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**A Dive into
Flaming Dreams**

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I

“Happy birthday!”

Two words. The only words written on the letter, along with the two tickets: Green Day in concert, on the 4th of February.

“Waaaaw!”

It is, for Lenny, one of the best gift his father could have given to him, a dream come true. He stands up in the middle of his family, and then jumps into his father’s arms, the rock fan who used to shout Led Zeppelin at home. To spend time with him, at a real concert? Already, he thinks about when he will be talking to his best friend later and telling him what he received! Of course the other gifts are nice, from new gloves—his mother always thought he could have cold hands even if his were the warmest of the family—and a voucher for the new bicycle he wanted since he had no use of his former thunderbolt, which is now too small for him. But if he had to choose, between the tickets and the whole lot of other stuff he had received between Christmas and now, he’d choose the concert every time. He

knows an occasion like that is very far from the material gifts and he loves it.

The following day, he is walking through the ten meters squared green park in front of his house, holding his new red and black piece of metal, screw, nut, chain and tire. He smiles broadly because, to him, riding a bike is still the best way to go from a place to another. He wears the school uniform: a red striped tie, a white shirt, a tie, a black blazer and a pair of black trousers and shoes. These shoes were supposed to be black but Lenny is sure these are brown. Anyway. He stops for a few seconds, letting his gaze jump from one bird to another over him. Right after the gate, he turns right. Straddling on his new bicycle, he crosses the road and pedals towards school.

He passes in front of his neighbours' houses. All of them are the same kind, even though most have a different colour for the wooden door and a different car parked in front of it. He goes past a few blocks and then stops. A McLaren. Right in front of him, the car he always dreamed of since he dreamed of cars, if no more than this. Astonished, he approaches the engine and looks at it carefully. Everything he ever knew about it is true: the carbon brakes and the light wheels, the retractable hardtop and the aerodynamic shape. He also heard it could race at more than 200 miles per hour, which is definitely very fast. Its navy blue

colour seems to show a sign of royalty or superiority; it makes the body car smooth, calm, flawless. Its sport tyres and rims, its touch still warm from the thrust of its twin-turbo V8 as if the vehicle has just come back from a race, its sense of power and mastery, each part of it amazes Lenny to the highest point. He starts thinking about having such a car, owning such a beautiful piece of work that humans can do, wishing he'll use one someday. His bike lays on the road, almost forgotten. He still knows he couldn't go to school faster or feeling the wind as he does on two wheels, but it could be nice to...

School. He suddenly realises he has no time to lose and gets back on his way. Raising his bicycle up, he adjusts his tie hoping the mark made by jam hidden under it won't be seen by the dean. He takes a last look at the car, promising to his bike that he won't leave it for a bigger vehicle but he will still try to come by later and maybe—why not—ask for a ride in this hot rod.

The enormous building or prison or whatever where Lenny has to stay the whole day rises in front of him. A friend passing by waves a hand. He thinks about his best friend Wylfrid who is travelling around the world with his family and it is sad not to see him around. Lenny nods to greet that friend back without falling from his bike, which he locks onto a gate and then walks through the front door. He sighs. Already, he knows the Math

and Science teachers will be angry when they see he hasn't done any homework, but his book seemed so much more important last night that he forgot it. The joy of yesterday's gifts and the car a few minutes before is gone. This day is going to be very long.

II

A kick on the ground and good bye. Lenny goes up and up in the air, right to the top of the church. He likes this place. It is peaceful, quiet, beautiful. He goes there almost every time, looking down at the town, looking down at these people running from a place to another, hurrying around. His gaze jumps from one building to another: some with birds on the roof, some with small or large windows, from squared ones to round ones. A large building is rising right in front of him, but not as tall as where he stands, with its grey sad roof, brown walls and a large wooden door. It is an orphanage, which works with the church, counting on the goodness of people passing by. On the left, on the third and top floor, stands a very small opening, through which he sees shadows and sometimes faces. These faces seem happy down there, playing on the street and sleeping inside, but he only ever see a few of them. He doesn't know where the others could be during the day and always thought there had to be another door behind. His time there usually lasts for 24 hours; he enjoys every second of it.

He jumps on his feet and then on the ground, landing softly. He walks pass the bakery, glancing at the croissants, apple pies, crumbles and cheese cakes, even though he is never hungry in here. Then, he goes by the last houses and runs to the river. He enjoys playing with fishes but doesn't feel comfortable with water. For him, the best thing on earth is fire. Every night, he takes a part of the fire in front of the orphanage to light another one himself, away from the civilization. He continues to walk, and goes into the woods a hundred meters further, were he knows some dark sorcerer or monster will be waiting to challenge him.

There is always a different one, stronger, stranger, that he has to defeat to prevent the earth from being destroyed. Sometimes this sorcerer has an army, sometimes he is alone. On that particular day, his birthday, he ends up in front of hundreds of beasts. Once again, he is alone. Once again, he must kill them and protect the world. Once again, he has only the fire he took at the orphanage, and he feels strong enough to fight everything.

The beast is tall and terrific, grunting, hitting its torso with fists as big as Lenny's head. It has long and sharp teeth, a burst of light making these teeth shine for an instant. It has no ears but bright red eyes and his fur is like a new moon night. It has small

claws but sharper than a knife and stronger than steel, as if they were made to cut down trees.

Lenny is not a tree, neither is he stronger than steel, and he is definitely not fast enough to run away from it. This time is one of the rare times he feels a bit scared. He usually isn't because he knows he will defeat the monster and be victorious but, who knows, something could go wrong.

And the fight starts, as if there were someone who ringed a bell or said out loud it was time. The beast runs towards him and he jumps in the air. A second later, the beast jumps too and they miss each other by an inch. A short sword is now in Lenny's hands, shining with a calm blue light. Turning around, the beast charges again. Lenny looks at the ground intensely and lights a fire, which grows fast, very fast, until it's the size of the monster. This one slows down behind the flames and stops. He cuts the trunk of a small tree and throws it through the flames, forcing the young boy to step back, which lowers the flames intensity and the monster runs in. Burning, almost blind with those flames, the beast arrives in front of Lenny and punches him. A hard punch, right in his stomach. He loses his sword as he hits a tree, the big one with a white trunk, but it doesn't hurt. Because he's a warrior. Because he's the last wall standing between the monster and the end of the world. Because whatever he does, he

must be victorious. He rises fast, knowing he has not a second to lose before the beast attacks again, and he rushes to his blade. The blinded beast gallops towards him, as if it was also its time to give everything, even his life, to win that precise fight. The noise is eerily similar to a jack hammer, louder and louder as the monster approaches. Lenny clears up his head, he has to focus on his task and forget the world around; forget the birds which went silent when the fight started, forget the breeze gliding between the trees, ignore the fire he lit which has now become twice the beast's size. He kicks the ground, goes up in the air, quickly. The beast doesn't have the time to understand where Lenny is that this one lands on its head, his sword in its neck. The beast falls down.

Lenny breathes out, wipes his forehead and sits for a minute. He then goes further into the woods, not caring about whether there is someone else around because there can't be more monsters. He heads towards a cave, where he usually finds peace and silence. Over him is a small blackbird, singing louder and louder behind a curtain of thin leaves. The light shines, and the sound he hears is disturbing, while the blurred trees disappear.

-Lennyyy! Time to go to school, it's half past eight, get up!

III

A broken wheel, how is this even possible? Lenny walks down the street, moaning and thinking about his mates to whom he knows he shouldn't have listened. It wasn't really his fault after all, he only followed them and did what everyone else had done before him, or at least it's what he thought. They were pedaling on a small road, slaloming between cars and riding their bike at some point on a large wall, between a parking and a house garden, and eventually one of them (the one who asked him to follow) dared him to speed up till the end and jump over a bush without a single step on the ground. He eventually did it and there it was, just where he was about to land, a metal bar fixed on the ground, pointing at him.

He goes, lost in his thoughts, passing by the the Corns' house where his best friend lives. He can feel the freshness of the pool on the other side of the house, where he used to swim and play with his friend, before this one did the world's best time ever of the house in breath-hold and Lenny stopped swimming.

He marches along the cemetery, looks in, and his gaze falls on a simple grave, stone and dirt, that's all. Two bunches of flowers dying on the ground in front of it. The name, Lenny can't see it from where he is, but he knows it by heart: Alicia Moreta. In the middle of the street, alone, he dives in deep memories.

Alicia Moreta was a sweet girl, blond hair, blue eyes. The typical girl every guy would like. Smart, funny, interesting, an awesome friend and a great tennis player. She lived two streets away from Lenny's and it was usual for them to play together each Wednesday afternoon in the park, with a blue ball or, after losing it, a smaller white one. They went to the same school, meeting each morning at a crossroad, this floral roundabout down the street, with flowers changing with the seasons. Then they were making their way to school, laughing about how scared of everything Miss Ordegan's cat was and about the new clothes of Mister Powell, who thought he could choose the new trend by wearing some unusual textile.

Alicia spent every single break time at school in a place where no one could bother her: the library. She liked to stay under the eye of the old librarian, who could keep the noisy boys away and let her dream, learn and think. She wasn't shy in any way but she liked the silence and the smell of books she could find in the school's library. She was usually quiet inside, as if something

was wrong with her, but as soon as she was out of the building, she exploded with life. Each smile, talk, walk or interest she could have inside was transformed in laughs, shouts, sprints and passion.

Her parents weren't as funny and smiling as she was. They usually just went to work and waited for her to come home, sometimes a bit angry if she was late because she talked too much. They liked to read. Her passion for books came from them, who had an enormous collection of history books the father read and the mother's detective stories. There were novels of every genre: comedies, dramas, horror novels, mythologies, biographies and thrillers. There was always a space half way through the bookshelf, awaiting the next acquisition. They had purchased books from all over the world when they traveled, but now they said they were waiting for Alicia to grow up before they could go on another journey. She liked the idea. She already had pictures in her room of all the places she wanted to visit. Her father used to take time choosing the photographs he could add to her collection.

One day, without any reason, she said goodbye to Lenny with a hug instead of waving a hand as they did daily. A long and warm hug, which really moved him. He didn't know why she did this and he thought about it on his way home, meaning to ask her

the following day. It was the only girl he felt good with because the others always made him feel uncomfortable, and he thought maybe she felt good with him too. At night, he sat on his bed, thinking about that warm hug, incapable of falling asleep. He went twice to the kitchen. Three times to the toilets. And finally slept. In the morning, however, she wasn't there. She wasn't at school and therefore he thought she could be ill because he had had a cold and a sore throat the week before and maybe she had caught it from him.

The truth came from the teacher, a week later: Alicia had left. He couldn't understand why or how she was gone, why she wouldn't tell him. He understood later, when he went to her house to ask her parents where she was then. Not far from here. The cemetery was her new home. It was horrible for him to imagine Alicia wouldn't come back, because of this goddamn Leukemia, as her father said. He spent the whole week crying.

Lenny comes back into reality. He has tears rolling down his cheeks. His fists are clenched and he feels as if he was burning inside. Opening his hands, he sees the marks left by his fingernails. He walks, slowly, singing a tune his mother used to sing when he was sad: "...Sometimes, it'll be so hard you think you just can't stand. But like in a movie, think about a happy end."

Birds don't sing anymore. There is no car around. The only sound is made by his shoes on the sidewalk. A cat crosses the road and runs away when it notices Lenny. He sees it without noticing it. He doesn't notice the sky clouding over, the dark sheep announcing the rain in coming. He doesn't notice the grandmother opening the curtains in the house across the street, waking up her grandson she's taking care of. He doesn't notice the pole. *Boom*

He opens his eyes a few seconds later, confused, and sits on the ground where he just fell. He has a headache and his back hurts, probably because of the impact he endured the moment before. He looks around, trying to get his ideas straight. Still alone, he is however fully awake and sees very well where he is and what happens around him, a car, a cat, the clouds. No broken bone and his watch is intact. But he is late again.

Lenny arrives at school sweating. The first floor he has to climb is reached in a few steps, shoving then his way on the stairs to the second floor, where his lesson takes place.

The open door gives him hope, maybe he'll be able to sneak in without being seen by the teacher! He approaches the gray door with number 24 on it, listening to one of his classmate who asks why there is an X and a Y value to find and why we couldn't put

a P and an L for once. Students laugh and someone answers, calmly, that later they would see what we use the other letters for and which the variables are. There are two things Lenny notices. One: it isn't the teacher's voice, which could have either a very good or a catastrophic consequence for him.

Two: he is ten minutes late and they seem to be in the middle of the lesson, which is definitely not a good thing.

He enters class, slowly, under the eye of this substitute teacher, because it would have been too long and indiscreet to go to a seat without being seen.

"Who are you?"

The new teacher, who is two heads taller than Lenny, has a calm and steady voice.

"Lenny... Lenny Bale. I... I had a problem with my bike," he answers quietly while he goes to an empty seat.

"Is your head okay?"

He takes two seconds to remember that he hit his head on that stupid pole and he probably has a bump.

"Yes! I think. I'm not sure."

"Maybe you should go to the infirmary. Just to check."

“Okay... Thank you.”

Lenny walks out the classroom leaving his bag inside. As soon as he's out, he smiles and goes back to the stairs he just climbed. Three steps later, his smile is not there anymore while he thinks about what his parents will say when they know he missed a class to go to the infirmary. He hasn't really lied to the teacher: his bike is broken so he did have a problem with it. But his parents might not agree with him giving this as an excuse, and he can't tell them he hit a pole as he was walking.

He arrives at the infirmary still in his thoughts while a girl walks out and they almost hit one another.

“Sorry,” he moans, without looking at the girl.

“Why are you here, Lenny?”

He stops and glances at her.

“Mara,” he says with a sigh. Definitely not the girl he wants to see. She is beautiful, but mean and stupid. She is always trying to show off and to prove she is better than everyone else. But above all and unfortunately, she is his best friend's girlfriend.

She instantly aggresses him, as usual: “You know my name? Great! Now answer my question, I guess you're not here because of your periods.”

He feels his head getting warmer and wonders if it is because of her or his bump. He looks at her right in the eyes and answers.

“None of your business.”

“Excuse me? You know I can tell your best friend that you’re being nasty to me. He will be angry at you and –”

“Sorry but I have to go,” he says quickly and rushes into the infirmary before she can continue.

The nurse is nice and she checks his head gently. In the room, it seems like there are enough items to open a Hospital: scalpels and other tools on a shelf, different devices to measure weight and height, a bed, lots of medics everywhere, creams and empty bottles on a desk, sheets of paper, pens, and the most important, candy and chewing-gums in a jar. When the nurse tests his eyes with a flashlight, he starts to feel a headache but the light dies. As she can’t find any serious injury, she gives him advice to get better and to keep his head safe for a while, asserting that there doesn’t seem to be any problem with it and that he will feel better soon. Then he walks out and waits for the four last minutes before the end of the lesson in the corridor.

The rest of the day is the same as always: teachers speaking, students not listening at all. At the end of the day, tired, Lenny

goes back home dragging his feet and thinking about his food and bed.

IV

The sun is rising over the village. Lenny, sat on top of the church, looks down at the small people walking down in the street. The heat caresses his arm; he smiles. It is a great day and he feels a wind of change in the air. The main street seems to be calling for him to come down. He jumps and lands right behind a woman who turns around and bleaches . She looks at him with a feeling between fear and incomprehension, then shakes her head and walks away. It is a common look he receives after a flight here, no one can even think flying is possible for humans.

The alley is filling with people as he approaches the market and he soon has to shove his way to access the first stall. Fruit is sold here, and even though he isn't hungry, he wishes for one of these pears waiting right in front of him. Sometimes, one of the orphans goes through the market and comes out with his hands full of food, but they don't seem to own any money or to pay for that food. Lenny's education, however, makes him more aware that he can't steal and he also doesn't know how to do it. But why couldn't he? Should he just practice?

That's when a shadow passes behind him, stops by the corner of the stall, takes a fruit without being seen and then runs to the next stall. Lenny hesitates, he only has a few seconds before the shadow disappears. He runs after it. He pushes through the crowd until he is out of the market and then turns left on the first street. A face appears quickly from the shadow when it sees that there is someone following it. It is a boy's face, apparently scared to get caught, so he accelerates. The chase continues for a few minutes, turning right, left, and sometimes crossing a street they've been on the moment before. None of them is willing to stop until the other one gives up. Suddenly, after a last left turn in a small and dark path, the shadow-boy disappears. Lenny, exhausted and out of breath, looks around him, hoping to find a clue or a hidden door. The only evidence he finds after rushing through the path at least six times is a small window three metres over the ground. It seems not only impossible to access from the ground, but also impossible to open because its heavy wooden shutters are locked. Lenny stares at the window. He doesn't want to break it or burn it down, as there are probably people inside. He also doesn't want to expose his powers unless he has to, but he definitely wants to talk to that boy. Then he smiles and decides to let it go, the boy was clever and fast; he'll try to catch him next time.

Lost in his thoughts, he whistles his way to a river which encircles the edge of the forest. He decides to build a fire here this time because he can't find the motivation to fight another monster or sorcerer. His mind is so focused on the orphanage and the kids in it that he feels like going there rather than the woods. The problem is that the last time he decided to stop fighting, someone was murdered in the village. Besides, there were two monsters the following day, which were so difficult for him to defeat that he was sick the rest of the week. As he warms up his hands, his body gets back some energy and motivation. He washes his head with some water and suddenly feels the bump he has on the side of his forehead. A bump? He never had a bump here, is it possible that the one he had at school... Having troubles to understand, he decides to think about it later, he needs to clear his mind. He watches the fishes jumping in the river, the black clouds announcing a not-so-good weather for tonight, the trees bending with the fresh Northern wind and people who were in the fields heading back to their home. Then, he smothers the fire with rocks and walks towards the woods, on the same way as always.

It is already late when he arrives at the big clearing where a monster or something is supposed to be. It is unusual to have to go this far, because the monster is almost always on his way to

the village and to the world, like in the movies. But not this time. Lenny sees branches and leaves moving on his right and turns his head, his body in position to attack. Focused, he walks little by little towards the bush which has moved again. It seems to be a small creature but he knows the small ones aren't the easiest to beat. Two steps away from the bush, he stops and lends an ear. All of a sudden, a black shape pounces on him and he trows himself on the ground. Turning on his back immediately, he looks for what attacked him and sees the shape flying away. He gets up and takes a deep breath. It was a blackbird. He wonders why there is still no one around and if he isn't too early or too late. That's when he hears it. A laughter, deep, as if it was coming from the depth of the Earth. He shivers and turns around.

The clearing is now lit by the pale moon, which is being covered by the clouds. A cold wind flows between the trees. Time seems to have stopped in the forest, no more sound comes from the animals, which resonate everywhere in daytime. The air becomes colder and colder and the smell of the beautiful flowers disappears. Everything is suspended. Nearby, some swamps formed from recent river flooding start to freeze.

Lenny stands in the middle of the clearing. A silhouette stands on the way to the village. Another one, the one who has laughed,

is on the other side, keeping Lenny right between them. When the laughter is over, the first figure starts shining blue, getting ready for a fight. The one standing between Lenny and the sleeping villagers has a green halo around it. Two sorcerers. The last one he had to beat almost killed him, using a dangerous spell coming from the most horrific lairs, the darkest shadows and the deepest abyss. And now there are two of them. How is that even possible? Lenny would have stepped back if it had helped him going further from them, but it actually doesn't. He tries to visualise how to beat them both, but the sorcerers don't give him the time to cogitate. The blue one attacks before Lenny's muscles can produce any movement and he is projected in the air. He lands a few metres away, hurting his back when he touches the floor. He takes a second to regain consciousness. It happens to be too long. The second sorcerer uses his halo to charge some dark magic that he sends on Lenny and which explodes on the grass around him. Immediately, the plants on the ground grab Lenny's arms and legs, immobilizing his body. Blocked, he shouts with anger and tries to free himself from his bonds, wrestling, trying everything to get his hands free.

His thoughts aren't clear and he panics. Is he really chained like this? The cold bonds, as if they were snakes, squeeze their grip around his wrists. He doesn't want to die and he's afraid of not

being able to make a single move. The sorcerers approach without hurrying. They're sure the little boy can't move and they'll kill him easily, which has put a sadistic smile on their faces. The blue one pulls out a dagger from his cloak, looks at his partner and laughs again. They come so close that Lenny can see their eyes, empty, without any feeling but hatred and wickedness. The blue sorcerer uses his magic to generate an ice dagger, throwing the first one away, and advances towards Lenny while the other stops. He arrives near the boy and raises his ice blade. At that moment, Lenny gets one of his hands free, and then the other. In a heartbeat, he is free, up in the air with his spear and lands in front of the sorcerer shining red.

Taking advantage of their surprise, Lenny swings his sword in the air. He already turns away and faces the green sorcerer while the head of the first sorcerer falls on the ground. Mad, full of hatred, the green halo grows bigger and more luminous. A fireball forms in front of the dark shape, enhanced by flashes of electricity. It is then thrown, fast, to Lenny, who has barely the time to fling himself on the ground, once more, before he feels the heat on the back of his head. He hears the fireball hitting a tree and looks up at the sorcerer. No tree had ever been touched before, that's why he never sent fireballs himself, but tonight is different. He has the fire of the orphanage within him and gets it

out in two fireballs, one in each hand. He spins them both and sends the first one to the middle of the green halo which is almost all he sees now, a powerful source of light. It goes straight to its target but is deflected at the last moment, as if it was nothing for the sorcerer. The first fireball hits another tree exactly when he sends the second one, but this time at the halo itself. At the moment it reaches the green light, the blast deafens and blinds Lenny. It takes him a few seconds to recover enough to look back at his enemy.

The sorcerer, without any light around, is getting up, shaken. Lenny bounces on him with his sword but both are fuzzy and have difficulties to fight. The sorcerer clenches his fists together and Lenny jumps backward through half of the clearing, landing on his feet while his sword flies into a bush on the side. They stare at each other and notice the dagger, absolutely in the middle. Running fast, Lenny reaches the dagger an instant before the sorcerer who flies. This gives him the time to seize this new blade quickly and point it towards his enemy. Already on him, the former green sorcerer doesn't have the time to be surprised or to do anything; the dagger pierces his throat and he stays there while Lenny moves away. The body falls on the ground with a heavy sound. Lenny falls as well, exhausted. He shuts his eyes, considering the long time it took to save the

world again. But he did it! His arm and back hurt. And he suddenly has to pee. A very uncomfortable feeling.

He tries to turn on his belly but hits a wall. He opens his eyes, looks around and smiles. He gets up and goes quietly to the toilets. It's ten o'clock, it's Saturday. This evening, he'll see Green Day in concert.

V

Lenny can't stay still. He moves from one foot to the other, walks in circles and looks at his parents' room door, wondering when it will open. He hasn't been able to stay still for the whole day. Green Day. With his father. It's a dream come true that the pictures of his father with his friends foreshadowed. Tonight. For real. There was never a lighter in the apartment but his father bought him one an hour earlier, which Lenny keeps in his pocket, ready to wave it during the best songs. A show. Two hours. He repeats to himself the recommendation his mother made: stay with your father all the time, don't follow strangers and drunk people, be careful with your lighter.

"You ready nyny?"

His father finally goes out, annoying Lenny once more with this nickname.

"I'm not five years old any more dad, stop bei-", starts Lenny.

He pauses, looking up and down at his father's clothes. His wide open eyes analyse each part of it. First, his father wears zebra

pants. The old pair of black and white trousers he had in a wardrobe for about twenty years that Lenny had asked to see many times. The rest was probably in that wardrobe too: a “Rock & Roll” t-shirt, a blue headband, a studded bangle and punk rock half finger gloves with silver rivets. A ray of sunlight reflects on the gleaming shoes, as if it was the first floodlight of an 80’s concert. The rock star turns around, makes a smooth move like The King, and bows.

“He always shows off with this outfit”, says Lenny’s mother from the room before addressing her husband. “Come on, Andrew, you have nothing of a star but the clothes.”

Andrew calms down and mutters.

“Why does she always have to snap my fun off”

Lenny laughs and they step outside, finally ready to go. Andrew asks his son the usual question, which comes up every time they go out together: Car or bus?

Lenny doesn’t like walking. He really doesn’t, even though he loves going everywhere by bike. When he and his father go out, there is no question about the time it takes because they are always on time, but the walking distance is a real debate. How long it can be between the car park and the concert, compared to

the distance to the bus, between buses and to the concert from the last bus stop, it is a vital calculation. He knows that tonight there will probably be lots of cars and they'll park further and he will have to walk more, so he chooses the bus.

They walk to the bus stop and get on the number 620, a light orange bus. The driver looks at Andrew with amazement, who then faces a few smiles when they get across the bus and sit at the back. At the next stop, Lenny opens the bus window and a fresh breeze comes in along with music from a street player. Father and son talk about the old classics and the new musics, singing bits of what they remember from the lyrics. They get off the bus at Season square and cross the road. They turn right and continue on that road, singing quietly.

A few minutes later, they arrive to the other bus stop... or where it should be. There is a sign with small letters written on it: "[...]not in service any more." Not in service? How can this be? Lenny looks at his dad, trying to communicate his question of whether they will be late for the show. Andrew seems worried as well, but he says that it's okay and he knows where to go to take another bus, but they have to walk a bit more. The squeak of Lenny's shoes on the gravel echoes his thoughts about walking while they go across a small park. The sun is hidden for a second by a small gray cloud, which seems to have his family with him

because there are soon dozens of dark clouds covering the sky. They walk in silence, both excited about the concert and worried about getting to it on time. At a crossroad, they see a small bus coming their way.

“It’s the 460! Run!”, Andrew says loudly, and Lenny sprints.

Lenny first and his dad with difficulties, both of them arrive out of breath at the bus stop a hundred metres away. The vehicle opens its doors slowly. The old driver doesn’t bother to look at the uncommon duo; he closes the door as soon as they’ve stepped in and drives, slowly, to the next bus stop. Time flies, as usual, but the bus doesn’t and Lenny fears they’ll be late. There are about twenty stops left before they arrive and every time, at every single bus stop, someone comes in and no one gets out. At Moments Road, two stops from where they have to go, Andrew rises, like a sun over the ocean, a star over the crowd, stepping through the mass to get closer to the door. But no one cares about him and he has to force his way. Lenny tries to follow him to the door, but he isn’t as tall as his father and he is soon blocked in the middle of these strangers who can’t smile or be kind and let him walk through. The bus slows down and stops at Red Stadium. Andrew gets off and looks at where to go now, waiting for Lenny to come. Lenny who isn’t here.

Lenny moves heaven and Earth to get out, blocked two metres away from the door, between adults who don't seem to be willing to move or even to notice him. His face is red. Red with fear, red with anger. The driver pushes a button and the doors start to move to get closed. Lenny wants to cry. He's going to lose sight of his father and he will be astray and miss the concert. He already thinks about how he will find where to go from the next stop. He stares at the closing doors and the incoming light which reduces each second.

At the last second, a hand rises on the doors way, stopping them. Lenny emerges from the adults at that instant, sweating, realising he can stay with his father and he will not miss the show. He hurries out. The bus drives away and Lenny looks around to see where to go. His dad is already waiting further, trying to see over people's heads where the right entry is, unaware of what happened. Lenny heads quickly towards him. He wipes a tear that was already halfway through his cheek. He glances at his father's watch. The show is meant to start in a few minutes, how will they get close to the stage if everyone is already here?

After the security control, which they go through without being arrested because they have no bag and they are late, the duo goes by a stall without stopping to buy a drink. Lenny is thirsty,

but he wants to see the awesome group and he knows his dad does too. This time, father and son hold each other's hand to stay together. Their steps are fast but controlled, they're pushing through to the middle, making others angry. Lenny doesn't care about them. Lenny cares about a show, which starts now.

An awesomely loud sound of electric guitar, accompanied by flashes of light and high flames, and by the claps and whistles from the crowd. Woah. The air is electric, everyone feels it. Lenny and his father arrive as close as they can to the stage and the stars enter under the lights. The first song is one Lenny particularly likes: Holiday. He usually listen to it when school is too long and he wants to do other stuff. The guitar starts in solo, then the drums and the rest, with a singer on fire, jumping, giving it all to the public. Lenny hears more than he sees, his view blocked sometimes by the jumping blokes in front of him. Then comes another song, and another. When the singer shouts: "Are you ready to rock?", the public roars like a giant lion. It feels like an entity, everybody is connected. The explosion of sounds, music, electricity, feelings, heat everywhere. A new music is a new sensation. He jumps with the crowd, sings and shouts with the others.

The fire throws on the front stage fascinate Lenny. His eyes are caught by these flames, growing in the air. He moves like them,

feels them, wants them to be bigger. His hands feel like in his dreams, when he throws fireballs. The heat. The light. And suddenly the fire doesn't come out anymore, it is gone. But Lenny liked it, maybe too much. At a point, he even wishes it back, he loves it with the music. The light. The heat.

An explosion. A real explosion of fire, on the stage. What the hell just happened? The fire burns the stage, quickly reaching the ground and the crowd. Screams resound as well, a second later, and the music stops. The previous sound of music is now a horrible noise of people running, screaming, falling.

It takes three seconds to Andrew before he takes Lenny by the hand and they run together to an exit. The nice concert has turned into chaos. The group has left the stage to get immediately to a safer place behind the building. The duo pushes the others, no one cares about getting out slowly and calmly. A huge bloke hits Andrew and he falls, with Lenny over him. The outfit is ripped off. They get up and run again. As they try to find a way out through the mess the concert has become, Lenny realises how many people there were. How many there still are, who enjoyed the show and now fear the fire. Next to him, there is a girl with blond hair which seems about his age, staring at the crowd for her parents to come out. Lenny is pulled by his father and continues to run as fast as he can.

They reach the doors and then the fresh air of the night. They only stop a street further, to breathe and look how the best night of the year is now an awful mess and horribly dangerous. Andrew checks his son and breathes out when he sees they are both all right. The outfit is ruined but it is only something material. The music is definitely gone. Lenny keep the images of people running, falling, crying. He can't get the blond girl's face out of his mind either. The beginning was so awesome. They look at people escaping the burning stadium until the police cars, ambulances and firefighter cars arrive. Lots of cars and new noise coming. Andrew tells Lenny that it is enough for the night and it is unnecessary to stay around. None of them wants to see hurt people or dead ones being carried out with some members of their family or friends wailing.

They take a taxi, quietly, both shocked by the disaster.

VI

Lenny can't stay still in bed. He lays on one side, then the other, then on his back, on his belly, and starts again. What happened during the concert is something he can't understand: why did it have to become so horrible? He heard the police say that a few people died and dozens were hurt. And this girl. She was like Alicia.

After an hour brainstorming on this nightmare, which was meant to be his birthday gift, trying to enlighten the cause of the disaster, his eyes shut, his body relaxes, he finally falls asleep.

The village is beautiful, as always. The rising sun creates dancing shadows which follow people wherever they go. There is life all around, people moving, talking, going to fish or to take care of their cows. A ray of sunlight reaches Lenny and he gets up. He has decided he wouldn't get on top of the church today; he wants to find a boy from the orphanage. The dreaming boy follows a small path to go to the market, to pass by the place where the running shadow had disappeared last time. There is still this window with its closed shutters. Still nothing else,

which annoys Lenny. Looking around, he only realises now that the path runs between a house and the back of the church. A plan builds up in his mind. He remembers a movie in which the detective looks for footprints, covers the floor with dirt, and finds the criminal thanks to this trick.

Half an hour later, he puts on the street a final layer of dirt he has collected. It is now too wide to jump over it without touching this dirt and Lenny is proud of himself. He feels energetic, ready to catch this shadow and know who he or she is. And if he isn't fast enough, which will be annoying but it is possible, the dirt will keep the footsteps and he will know for sure where the shadow is gone. Lenny tries his system, and immediately regrets it. The dirt sticks under his shoes and he can't take it off or wash it here. Anyway, he knows which prints are his own and hopes it won't be a problem.

Tired, he sits for a while on the side of a street to think and let his thoughts fly: school, parents, playgrounds, forest, monsters, fights, school again.

Lenny heads towards the orphanage and then the market, wishing to see someone again. His voice is calm when he shows to a small lost child where his parents can be, but also filled with curiosity and excitement for the chase he wants and to see who

is behind the kind of mask this runner wears. As usual, he can't buy anything but he slaloms between people and stalls. His gaze stops on a hand, grabbing an apple. The problem is not to take an apple, he has already done it many times. It is not that the apple seems a bit small and not as nice as the others. It is not that the old man selling at this stall has always scared Lenny because he seems to have no light in his eyes, an empty look. It is none of these. In fact, the real problem is that the hand has no arm to be attached to, and no body or head. So where does it come from?

The hand disappears under the stall with the apple. A few seconds later, there is a move on the side and something gets out in the crowd. The shadow! His muscles on tension, his mind focused, Lenny follows quickly. This time, he tries to be more quiet and unseen. He hides behind wooden planks and sticks leaning back against a wall, take a quick look right on time to see the shape he chases turn left and enter the village's cemetery. The teenagers, separated by a hundred metres and a tree or two, walk in silence and respect between the graves. The names keep passing before his eyes, dads and mums, sons and daughters, brothers, sisters, lovers. Different families, stories: Elisabeth Desiree, Marc Harp, Dawson, Grover, Denver, Bale, Sewton.

Lenny thinks about Alicia and her place in the cemetery. It makes him want to cry immediately when her face comes back to his mind, but he holds his tears. There is just one that tries to find its way on Lenny's cheek, the only one showing his sadness. He looks at the grave which should be hers and is taken aback when he sees that there is someone crouching in front of it. The one he follows has stopped and is now looking at a grave with a grieved expression. The tomb is flowered and Lenny decides to see who the boy is and whose grave it can be. His shoes criss on the gravel, although he tries to be silent to respect the dead's sleep. The boy Lenny can see closer now stands up when he hears the footsteps. They glimpse at each other. For a second, Lenny looks at this young boy with brown hair, light skin and dark eyes; he is just a normal boy, like him. The grave is definitely not Alicia's, because it is a very different one. This one is in stone, with the inscription: Talia Mac Iorie. It must have been a person very close to the boy but there is no date on it, therefore Lenny can't see when she died. All of it happens in a wink, that short glance. Then, the moment dies and the boy runs away, his stolen apple in his hand.

Lenny stays frozen a few seconds before he runs after him, out of the cemetery, and on the streets. They follow almost the same roads as the previous time, left, right, left again. Lenny tries to

run faster than the other boy, almost as if he was flying, but the boy outdistances him at first and Lenny isn't able to catch up. However, he gets closer while they reach the path behind the church. Turning on that street, Lenny discovers he has lost him again. This means his footprint system is about to be useful. Or maybe not. Approaching the line of dirt, which smells because he probably didn't take only dirt, he sees something he has forgotten to think about. It is a street. In the middle of the day. Many people walk on it. The number of footprints is unbelievable compared at what he imagined and there are so many that, for a moment, Lenny thinks about giving up. But he can't. He looks around and pricks up his ears. There is no sound of someone close, no one coming, so he starts looking for non-understandable prints. By elimination, he discards all of them in about half an hour. He must have missed something.

He then thinks differently. Lenny arrives in front of the wall where there is a window and stares at it. It is still locked. He looks down; the only footprints leading here are the one he just made. Disappointed, he sits down against that wall. He is upset. How on Earth is this bloke capable of disappearing that easily? If he only knew. His gaze is fixed on two footprints in front of him, he doesn't know what to think about them. Why are these here? The two footprints in front of him are weird, and therefore they

may be of some use. He comes nearer. The two footprints are facing a wall, the church's one.

Lenny reaches the wall, places his hands on it. It is cold, rough, strong. Nothing to hold on. And the boy wouldn't have had the time to climb all the way up. He follows the wall, inch by inch, until the stone gets warmer. There is a small gap at a point, where air comes through, and Lenny hears a click when he blocks the air. A mechanism clinks and a part of the wall is sucked up in the floor, leaving just the place for a boy to go through. Lenny goes quickly inside and the wall closes immediately afterwards, with a muffled sound.

The secret passage is what made the boy unseizable. Behind the wall is a small space going straight to some stairs, the place lit by a single candle on the wall. He decides to go there and see. Despite what he thought, there is a lot of air in here, and even a fresh wind while he climbs up the stairs. He has goosebumps. He goes to the next candle, a few steps further, and lights a small fire in his hands to get warm. The ascension is long. It is as if the roof wasn't there and the stairs led directly to Heaven. Thinking about this, he reaches the top and the door, locked, that blocks the way. He can't get back. Not now. Gathering his energy, he points his fire at the keyhole, melting it in a sizzle. And he pushes the door. Or tries to. He has to put all his weight to move

it slowly, slipping a few times, starting again until he can walk past it.

The corridor behind is totally different. It is well lit by the last rays of daylight passing through the windows and it is so huge that a giant at least twice Lenny's size could have walked in here. The sun through the stained glass window draws people on the walls. The marble floor gleams and each step echoes as if someone was walking behind Lenny, who stops twice to be sure he is alone. Two doors wait at the end. One leads downstairs to the prayer room, or at least it is what is written on the door. The other one is ajar, there is no inscription on it.

Lenny walks like a king through the corridor to the slightly opened door. A noise comes from behind, like objects are being moved around. There is the sound of a glass smashed on the floor, and then a swearword. Lenny enters. Right after the door is a room of a normal size, quite like the room he has at home but with way more objects and knick knacks than he ever had. The small bed on the corner is made, it is the only tidy part. In the middle of the boxes, objects and bed stands the boy, gaping, looking right at Lenny with his eyes wide open. They stare at each other for a moment a lot longer than the one in the cemetery before the boy decides to speak.

“Who are you?”, he says, still amazed and his eyes still fully open.

The voice is calm and warm, although he seem to wonder how this other boy has entered in here.

“Hey”, Lenny starts with a joyful voice before understanding he is not with a friend, yet, and he is not supposed to be here. “My name is Lenny.”

The boy keep staring at him but frowning. “Why are you here?”

“Well, I saw you a few times and I just wanted to meet you because you seem so nimble and fast and I wanted to know you more and—”

“Wow okay calm down”, he interrupts. “I’ve never seen someone coming here so I guess I have to trust you now that you know where I live.”

Lenny looks at him with hope and happiness. The boy continues. “My name is Kurk. Kurk Mac Iorie. I’ve never seen you around except the two times you followed me. Where are you from?”

Lenny tries to think about a proper answer but none comes to his mind.

“I’m... from far away, a bigger place a bit different than here but I quite like to come here. I just wish I knew some people to play or discuss with.”

Kurk sits on his bed and shows Lenny a seat he can use, behind a pile of papers. When they are face to face, the boy talks a bit about him.

“Father Tarmikos, the cleric of this church, has taken me here when I was a baby, right after my mother died. He teaches me lots about the church and I learn the rest by myself, when I get out.”

Amazed, Lenny starts explaining how they are taught where he is from, and he asks about the people here, the life, the orphanage, the forest. As for the last two topics, the boy doesn’t say much. He says the life is difficult in the orphanage but better than no life at all. About the forest, he says it is dangerous. No one ever enters there except father Tarmikos when he goes to cut some herbs in the woods, but he never walks far because at night, strange things happen there. Lenny can’t tell him he usually goes there himself at night because he would have to show his powers and he just wants to talk with his new friend. They discuss without thinking about the time. Kurk lights a candle when it gets too dark. Lenny forgets totally about fighting

monsters or sorcerers, he is absorbed by his discussion with Kurk. This one eventually falls asleep later, and Lenny looks at his for a while, a smile on his face. He has finally met someone here.

VII

It's 7 O'clock in the morning. A few days have gone since the accident at the concert. The technicians explained that the machines throwing fire had probably not been checked properly and they were too old to work. New ones have now been put in place and checked for other concerts or shows.

Lenny and Kurk are getting closer to one another each time they meet. They play together, they steal together and discover new places in the village, sometimes on the rooftops. A few minutes ago, Lenny was sitting on the floor next to his friend, behind the closed wooden shutters. These shutters he used to look at from the path where Kurk always disappeared have been part of a free house since the old man there died. Now, he is sitting on the floor back at home, next to his bed.

Today is a school day, but also an important day. Wylfrid is coming back! Lenny has been missing his best friend since the moment he went away, and seeing his stupid girlfriend around is annoying. At least with him she is nicer. Sometimes she can still be mean, but Wylfrid loves her for whatever reason and they

always find a way to agree. As long as it is not against him, Lenny's fine with it.

He has just entered the kitchen to have breakfast with his mother when his father enters the house, covered with oil and grease.

"I hope it's steady now, you'd better check", Andrew says, looking kindly at Lenny. The son doesn't understand immediately, he takes a few seconds staring at his father's face, which is not far from a zebra face.

"You fixed my bike?", Lenny finally asks. His father nods and Lenny runs out of the house through the back door, into the garden. Right in front of him, his bicycle, good as new. He rides two circles around the garden and then comes back in, leaving his vehicle where he found it.

He runs into his father's arms to thank him, forgetting the grease. At the same time, his mother gets out of the kitchen to see the duo with disgusting oily black spots on their clothes. On Lenny's uniform.

"LENNY! You have to be at school in half an hour! Get in the shower right now!", His mother panics. "And leave your clothes here, I have to clean what you've done." She throws a heavy

glance to her husband when she says “you”. When Lenny goes to the shower, she continues. “And you’re next, Andrew, it’s nice to fix his bike but it is no time to play with dirty things.”

The shower is fresh and nice, Lenny usually showers in the evening and this wakes him up. He likes water but not too much. It is more his best friend’s passion, he prefers the fire. Unless it kills people or ruins Green Day’s concert. He saw his father hanging the ripped outfit in the rest room, a memory that he’ll never wear again but which was part of his best years.

Lenny dresses up with his second uniform, which is the same as the first one, but this one is clean. He quickly takes his school bag and an apple. When he carries the bike through the house, he hears his parents.

“Oh c’mom Lisa, it is just a bit of grease, and I’m going to work anyway, why should I—”, he tries to continue but Lisa pushes him into the shower.

“You are filthy, there is no way you’re going to work with this face! Maybe you get dirty there but at least you show that you are a proper man, going to your workplace clean.”

A second later, he hears the water falling on his dad, who yells.

“Aah! It’s cold! Lisaa c’mom!”

Lenny chuckles and closes the door.

He takes his bicycle and pedals as fast as he can to school. He only looks right and left at the crossroads not to have an accident, otherwise he'll have to go to school on foot. And he doesn't like to walk.

The bell rings exactly when he sets a foot in class. He is red because of the short time he had to come from home to school, but he is on time, for once. Unfortunately, Wylfrid sits at the other side of the room and the lesson starts. During the entire time before the break, Lenny keeps his eyes on the clock, waiting. He wants to know everything about his friend's trip, where he was and what he saw. Suddenly, the bell rings. He stands up, packs his stuff, which he didn't use much for the lesson. The truth is he only realises that it was a math lesson when he looks at the blackboard, where a few equations are written. It isn't the first time he doesn't listen to a lesson, but this time he was particularly lost in his thoughts.

Outside, Wylfrid is nowhere to be found. Someone tells him they are already outside with Mara, on the play field or around. He walks down the stairs and heads towards the double doors. He passes by some girls and says to himself he will talk to them after talking to Wylfrid. He never talks to them. And he will

probably never do. Being shy, what a shame. There are people playing football on the playing field, Wylfrid and Mara are having an intense conversation on the other side. When Mara comes to Lenny, he thinks about the worst scenarios. She could shout at him, or say that now his friend is mad because he didn't say why he was at the infirmary, or maybe she will be mean again for whatever reason. Instead, she arrives with a smile.

"Wylfrid is waiting for you on the other side", she says, still smiling. Lenny can't believe it.

"Well, okay... thank you", he answers with hesitation. Why is she nice all of a sudden? He goes to his friend, thinking about the world, the countries, the few he has seen and the lot he wants to.

Lenny speaks first, before they reach each other, with a joyful voice.

"Wylfrid! It's been so long, two whole months, I missed you man!"

"Lenny!"

They hug.

"So tell me, how was it? Have you seen beautiful places? And animals?", Lenny asks, his eyes wide open. "And about the weather? And the peo—"

Wylfrid is exceptionally not excited like Lenny. In fact, he is not excited at all and he has a tear rolling down his cheek.

“Ehm, Wylfrid? What’s going on?”

His head seems heavy on his shoulders, he is not the happy guy who went around the world anymore. He looks at Lenny with a sad smile.

“Mara broke up with me”, he says with an unsteady voice.

“Oh man...”

They hug again.

Lenny feels like a huge weight has been lifted from his shoulders. Of course his friend is sad, he won’t tell him about his trip right now and he’s not in a mood to play or laugh or whatever, but at least nothing really bad happened. Mara was so stupid that he even feels happy about this. He thinks about her smile two minutes earlier; she was trying to be mean, again.

The end of the day goes in silence. Lenny thinks about how he could make his best friend happy, but he also wants to talk about everything that happened to him and he knows it will not help. Wylfrid doesn’t seem to listen to anything but the bell and he just waits for Lenny at the end of the day, when it’s time to go

home. They both have a bicycle but it isn't time for a race now, so they leave the bikes at school and head for the park.

The smell of barbecue coming from a garden next to the park brings awesome memories back into Lenny's mind. The Poobecue afternoons with Wylfrid and his parents were awesome. Even when Wylfrid's dad burned himself and seemed so anxious about the way it only happened when Lenny was there. He still has at home the first invitation card Wylfrid gave him, with only two sentences on it: "A pool, a barbecue, what else? This week end comes the first POOBECUE afternoon!" He laughed at first when he read the name but, finally, it sounded pretty cool.

Wylfrid has noticed the smell and glances at Lenny. Then he walks through the park, on the grass for a few metres with Lenny behind. They reach a tree, an old one with big boughs. They sit high, up in the tree, in the same way they used to before Wylfrid left, as if he wants to show that he is still the same even if he cannot smile for now.

Two birds sing and answer one another for a long time before the friends start talking. Lenny doesn't know what to say and Wylfrid doesn't know if he wants to say anything. He still starts, because it will make him think about something else, because Lenny is waiting for it, because he'll have to talk one day or another. He

explains how they landed first in Berlin and how he didn't understand a single word there even though they've had German lessons at school. He talks about the Sahara, the scorpions, the sun and the heat. The light in his eyes brightens up when he remembers the swim in Australia, and the surfing. He finally has a little kind of smile when he goes through the way his father screamed when he fell into a river in Bolivia. This one thought there were crocodiles but there were actually none.

Lenny smiles as well, thinking about his own father this morning. It is the first emotion he shows since Wylfrid has started to speak, absorbed as he was in his friend's stories.

The way back to their bikes and home is lighter. There is some sadness left, but the old Wylfrid is back. He laughs about little things, or at least he tries to. When they arrive in front of Wylfrid's house, they're not ready to walk away from one another. Two months! They still have much to talk about.

They walk together into the house and Lenny asks Mr and Ms Corn if their son could sleep at his place tonight. He uses an old technique because they don't look like they want him to: "My parents are okay with it! They have already cooked a meal for us and prepared the bed and it will be fine and we will be on time at

school tomorrow!" Wylfrid's parents finally agree and the two friends ride to the Bale's house.

They open the door, walk through the house to leave the bikes at the back and then they go to the kitchen. Of course, Lenny's parents have never agreed on this, but they're not home yet and it was usually not a problem to have Wylfrid sleeping in Lenny's room, so there won't be a problem now. Lenny's mother has an office dinner and his father works very late today. By the cooker there is note from his father asking him to prepare one more meal for when he comes back. One more. Not two meals, not one for Lenny and one for his daddy, but one more. So technically, preparing for Wylfrid is okay.

The two friends eat together, prepare a mat on Lenny's room's floor and get ready for bed. Teeth brushed, showered, wearing pyjamas, they lie down in their bed and turn off the light, keeping the desk lamp for the atmosphere. It is the best way to talk through the night without being told off by Lenny's parents. This time, Lenny starts, he explains the concert, the things Wylfrid missed and the ever boring stuff at school. He also tells Wylfrid he's glad to have him back around. They lower their voices when they hear the sound of the key in the door and even stop talking when they feel that the parents could enter the

room, but it doesn't happen. An hour later, the room is filled with soft snoring.

VIII

Lenny wakes up and stretches his arms, yawning. He sits up to see what time it is. And hits a beam.

“Ouch”, Lenny says, with a muffled voice.

Someone moves next to him. Kurk! The only thread coming through the window of light touches the awaking boy’s face. They have slept in the limited space of an attic, in someone’s house. They both stand up carefully, not wanting to hit anything or to wake up the house’s owners. They reach the small gap by which they entered and climb onto the rooftop, where they sit. The sun is starting to rise.

Lenny looks at the empty streets, waiting for the first workers to get up and walk out of their home. There is a pile of hay below, left on the street corner to be moved to the animals later. Time seems like frozen for now, the moment when the sun is only halfway visible but nothing moves in the village. Soon, the cock crow should make people head back to their daily duties.

“What do you want to do today?”, Kurk asks.

“Run into the forest?”, Lenny responds, knowing it is something Kurk will not do because it is dangerous. Lenny doesn’t even know if he would get back there. He has never been out of the forest for such a long time and there must be many monsters and sorcerers waiting for him. The last time he went there, it was during the day to avoid monsters, and he found that the two burned trees were still there. It means that the forest doesn’t reload or repair itself when he isn’t there. This world seems more real day after day.

“But be serious. We could try to go catch some fishes. What do you think?” Kurk says, looking at the river they can make out in the distance.

“Well, I’ve never tried to fish”, Lenny answers. “But I always wanted to! I could try to learn if you’re willing to show me.”

They stand up, trying to figure out which way could be safer to go back down to the street. Lenny walks around the roof and feels the tiles moving under his feet, and this makes him stay further from the edges, just in case. Kurk, on his side, does the exact opposite; he walks on the edge to see where they could find enough grip on the wall or on windows. The tiles are no steadier for him. They are old, they don’t stick enough to the roof, and it’s Kurk’s right foot which goes with the first one to fall.

“Lenny!”, Kurk calls, off balance and panicked. Lenny looks at him right when another tile—the one under his left foot—falls from the roof. Kurk tries to hold on other tiles but they also fall and Lenny is not fast enough. Even if he doesn’t mind showing his power at that point and flies to the edge where Kurk stood, the boy from the church is already gone.

A wave of sadness, hate, anger and incomprehension burns through Lenny. He jumps from the roof. It’s halfway in the air that he sees his friend. Not a dead body, or even an injured one. He seems fine! The pile of hay on the street has cushioned the fall. Lenny still feels the burden of horrible thoughts that went through his mind a moment before, but he now feels as light as a bird. He lands on the hay, hard but without hurting himself.

Kurk, who had his face in the hay, hasn’t seen Lenny’s power and stares strangely at his friend. He doesn’t understand why he jumped, but he is glad to have a real friend: someone who could throw himself from a rooftop to try to rescue him. They both remain quiet for a moment, then they hear the cock crow. And they laugh. They laugh about their recklessness, about their luck, about the hay and the death they’ve faced. Or at least the broken bones.

The sun is rising higher in the sky and the light reaches the pile of hay in the street, like a sign showing what saved them. A strong wind begins to blow, which sweeps away a large part of that pile. And with it comes a scream.

It isn't a scream like kids playing, or like Andrew in the shower, or like someone hurting himself, or even like Kurk calling for Lenny. It is stronger. It is a frightened and deep scream. It is a scream coming from someone who is either dying or who has seen death. Maybe both.

Lenny and Kurk glimpse at each other and then run to where the awful noise came from. They cross a few empty streets. They finally reach the house with an open window on the ground floor, from which another scream has just rang out. They jump in without hesitation and the scene is heartbreaking.

A woman is at the side of the bed, looking at a man lying there. His face is white. Too white. It is as if he has no blood running through his body any more. The woman is the one who screams. She is holding a baby, who looks exactly like the man, and who also shows no sign of life.

Another scream comes from another house. Then another again. The village is waking up later than the usual time because strangely most workers couldn't hear the cock crow. They

couldn't hear anything, and it is not a simple question of inattention. It is an infection.

"Lenny", Kurk begins, staring at the street, "I think I'll try to see if someone can be helped. You should stay with her and look if you can learn anything about what caused it."

Lenny nods, while trying to get the lifeless baby off the desperate mother's arm. Gently, he manages to take it from her and lays him on the bed.

"Uhm... hey? My name is Lenny", the boy starts, embarrassed and still under shock. He continues, trying to seem a little bit more confident.

"I know it's hard... okay, it's definitely the worst time of your life and I can't change anything about it. But... if we could know why it happened... maybe we will be able to save others. Can you tell me your name first?"

"I'm... I'm... Regadon. Kira... Regadon", she answers between two sniffing, her gaze still stupefied by distress.

"Okay Kira", Lenny says, unsure about this reversed situation—him being like an adult with a hurt child. "Do you have any idea of what happened?"

She finally looks at him.

“No... not at all. He went with the baby, to the river, and they came back normally and, and this morning...”

Kira bursts into tears. Once again, Lenny feels like an investigator, trying to find out who committed a crime. And if no crime was committed, then how they died and what can be done to prevent others from undergoing the same fate.

If there is one thing Lenny has learned with his crime novels, it is that there is always to find a clue. Sometimes it is a right one, sometimes a wrong one, but it doesn't matter; once you've found a clue, you follow this lead until you find other clues, suspects or anything. Then, you solve the question and conclude the investigation. It's what he has to do now. The only clue he has is the river, but what about it?

Two hours later, bodies are taken to the village centre. Almost a third of the inhabitants lie there on the pile. They will all have to be buried as soon as possible. Weeps, howls, the village is in mourning.

Lenny and Kurk have talked to five wounded adults who have lost someone in their family. And it seems that the river was not a useless clue: every victim had been to the river in the evening, around twilight.

The duo goes to the river while father Woodrow Tarmikos prepares the church and asks for the children from the orphanage to help digging in the graves.

When Lenny and Kurk arrive close to the water, they don't see what's wrong at first. Kurk, without thinking, takes some water in his hands, smell it and tastes it.

"What are you doing?", Lenny shouts, scared about losing his friend for the second time of the day.

"Don't worry, the water is fine", Kurk states, "And a small amount like this couldn't kill me anyway."

"I don't care!", Lenny reacts, "Do not try to be another body on the pile."

His voice breaks at the end of his sentence. It has been a difficult day and it doesn't seem to get better. Why did everything have to go wrong around here? Being with his friend was good enough for him, he didn't need action and troubles any more.

Kurk glances kindly at Lenny. It is not everyday that someone cares about him. In fact, Lenny is the closest person he has, he is like his family now.

“Okay Nynny, let’s try to see what caused this horror”, Kurk adds. Lenny moans, he shouldn’t have told his friend how his father calls him.

Then they see it. The colour. The river has always been very light and clear but now they can’t see the bottom of the riverbed. On the other side, plants that Lenny doesn’t know poke out the water.

“Hey Kurk?”, Lenny calls, then points at the plants, “do you know what these are? Did they only grow last night?”

Kurk shakes his head, and notes that the colour is darker around these new aquatic plants.

They observe the plants for a while before noticing there are more of them close to the forest. The boys walk a fair way up the river, appalled by the hundreds, or even thousands of plants they see now in the water. Dark green, dark blue, brown or even black, these kinds of seaweeds don’t seem to be a good sign. The boys stop by the forest edge, where the vegetation is also out of the water. The two investigators don’t feel confident. It used to be only Kurk who didn’t want to walk in the woods, but now Lenny doesn’t either. What if he couldn’t take the monsters down? Now they really kill people.

“I know it will sound crazy”, Kurk says, “but I think we should try to see where these plants come from.”

Lenny opens his eyes wide.

“You know, it’s probably the reason why many people just died... It scares me off as well, but we need... at least to have a look”, Kurk continues.

They pause for a few seconds, trying to imagine what they will face. Lenny is much more aware of what happens in the forest, but he wonders if he can tell Kurk. He will have to if he needs his powers at any point.

There is no noise under the trees. The air is completely still. Even if it’s the middle of the day, no light comes through the branches and leaves a hundred meters into the woods. And they don’t have to walk any further.

In front of them looms a weird tree by a clearing. The tree is dry, it seems old and dying. The clearing is not the one Lenny sometimes went to when he fought. This one is bigger and not empty when he arrives, compared to the last time he faced enemies in the forest. Today, or tonight because even if there is no tree, there is no light around and it seems that the sun can’t brighten the place, the clearing is full. Full of moving shadows

and monsters that Kurk and Lenny see in the occasional blaze thrown by a sorcerer to another. Some war dogs, more like hell hounds, at least Lenny's height with teeth longer than his hand, walk. Some giants rise higher than the trees, twirling axes and sledgehammers over their head. Dozens of animals with many heads, like the hydra, but small and fast play here and there, dreadful puppies. There are red eyes everywhere, mouths full with blood. It is nowhere near like the other times. It is an entire army. The boys can't believe what they see and remain stunned, frozen, between two trees.

It is one of the dogs or hounds or things with teeth which gets them out of their torpor. Noticing the unwanted kids, the beast comes straight to them. They immediately hide behind a tree, but after a second, they understand that it will not be enough. The beast can smell them.

Suddenly, it runs and ploughs into the tree, which is old and produces a terrible sound. A crack appears at its base, and gradually the trunk starts to fall on them. Lenny reacts instinctively. He burns the trunk. Unfortunately, there is a tooth which reaches Lenny's arm and cuts into his forearm, deeply. The boy throws a fireball to the monster, without waiting any more, straight at the muzzle full of teeth.

The next second, he has every single eye on him. He has projected the beast to the middle of the clearing, still burning. And Kurk stares at him as well, speechless. They don't have much time to think, Lenny is the first to make a move. He takes Kurk's hand and runs to the edge of the forest, to the sun and the river.

Next to the water, the plants have grown taller and from their small thorns drips some liquid, probably poisonous. They take a too long moment looking at this because a trunk flies over their heads and crashes a bit further, followed by a fireball and rocks of all sizes. The army follows, and it is too big for a small village. The sun is already down, time flew in the forest. Lenny wonders if there is anything normal—not magical or dangerous—after the first trees any more. And soon it will be the same out of the forest.

He stops to throw another fireball behind him, interrupting Kurk's run. When he turns, it is to see a horrific scene of a monsters' army heading to a helpless village full of wounded people.

"Kurk!", Lenny calls, "Go find everyone out there, tell them to get armed and ready to fight!"

The boy stares at his friend, willing to stay with him, but the army approaches fast, especially the hounds. And so he runs.

Lenny faces the hundreds of beasts, alone. He generates a wall against the sorcerers' magic, and draws the short sword he likes to have when he fights. He doesn't feel the fight will go as well as it used to when he fought a single beast or sorcerer. Especially when the first hounds cross the translucent wall as if it didn't exist. When an ice ball passes through without even being slowed down, Lenny's arm starts to shake. He can't do it. Not alone. Fear seizes him, as a hound attacks him. He hears voices from somewhere who try to call him. He lights his sword and decapitates the hound, then screams when the second hound arrives with his mouth wide open. Before Lenny can kick the ground to fly away, the beast reaches him and his teeth brushes past the boy's ear.

"Lenny!", a voice says, louder. His vision changes and he falls from his bed.

"Lenny! Are you okay?"

Wylfrid looks at him, frightened.

IX

“Wy... Wylfrid? What are you doing there?”, Lenny asks with a loud voice.

“Shhhhh”, Wylfrid responds, “calm down man, you’re waking the neighbours...”

He pauses, then adds, “are you okay?”

Lenny tries to calm down, his heart pounds in his temples. He feels dizzy and has troubles understanding where he is. He takes a few deep breaths, looking around. The room is illuminated, Wylfrid is standing in his pyjamas and Lisa is standing in the door frame. Lenny stares at her.

“Mum? Wait... what time is it?”

She comes near him.

“It’s five o’clock... What happened to you?”, she asks quietly, with an anxious face.

“What happened? Nothing! I had a nightmare, that’s all”, he answers quickly, the images of the last minutes spinning in his mind.

Wylfrid also approaches Lenny and explains.

“Man... In an hour you’ve screamed three times. I first thought that it was just a nightmare but after the second one... and we couldn’t wake you up. Your dad has called a doctor.”

Lenny shudders. Three times. The villagers’ deaths, the first hound in the forest and the last one before he flew away. It was overwhelming. The world where Kurk and the villagers are left with the monsters seems both trivial and so true, so real. What is he supposed to do with it? He glances at Wylfrid, who continues.

“Your arm also started bleeding and you felt so hot to the touch... I got burned when I tried to stop the bleeding.”

“Wait, I’m not bleeding here, it was just...”

Lenny holds his forearm in front of him and stares at a mark. A scar, all along his forearm, the beast’s tooth. How is this possible? Lenny tries to discard the thought, because he feels like he will soon have a panic attack.

Andrew enters the room.

“Lenny? You’re awake? Oh thank the Lord” Andrew exclaims, Wylfrid and Lisa stepping aside to let him take his son’s hand. But he backs off immediately.

“Ouch! You’re still hot. But we may not need the doctor in emergency, we’ll go this afternoon if the temperature doesn’t come back down.”

He walks out with the phone in the other hand, blowing some air on his other hand where he almost got burned. It is not the first time his son is hotter than an average person. He even keeps a notebook, on which his son’s temperature peaks are written. He has to show it to a doctor who checks from time to time that Lenny lives well with his abnormal body heat.

Lenny keeps an eye on his scar, hoping it might disappear. It is strange that this wound is already a scar, not bleeding any more even if it happened such a short time before. A scar. A scar which remains from the other world to this one.

Lenny’s parents have called the school to say he wouldn’t attend the lesson. Wylfrid also stays with him. Lenny’s best friend doesn’t even think about Mara anymore, he has already forgotten. Especially with Lenny being hurt.

Andrew finally decides to go to work at ten. He agrees that Lisa will be able to take care of the boys and she can call him whenever the situation requires it. Lisa decides to use the day to clean the house thoroughly. Wylfrid will help whenever Lenny needs to sleep or rest alone—it is the only way he can avoid school.

Wylfrid, in the room, doesn't know how to help his friend. Should he try a joke, or a story, or...

He smiles and starts to sing: "You grow with the fire, grow with desire, ..."

Lenny follows the lead: "... Little boy will be a man. You'll be taller than a mountain, stronger than a rock, you'll overcome every pain."

Naturally, they hear Lisa from upstairs singing along: "Sometimes, it'll be so hard you think you just can't stand. But like in a movie, think about a happy end."

Lenny laughs. This song brings back many memories, and he sang it to Wylfrid the day before. They're both okay. Let's take the day in a happy way.

The afternoon comes and Wylfrid helps to wash the house while Lenny stays a bit on the couch with a thermometer. Their belly is

full of a copious plate—gnocchi with lemon and pesto, a delight—made by Wylfrid and Lisa. These two work together, room by room, gradually forgetting the morning problems. Lenny joins them at a point, they sing songs which come to their mind and time flies. Windows, carpets, shutters, doors, tables, everything is cleaned up.

At the end of the afternoon, the phone rings and Lisa takes the call. Lenny guesses that it has to be someone nice at the other end of the phone, because his mother smiles and laughs. She also explains what happened in the morning. Lenny and Wylfrid look at each other without understanding who could need such information. Then, she seems worried. She hangs up the phone and calls them.

“Lenny! Wylfrid!”, she shouts.

Their feet shake the stairs and they enter the living room.

“Who was it? What is happening?”, Lenny asks even if Wylfrid was first because it is his mum and Wylfrid doesn’t want to be impolite.

Lisa seems worried and happy and the same time. She looks a second at the duo, who waits for an answer like puppies waiting for food.

“It was Mr. Corn”, she finally declares, adding with a quick glance at Wylfrid, “your dad”.

“And?”, Lenny insists because he really wants to know now.

“And, he’s okay to organise a poobecue for you two this evening.”

“Really?”, the two boys exclaim in a single voice, before they jump for joy. They’ve had so much fun at the previous occasion. What’s better than a poobecue to make up for lost time and to have a more interesting day than at school in the foreign language lesson!

“But...”, starts Lisa.

The boys calm down and look at her.

“I’m not sure you’re well enough to go there and not enough to go to school.”

Lenny and Wylfrid look at each other, and it’s Wylfrid who speaks first this time.

“Don’t worry! Lenny can rest at my house if he needs to, and my parents are home today so there is no problem!”

“That’s what your father said, and it’s why I said OK. But Lenny’s back here at the least problem.”

They both nod, take their stuff and promise Lisa they'll be good. Lenny and Wylfrid talk about school on their way to Wylfrid's house. They joke about the Spanish teacher, who seems so stereotyped with her movements and expressions, and also the German teacher, who is the complete opposite: a boring man who has probably never been to Germany or to any countries but England and France, which doesn't help his teaching skills.

They arrive at Wylfrid's house. The sun is still shining high enough in the sky and there is a lone white cloud floating around. In the garden, Mr. Corn greets them with a wave, he is already working on the barbecue to get everything set up as soon as possible. The pool is also ready to be used. Wylfrid drops his bag and jumps in, still dressed. Lenny laughs but decides to change inside the house.

"Lenny!", Wylfrid calls from the pool, "come back here, we have a competition to start!"

Lenny walks out.

"A competition?", he asks with irony, "You think you can beat me?"

Wylfrid guffaws. He stares at his friend, whom he has always beaten, especially in the pool competition, and waits for him to show his determination once again.

They play in the water for two hours until they get tired, especially Lenny, who declares he will only count the time from now on. Out of the pool, he sits on a deckchair from which he can see both the pool and the barbecue. It is the perfect place to count the long minutes Wylfrid is able to stay underwater and also enjoy the flames coming out of the barbecue. The flames? He realises there is actually not a single flame burning under the sausages in the big black plate. Wylfrid's father seems to be annoyed and getting angry at the machine.

"Mr. Corn? Can I help you?", Lenny asks, walking to the barbecue.

"Well if you're able to make it work...", he answers. While Lenny tries to find what prevents the fire from coming out, he adds.

"Just wait here an instant, I'll try to find a lighter in the kitchen."

The barbecue grill is made in such way that every part of it can be seen from the outside. The tube through which the gas comes has a little sluice gate, closed. The matchbox is on the ground, open and empty.

Lenny hesitates for a few seconds. Wylfrid underwater, his dad in the kitchen, he has nothing to lose. He opens the sluice gate, slowly, hears the gas coming out. Then he concentrates on his hands. At first, nothing happens, and he is almost relieved, but then a spark comes out of his finger. He is taken aback. Is it really possible? He starts again, and this time he gets a flame. Small, but still a flame, from his bare hands. He lights the gas outflow and then steps away because Mr. Corn is coming back.

“Wow, how did you do it?”, Mr. Corn calls.

“I... I just found another match. It was... in the grass!”, Lenny assured. He isn't sure about his explanation. Anyway, he can't tell him he lit the gas with his hands.

He runs back to the pool because Wylfrid just got out, after 3 minutes and a half down there! What a time! They both relax on the side of the pool until the meat is ready. Then, finally, they eat with Mr. and Mrs. Corn, who has finished her work from home and comes out of her room. This day isn't so bad after all.

It isn't, until the night comes. Wylfrid's parents say their child will stay at home this time, they both need some sleep. Lenny tries to argue but his arms and legs are aching, his head is heavy and his eyes can hardly remain open. He finally agrees on going home and to bed.

When he touches the bedsheets, the panic comes back, faster than a galloping horse. He waits for a minute, calming his breath, then lays on the bed and instantly dives into his dream.

X

Lenny opens his eyes. He doesn't see anything at first; it is the noise which reaches him before anything else. A sound full of screams, burning wood, stones crashing on houses. Then, the smell. Illness, poison, fire, death, and above all: blood. Lenny turns on his back. He was facing the ground and it is when he finally tries to stand up that he understands where he is exactly.

The pile of bodies, in front of the church. It is either someone who has thrown his body here or him who has landed on the pile when he ran away from the hound. The smell obviously comes from here. Lenny feels sick and nauseous. He retches. Screams come from everywhere and explosions blind him. He runs into an alley and breaks into the first house. Here, the noise is not as loud.

"Who are you?", says a little girl, emerging from behind a wardrobe.

Lenny doesn't answer immediately. The girl is small, but she holds a knife in front of her. She seems afraid and he doesn't want to scare her more.

"What are you doing here? Who are you?", she insists, waiting for an answer.

"My name is Lenny", he finally says, his voice hardly covering the explosion nearby. "Where are your parents?"

"I have none. I'm from the orphanage."

"So why are you here?"

"One of my room walls blew up. I was at first trying to find somewhere safe."

Lenny hesitates, then understands that there is no point trying to lie to this girl: she had already seen too much.

"Nowhere is safe here. I don't even know if there are still adults alive. I don't know what we can do", Lenny admits.

Surprisingly, she puts the knife away and comes forward. Her voice is clear when she speaks.

"I think I do", she says. She steps forward again and continues.

“There are lots of us from the orphanage who are in different houses around. We want to trap these things in the middle of the village and burn them all.”

The words come out of her mouth in the same way as if she was an army general. Lenny is amazed. His gaze is locked on that small head full of courage and determination, that small girl who matured because she had to. He thinks for a moment.

“Okay... what’s your name in fact?”

“It doesn’t matter. My friends call me Bird.”

“Well, Bird, I can set fire to the place, but how will we take an entire army in the middle of this?”

“An army? Most of them are not real! I’ve seen these blokes behind making some appear and the things they create can’t do any harm, they’re just there to scare us off!”

Lenny thinks about it. He can’t really understand how it is possible, but nothing surprises him about this world anymore.

“Do you think we could gather the villagers somewhere to plan this?”, he asks, wondering if they will be in sufficient numbers.

“The church still resists... I think the basement is empty, we used to play there with Kurk”, she declares.

Lenny's eyes light up.

"Kurk? You know him? Do you know where he is?"

"He was here not long before you arrived, I had to take care of him because he couldn't think as a normal person. He was trying to go back fighting, even though he can't fight. He's looking for someone who, he said, saved his life."

Lenny laughs. It is a small relief, but his friend is alive, at least. And looking for him. He opens the door and takes a look outside. Then he glances back at the girl.

"It's now or never if we want to have a chance. Try to find the more people you can and send them to the church", he says, taking the lead.

"Okay", she responds, to show she is ready.

Lenny steps outside and then comes back in, thinking.

"And... Bird?"

"What? Anything wrong?", she asks, her knife back in her hand.

"No, no... Just don't get killed", he advises.

She nods with a little smile, her eyes still determined to kill these things which invaded her village. And Lenny's gone.

He runs through the street, through the fire, through some monsters and villagers that he barely notices. He reaches the end of the village and takes off, rising up to the last rooftop before the countryside. From up there, he has an overall view of what is happening around, without being on top of the church and the sorcerer's target.

Around him, there are a few burning houses, bodies lie on the land. Many bodies of monsters, only a few of villagers, probably because the latter were able to hide when the attacks started, thanks to Kurk. The sky is dark and seems to want to throw a few lightning strikes on the already-wounded houses. Fire. Causing chaos, it is now the only solution they can think of.

Lenny throws a fireball to a giant he sees three streets further, which dies instantly. Lenny was used to fight with his sword in the past, but the consequences scare him, as he now knows he can get hurt for real. A group of villagers, dressed as if they just got out of bed because the day didn't give them time to change into their clothes, are trying to hold on to a barricade made from tables, chairs and odd pieces of wood. Unfortunately, there are three hounds attacking on the other side and a fireball might still just burn it all. Lenny prepares himself mentally, takes a deep breath and jumps.

He runs down the street and turns left. A sorcerer is there on the way, walking from the other end and hearing Lenny's steps on the gravel. The man reacts too slowly; Lenny is already on him, half running and half flying, his sword up high. The sorcerer's head falls on the ground and Lenny pushes the body out of his way.

The boy slows down to give himself time to think about what will follow. He then turns right at the next crossroad and reaches the barricade, on the monsters' side. The hounds break chair by chair and table by table with their teeth. They can't hear Lenny because of the villagers' scream coming from behind the barricade. They can't smell him either because the dead bodies under their paws smell horrible. He heads towards the first one, slowly, without taking the risk of being seen but also without being really careful. A wooden plank cracks under his foot. One of the beasts, the one on the right, lends an ear without stopping or slowing down his task and Lenny freezes. He can't be seen if he doesn't want to end up burning the whole street. A few inches away from one of the beasts, he feels the hound's fur bristle. Lenny's thoughts become confused, he tries to figure out what he should do. His thoughts suddenly stop flying in every direction, his mind focused, he knows how to proceed. It is now or never.

The few villagers on the other side of the barricade hear the horrific sound of the hounds' attack. The loud chatter of their teeth makes the villagers step backwards from the wooden pile. Nothing pushes against the barricade from the other side anymore, but the sound of the beasts fighting seems to be even more frightening. They all have something in hand in case they have to fight, but nothing is really appropriate. One has a small hammer, another a pitchfork. One has only a wooden stick.

On his side, Lenny is in rage. He has hit the first beast but it has disappeared; it was an illusion created by these sorcerers. The others, on the contrary, are every bit of real. While Lenny finally kills one by throwing his blade to the hound's throat, the other catches his leg with full teeth, making Lenny scream.

He manages to kick the second monster's head with his other leg and to free himself from the grip. The hound steps back, dizzy. A stream of emotions flood Lenny while blood spurts from the wound. It isn't time to cry or moan, it's time to fight. Leaning back against the barricade, the young man sees the hound rising his head up and focusing on him again. Without hesitation, he lights his hands and sends a wave of fire through the street, sweeping the beast along.

The villagers have heard one of the craziest screams of the day from behind the barricade. When they then hear someone calling from the other side, they are everything but reassured.

“Hey! Could you help me come through please? My leg hurts”, Lenny calls.

They stare at each other, it seems like a human voice. A teenager’s voice. What if it was a sorcerer’s trick? They can’t risk a life though, so they approach the wooden pile and start pulling off doors, tables, and everything that stands between the boy and them.

When it is finally done, they take a moment staring at the bleeding boy, standing next to a dead hound, little flames raising from his fingers.

The little group of villagers and Lenny arrive at the church. They’ve only seen a small monster on their way, which Lenny has knocked out with a single fireball. Lenny sits on the doorway after showing the way the others have to follow. One by one, they enter the huge building in silence and head for the basement. The battle is half way through now. There are still screams, shouts, people running and dying. And Lenny just sits there, outside, biting with all his strength on a wooden stick he found, trying to forget the pain. A child runs towards him.

“Bird asked me to tell you that we are ready”, the small girl says, out of breath.

Another child follows:

“The things are all following the last boys and girls, who are running to here.”

“The other adults are mostly inside, I believe”, says Lenny hesitantly, trying to know whether other came as well.

The boy answers, adopting a soldier’s posture. “I brought the last group, except yours, a few minutes ago.”

Lenny wonders how this boy can have seen him and then gone to the other group; these orphans really know the place well. They’ve grown up here and spent there entire life running through the street and between the houses.

He stands up with difficulty and the help of the two children. His wound is already healing, a lot faster than normal. The children wait for their friends who are coming from a street two hundred metres away. Lenny already kicks the ground with his other leg, rises to the top of the church and gets ready to burn every monster and every sorcerer in sight. He has been there so many times, his gaze jumping from a building to another. He looks at the bakery down there, where he used to spend some time

dribbling for the pastries and cakes. It is only one of the many buildings he will have to light up.

The last children enter the church and close the door. Lenny doesn't fire yet. The first hound attacks the door, followed by a giant. A sorcerer sees Lenny and throws a dark green blast at him, which the boy dodges with a foot. Lenny waits for most of them to be in front of the church and he knows the door is made to hold long enough.

Then, suddenly, it's time. The fire from two houses further calls for Lenny, the dancing flames seem to be waiting for him to use them. And so he does. The flames grow higher, quickly, like a mirror from Lenny's hands, where long blue and red flames wave. Lenny's eyes look for other sources of fire and there is soon a dozen of fires around the monsters, around the church. Most of the beasts have seen him and some of them are even trying to climb up the building. The sorcerers fire a few spells at the young man, standing alone up there, with a bleeding leg, dangerous hands, crazy eyes. And he sends it all onto them.

XI

“Lennyyy!”

The boy open his eyes, terrified. It is his mother who screamed his name and she doesn't look well. A pale face, dark rings under her eyes, an ocean of tears on her cheeks.

“What, what happens mum?”, Lenny asks, wondering what he has done wrong here.

Lisa smiles in relief; her son is awake. But her face doesn't get more coloured. In fact, her arms are shaking and she doesn't know what to do or what to say. She opens her mouth after a few seconds but no sound wants to come out, so she shuts it. Then, she stares at her son for another few seconds and tries to explain, with an unsure voice.

“Well... you were yelling again tonight. And it's 3 a.m... and your leg was bleeding. It's... your dad called the doctor again, you'll have to go to the hospital.”

Lenny integrates all the informations. He was yelling again. Of course he screamed when the hound bit in his leg, and sure he bled, but how could he possibly explain it to his parents? They called the doctor: at least he will heal. In the same way than last night, he only has a scar now but it still hurts like hell.

“Okay mum but you know it’s okay, I just need a medic because it hurts but I’m okay”, he says, not even sure of whether he tries to convince her.

Another tear rolls down Lisa’s cheek.

“What happens to you? Why do you hurt yourself when you sleep?”, she asks in a quivering voice.

“I’m not hurting myself!”, he immediately protests. But he knows he can’t tell the truth either.

Andrew enters the room. He looks at his wife, then his son, wondering if it is a good idea to hug him because he seems to have a body as hot as the day before. He decides to avoid the risk and announces that the doctor will soon be there, then he turns away and steps out.

“Dad? Can I just take some medics instead of going to the hospital?”, Lenny calls.

Andrew comes back in.

“Come again?”

“I said: can I take some medication and not go to the hospital?”, Lenny repeats.

His dad sits on the side of the bed, which creaks.

“I’m sure it’ll be okay soon boy”, he assures, “But for now, you need a real check up. First for your injuries, but also for your head, we need to know how to help you, son.”

Lenny freezes. His head? Do they want him to see a psychiatrist? No! He’s not crazy, he’s living things they can’t understand... Suddenly it is too much. He can’t let them take him to a madhouse!

He tries to get up, but falls because of his leg. Lisa tries to help him but she burns herself when she touches his skin. He takes a deep breath and gets on his feet.

His father tries to make him sit down.

“Do not force on your leg!”, he advises, “And don’t worry, it’s all about understanding what happens...”

Understanding... It’s too much for Lenny.

“It’s not my fault!”, he explodes, “I would never hurt myself! It was a monster, he bit me. But I killed him so it’s okay now, I’M NOT MAD! I wouldn’t—”

“Calm down Nyny, calm down!”, Lisa cries, caring about his health.

“Try to take a deep breath, the doctor will be here any second”, Andrew adds.

“STOP calling me “Nyny”!!!”, Lenny screams. He feels his head heating up. His blood is boiling, his hands are ready to blaze at any instant. He runs to the kitchen with his parents on his heels.

Both are terrified to see their son like this. They try to calm him down, to reassure him, to help him, but they are powerless.

Lenny, on his side, feels like he is about to blow up. He wants to tell his parents about what he lives. He needs to tell them. But they keep on talking, and talking, and talking. It’s an indecipherable noise coming at his ears, growing louder and louder. White face. Hand moves. The boy feels a pressure in his head and the bitter taste of blood in his mouth. More words. More noise. He is reaching his limits, like a birthday balloon with

too much air, like an overloaded truck trying to cross a wooden bridge. Too much. Over.

“Shut uuuuuuuuup!”, Lenny yells, with every bit of air in his lungs. His hands light at the same time and flames taller than him emerge from his fingers. Lisa and Andrew can only avoid the fire by jumping out in the entrance. Lenny’s body is soon entirely alight. He is a living fireball, standing in the kitchen of this small house, getting everything out. Each word he would say to explain his situation and his dreams is exploding in the form of taller flames and higher pitched shouts.

The flames glide along the walls and slide by the cupboards and the fridge. One of them seems even more ambitious and heads towards the oven and the hotplates. The heat becomes unbearable. Everything goes too fast. The single flame which was dancing on the oven is followed by a few others, and they reach the gas stopcock. The heat has caused a leak. The gas is coming out. There is a thundering sound and then, it stops.

Then, there is no more explosion, no more scream, no loud noise. There is also no more light except small flames all over the kitchen and a few on the walls in the hall. The only sounds come from the crackling of the fire. Lenny is in the kitchen; he lies on

the ground, on his back. His forehead bleeds. The kitchen lamp, the heavy one his parents loved, is in pieces around his body.

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The doctor was already on his way but it was meant to be a check up on a boy's sleep troubles. Now, there is an ambulance. And fire-fighters. And a police car. There are also neighbours watching: Mister Powell, in a new original outfit; Miss Ordegan and her scared cat, which is for once more interested than scared; and a few children who interrupt their journey to school to see what is happening. The house is burning, the windows are blown up and bits of the roof are falling on the ground.

*

Lenny dives back in his memories. It is nothing like he ever experienced before. For once, he is not in his body. For once, he cannot act or interact with anything or anyone. Memories. He tries to understand how he got here. Everything seems unclear,

blurred. Then, his brain seems to decide to unlock some parts. The deepest parts.

At first, he is taken back into the kitchen. He looks at himself burning everything, from floor to ceiling: the walls and the paintings, the flowers, napkins and all these little things which burn too fast. The images get blurred again, and it is another scene, in the Corns' garden, lighting up the gas. He just had to concentrate on his hands to have a flame appear, to heat his hands enough to create a sparkle.

It goes backwards. Backwards to the concert and Lenny's hypnosis in front of the flames. His will to see them rise higher, taller, bigger, and the panic in people's eyes when it exploded.

Further back. His palm too hot in front of the cemetery and a wave of anger and sadness going through his skin. Alicia. A girl who didn't deserve to go wherever she could be now. Lenny sees himself when he heard her father talking about this goddamn Leukaemia. The first thing he did was running out of that house. He observes the little boy he was sprint to the end of the town into a small forest, scream to the moon rising up and fear a fire starting in front of him. It was declared the day after to be an accident caused by ashes which still contained some ember. Now

that he watches from outside, he can notice his boy's hands glowing red.

Before the concert, apart from this accident in the forest, he was never too close to the fire. His parents had sealed off the chimney, they were always far from the people who were smoking and they never ever made a barbecue in the garden. Lenny has in mind different scenes of his mother telling him to avoid the fire or to be "very very careful", like each time he went for a poobecue. Or the one time when the family was by a friend's house for Christmas. His parents decided to wear a jumper inside instead of coming close to the fireplace.

Lenny's brain seems to be willing to dive more. The boy is taken back to a small room with high windows and white curtains allowing the sunlight through. He is only a baby, and he sits in the corner, playing with a small green and blue bicycle toy. His parents are on two chairs in front of a desk, and there is someone behind that desk. He wears glasses, a white coat and a slight smile. Lenny cannot see what is written on the guy's badge but he hears perfectly.

"I just don't know what to do any more", his mother says in a heartbreaking voice Lenny never heard from her. "I freak out every single time... I can't think about anything else..."

The man behind the desk responds with a comforting voice: "Of course. It is perfectly normal, you have suffered a psychological shock with this... horrible fire." He pauses. "I advise you to stay away from fire as much as you can for now, and with time, you will go back closer to flames."

"With time? Close to the flames? But how is this even ever possible?", she asks.

"I know it sounds crazy for you now. But the feelings ease with time. After a trauma like yours, it will for sure be long, and the memories will never totally disappear... But it will ease. Then you can approach fire."

"And for our son?", his father asks, his voice quite similar to his mother's. "What can we tell him? About the fire and... his brother."

Tears roll down both parents' cheeks when this last word comes out. The man behind his desk looks at the baby Lenny.

Lenny shudders. It is as if this adult could see through the baby, as if he was looking right at him, in whichever form he was to attend the scene.

The man answers after a couple of seconds.

“The boy won’t remember, he is too young. He could occasionally keep an image or two but he will never know what it is if you don’t tell him.”

He hesitates, unsure about the proposition he has, then continues.

“It is your son, your choice about what you tell him or not. I think that you should keep it for you. Keep your family pictures in a box somewhere but don’t tell him about it. He will maybe know in a few years or maybe never, but he doesn’t have to feel guilty of anything as we suppose one of them has pushed a candle in a way or another. Children’s brain are very sensitive to guiltiness...”

Lenny’s parents keep their gaze in the emptiness, acknowledging the advice. Don’t tell. How to do this?

On his side, Lenny doesn’t feel his body but the pain is real. The words are mental arrows thrown at him.

The adult in white adds: “And for the fire, try to not keep him totally away, but you have to do it the way you feel. Try to keep him aware of the danger and advise him to be very careful but you can’t erase fire from his life.”

The images disappear and let Lenny alone. Alone to think. Alone to try to understand what he has seen. A brother? What fire?

All of a sudden, he is taken into a storm. A hurricane of memories, good ones and bad ones, coming from everywhere and swirling around him. Everything becomes cloudy and disappears. Lenny is in an empty place. The emptiness. He isn't scared, but he wonders if this is what is called the "afterworld", Paradise or Hell or whatever it is. A light comes from far away in front of him. It comes fast, and in a minute it reaches Lenny. Another memory. The deepest one from his brain's most remote areas.

XII

June 1998, a peaceful heat flows through the air. The old wooden bookcase covers the entire wall next to the door. The dark shutters are closed, the small window slightly open and the painting on the other side looks down at the room in silence. It is the portrait of a young lady with big brown eyes, small tears rolling down her cheeks as if she knows what is about to happen in that room. The place is lit by the few candles spread out around it. Right in the middle, two short cradles where barely appear two small heads under the silk sheets. Their breath calm and deep, their mind flying from dream to dream, far away from this place, in the sunny blue skies along the side of multicoloured birds.

The smallest baby of the two starts convulsing, while his dream turns into a nightmare and he grimaces in pain. His eyes suddenly open wide. He stares at the ceiling and the growing fear runs up his throat. He cannot move any more. He cannot feel, or think. He is paralysed by this fear, paralysed by the nightmare his own brain created. The boy clenches his fist, he doesn't want

the darkness to be here; the dark scares him. Then the darkness disappears. The heat is more powerful, and the entire room is lit. He glances at the candles. The long and thin flames go up to the ceiling; blue, yellow, orange, red, all the colours he saw in his dream. He likes these colours. He likes them with a unmeasurable passion, a strong intensity reflected on the flames as they grow bigger and bigger. Gliding along the bookcase, threading their way through the books, touching each detail of each page, each letter, they climb up the walls, they invade the room. The painting, only witness of the scene, seems to cry more and more as parts of the bookcase fall on the cradles. And the screams start. A high-pitched scream from the biggest baby's chest.

After this, everything goes fast: the footsteps rushing the stairs, the cold outside, the siren sound approaching, the flames everywhere, parts of the ceiling falling on the frightened parents and their children. The mother takes the smallest baby in her arms, while the father holds the biggest one, and they hurry out.

The wooden floor burns and collapses under the father's feet before he and the baby he's holding reach the stairs. Wounded, he gets up and picks up the infant whose head is bleeding. He limps to the door, left wide open by his wife, and doesn't stop until he falls on the ground, next to the garden's portal, far

enough from that pile of ashes still upright which used to be his family home. He looks down at his child, the little human doesn't breathe any more. His wife falls on her knees, still holding the smallest one in her gentle arms. Her world has been destroyed.

On the road, the fire-fighters arrive with a useless ambulance. The parents are distraught by their son's death and the house keeps burning. They will never see the kitchen again, with its enormous fridge where the sweetest cakes were kept. They will never see the living room either, where they used to sit on the chimney corner, reading crime novels and newspapers. Neither will they see their room again, the large bed and the family books, nor the hallway any more, the paintings as Morning Hunt or Tango Moment, these dreams of unseen places. They will not see these ever again, but they don't care. Why would they? How could they even think about it now, now that one of their twins is dead?

A policeman approaches to help separate the parents from their child's body, which is taken into the ambulance. Moves are quick but without conviction. They know it is too late. The head has hit the ground hard when the floor collapsed, and the blood loss is huge. In all that noise, screams, tears and lights, the twins have their eyes shut. One is dead, the other sleeps.

XIII

Lisa and Andrew are waiting. It has been hours now, and the doctor said it was a matter of time to know if he would wake up or not. Their son. Lying in a white bed in front of them, his body is also waiting. Waiting for his mind to decide whether he wants to wake up or not. Waiting for the doctor to decide for how long the hospital keeps a boy in a coma before unplugging the machines. There are three screens in the room, informing about his condition. The biggest one is an ECG, showing a clear state of the beat of this small heart inside their son's chest, calm and regular.

The clock's hand indicates eight p.m.; the couple has been in this room for ten hours. Their eyes are red and tired. Holding each other's hand, they contemplate the unique son they have left. Lisa thinks about what happened, trying to understand the events of the last few days and wishing things had gone a different way. Andrew can't even think. Losing a second son is unthinkable, but he can't do anything here. He is powerless, distraught, lost.

There is a knock on the sliding door but none of them turns around. A nurse comes in, checks the screens, the catheter, and walks back out without a word. He comes around to check every half an hour. They talked a few words at first but now he passes like a ghost. The doctor came twice since Lenny has been put to lie here, also to make sure the parents are still strong and sane.

This time, the nurse went out faster than usual, called by a doctor in the corridor. He didn't take the time to push to the end the sliding door, which didn't lock properly and the discussion from outside comes now to Lisa and Andrew's ears.

"Are you sure about this? 3?", asks a female voice.

"I know, I know, Talia", says the nurse's voice, "it seems totally unbelievable! But I checked it twice already, and there is no doubt."

For ten seconds, no word is pronounced, as if it were an enormous news to take in. Then Talia continues, unsure.

"So you're saying... that he is clinically at 3 on the Paediatric GCS, but... that the electroencephalography shows more activity in his head than in an average person's?"

"Yes. I didn't believe it either at first! The only thing I know is that the brain can work even if the EEG shows a flat line, but I

never heard of this working this way! And I think we should send it to a research centre, and they will maybe discover new mental aptitudes, and it will be a huge advance for the medicine and–”

“Oooow!”, interrupts Talia, “Let’s take it easy and ask other medical institutions about this.” Her tone shows this is no time for discussion and she is his senior in the hospital hierarchy.

“Could you take care of it?”, she adds, more gently.

The nurse, cut off in his joy momentum, doesn’t answer and his shoes hit the floor for at least a minute before the sound is too far to be heard. The doctor leaves as well after going through the report, mumbling about the signification of the number 3 and the brain activity.

*

Lenny moves a hand. Then the other. He yawns and opens his eyes. The sky is clear, blue, and the sun shines high above. There is a bird whistling on the edge of a rooftop, as if it was welcoming him back. Lenny stands up, slowly, taking care of his leg which seems to be healed but fragile. He is in the middle of the village, where the church used to stand. Now it seems that

there are only ruins left. There is still enough standing to protect the trapdoor on the floor under which most of the villagers were hiding. This trapdoor is now wide open and a boy is running in his direction.

“Lenny!”, he calls.

“Kurk!”

It is a relief to see his friend alive. He is followed by other children and adults.

Bird is right behind him, smiling broadly.

“I took care of myself! And of Kurk. Or shall I say this stupid kid who wanted to fight with you at the end”, she says to Lenny, pointing at his friend.

“Ahem... yea... I didn’t want you to be alone but... after all... it seems that you did well”, Kurk admits.

A boy pushes through the circle formed around Lenny and arrives at Kurk’s side. He is tall, and looks very familiar.

Kurk continues his explanation. “I also had to take care of you... for him.” Lenny and the new boy stare at each other. “You told Bird that your name was Bale, and it reminded her of someone.”

Bird steps forward. "I knew there was someone called Bale in the orphanage... and your face... it was too similar to be a coincidence..."

Lenny has the feeling his brain finally opens wide and let the memories out. Everything is clear in his mind: what he is capable of, what happened here and what happened with his parents. He can't avoid a wave of guilt about what he did as a baby. His family.

*

Lenny lays in bed. The white place makes him look like a small angel. Except the machines. The respiratory system. The button to call the nurse. All that keeps him alive for now. Andrew and Lisa are still waiting, hoping there will be any sign showing he will wake up. But there isn't. The body doesn't move, there is only his chest going up and down, slowly, letting them know there is a chance. Letting them hope, and wait. On a table, in the room, stand pictures of them, flowers from the family, chocolates and candies. The gifts he will have when he opens his eyes, when he speaks again.

Lenny's fingers move. A single move which immediately stops. His father open his eyes wide, waiting for another sign, and Lisa comes nearer to her son, holding his hand. Lenny doesn't meet his mother grasp, but it is now his mouth which moves as well. His lips tremble at first, but then he takes a breath. A deep one. He goes down to reach his last resources to speak, any bit of energy is required. He has a spasm. His right hand accidentally detaches a cable going into the monitoring, which activates an alarm sign. All the vitals go down to flat lines while the monitor doesn't receive a single data any more.

Lenny stops moving and his parents hold their breath. A doctor and a nurse enter the room in a hurry because of the alarm. They all look at Lenny, who articulates, with his lips stretching in a thin smile.

„Hey brother.“

The End.