Since puppies, you say?’ the officer repeats. ‘And you’re close?’

‘We’re best friends’ I say.

The officer clears his throat. ‘And he sent you here?’

‘How could we know about you having the spheres here otherwise? They are a secret, right?’ I give him a conspiratorial wink.

I can tell he’s assessing the situation. In my chest, my heart is pounding. I’m so pumped with adrenaline, I feel I can easily explode right there on the spot. I try to control my breathing, hoping that my stress doesn’t show.

‘Well, the spheres have been used already’ he utters after a long pause. ‘That’s why they give us them. They’re good for nothing.’

‘They’re good for us. And for *Brutus* too’ I say, putting an emphasis on the name.

The officer casts a furtive glance around. He undoes a button on his shirt. Then he strokes his belly for a moment. We wait patiently for his mental process to complete.

‘Perhaps I should make a phone call and ask them about it...’ he says eventually.

‘I can also call Uncle Roman directly, if you prefer?’ Jandaya offers innocently.

‘“Uncle”?’ It’s the officer’s turn to be surprised.

‘He is literally like a father to us. He’s the patron of the Home for Mongrels, you know. I and Brutus are his favorites. He has a soft spot for me. I can’t imagine what his reaction would be if I told him that you’ve denied to cooperate.’

‘Whoa, I haven’t denied anything. Let’s remember this, all right?’ He raises his paws in the air.

I cut to the chase. ‘Then we’re going to need some spheres. Ten or twenty should be enough, right?’

I turn to Jandaya and she nods. The officer looks at her, then at me, then turns to the clerk woman at the desk.

‘Shall we give them the spheres?’ he asks.

She’s already putting on her coat.

‘I couldn’t care less’ she says.

‘Wait here’ the officer orders and disappears into the station with one last furtive look around.

In a moment, he returns with a plastic bag.

‘You’re lucky. The rest have been smacked already. I hope these are enough.’

“‘Smacked’?” I frown.

‘We hit them with a club, just in case. Who knows what these gadgets could do. If they’re able to interfere with the infoscreens, they could probably get into our system too.’

I look at Jandaya, struggling to rein in my impulse to laugh. Then I focus on the bag of shiny blue-green orbs. I count about ten of them. We thank the officer, then I stuff the spheres in my backpack and we leave. This has been a piece of cake. Outside I turn to Jandaya.

‘Your “Uncle Roman” must be a big deal if the mere mention of his name turned a police officer as soft as overboiled spaghetti.’

Jandaya chuckles. ‘You know, he’d be pleased if I called him ‘uncle’. And he *does* have a soft spot for me. I wasn’t lying about that!’

We walk down an alley that smells like rust and rubbish bins. Suddenly, there’s a flash in front of us. A bright light, like a flashlight, as if somebody has taken a picture with a giant camera. Our surroundings glow.

‘Look!’ Jandaya whispers, pointing up.

An inscription has appeared on the infoscreen on the façade of a block of flats near us, in jagged, raw letters. It looks like a graffiti but it isn’t. It says, ‘The wheel turns south in Zone Three’.

We freeze. Wasn’t the infoscreen showing an ad of a restaurant mere seconds ago? Has somebody just used one of the mysterious spheres? Right under our noses?

‘Somebody tug me by the tail! What’s the meaning of this?!’ I look around in all directions.

Jandaya is already on her way to the inscription, so I follow her. And then I spot a silhouette.

‘There’ I whisper. ‘Somebody’s there. Do you see them?’

A dark figure slithers down the alley. It doesn't run. It doesn't hide. It just walks, as if it has nothing to do with the inscription behind it. We decide to follow it. In a moment, I recognize the gait, with one shoulder bent slightly lower than the other. Brutus! I look at Jandaya. She tells me to stay back and trots after him. I turn back to where we saw the graffiti. Why didn't I take a picture of it? How foolish of me! I rush back, taking my screen out. Just then, a patrol car appears out of nowhere. I duck behind two rubbish bins. I don't want to be seen, to be asked irrelevant questions. I'm in enough trouble as it is, and I wouldn't be surprised if they took me in for the inscription too. No, thank you!

The headlights of the patrol car flash on the wall opposite me and it pulls up. All right! I expect that the driver will get out but then the engine revs, the car makes a sharp U-turn and disappears behind the corner. Why! I jump out from behind the bins and I rush to the mysterious graffiti but before I can focus my screen, the inscription disappears, as if it has never been there. All that's left is a blinking ad for Bad Dogs Bar. Okay! So, this is what the spheres do – they send messages. In this case, from Brutus to the police officers in the car, or from somebody else to the officers? And who has activated the sphere if not... Brutus himself? We've got you now! I turn and I rush back towards the spot where I left Jandaya. Now we've got you, you ruffian!

XXIII

As I approach, I can hear them shouting at each other.

'So what if I *am* working for him? Do you have a problem with that?'

Brutus is waving his paws in front of Jandaya who is panting, her fists clenched close to her body. They hear me and they both turn around.

'Oh, there he is, the little puppy! How can you stand this guy, always at your tail?!' Brutus's question is aimed at Jandaya but he glares at me. Then, he grins and blows me a kiss.

This sets me off. The fur on my neck bristles up and I bare my teeth.

'Stay away, Oscar! This is between me and Brutus' Jandaya warns, as she glares at him.

I growl in response.

‘I do have a problem, yeah!’ she says. ‘Granitsky is simply using you, and turning you into a bad guy. I know that you’re not as bad a guy as you pose as.’

‘You just think you do. I’m not the whining little doggy I used to be. Now I’m strong and I can do whatever I please. And I don’t owe you an explanation! Okay?’ he growls in her face.

‘You can do whatever you please, can you? Even if somebody gets put in jail because of your actions? Has Harry done anything to you?’ she says.

‘He doesn’t care about Harry’ I add from the side. ‘Otherwise, he wouldn’t have started the fire!’

‘I’ve started nothing, you idiot!’ Brutus barks at me, and Jandaya steps between us to stop him from throwing himself on me. ‘What the hell is he blabbering about?’

‘I don’t believe you!’ I shout. ‘You think we don’t know it was you? Ha! Think again! We’ve got your graffiti too, the one with Harry. Harry on a leash. Very clever, good job! You’re a genius!’

‘Blah blah blah!’ Brutus mocks. ‘The easiest thing to do is blame me.’

‘So you admit this is what was drawn on the graffiti?’ Jandaya asks.

‘I bet that Granitsky wouldn’t be too happy when we tell him we’ve got evidence that you were there right before the fire started. If the police start interrogating you, sooner or later they’ll get to him too’ I add.

‘You bet? Ha ha ha! Well, well! Listen, brat, I don’t have to explain myself to you either! Or to anybody else. Is that clear?’ Brutus has bristled up.

‘We’ll tell Granitsky that we know about you! When he hears you’ve made a blunder, you won’t play so cool, will you?’ I threaten him once more.

Obviously, this pushes a button because suddenly Brutus flips out. He shoves Jandaya out of his way and jumps on me. We come to blows. We’ve both got so much bottled-up anger that neither of us holds back. I’m aware that most probably tomorrow I’ll be licking my wounds but my adrenaline has surged so high that right now I feel no pain at all, just the desire to keep punching him.

‘Boys, stop it!’ Jandaya’s voice seems to come from somewhere far away. ‘That’s enough! You’re both such idiots! STOP IT!’

Somehow, she manages to wedge herself between us and stop the fight.

‘He’s the idiot! And a ruffian too!’ I say as I lick my paw. ‘And an arsonist!’

‘Listen...’ Brutus hisses at me. ‘Make sure I don’t catch you sniffing around me again, you hear me! Or it won’t be just your nose bleeding next time!’

My nose bleeding? Now I can feel it. The fur on my muzzle is matted. Great! My hoodie is soaked too. With a grin, Brutus turns around and walks away slowly. Damn! His paw! I forgot to check if he’s got burns from the fire. I look at Jandaya.

‘Do you have tissues?’

She shakes her head angrily. Doesn’t look me in the eye. There. I knew she would be angry with me. But there’s nothing to be done about it. It seems I’ll simply have to suffer through her punishing silence, and then endure a lengthy scolding. She’ll be nagging at me all the way to her place. I give her a sign that we should go. The earlier it starts, the sooner it’ll end.

‘I’m sorry, Jay’ I say to unplug the flood. She doesn’t stop all the way back.

XXIV

‘I’m absolutely sure that he’s lying!’ I say as I lounge on the rocking chair.

I’ve lifted my feet up on the windowsill, and the blissful sun caresses my swollen nose. Today school’s off so we’ve been here since morning.

‘Yes, poochie’ Rubie says and pats me on the shoulder. ‘I’m sorry that I wasn’t there so the two of us could teach him a proper lesson. Picking a fight with you! Why didn’t he pick a fight with me? Then he would meet his match!’

‘And what might you mean by that? I didn’t give in to him, for your information!’ I say indignantly.

Clutch and Jandaya look at each other. Jandaya sighs theatrically, making sure I can hear her. Clutch follows suit. I’m just about to say something in my defence when a key turns in the lock. Startled by the sound, I nearly fall off my chair. Everyone looks at each other and we turn to the heavy curtain in the hallway. It moves out of the way reluctantly and reveals Ned’s muzzle. My heart misses a beat. Will this happen every time I see him? The others are clearly embarrassed.

I follow his gaze to the panel we've made. We've put up photos, articles, various notes and drawings. A loaded silence settles. Even Rubie has stuck his nose into his piece of paper, drawing the Morning Eye. It's the nickname we've been using for the high arched window on one wall of the lair; in the morning, the first rays of the sun enter through it, and it offers a beautiful view of the entire city. Rubie came up with the nickname. He's into such stuff. One day he spent a good half hour praising the beauty of the window, the grace of *art nouveau* (I had to look up the meaning), the effect of the light passing through it and so on. It's mind-boggling, the things that intrigue him. Back to the present, Ned nods a few times, and then he says simply, 'Impressive.'

'We're sorry for... errr, the mess' I mumble in response.

'Oh...' He waves it away and tosses his bag to one side, and his jacket on top of it. 'Anybody want tea?'

Jandaya lifts her paw. 'I do.'

Slowly, the rest of us join her.

'All right. Keep debating in the meantime. I hope I haven't interrupted anything' he says with a smile.

I shake my head. 'No, sir, you haven't. And how—'

'You can skip the "sir"' he says with a smile.

'Okay, sss...' I stop myself almost in time. 'How was your trip?'

'Long' he replies briefly.

Is he investigating something now? Even though the newspaper's been shut down? What does he do when he's away? My eyes run across the dirty window pane. It must've been years since it was last cleaned! But the dirt adds to the charm of the place. It gives things a certain... antiquated feel. What a nice word! An antiquated place. It fits with Noxville himself, with his last-century looks.

'Hello? Earth to Oscar? Are you here? We're talking to you!'

It's Jandaya. Her voice brings me back.

'Sorry, I was thinking. What did I miss?'

'Green with blackberry or balm?' Ned inquires with his back to the stove.

'Ahem, balm, please. Thank you.'

As he returns with a tray, he doesn't miss my swollen nose. He inquires about it and we tell him about the fight. And not only that. We report what we've been doing over the past few days and what we've sniffed out. He listens on with a smile on his face. Obviously, we mention Brutus all the time. When I pause to take a breath, he interrupts me.

'And could you be overreacting? Listening to you, I get the feeling that you don't like this Brutus fellow one bit. Hence the easiest thing for you is point a finger at him. But this could get in the way of your investigation...'

'So you think it's not Brutus?' I scowl.

'I'm not saying that. But you need to keep an open mind. If it isn't him, who else could it be?'

Rubie grins. 'Now, that's what I call a spin!'

'I don't know. Who?' I ask.

'Well, find whom to ask about it' Noxville suggests with a smile. 'It's your investigation... I've got other things to worry about.'

I take a sip from my cup. I turn to Clutch, and she shrugs. It *is* Brutus, clear as day!

Jandaya gestures that it's time for us to get going. I don't want to go back home. I want to stay here.

'Can we come back tomorrow?' I ask. 'It's just that here it's easiest for us to focus.'

'*Mi casa es su casa*' Noxville replies with a nod.

XXV

My screen's ringing as if it's on fire. I glance at the clock: 2:30 am. It's Clutch. Worried, I pick up.

'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine. Why?' she asks, apparently puzzled by my question.

'Well, you're calling me at two in the morning' I point out with indignation. Since she's fine, I can allow myself some bitterness for her waking me up.

'Oh, is it two already... I didn't realize.'

‘Well, next time try to reali—’

‘Listen’ she interrupts. ‘The spheres that you got from the station... I managed to download a lot of stuff from them...’

I sit up. ‘Weren’t they bust? The police officer told us that they’re good for nothing.’

‘Oh, please. As if they would know. No way somebody would develop such a complex technology and make it single-use. Even a baby would know that they could be reactivated and the information inside could be extracted’ she explains and laughs out.

‘Is there something on Granitsky?’ I ask straight away.

‘There are no names, just a bunch of strange graffiti, addresses, some abbreviations. It’s all very weird’ she replies.

‘As expected. I guess they wanted to stop other dogs from figuring out what this whole thing was about. When we saw the bomb in the Old Town, the police just read the inscription on the graffiti and dashed off straight away, remember? As if they’d come especially for that – to read it!’

‘The question is who sends the spheres to them...’ Clutch wonders.

‘And why’ I add.

‘Okay. Go back to sleep. Tomorrow we’ll talk about it. I didn’t mean to wake you up’ she says apologetically.

Yeah, right. We hang up and I lie back in bed but my curiosity won’t let go. I send her a message. *Hey. Can you send me the files you downloaded?* They start arriving in our chat window with pings, and I sit up to log on my printer. I reach for my notepad on the nightstand. I wait for them all to be printed and then I examine them. They are weird indeed. The messages are veiled and mean nothing to me. What does the whole thing mean? I get the feeling that the more we dig, the further away we get from our goal. At least, we established that this is a way of transmitting information, right? The spheres are untraceable. It’s as if both sides can talk to each other via a cipher which is unintelligible to everybody else. Safe and sound. And it seems that there’s nothing for us in the messages. I leaf through the printed pages. I drop them on the floor and I lie back in bed. But then I realize that I have overlooked the dates written with tiny numbers in the corner of each page. I sit back up and I look for a recent date that I can link to an event that

I know of. There! A graffiti dated from the day after the fire. *Security. 1000 bones. Chair.* Utter nonsense. Even if 'security' refers to Harry, what are these 1000 bones? My head spins. I lie back down and I start thinking. Could 'bones' refer to bons? I whistle. 1000 will be enough to fix one's ranking and one's life, no doubt about that... Does this mean that the security will get 1000 bons? Could this be some sort of compensation for Harry? He gets arrested and gets a thousand bons for it? Or have they taken the bons away from him? This would make more sense but he hasn't got even 500. And then... What does 'chair' mean? With heavy eyelids, I write down in my notepad what I've learned, making a note that we need to get into the bon system. I fall asleep with the feeling that I'm on to something and I can't wait to see where this clue would lead us to.

[text in illustration]

Brutus

Naughty

Nasty?

Nutcase!

XXVI

This morning, I feel wound up. My tea is still hot but I don't have the time to wait for it, so I take sips after each bite. When I yelp again, Fara looks up from her plate and stares at me.

'Be careful not to burn yourself. It's not a pleasant feeling.'

'Ha-ha! Very funny!' I snap at her.

'Not only can't he wait to get out of here but he's lost his sense of humour somewhere along the way, too.' She sighs theatrically and turns to Dad who doesn't respond.

'I feel knackered. I slept awfully last night... And something gnaws at me, so I have to check it out' I mumble.

'Well, it makes sense, you got beaten up, after all' she keeps on nagging, and chuckles as she points at my swollen nose.

Dad grunts as he methodically scoops porridge from his bowl. Fara must have told him that I had a fight with Brutus. She saw me when I got back home the other day and I told her everything. However, Dad doesn't seem bothered. It's to do with me, after all, not his precious *work*. Even after his demotion he's still working ten hours a day and often brings along files to work on at home too.

'It's nothing' I decide to justify myself nevertheless. 'And our investigation is progressing! For example, when we went to the municipality...'

At this my father shifts his eyes towards me and scowls. I'm certain that inside he's quite displeased. If he spoke to me, he would have already spat out something like "Kids! What business have you in the municipality?!" But he doesn't utter a single word to me, he doesn't even look me in the eye. Still, I can tell his ears are pricked.

'...we found out who might benefit from the fire. And take a look at this...'

As I speak, I take out the crumpled sheet of paper from my pocket and I spread it on the table. I read the inscription: "Security. 1000 bons. Chair." Fara perks up.

'Clutch managed to get it off one of the spheres I told you about. It's the same as the one that got Harry to leave his room in the night of the fire.'

'But it's rubbish!' she says. 'It doesn't mean anything!'

'Yes, it does. '1000 bones' might be slang for a thousand bons. But a thousand is a huge amount. If they take away so much from you, you'd be better off dead...'

'But if they *give* them to you, you'd live like a king' Fara counters with a whistle.

'Exactly. And then this... 'Security'. If they took the bons away from Harry, he'd never get out of jail. If they gave them to him, he shouldn't be inside at all...'

'And are you sure this message is connected to Harry?'

'It was sent right after the fire... I don't know whom to, nor where but it's worth digging... The only thing I can't comprehend is this 'chair'. What could it mean?'

Fara shrugs. For a while, we stay silent. And then, a voice.

'"Chair" means a seat in the City Council. You get one when you're in the city government.'

Fara and I look at each other. Did my father just speak to me? I'm overwhelmed by surprise combined with a feeling of warmth. I all but wag my tail.

I try to put it all together. 'So, somebody will get a thousand bons and this will grant them a seat in the City Council, right?'

'I didn't say this. I simply explained what 'chair' means. And whoever gets to sit in it, doesn't leave for an entire year.'

I look at Dad who's staring back into his bowl again. It seems he doesn't want to continue our conversation. His muzzle has gotten so white, it feels like he grows older by the day. I want to put my paw on his shoulder, look him in the eye, tell him that I'm going to fix this mess. But I stop myself. Instead, I offer Fara to join me but she declines my invitation brusquely. How long will she hide at home, I wonder? For now, she's keeping it together but tomorrow she might lose it too, who knows.

'Very well, then.' I get up and I leave my serviette on the table. 'I'll go do some sniffing. You can wish me luck!'

Fara nods, and Dad continues to dig into his bowl methodically. When I'm at the door, my screen rings. It's Rubie.

I pick up. 'How's it going, dog?'

'Listen, poochie, I didn't tell you about it but this morning before school I went to see Harry.'

'A visitation? You should've taken me with you.' I'm not very pleased.

'It all happened very fast. First, I got a message to go to the headmaster's office—'

'Overdoo has summoned you? What for?'

'I'll get to that too. I wanted to speak with Harry, to let him know that I'll use this visit to the headmaster to ask him to speak up for him. To whoever he needs to. 'Coz Harry's been doing his job here in the school for so long, you know—'

'And?' I ask gloomily.

'Harry smiled and said that I wouldn't get anywhere with this because Overdoo hated him.'

‘Hated him? Rubbish, last time he even said that he felt bad about him getting detained’ I say.

‘Harry told me that recently they had a quarrel and Overdoo was really pissed off’ Rubie says. ‘Obviously, Harry saw him take stuff from school, stuff which is supposed to be *for* the school...’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning that he caught him loading a box of monitors in the boot of his car. He asked what he was doing, and Overdoo told him that he was going to use them for some competition because the organizers didn’t have any equipment.’

I shrug indifferently. ‘So? It might’ve been the truth.’

‘Only he didn’t return them, see? Harry kept asking when he would be bringing them back. Eventually, Overdoo got so mad that he kicked him out of his office and told him he wasn’t going to put up with some security guy holding him responsible.’

‘So, Harry thinks that Overdoo is stealing from the school?’ I gasp.

‘He told me that he’s caught him carrying away containers with liquid soap several times, claiming that they didn’t meet the quality standards. At least once every few months. But Harry never said anything. He’d even seen the headmaster leave the restrooms with a bag filled with toilet paper rolls.’ Rubie laughs out.

‘You’re kidding me! Toilet paper?’ I burst out laughing too.

‘The thing is, Harry is convinced that since that incident with the monitors they’re not on good terms at all, and he even expected Overdoo to sack him...’

‘Then comes the fire, Harry gets blamed for it and Overdoo sees an opportunity...’ I say.

‘Exactly! So, according to Harry it wouldn’t be in Overdoo’s interest to help him or speak up for him’ Rubie continues sullenly. ‘And Overdoo has summoned me because he obviously found out that we’re still sniffing about the fire even after you were suspended. Probably Brutus complained to him about it. He threatened that if we don’t stop, I’ll follow in your tracks.’

‘I’ll understand if you decide to take a step back’ I say. ‘You need your bons for the Art Academy. They wouldn’t let you in with less than 500.’

‘He said the same. And he emphasized that he had connections. He could stop me from getting in. But if I played along, he said, I wouldn’t have problems, I would get in without an exam even...’

‘This is disgusting, dog... Yes, he’s the headmaster, and so what? How dare he threaten you like this! Did he want anything else besides you quitting your sniffing around?’ I ask.

‘No. He seemed more interested in finding out how far we’ve got and whether we’ve found out something. He said that he was very concerned. That it wasn’t good for the school and so on. With all this digging we were asking for it. We should leave it to the police. And so on.’

‘Yes, as Noxville wrote in one of his articles, ‘it is always best if we don’t get the dogs barking’. Now I start to see what he meant...’ I say with a frown.

‘However,’ Rubie continues, ‘this doesn’t bother me at all. We go along with the plan, and Overdoo can piss off. I’m not scared of him!’

‘Neither am I!’ I say.

‘So, meet after school at Noxville’s?’

‘I’ll be there!’

I’m already on the street and the cold wind slaps me on the muzzle. So, this is what having authority and abusing it looks like. What a prick! Does being the headmaster mean he can steal as he pleases and blackmail us too however he pleases? Admittance to the Academy without an exam! Does he offer stuff to Brutus too? And if he does, what does he want in exchange?

XXVII

At Noxville’s, Clutch has projected her monitor on the table and roots about in some data bases. I pace about her with my paws crossed on my chest until Jandaya snaps at me and orders me to sit down because I’m setting her on edge. Noxville starts laughing but he doesn’t look up from his book. He’s one of the last remaining dogs who still read books on paper. His library is like, huge, and I wonder where he finds all these books. I thought paper books had disappeared years ago.

‘What are we looking for?’ Clutch asks simply.

I leap up and dash to her. 'Are we in?'

She just nods at the screen without responding.

'Harry Scribtag. Check out his bons.'

Noxville looks up to us. I think I notice his ears flicker for a moment. Clutch's fingers dance on the keyboard and in a second, she lets out an angry shout.

'What?! How could he have just eight! Dogs have ten as newborns!'

'Look here!' I point on the screen to the others. 'Here it says that 42 bons were taken away for suspicions of vandalism, 100 for concealing information, and then another 300 for setting a bad example for the community!'

'Vandalism, concealing, bad example? Are we talking about Harry here, or about some seasoned criminal?' Rubie is outraged.

A foreboding that we're going to lose grabs me by the throat. It's as if I'm stuck in a whirlpool. The sight of Harry's vanishing bons makes me dizzy. Do they really believe that he's a criminal? What are we doing here? Why can't we progress? How is it possible that an innocent dog can lose it all in the blink of an eye? How can life be so unfair? I'm restless, furious. It's clear that Granitsky wanted the fire to happen, then Brutus started it, and now Harry has been accused of it. Granitsky has stolen the Lantern away from us! And why did they give all these hollow promises, hoodwinking us? "We'll build a Youth Centre!" Yeah, great! And not only that but getting Harry, of all dogs, to get the blame for it! I bang on the desk with all the force I've got and I growl. My friends turn to me in shock. I'm furious! I'm ready to confront him, face to face!

'Jay, I want to talk with Granitsky. Can you help me?'

'A fact of interest – this table is more than 200 years old' Ned announces, setting his book aside, then he turns to Jandaya.

'Okay, let's go to his office!' She leaps up.

There's no need to beg her, or to explain what I'm thinking. As she puts her hoodie on, she warns me: 'But no bs, right?'

I nod and I look at Ned. There's something strange about the way he's looking at us. With some new interest. Is it real, or is it my imagination? I'd give a hundred bons to find out what's going through his mind.

XXVIII

‘Jandaya! I’m so glad to see you, my dear girl!’

Granitsky opens his arms wide, and Jandaya accepts his hug with a wry smile.

‘I see you’re with your friend again. What was his name?’ He’s still looking at her, although he’s speaking about me. I’m sure he does it on purpose.

‘My name is Oscar!’ I reply instead of her. She looks at me and I take a few steps towards them.

‘You’re cocky.’ He’s talking to me now. ‘Cockier than the last time we met. Back then you couldn’t tear your eyes away from the ground, and now look at you!’

He laughs so hard that his belly shakes. He doesn’t seem that scary anymore. He’s got money and everybody stoops to him? So what? We know how he achieves his goals. And the Lantern is yet another of his whims! Harry has fallen victim to his greed. If Mom was alive, she would’ve despised the guy! I feel the same way. I don’t know him but the image that the barkmedia has built of him has nothing to do with reality. They present him like the sweetest soul in the world. “The entrepreneur who does so much for our city!” Hypocrite! I already hate him for everything that he stands for. I can’t believe that he’s here, and Harry is arrested! I take a breath in and I try to control my anger. This time, I won’t give in to him and let myself be intimidated.

I start with my muzzle held high. ‘We know that—’

Jandaya interrupts me. ‘The mother of a friend of ours is friends with one of her neighbours, and she told her that they’re building something new on the spot where the old school used to be... We were wondering... Given that I think you know everything about this city, whether you knew what would become of the Lantern now?’

‘I might just as well’ he replies with a wide grin. He’s still keeping up the pretence of the kind, concerned gentleman.

‘We know that there’s going to be a mall there’ I blurt, and Jandaya pinches my leg, hard. I cannot play her games.

‘You know, do you?’ He frowns.

‘But we wanted you to tell us more. Could you? For example, when will it be ready and what is it going to be like? Before, they promised they were going to renovate the building and turn it into a Youth Centre, and now...’ Jandaya feigns curiosity.

‘Well, obviously! There’s no way to renovate after the fire... It was a beautiful building’ Granitsky sighs theatrically. ‘But only an ugly, dangerous singed ruin remains in its stead now. Both Mayor Eagler and Overdoo announced that they wouldn’t be investing any resources in it, see? It will cost much more now that they have to start from scratch...’

‘So you bought the place after the fire, is that it?’ I ask.

‘Buying it? You’re mistaken, the plot is not mine.’ Another grin.

‘But of course.’ I cross my paws and I look away.

‘Anyways, I don’t think that whoever bought it could have done so before the fire. After all, doesn’t the whole city know that the school was part of our architectural heritage? And as such it was owned by the city...’

Every word that comes out of Granitsky’s mouth has a deliberate emphasis. What an actor! He lies to us brazenly, without batting an eyelid. I itch to ask him about Brutus, about the new mysterious spheres, about all the other ‘accidental’ fires...

‘But you know what? I think I might have a word with the buyer. I’ll advise him to include one floor for a student’s centre in the plans. It’s only fair, right? I can even promise you that I’ll pay for the interior and the equipment. After all, it’s going to be eight floors. Surely, one can serve the puppies! Heh-heh!’ He waves a magnanimous paw. ‘I see how worried and involved you are, so this is the least I can do for our puppies. You are my inspiration. Candy!’

His secretary, “Candy”, materializes on the doorstep and looks up to him, expecting orders. He simply commands, Write!, and he starts dictating, while her fingers with flashy polish click on the screen.

‘After my meeting with inquisitive students today I made a promise that in the new shopping mall which is about to be built in the place of the old building of Barcus Aurelius School I will build a special place where the puppies can develop their talents, and so on, and so on... Now, finish the thing and send it to me for approval before you forward it to the barkmedia. And now, as grateful as I am for this meeting, my dears, I have to send you away because I’m quite

busy. Treat yourselves with some dog biscuits on your way out. They are a special delivery to me from the shop on Edgar Alan Paw Street. They make the best pate there!’

Which costs more than what Dad earns in a month, I think.

Hold on for a second! When and how did he manage to turn the tables and take advantage of our meeting? His wide grin seems almost amiable but if he thinks he can fool us, he’s deeply mistaken. We are well aware that he’s the puppet master in all this, and Brutus’s tail will fall off from all the wagging around him. And if we don’t stop him, he’ll just go on doing whatever he pleases! While others suffer! Like Harry!

‘And what about Harry?’ I freeze on my spot, despite his intention to kick us out of his office.

‘Harry? Is that the security person? Well, I guess he’ll just get what he deserves’ he says.

‘What a pile of bullshit!’ I argue.

‘We’re certain that he’s innocent’ Jandaya completes my thought calmly. ‘He would never do such a thing. And he doesn’t deserve to be in jail.’

Granitsky puts his huge paw on her head.

‘Now, this is something I cannot interfere with. When Overdoo called to inform me about the fire, he was already positive it was the work of the security guy. If he’s innocent, he’ll be released. But I believe you don’t work for the police, do you?’ he says, trying to push us out ever more insistently.

‘But they’re taking away all his bons! Even if they do let him go, he’ll have nothing! Nothing!’ I persist.

‘If they release him, I’m sure that there’ll be a way to fix his bon problem too. I know a lot of dogs. And I’ve scratched quite a few backs, you know’ he says and gives us a wink.

I frown.

‘All right, thank you for stopping by and don’t forget to take a biscuit. I always treat my guests on their way out, so that they are left with a nice taste in their mouths after meeting me, ha ha ha. And if you want to discuss something else, come back. And if this... Harry, was it? If this Harry is innocent, we’ll fix his bons, don’t worry.’

“We’ll fix.” Who does this guy think he is? God? He doesn’t even work in the Ministry of Bons. How could he fix anything? His secretary pushes us out with a smile. She closes the door to his office, then says with a voice as sweet as honey, “Biscuit, dears?”. They do look tasty, no arguing there, but I doubt they would mask the bitterness in my mouth. I stare in front of me. Jandaya’s screen starts ringing.

‘What? ...Now?’ she says and she turns to me. ‘Okay, we’re on our way!’

I frown expectantly.

‘It was Clutch! They want us to meet them straight away. She didn’t explain why, she just said “You won’t believe this!”, and judging by her tone, she’s really excited about something!’

‘Clutch excited?!’ I ask with a grin.

‘Exactly!’ Jandaya replies.

With that we both rush back to Ned’s lair.

XXIX

As we come in, Clutch jumps off her chair, and Rubie leaps on me.

‘Whoa! Whoa! Easy now!’ I try to push him away but he grabs me in his arms and lifts me off the floor.

‘We’ll get him out, poochie, you know! We’ll get him out! We already have proof that it wasn’t him!’

He starts swaying me this way and that, as hard as I try to tear myself away from him. The girls giggle.

I look at Noxville who is sat at his desk, writing something in a big leatherbound notebook. His face is impenetrable but I’m certain that he keeps an eye and an ear on what’s going on in our end of the room. And it’s not my imagination! I’m convinced he has something to say about all that, and I’ll find out what it is! At last, Rubie lets go of me and I take a breath loudly. He is strong. If he squeezes me harder, I can easily break a rib or two.

‘I like you more when you simply wag your tail’ I huff.

‘In a moment, you’ll be jumping with joy together with me’ he says.

I shift my eyes between him and Clutch impatiently. 'Well, would somebody be so kind as to spill the beans, please?'

'We played the CCTV footage again' Rubie says, bouncing up and down.

I'm confused. 'So? We must've watched it a hundred times or more with Clutch!'

'Yes, but there was something we missed' Clutch says with a grin.

'For bone's sake, tell us what you've found out!' Jandaya erupts.

Clutch plays the footage and we all crowd around the screen. Once again, we watch the silhouette as it leaves the shadows around the Lantern, looking around, and running away from the building as the first flames start licking the windows. Then it slithers among the shadows, turns around the Cylinder and leaves the range of the cameras. With a chuckle, Rubie tells us to watch carefully. Clutch pauses the footage and rewinds to the moment before the hooded figure turns around the mirror façade of the school, and then...

'There! See? A reflection of his face!' she announces, pointing at the shiny surface of the wall, where we can discern a twisted face.

My heart starts pounding. The quality of the footage is poor but it's good enough to show that this is not Harry. It's clear! How could we have missed it! Clutch squints her eyes, and she zooms in on the face reflection.

'Can you enhance that?' I ask.

She nods and as the image becomes clearer, both I and Jandaya gasp.

'But this... This is... It can't be!' She turns to look at me.

I'm so shocked that I can't move. I try to put together everything we've learned so far. I was certain that Brutus was the one to blame for the arson and that Granitsky was behind all this. What we needed was proof to expose Brutus in order to free Harry. But *this*? How can we explain this? Overdoo? Why would Overdoo set the Lantern on fire?

'Why would Overdoo set the Lantern on fire?' I ask aloud and my eyes dart to Noxville.

He's watching us. I see a hint of surprise on his face. This is new!

'Why indeed! Put yourself in his place. What would've made you do something like this?' he says in a flat voice.

'Fear? Maybe somebody pushed him?' Jandaya tries.

Ned nods. 'Not a bad guess.'

'Fear?! No way! Overdoo doesn't seem like somebody who could do something like this because he's afraid. I'd rather say he's after something!' I suggest.

'Favour for favour? It's an established practice' Noxville says, nodding again.

'It could be both – fear and a favour' Clutch joins in.

Ned smiles. There's this feeling again! He looks like he wants to hint something to us.

I don't have the patience for that, so I ask him directly. 'You know something that we can use, don't you? And you want to help us! Tell us what you know, please!' I'm panting already.

'Good job, Oscar! Your intuition's good. The truth is that you helped me, not the other way around' he says with a smile.

'We helped *you*?' I gasp.

'Perhaps I should tell you exactly what I've been working on in the past few years' Noxville says and smiles again.

XXX

'Do you know who makes the decisions in this city?' Ned asks.

'Eagler? He is the mayor...' I reply.

Ned shakes his head.

'The mayor has a say in it – he's the face of the city. However, his power isn't absolute. It wouldn't be right if he made all the decisions alone. This would enable him to do whatever he pleased, wouldn't it?'

We all nod.

'That's why we have the City Council' Noxville continues. 'You've heard of it, haven't you?'

Security. 1000 bons. Chair. The memory of the graffiti appears in my mind. I frown. What has this got to do with the fire? Rubie, Clutch, and Jandaya are silent, listening closely.

'The Council was created so that the city could be governed in a fair manner and the mayor be prevented from abusing his power. And here's the funny part. Are you ready? The

Council has control over the mayor's decisions but nobody has control over the decisions of the Council.'

'Isn't this the reason to have so many councilors?' Rubie asks. 'So that they can control each other?'

'Exactly. Nine in total. And they should be the most merited, the most recognized, the most clever and dedicated dogs in the city. The best of the best' Noxville explains.

'And in order to get into the Council, you need to get to 2500 bons' Clutch reminds us.

'Indeed. And to get to 2500 bons, you really should be a model citizen. In the past, the Council has consisted of scientists, physicians, inventors, engineers, architects, judges, teachers...'

'But that graffiti said '1000 bons. Chair.' What does this mean?' I ask.

'It means that over the past few years somebody interfered with the system and now bons are given not because of public merit...' Noxville smiles.

I figure it out. '...but because of favours!'

'So, somebody raises your bons and you get into the Council... And so what?' Rubie interrupts.

'What do you mean, 'so what'? You get power!' The picture starts becoming clearer. 'The City Council is more powerful than the mayor. And if you have loyal dogs there, you can easily rule the city!'

Noxville nods. 'Yes. And these loyal dogs are what we call 'proxies'. They no longer serve the city, even though they are paid by it. Simply because there's somebody who pays them more.'

'I still don't quite get it...' Rubie wrinkles his muzzle.

'Let me try to explain it better' Ned continues. 'You've heard dogs talk about corruption, haven't you? On the barkmedia, or your parents, or some other grown-ups. This is not a topic that we discuss with our young, and perhaps we should. Corruption is part of our world and it has many faces. Starting with giving somebody something in exchange for a favour...'

Jandaya nudges me. 'Like what you did with the lady at the station, so that they would let you visit Harry!'

I look down. I still feel embarrassed about that.

‘...and getting to dogs who use the power they’ve got for their personal gain. For example, as the headmaster of a school, Overdoo has to approve all the decisions regarding this school.’

‘Like suspending Oscar’ Clutch says.

‘Or threatening Rubie that he can determine whether he gets admitted in the Art Academy!’ I say through clenched teeth.

‘Yes. And he obviously set up Harry because Harry caught him stealing!’ Rubie barks.

Ned nods. What else? I have the feeling that we’re missing something important. What *are* we missing? Think, Oscar! How else can he benefit from his power as a headmaster?

‘Could he somehow have gotten access to the construction papers for the plot of the Lantern and...’ I jump on my feet.

‘Very well, you’re getting closer. I’m very good friends with your history teacher. During a staff session Overdoo blabbed out that the Lantern would soon be history. My friend got suspicious and called me. Without wasting time, I checked the situation and guess what... I found a demolition project signed by the headmaster himself. Obviously, somebody just added it to the folder with approved projects. I quickly filed in a complaint to the mayor’s office. He put a stop to the project and the Council couldn’t oppose his decision, of course. The old school building was a part of our architectural heritage, after all. But apparently this upset somebody’s plans because soon after the fire broke out. Which led me directly to the school, and by chance – to your history class too.’

I flare up. So, all this time Overdoo has kept this scheme of his a secret and has lied to us about the fire, the new youth centre, about Harry and how nobody knew anything about anything. About how sorry he was... *Somebody’s plans...*

‘We know that Granitsky wants to build his stupid shopping mall on this plot’ I say as I cross my paws on my chest. ‘He used his driver to buy the plot for him. Does this mean that he’s using Overdoo too?’

‘I wouldn’t call it ‘using’. I’d guess that he’s promised something in return to him’ Ned says with a smile.

Suddenly I see it. ‘Bons!’

‘Yes! This must be it!’ Clutch realizes. ‘Our check-up showed that Harry had lost almost all his bons but we didn’t think to check whether somebody else had got them for a job well done, did we?’

She logs back on to the ranking system and opens Overdoo’s file. What a surprise! 2800, and the last 1000 have been acquired on the day after the fire! So, now he meets the 2500-bon requirement to get a seat in the City Council next year.

‘We’ve got you now, headmaster!’ I say triumphantly.

‘Some dogs are willing to do anything if it would bring them closer to power’ Noxville says. ‘Overdoo didn’t hesitate to set the Lantern on fire. And at the end of this year, he’ll have enough bons to be admitted in the City Council. But he has overlooked one small detail. Whoever gave him the bons holds all the aces.’

‘The real threat’ I whisper. ‘And if Overdoo doesn’t play along and do as they want, they can tell everything they know about him...’

‘And who’s responsible for the bons?’ Clutch asks. ‘It’s the Ministry, isn’t it?’

‘It ought to be but Granitsky told me and Jandaya that he can fix things with Harry if it turns out he’s innocent. “I’ve scratched quite a few backs”, he said’ I explain.

‘And this brings us to the highest levels of corruption and the puppet masters who play high. It’s them that I’ve been trying to expose for years.’ Noxville sighs. ‘But recently it’s getting very hard for us journalists. They always find ways to misinterpret our words and portray us as liars.’

Rubie brings us back to the matter. ‘So, somebody wants to have proxies in the City Council, so that they could protect their personal interest and not the good of the city, is that it? And you can’t prove it?’

‘I couldn’t. But then I had the good fortune of meeting you, didn’t I?’ Ned says and gives me a wink.

I didn't sleep all night. I kept going over all the things that we learned in the past few days, over and over again. We are alone. Literally and metaphorically speaking. There is nobody to turn to, nobody we can talk to about our findings. Who'd believe us? The police? Ha! Some of them work with Granitsky... How can we tell the good cops from the bad? Or the mayor, perhaps? Ned said it wasn't a good idea. Basically, we can't trust anyone... Should we try to put pressure on Overdoo directly? Out of the question! One wrong move and all the proof we have will vanish and somebody will try to stop us before we've even started telling our story. If Mom was still alive, I'd go to her, tell her everything and ask for her advice... But all I've got is Dad, and he'd rather not meddle with such matters. And I've caused him enough trouble as it is. No! We need to be smart about this. We need to stalk like a predator before playing our cards. We need to consider our approach very carefully, think about potential allies... My feet have automatically taken me back to Ned's lair. I realize that the loud noise I hear is me banging on the front door.

'Hello, friend!' Ned welcomes me warmly.

'The others are at school, so I...'

'Yes, yes, I know.' He waves a paw. 'Come in.'

His lair is the only place where I don't feel on edge, like I do at home. Even Fara who's always in a good mood, smiling, admits that recently it's been really hard to communicate with our father. So, I have to fix things! I owe it to Dad, and to her too. I owe it to Mom. I would like her to know that she's brought up a worthy pup. And be proud with me!

'What's going on in there?' Ned points to my head with the tip of his muzzle and smiles gently.

I sit back on the chair and start massaging my temples. 'Is that it? We got so far but now there's nobody to talk to about it?' I whine.

'Have patience, Oscar! Right now, you're the ones holding all the aces. You are in the position of power, so you need to plan carefully. And then, the right moment will come along. You'll see.'

'It's not only that. Since I've been suspended, Dad barely speaks to me. I'd give anything if he would even shout at me! He has to work more hours because of me... He doesn't get mad. He's been demoted in rank... He doesn't get mad. His payment is reduced... He doesn't get mad

at me. He didn't move a muscle when I told him I'd met you and we came every day to yours! I'd be the happiest person ever if one day he decided to look at me again. If I didn't know him, I'd say that he was concerned about his bons only. But it's not even that. I don't know what's going on in his head, not at all.'

Noxville listens and nods ever so slightly.

'Your mother was an eager opponent to this ranking system, you know' he says in an attempt to distract me.

'My mother? I... I couldn't bring myself to asking you whether you two were close when she worked at the newspaper. I mean, I know she admired you, after all, she kept all these articles but...' I look at him.

He smiles.

'Brittany. I called her Bri. She hated it because—'

'She hated Brie cheese' I finish his sentence and we both laugh.

Ned stands up and comes over to me.

'You always carry that pen with you, don't you? Can I have it for a moment? I want to show you something.' He reaches out a paw.

I find Mom's fountain pen in my pocket and I take it out. Time seems to slow down. I pass it to Ned, he strokes it with his finger and pauses over the engraved symbol.

'Do you know what this means?'

'What? The symbol?' I ask.

He nods.

'I don't know. I always thought that it was the logo of the brand but when I searched for it on the barknet I couldn't find anything. Perhaps they've shut down or something, who knows. I guess it's something old. Nobody uses fountain pens anymore anyways.'

'True, nobody uses them but us' he says and he takes out an identical pen from the pocket of his vest.

I gasp. I stare at his pen. And then I see it... The symbol is actually two letters together, VC, but the calligrapher has turned them into something like an ancient rune. That's why I haven't

been able to find the producer of the pens. They are just usual pens branded with an unusual acronym.

‘VC. The Voice of the City’ I whisper.

‘It was your mother who came up with the name, The Voice of the City’ Ned says with a smile.

‘Really? She never told me.’

‘And she never let me give up, as long as she lived. She bounced about, howling that as long as there was somebody who would make problems public, nothing was lost. And as long as there was somebody who would do some digging, there would be dogs who would be afraid of the truth. And as long as there was somebody who asked the questions, there would be dogs who would want to know their answers.’

My eyes fill up with tears when I remember how Mom would read me the articles before I went to bed for years. I remember how we put them in the right order in the red folder that she left me... I get up and I throw myself into Ned Noxville’s arms. I hold him tight and when he hugs me back, I start sobbing. I don’t know what’s gotten into me. Later, I might be embarrassed by this but right now I *need* this hug. I need to be absorbed into his memory of my mother and drift into the emotion which is overwhelming, warm, bright, inspiring. It’s so nice that they were friends. It’s so nice that I met him! If only Mom could see us now...

Then the moment passes and I take a step back. I wipe the tears away and I go to the panel on the wall. I don’t want to dig too deep into this memory. I don’t want to use it all in one go. I know that I’ll be coming back to it again, and I feel grateful to Ned that he’ll become a part of my life. And no, I don’t think this is too rash. I felt it when he hugged me. We didn’t need to say anything. I look at the panel before me. The evil’s there. All we need to do is shed light on it.

XXXII

Our most important task is pretending that we don’t know anything. And we do. Our behaviour is exemplary. We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves. Rubie told me that he even doesn’t respond to Brutus’s teasing. The guy bares his teeth to him, and Rubie simply smiles. Good

boy! Jandaya bumped into Overdoo in the hallways a few times. Every time, she greeted him and wished him a nice day. The most recent time he talked her up. He asked how I was. What a hypocrite! His paw is still bandaged – he must’ve burned himself badly. What goes around comes around! Already, rumours are circulating that there’s going to be a new headmaster because Overdoo is leaving. It seems that his plan is in motion. He’s got his bones and he’s ready for the Council, right? Oh, I can’t wait to see his face when we put a spoke in his wheels!

I’m back in the lair. I’ve grown into seeing this place as my second home. I get up to stretch my legs and I go to the Morning Eye. The sun is out today. The city appears grey and gloomy. Only the infoscreens on the buildings flash with their colourful ads. My eyes swoop over all the buildings that Granitsky owns, scattered like ugly malformations across the city – too modern, too out-of-place. And with the most gigantic infoscreens on their façades. This is what the Lantern will turn into, too. Soon, another tumour will appear in its place, erasing the past altogether. And on it... an infoscreen, of course. All the infoscreens on Granitsky’s buildings advertise other businesses that are connected with him – I know it now: restaurants, construction companies, casinos... We dogs are wired to mark our territory. But I must acknowledge one thing: this dog has scope. He’s left his marks all over the city to claim it as his.

And suddenly, as I stand watching, I realize what we need to do. My ‘genius idea’ doesn’t *strike* me, it doesn’t sweep me off my feet. The solution simply solidifies, as if it’s been there for me all this time. I grin widely. If he can do it, then so can we! He marks his territory? Then we’ll mark too. On his own marks. With his own means!

The city is not anybody’s personal property. And it’s been silent for way too long. We’ll bring its voice back. It’s time to wake this city up.

XXXIII

There’s a knock on the door of my room. It’s Fara. She stares at the chaotic pile of notes, photos and printed documents and whistles softly.

‘Wow! Now, this is some serious mess.’

In the past few hours, I've been sorting, arranging, describing in chronological order everything that we've gathered during our investigation. We'll start with the fire. My idea is to move from the small to the great, from the particular to the general. From our investigation of the fire that took out our favorite building to all the buildings that burned down and are connected to Granitsky, and thence – to the abuse of authority that Noxville is trying to expose. Then, we'll finish with information about the City Council, about the illegal offers and the distribution of bons. Great! It'll turn out as a very solid piece of journalism. I want to tell the world about all the levels of corruption that we've encountered, from offering a dog biscuit as a form of bribe to ensuring you'll get a seat in the government of the city. About all those who crave power and are willing to stop at nothing to get it. We'll include screenshots from the CCTV footage, printed messages, a copy of the construction license, the graffiti with Harry with Brutus's tag, photos of Overdoo and Granitsky...

'It'll be quite a substantial article' I brag to my sister.

'Where will you publish it?' she asks.

'On the barknet, like a normal page. What's more exciting, however, is how we're going to let dogs know where to find it' I say with a wink.

'How are you doing, sweeties?'

A big, wet nose appears through the door, followed by Rubie's grinning face.

'Rubie! Dear me! It's been ages since I last saw you!' Fara barks out with delight.

Rubie is followed by Jandaya and Clutch. I get up and I gape at them. 'What's going on? Why are you all here?'

Clutch starts explaining. 'After school we went to Noxville's first, as usual—'

'...but he wasn't there' Rubie inserts.

'The flat was empty and it seemed... cleaner and tidier, somehow. It felt awkward to stay there. As if we didn't belong there anymore.'

Her words startle me. 'Has he left again? Without saying 'goodbye'?''

'I'm sure he'll get in touch again. And he left this.' She passes me an envelope.

'It says 'For the Guardians of the Lantern' on it.'

'Would this be us?' I look at my pack.

Clutch smiles. 'Seems so.'

"'The Guardians of the Lantern'" I repeat. 'I like it.'

We sit on the floor and I carefully tear the envelope open. I take out a sheet of paper written in a nice cursive paw. It smells of ink. I start reading it aloud.

My dear Guardians of the Lantern,

I leave you this letter with a smile and a touch of sadness. I must leave urgently, otherwise I wouldn't have missed the opportunity to wish you good luck face to face. I'll follow your actions on the barknet. Honestly speaking, I can't wait for it!

I had a mission – to unravel the mystery with the scheme for seats in the City Council. Since they shut down The Voice of the City, I prefer to rely on myself mostly. 'What about the others from the newspaper?', you might ask. We went our separate ways a long time ago. That's why I started this investigation on my own. I wasn't looking for allies. I didn't think anybody would believe me, let alone help me. And then you came along – sniffing about a fire, with a sparkle in your eyes and an intuition stronger than that of many professional journalists. When we met, you reminded me that sometimes, help comes from the most unexpected places. I saw the potential you had, I saw the same spark which I and my colleagues at the newspaper always carried in our hearts. The spark that your mother carried, Oscar. I don't find it in the least surprising that it burns so brightly within you too!

Let me be completely honest. In the beginning, I used you a little. I hoped that you'll get a whiff of the clues which I couldn't pursue openly. But you know what? I'm not sorry. Because you proved yourselves to be real journalists. Smart, brave, persistent, deeply convinced that the truth does matter.

Together, we uncovered enough to cut off one of the tentacles of the Great Evil. We proved that not all could be bought, not all could be hidden. As for the Lantern... I'm sure that you already

realize that the Lantern is not just the building which was set on fire. The building burned down but the Lantern still sheds its light – through you.

Keep asking! Keep taking notes! But promise me to be careful! The game you started can be dangerous in this city. Don't leave any traces! And watch your backs!

I can't wait to see you again!

Yours,

N. N.

PS I include something small, just for Oscar :-)

I shake the envelop and a small ink cartridge falls out. I smile, and Fara gasps. I don't need to explain anything. We all know that with it, Mom's fountain pen will be writing again.

XXXIV

Fara brings a bowl of snacks. Without much ado, we have moved base from Noxville's flat to my room. I doubt that Dad would disturb us, even when he's home, and not at work.

I finish formatting the text and as we upload the last of the photos, I sign the article: *The Guardians of the Lantern*. Then I sit back.

'I think the first issue of *The Lantern* is ready' I announce with a smile and I get goosebumps from all the excitement.

'Almost!' Rubie barks, then reveals his sketchbook to us with a loud 'Ta-daa!'.

'Wow!' Jandaya says.

The symbol. The Morning Eye. It suits us. Rubie has been working on it for a few days now, since he got inspired by the window in Ned's lair, but he refused to show it to us. I couldn't wait to see the final result.

‘Dog, I love it!’

I turn to the girls. They also nod eagerly with approval. We’ve decided that besides our page on the barknet, we’ll use it as a tag for our graffiti from now on. The graffiti we plan to use to mark our territory.

Jandaya has spread a map of the city on the floor in my room and now she uses coloured pins to mark the buildings which used to be architectural heritage but have been replaced by Granitsky’s buildings – huge, ugly, Kitch monsters.

Clutch activates the spheres again. All we need to do is draw the messages and upload them on the spheres. Yes – we are planning to use the same spheres that we took from the police. The ones that were used for the delivery of secret messages. Ha! We’ll upload one graffiti on each sphere. And on each our tag will be visible – the Guardians of the Lantern. The tag will serve as a link too, opening our page in the barknet when scanned.

‘Hold on! I thought that the spheres could interfere with the infoscreen for several minutes and then the image disappeared?’ Fara says as she munches on a biscuit.

‘A simple change in the settings’ Clutch says, ‘and now they can last for as long as I please. Literally, I have to deactivate them to make them switch off. Even if somebody tries to change the ad on the infoscreen, the graffiti will still remain there. In order to make it disappear, they’ll have to switch off the infoscreen altogether from the central info post. And it’s not manned during the weekend!’

‘And if you get caught?’ Fara asks.

‘Nobody would know that it’s us behind this. Only that police officer in the station could suspect something but if he admits that he’s given a bag of spheres to a couple of puppies either no one would take him seriously, or he’d get into trouble’ I explain, as I stare at the monitor, checking my text for yet another time.

‘I bet that he won’t say a thing’ Jandaya says and props her muzzle innocently on her knees.

‘I’m proud with you. With all of you’ Fara says and she puts a paw on my shoulder. ‘And Mom would be proud with you too. You know that, don’t you?’

I nod. ‘I do.’

Jandaya stands up, puts her paws on her hips and looks down at the map. We flock around her. The city sprawls before our feet. Our city. We scrutinize it, the way that artists scrutinize their empty canvas – with excitement and eagerness. We look at each other and I silently wish us luck. It's time to draw...

XXXV

The barknet exploded. The city woke up covered in bright, bombastic headlines. The day when morning saw all the buildings owned by Granitsky 'tattooed' with messages from the Guardians of the Lantern will stay in history forever. I know it sounds too presumptuous but it's true. I would give anything to see Overdoo's face when, on his way to school this morning, he read on the skyscraper on Misty Street "Tale about the headmaster who set his own school on fire". Did he anxiously click on the tag immediately to read the whole story? Or did he continue along Chestnut Shade Street where he was met by another graffiti, the one on the shopping mall? "How to get a *chair* in the Council? Who distributes bons and why?" My favorite is on the restaurant: "Who put out the fuse of our Lantern?" A refined heading for refined muzzles. And a salute to our classmates who also loved the Lantern, like us.

Of course, all the 'hooks' that we set in our headings are like this – bold, brave, exposing. Since we activated them on Saturday night nobody has been able to take them down. And now everyone knows about them. The news was on the barkmedia too!

How much longer would dogs talk about this? I find it funny to read the speculations as to who might be behind this image – former journalists, angry citizens, victimized employees of Granitsky, and all kinds of other suggestions. Nobody will connect the graffiti with some pups from the school. But the Guardians of the Lantern will become the central figures of many urban legends, I feel it.

Rubie meets me with a wide grin. Clutch and Jandaya slide under the tree, one on her board, the other on her blades. After the marks left by the Guardians, there are no classes today but we got a message to gather in the school yard. Even I got it, although I'm suspended. Obviously, Overdoo couldn't erase me from the centralized school system. Probably they've

prepared a statement. I notice some technicians who are setting up the stage and rigging some equipment.

‘Look!’ Jandaya points. ‘They’re taking Overdoo away!’

We rush to the crowd that has already gathered. I try to catch his eye, to gloat. He’s stuck his muzzle down to the ground. A dog can avoid others’ eyes but not their catcalls. Names and boos come from the crowd around us. I catch a glimpse of Brutus from the corner of my eye. He’s serious, paws in pockets. A police officer approaches him and guides him to a patrol car. Alleluia! It was about time he got what he deserved! And then, if he comes back to school, he wouldn’t have protection so life wouldn’t be so easy anymore, would it! I silently rejoice.

A teacher walks toward the stage. Ms Coquette, our philosophy teacher. A small woman, plump. She has thick white-rimmed glasses which make her eyes seem even bigger and wetter.

‘May I have your attention, please, students?’

The clamour slowly subsides.

‘Let me get straight to the point. The events over the weekend are about to be clarified. Until the situation with Headmaster Overdoo is resolved, I’ll replace him.’

‘Overdoo, straight to jaaaail!’ somebody shouts.

‘Silence, please!’ Ms Coquette attempts to restore order. ‘With regards to the recent revelations, I should probably notify you what is to become of the old building of our school.’

Cheers come from the audience. I see the Lantern opposites me. Blackened. Ms Coquette insists explicitly that it will be renovated. That there won’t be any ugly shopping malls in its place. It will be turned into a municipal youth centre, as was promised to us years ago. Now the municipality will open a call for quotes and will assess projects for the renovation.

‘Mayor Eagler promised to supervise the construction work personally. In the meantime, should anyone have any questions, the doors of my office are always open.’

Loud applause follows, then somebody shouts again. ‘Overdoo, straight to jaaail!’

And then everybody picks up the line and starts chanting. Music to my ears.

Did we win? If we did, then why don’t I feel like a winner? Overdoo and Brutus were arrested but nobody does anything about Granitsky. They don’t even mention his name. As if we’ve never mentioned that it is *him* who’s behind all this. Suddenly, everyone is focused on

Overdoo. He's the arsonist, there's no arguing there, but... As greedy, stupid and disgusting as he is, he is not the Great Evil, is he?

I remember one of Ned's articles. In it, he writes: "You cannot defeat the system winning one battle against a particular villain. What you need to do is fix it from within, so that it stopped producing villains." If he was here now, I would ask him, "What now?" But he isn't, so I ask my pack instead.

'Go to the Old Town?' Clutch suggests. 'To see what needs to be done there too. Since the Guardians of the Lantern already marked the new part of town...'

We jump on our boards and we slide smoothly in a line towards our next adventure where the new case of the Lantern awaits...

EPILOGUE

'It's my turn!'

The pup dashes forward from the very end of the pavement at the top of his speed and when he reaches the edge of the shadow, he leaps high in the air. With a graceful arch, he lands over on the other side of the sunlit spot on the street. I applaud.

'Did you see me?' he turns to me.

I nod. His friends bounce with impatience, waiting on a queue. The next pup gets ready for the challenge but nobody can beat little Bang. I've come to watch them play a few times now. They bring back the memory of the times when I used to be a pup, and I love the care-free air of the place too. I haven't told my pack about this game, *shadow*. It's something of my own, something I associate with my family. And speaking of family... When they called me back to school, my father got his bones and his ranking back, and Fara can't stop telling dogs how proud she is with me. And today, as I was about to leave, Dad called me over. He put a paw on my shoulder and looked at me. This time he really saw me, he wasn't looking *through* me. I nodded and I smiled. And now I have this feeling, as if everything is back to how it used to be. But I feel changed somehow too. I get up.

'Wanna play?' Bang asks.

I shake my head and I scratch him behind the ears.

‘Maybe next time. Now I need to go.’

I pull the hood of my hoodie on. The sun is setting. The shadows grow longer and soon there’ll be no sunny spots to jump over. I leap onto my board and I slide smoothly down the street. The Old Town is so quiet at this time of the day! Then, I think I hear hushed voices. I slow down and I strain my ears. It’s not right but my puppish curiosity and the journalist in me get the better of me. One never knows what clues one can find here. I sneak around the corner to a narrow, dark alley by a run-down old building. A faded sign on its door says ‘Post Office’. I hide behind a dumpster and I crawl forward just enough to peek behind the rusty bin. I see two silhouettes. I strain to hear what they’re talking about.

Thousand owls! One of them is Granitsky! My heart begins pounding.

‘You haven’t learned your lesson, have you? You don’t know when to stop. Perhaps I wasn’t clear enough last time?’ His voice is low but dripping with spite.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just got back. I haven’t been in the city since—’ the other silhouette starts.

‘Enough lies!’ Granitsky interrupts. ‘It’s always “I’ve just arrived”, “I know nothing” with you. And then things go bust.’

The other silhouette shifts. As he counters Granitsky, there is a familiar joyful note in his voice.

‘If you hint that I’m the reason for your plan to fail, you need to tell me what the plan was in the first place.’

There’s no fear in his voice, just a dash of mockery. As if he’s smiling while he speaks, like... It can’t be! Like Ned would’ve done. Ned!

‘Let me repeat myself – I wasn’t here but I admit that it was quite amusing to follow the whole thing on the barknet. Evidently, fiddling with the bon system is not enough for you and now you’ve decided to stick your paw in the City Council too, have you? I’m even surprised that you got away with it again...’ Noxville adds.

‘Listen to me very carefully!’ Granitsky takes a step towards him. ‘You have no idea what you’re dealing with. This is not a game of cat-and-dog.’

After a pause, Ned says, 'It's not me who should be concerned here. These "guardians", as they call themselves, obviously have a dirty trick or two up their sleeve.'

My heart misses a beat. I feel I've blushed, from shame but from pride too. I need to make myself scarce before they get a whiff of me.

'I'll get them too. And when I do, you'll be the first one to hear it' Granitsky hisses through his teeth.

Noxville sighs. 'This city doesn't belong to you, Roman. Just accept it. You've got more than enough – money, power, influence. And with the aid of the new spheres now you can give commands without a trace... What more do you want?'

Aha! Well, yes, of course! The spheres are untraceable. So, they cannot damage the glossy image the barkmedia has built for him and they are ideal for his darker activities. It all fits together perfectly!

'It doesn't belong to you either!' Granitsky barks at Noxville. 'So you'd better get out of my way unless you want t—'

I get goosebumps.

'You cannot scare me, Roman! Dogs like you don't know when to stop. Sooner or later, you'll end up behind bars.'

With a shrug, Noxville turns, climbs on his bicycle and before he leaves, he touches the peak of his cap and nods. Then, he creaks away into the darkness. Granitsky is not stupid. He won't go after him. Not now, not in this way. He has heard Noxville but he won't listen to him. Dogs like you don't know when to stop, Ned said. But as long as there's somebody to breathe down his neck and disturb his plans, Evil will not win in this city. I clench my fists and I slowly crawl back. As I start sliding on my way home, my head begins to spin. Noxville is back. And he knows Granitsky. Closely. And it seems that we are in, deep. But I have no intention of swimming back to shore. Not until we've won.

THE END

[text in illustration top to bottom, left to right]

Brutus Granitsky

What's the connection?

What does he get?

Protection

Safe future

He uses his money and power to get something that doesn't belong to him! Is this corruption?

turpentine

+ promises

- he's promised smth to Ov. and he got his signature!

Bingo

Police?

Something is free but it's inaccessible unless you pay for it?!

Why?

What do they use them for?

Mean!

Why do they destroy them?

who benefits

what will happen to her?

buy tea

the Cylinder

[next page]

Burning down buildings which are not for sale but are sold after the fires?

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

Do not trust authority simply because it's authority!

Charm and smiles – not to do good but to get the public's approval!

Corruption is a secret that everybody knows about!

“the emperor's new clothes”

ANOTHER FIRE IN THE CITY

A HOMELESS MONGREL TO BLAME

Argument with Overdoo?

has it got anything to do with the fire