

WORLD IN-BETWEEN

LOOKING FOR THE WAY OUT



OLYA AMAN

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Olya Aman

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Chapter 1. Horrible life

Damn this life!

Nothing was going according to plan for Alex again.

It was going the same old way. But the same old way was definitely downwards.

His alarm clock happily did not work again today. Or, probably, it worked, but then the devil's “dream catcher” helped. Well, you know, the sort of thing when you wake up, get ready to do business, walk down the street with a full understanding that it is happening, not even knowing that in reality you are still

drooling on your pillow to the sound of the alarm clock buzzer ringing on your phone. It should be noted that Alex experienced this kind of hell day after day and it has always been as if for the first time.

Maybe it was because of lack of sleep? Or because of poor nutrition? It was not out of the question. Mother has always said that he should not set his sights on studying in the capital! That would be great to be studying at some vocational school with a scholarship five times higher than now and no reason to study or even to move his butt from the creaky dormitory bed. He felt like a raven that had flown into the king's mansion!

Having reached out and finally recalled what day it was, Alex frantically jumped up ruffling his hair in panic and afraid to even look at the clock, ran across the room to collect his things. He stumbled over the cat, put his foot into the right pant leg after a couple of tries, and pulled his tie so that it would fit to be hung on it. But first, of course, was the interview.

Finally, he dared to look at the worn phone screen. Was it ten to eight? The best time to be late for the last morning bus to the center of the city.

Alex flew out of the apartment as fast as he could and his dirty shoe heels thundered (he had not had enough time to clean them) against the stairs. According to some nasty trick he usually never had time to wait for the elevator to come.

He didn't manage to jump into the bus and had to try to squeeze into the closing

doors and stay there because the people inside were packed as tightly as sardines. It was impossible to take a step to the left or to the right.

The old bus somehow rolled to the edge corner of the city's center, which was hardly any different from the most wretched sleeping district. He walked four blocks from there and finally came to a huge twenty level glass wheel, illuminated with all the colors of the rainbow. They probably hadn't turned off the light since the night. It looked so amazing that all Alex's fears vanished immediately, and with a refreshed soul he safely came to the office, where the interview arranged by the manager was to take place.

Having gathered his courage, Alex straightened his tie and enthusiastically reached for the door handle. However, the door was locked just as certainly as the alarm did not ring this morning. "What the hell," - a thought flashed in his head, and when he looked at his watch, he saw that he was only five minutes late, - "What an impatient boss!"

- "Excuse me! - in a voice that was hoarse after sleep (he had not succeeded in talking to the cat or having a cup of coffee that morning) Alex called the man with a well put-together appearance in a classic suit with clearly important folders in his hands in the hallway. - I was invited for an interview, but no one is here, and I ..."

Having glanced at the pricey watch, the man rolled his eyes and cursed. It must have been that Alex wasn't the only one having a bad morning that day.

- "I've been totally busy, I'm sorry for that – the man said in a voice, which did not express anything, inserted the key into the lock violently and opened the door. – Come in."

Alex followed the man into the office, but there was no time to examine the furnishings.

- "I'm in a hurry," - said the man still looking at his watch. – "Sit down. I think five minutes will be enough, tell me about yourself in a few words".

Surprised, Alex could not utter a word for half a minute.

- "Well, as I wrote in my curriculum vitae ..." - he coughed, trying to attract the attention of the manager chained to the clock, and he finally slowly turned his weary gaze to his rumpled suit (which was not even slightly similar to the manager's suit.)"

- "As I mentioned in my curriculum vitae, I graduated from the Department of International Relations, worked for two years as a translator, passed the training courses..."

- "What salary do you want?"

- "P-pardon?"

- "Never mind."

The manager suddenly started to quickly write something on a piece of paper, and Alex became speechless again.

- “Here,” - the man with the watch finally said, taking a piece of paper and holding it out.

- “Call me, if you do not get an answer by email today. Good luck,” – the manager automatically produced a worn-out forced smile on his face, sadly folding papers into a stack and stood up.

- “Is this all?” – the young man managed to utter and was immediately literally pushed out the door. Having locked the door with a key, the manager disappeared as quickly as he appeared without answering.

“Was it worth it to come here so early,” - Alex grumbled to himself, standing in a crowded bus and repeatedly hitting his face into the back of the chubby man, who was standing next to him when the bus bounced over every other bump. – What an interview! And they call themselves a solid company! Charlatans and bureaucrats are all the same.”

- “Young man, pass me the bus fare!” – a stocky fare collector suddenly yelled right under Alex’s ear.

- “Have a heart, I just paid”. – outraged, he said tiredly. However, there was not a trace of heart in the eyes of the woman who was chewing bubble gum.

- “If you paid, show me your ticket.”

- “Do you have sclerosis, or what?” - he began to slap his pockets as aggressively as was possible in the cramped space. Old ladies who were under

Alex's elbows started to grumble and the chubby man standing in front, turned around and looked grimly from under his thick eyebrows.

- "If you talk rudely to me, I'll make you get off immediately," – the conductress interrupted him. – "Will I get your ticket today"?

- "If you don't cheat me again," - Alex muttered, paying a second time.

- "It's a great day, there's nothing else to say," - he grumbled as he climbed the stairs to his floor and started to get out his key. However, as soon as he entered his staircase, his back felt cold, and the hair on his head stood on end. The door was not locked. It was ajar.

Having carefully walked to the front door of his apartment, Alex put his hand over the phone in his pocket, ready to dial 911, and put a key into his fist with its teeth forward so that in case of any resistance he could insert it into the eye of the uninvited guest. He kicked the door open like a real special force soldier, not coming close. Having loudly clattered against the wall, the door was waving from draught in the hall, but, no matter how long he waited, nothing happened.

"Did you smoke too much" - rattled the screechy voice of the gossipy neighbor from the lower floor. She had already climbed one flight and was now looking at him from between the railings. - Why are you a freaking addict brawling in broad daylight? I'll call the police. They will teach you a lesson!

"That's right! Call the police". - Alex shouted back loudly feeling indignant at

the insulting injustice of life. "My apartment has been cleaned out by the way!"

"Did you have something to take"? - Smiled the malicious neighbor and trudged to her apartment. However, she called the police.

No traces of anyone breaking in were found. No one had keys except the owner. Alex came to an awkward conclusion: in the morning rush getting ready for the ill-fated interview, Alex himself had forgotten to close the door behind him. Apparently, no one had a chance to visit the apartment, because nothing was missing. But Alex's cat managed to slip away.

It was a blow. It was not that there was nothing to worry about. But, like many lonely people, Alex was extremely attached to his pet. And from now on, this evening and many subsequent ones would be spent in his two-room box all alone.

Another shock was a sudden discovery: there was no e-mail. Neither now, nor at some other time. How could those representative employees lie to his face saying: we will send you an e-mail!

Snatching a piece of paper with a number from his pocket, with mixed feelings Alex plugged the numbers into a broken old keypad while he was alternating between the need to breathe in and out, calming his frustrated nerves, and express everything he thought to that crouching cock with an expensive watch. "The number was dialed incorrectly", - answered the voice in the receiver in a friendly mechanical manner. Cursing himself, he was dialing the same number

again and again, consequently changing the incomprehensible numbers to everything possible, but to no avail: “wrong number” was followed by “the number does not exist.”

“A fraudulent office!” - he shouted in a fit of temper, almost throwing the phone against the wall. But at the last moment he came to senses: phones were not cheap now, and judging by the circumstances, he would have to search for a job for a long time.

He sighed, looked around, as if he was in his apartment for the first time. There was emptiness in his heart and it was unlikely that the matter was only about a cat. It was empty so often that Alex usually hardly noticed this feeling. At times, it seemed as if he was born with it. As if he was born a loser.

But even losers have to live. What for? Hell knows why people live. But as long as you live, you need to do something. However, he had nothing to do. There was the useless diploma from a mediocre university in the capital collecting dust in a frame on the shelf. He had no work, no goals, no family and no friends. Those whom only recently he was taking as the first or the second ones, have been far away at different ends of the Earth, unlikely to remember an ordinary and insignificant guy like him.

So he sighed again, just in case, made himself tea and went to wait for the letter from the firm he already hated to a non-existent e-mail address and for the end of another useless day of his life in the expanses of a social network with

thousands of familiar strangers.

At times like this, the old cat usually jumped on his knees and, leaving its marks on his pajamas (since Alex lived alone and rarely left the apartment when it wasn't absolutely necessary, he usually wore pajamas), curling into a ball and starting its old purring music box.

But now the cat was gone. And why did this last good soul in this mortal world decide to leave its faithful friend in its old age? Did it do it to seek adventure? For a moment, catching his own reflection on the darkened monitor while it was loading, Alex involuntarily covered his face with his hands. He would have fled from such a useless wanderer as he was if he could.

A sudden squeal in the headphones made him quiver and having choked on hot tea, he tipped the cup with the remaining tea right on his pants. Kaspersky from its personal circle of hell decided to inform him about the infectiousness of the computer.

Wailing from pain and humiliation, cursing, he went to the bathroom to pull off the pants he had forgotten he was still wearing and to put his scalded knees in his usual stretched pajamas. Everything began to fall from his pocket: change, all sorts of papers, a bus ticket which he did not use when he was returning from the center of the city, the crumpled piece of paper with the number of the man who had deceived him from the office and a napkin with traces of lipstick with neatly printed numbers on it.

Being confused, Alex picked it up and looked at it from all sides. No matter what, something was clearly wrong. Couldn't it be...

Alex slapped his forehead so hard that stars began to dance in his eyes. Or was it because of excitement? Probably. He rushed to the phone and dialed the number instantly. There were long beeps in the receiver, and when they broke off with an aspiration at that end, his breath was interrupted and he could barely squeeze out the words:

- "Is this Anya?"

- "What? Who is it? I don't understand," - the girl muttered sleepily.

- "It is you, I recognized you at once from your voice, Anya. This is Alex. We met two days ago at the bus stop, do you remember?"

The answer was a tense silence.

- "You put your number in my pocket yourself," - Alex was trying to remind her more forcefully, knowing with despair that he was unlikely to have been remembered.

- "Exactly!" - Anya responded to Alex's great surprise and at the same time jubilation. - "I was telling you about our shelter for homeless animals, right?"

- "Yes!" - exclaimed Alex, happy as if for the first time. - "Don't you want to..."

- "Can you help us tonight, by the way?" - Anya interrupted him, but he paid no attention to it, and furthermore, he did not attach any importance to it.

- "Sure, I would be happy to!"

- "In this case, see you at the meeting place at five. I've told you the address."

- "How, tell..." - but Anya had already hung up.

For the first time in months, the smile remained on Alex's face for several hours. Could he finally have a streak of luck after so many years of total setbacks and failures? Would there be at least someone in his life who would bring a new, fresh stream of energy to it?

Anya was an environmental activist, who worked with an organization that helped homeless animals. "What a noble activity," - thought Alex. The evening would have to be the most romantic in his entire life. That's why he was doing nothing but looking in the mirror like a schoolgirl before her first date, ironically reproaching himself somewhere deep in his soul.

Happiness was finally beating in the young man's heart, so he didn't care about how stupid he looked, especially since there was no one to look at him anyway. He even got so carried away by this that he forgot about the loss of his cat, and before leaving poured him a whole bowl of dry food with joy. Let it have a holiday today.

He walked down the street in his best suit. And he hardly cared that he had to walk to the other end of the city. He hardly cared that if he bought a bouquet of roses now, in the evening he wouldn't have enough to buy a bundle of semi-

prepared ravioli at the nearby kiosk. He bought a whole bouquet of the best roses that he could find along the way.

Approaching the appointed time and place, Alex was surprised that he didn't find the one he expected to see there. Just a couple of days ago at this very spot he met a girl with eyes the color of a distant clear sea and it was impossible to take his eyes off her wavy hair that the blustery wind played with.

Today there was a woman with a flabby face and evil eyes, who was for some reason suspiciously reminiscent of the fare collector from today's bus, who threatened to throw him off "without waiting." "God forbid, she works here part-time," - Alex thought before he noticed with relief that it was not her. They just resembled one another like two drops of water. There must be some kind of evil old lady gene that makes its carrier look like this? What nonsense!

- "Hello!" - Alex timidly greeted the woman, confused and not knowing where to put the bouquet of roses. He was still hoping to take it directly to Anya, with whom he had arranged the meeting.

- "Are you new?" - the woman greeted him hoarsely, nodding casually in response to the greeting.

- "Pardon me?"

- "God will pardon you," - the woman laughed for some reason. - "I'm asking you, are you new to the "Society on Protection?"

- "Let's say I am on probation," - he said cautiously. - "Actually, I'd like to meet Anya. The blond one."

- "She went to Germany two days ago. She lives there".

For the second time that day, Alex could not utter a word.

- "But, how? I spoke to her on the phone just today!"

- "Oh," - said the woman, grinning, - "Check your mobile balance, my dear. Roaming is costly, of course. She is actually our coordinator, no more, no less. She organizes our work remotely."

- "Remotely?" He muttered, feeling how he was gradually losing touch with reality and how the roses in his hands were withering in parallel with his happiness somewhere at the bottom of his heart.

- "Why would this beauty do this dirty work here?" - Snorted the woman contemptuously, - "Why do you think she seeks out volunteers like you?"

- "Does she seek out?"

- "So, are you coming?"

The world was crumbling underfoot.

- "I'm coming."

Alex followed his escort in the direction of a narrow street where a small garden was located. It must have been an orphanage. On the way past the stop, he

pushed the pink bouquet deeper into the trash can.

- “By the way, my name is Anya Kuznetsova. I am Anya too,” - for some reason the woman added.

- “Alex,” he said quickly, almost to himself.

- “Nice to meet you!” - Anya Kuznetsova grinned and began to say something that he was certainly not interested in.

Contrary to all expectations and hopes the evening passed quite awkwardly. Anya Kuznetsova clearly was not exaggerating about the “dirty work.” The three hours, during which he was assigned to clean almost the entire shelter, lasted an eternity.

Alex returned home in a bad mood. Silence greeted him. Only now he recalled that he had lost the only creature with whom he could share another disappointment.

Must it be some kind of sign? It shouldn't be this way in life that day after day, month after month, a person was in the same hell.

However, Alex was an example of such a person. Whatever he was involved in, everything went wrong. When he was twelve he was accused of pickpocketing at school and now he had a criminal record, which doomed his personal file to the life-long note of a potentially unfortunate citizen. When Alex was fourteen and was cherishing the dream of becoming a famous basketball player, he was not

accepted into the junior teams. At the age of seventeen he failed the entrance exams into the university he most wanted to attend. At the age of nineteen he got into an accident that was not his fault during his road test. And now in one day his cat had run away and he missed the opportunity to get acquainted with a pretty girl and to get potential work.

Even the small things made the day unlucky. Not only had he overslept, he also paid twice for the bus, did not lock the apartment and burned his knees, which were still hurting.

- "If it is a sign, it is definitely showing that I am superfluous here," - Alex said loudly, as if someone could hear him. - "So isn't it easier to leave the party while no one is watching?"

"It seems I'm already going crazy," - a thought flashed through his mind. - "What party am I talking about?"

"Every little fly that buzzes around me in a hot sunbeam, is a participant in this whole choir. It knows its own place, loves it and is happy," - suddenly he recalled the lines of the topical Dostoevsky, which he once read and which stuck in his memory for some reason. "Only I'm superfluous," - echoed the voice in his head, - "Just like that consumptive, who did not shoot himself. At least there was someone to hate him, but there's nobody to hate me."

"By the way, Dostoevsky did not teach evil, though his heroes did not have everything in order. More precisely, everything was in disorder from start to

finish,” - said some other voice. – “Well, maybe in that case you should go kill someone? Go, so to say, against the system, nature, fate.”

Alex shook his head in fear. There are thoughts that sometimes come into your head that make you uncomfortable! Especially since the lives of Fedor Mikhailovich’s heroes did not end well.

- “Then why wait?” - he said suddenly aloud again. – “I can’t tolerate this anymore!”

In fact, the simplest and most logical idea, which could come to his mind at that moment dawned on him. If he is doomed to eternal failure, and to go against it is equivalent to suicide, why not immediately resort to the latter?

In eerie anticipation of some new (and, obviously, last) adventure, he suddenly began to recall the whole past day: alarm clock, shoes, tie... Exactly, a tie! A tie, tied so tightly that it could choke. What if he tried this?

With trembling hands, he pulled a tie from a heap of clothes, turned it in his hands and pulled it with force. The threads squeaked, stretching. The tie was thin and slippery.

Having recalled something, he rushed to the pantry with all his strength. That was right - pieces of ropes were left after long-standing and according to habit, not finished, renovations.

Alex chose the longest one and rushed back to the computer to “google” the

most popular sea knot in which he could trap himself. Having found it, he began to practice with loose rope: “This goes here, this one there, then, wrap it.”

And only when everything was ready, a terrible thought visited him: “What the hell am I doing?!”

Would he commit suicide so spontaneously? Probably, on the threshold of a new, good life. What if the manager responds tomorrow? What if the missing cat returns? What if Anya who went to Germany calls back? Who will pick up the phone to answer her call?

Only his diploma would remain mediocre and dusty, the officer will not think to scribble something about the schoolboy in his papers, the drunken fellow will not turn off from the oncoming traffic.

Thrusting the loop against his chest, Alex put on his jacket and cap again, and ran out of the apartment, no longer caring whether he closed the door behind him or took the keys. He wanted to get some fresh air.

There was a very dreary November on the street. It was already dark, but neither the stars nor the moon could be seen. The sky was covered by black-brown clouds. It complied with the oppressive mood.

The street was lit only by intermittent lights. A half of them were broken by hooligans, the other half were burned out. There was no a single person on the sidewalk, which, in fact, was not surprising in such wind. Only the cars were

scurrying along the avenue with a booming rustle.

Realizing that, according to the laws of his unhappy fate, he would inevitably face hooligans at one of the entrances to the city, he turned towards the seemingly safe wasteland, and headed for the forest. There was an amusement park there in the summer, but now the Ferris wheel was stopped, the roller coasters with old cars were rusting under the rain and melting snow, the ticket booths were closed, and the race track with small cars seemed to be closed forever. It was not the best place to lift his spirits, but there was simply no choice.

When Alex reached it, he pulled out his mobile phone and turned on the flashlight. Gusts of wind tore the last wet and half-rotten leaves from the trees. He walked to the race track and climbed into one of the cars and began to wait. What was he waiting for? He did not know himself.

His knees did not fit and were leaning against the steering wheel. The metal was cold, stiff and wet, so, his feet became numb very soon.

Suddenly he shuddered when he heard the rumbling. For a moment he was stunned, but no, it was just thunder.

With difficulty, Alex got out of the car and unbuttoned his jacket, taking out a rope. He suddenly found that he remained dressed the same way as he went for his obviously unfortunate meeting: in his best trousers, a shirt, with a bowtie around his neck which was tied on a slight diagonal.

He adjusted his tie and grinned at himself. The suit was just right for such an occasion. Looking back in search of a suitable branch, he continued to recall what else should be recalled before his death. For example, he did not clear the search history from his browser. Although it was unlikely that someone would look at it, so there was nothing to worry about.

Moreover, would it matter to him? Suddenly he realized that, in fact, it was the first time he seriously thought about what would be there, beyond the edge. All his life he has been reassuring himself that everything there would be the same as before his birth: emptiness, nothingness.

But, it was difficult to imagine his own absence. How could he deny himself? After all, here he was, alive, made of flesh and blood...

Meanwhile, the first rain was already falling. Alex had already climbed onto the car, in which he had been sitting only a few minutes ago. A large shriveled tree stretched its branches directly above the car. Its branches should have been strong enough.

Alex diligently tied a loop to the tree the same precise way as he did it to the knot, as if not his death but his life depended on it. The car had already become slippery under the drops of the rainfall that was just beginning.

When he put his head into the loop, the rain was already pouring heavily, dulling the forest with its noise. "The wet rope will fasten sooner," - he thought before his foot involuntarily slipped from the bumper of the rusty car, and his feet

landed twenty centimeters above the field of the race track.

The rope indeed pulled together quickly, biting into his neck. Surprised, Alex grabbed the loop in horror, trying to pull it away for a moment, but his fingers did not want to stick between his neck and the properly tightened rope.

He was getting less and less air, and darkness was slowly eclipsing the light in his eyes. For some reason, it struck him that he left the phone turned on in the car so that he had his hands free to bind the rope better. Now it was lying there with a flashlight on, illuminating his body, which was beating in death spasms like a searchlight. Nothing could be said. This was a powerful scene!

Suddenly, an unclear wave of pleasure swept over him. A memory of the article, which he read on the internet some time ago flashed in his fading consciousness. It had said that at the critical moments of suffocation, the victim gets overtaken by euphoria, which is the last moment before death.

Ready to plunge into darkness, he looked at the cloudy sky for the last time. But suddenly, somewhere in his subliminal mind, he felt that he was being pulled down. Someone or something was pulling his shoes. He was falling somewhere into the darkness vaguely realizing that he was rushing into the abyss with his soul and body.

Alex felt that someone was dragging him on the ground by his belt loops as if in a misty half-sleep. His hands were dangling lifelessly, and he was not even able to move them. What was happening seemed so unreal, that even his body was

beyond the control. However, the sides of his palms felt the rough and wet asphalt quite clearly.

His neck was still being rubbed by the loop, which someone now carefully loosened. His head was pounding, as if from a hangover. He tried to say something to call the person who was dragging him, but the nocturnal darkness and the shroud, which appeared from somewhere before his eyes, did not allow him to see anything. However, only an indistinct groan mixed with a hoarse voice sounded. Having groaned again to clear his throat, Alex tried to lift himself up, but nothing happened. His abdominal muscles did not want to obey.

However, Alex's ears were still working well. Desperate to move and speak, he began to listen carefully, as never before in his life. This effort soon produced results. A dog was next to him.

And not alone. Soft, but strong paws paced through the puddles, barely clicking its claws against the hard surface. He heard their heavy breathing right above his ear, and his hair instantly stood on end. His blood froze in his veins. Unpleasant scenes flashed in his head, from which he came to a terrible conclusion: a pack of stray dogs considered him dead and were carrying him to eat. Now he did not want to die at all!

“And did he ever want to die?” - he thought suddenly. – “Stop, what?! Die? What had happened today?”

But he did not get an answer.

His first thought was to let the dogs know that he was not a corpse. But futile attempts to move led to nothing again. Alex tried to give his brain a clear signal: to kick with the leg he was being pulled by, but responded with nasty tingles and did not even shake. He seemed to be paralyzed, without losing his senses.

The veil before his eyes suddenly began to lift. Moreover, it clearly rustled with the sound of tires scraping sharply along the highway, got lit up by the crazed flash of bright headlights, and a deafening automotive whistle hit his head painfully.

Finally, having managed to moan at the noise produced by the car, Alex continued to listen. Now he was unable to open his eyes, feeling his consciousness swimming away from him again.

The door of the car slammed. The driver croaked, obviously stunned by what he saw. The heavy dog's paws began to move farther and farther away.

The stranger's boots cautiously approached as the dogs were running away.

- "What a Hell," - he whispered frantically. He timidly bent over Alex who was lying on the ground and began to slap him on the cheeks. - "Hey, boy, wake up! Do you hear me? Damn!"

Alex tried to move his eyes under his eyelids to make the driver understand that he heard him and was okay, at least relatively. But, the movement was hardly noticeable in the dark.

- “Hello, is this an ambulance?” – were the last words Alex heard. – “Someone is dying here.”

“Now I'm definitely going to a psychiatric hospital,” - disappointedly, but to his own surprise calmly thought Alex, having suddenly recalled that the loop was still hanging around his neck, and lost consciousness. It was the second time that night, and it turned out to be for a long time.

- “He woke up, he woke up!” – the nurse started to shout as soon as Alex opened his eyes a day and a half later.

The doctor who had a mustache and pointed beard and was wearing a white gown ran up to Alex and immediately began to shine light into his eyes with his vile flash-light. He began to speak in a voice which was surprisingly pleasant:

- “Welcome back! What’s your name, by the way?”

- “Alex,” - he answered hoarsely after such a long “sleep.”

- “How do you feel?”

- “Disgusting.”

- “It will end.”

- “I hope so.”

The doctor sent away the nurse with a nod of his head. She left, closing the door behind her. The doctor picked up his robe gently and sat down on the edge of the

bed.

- “Now there's certainly no one to be afraid of. So, tell me everything as it was, and I will help you as much as I can,” - the doctor began to speak suddenly with an unexpected perceptiveness.

Originally, the words Alex heard were not organized into sentences and all the doctors who seemed almost translucent were blurring before his eyes and did not combine into one doctor. The same was happening with the beds. Alex shook his head and collected his thoughts, but still he could not understand what the doctor was talking about.

- “Sorry?” - he asked in a voice, which was still hoarse.

- “Well, you know, patients aren't brought to us every day with loops around their necks,” - the doctor continued quietly and delicately, looking away.

- “I'm not one of them, doc,” - said Alex, having finally guessed what they wanted from him. The first alarm bells had already rung, and it was time to lie. – “I absolutely don't remember anything that happened yesterday. It like flew from my head, to tell the truth,” - he raised himself on the pillow and confidently moved closer to the doctor, - “I don't remember much from that evening. I think I drank too much.”

The doctor grinned incredulously in response. He was silent for a while, got up from the bed and adjusted his gown.

- “So, you do not need the specialists' help?”

- “Thank you, doc,” Alex said politely.

The pause was prolonged.

- “So, what about relatives and friends?” - the doctor recalled suddenly.

- “What do you mean?” - asked Alex, not understanding.

- “They should be informed that you're here so that they don't worry.”

- “I have no relatives or friends here,” - Alex almost interrupted. And, having suddenly recollected, he hastily added as indignantly as he could. – “Especially after such binge drinking.”

Now the doctor smiled more gently, however, not without a note of regret. But, suddenly, having completely dissolved in a smile, he replied:

- “In your place, I would not be so completely sure, young man.”

- “What are you talking about?” - he was puzzled again.

- “Your old “friends” almost killed you, but absolutely wild creatures saved you. This is totally incomprehensible!”

- “How do you know this?”

- “It seemed you hallucinated. And being totally unconscious, you were saying only one phrase: "I was rescued by dogs!”

- “Didn't they want to eat me?” - Alex incredulously tried to cool down the ardor

of the suddenly inspired man.

- “Note: based on your words, they didn’t drag you into the forest, but to people!”

The one saved by the “creatures” did not know how to answer.

- “Of course, I'm not a zoologist, and certainly not an ethologist, but I know one thing for sure: the animals clearly had good intentions if they really dragged you towards the road. Why? That’s a completely different story,” - he sighed and smiled brightly with his kind eyes again. The doctor prepared to leave and said in parting: - “Well, Alex, get well. And don’t abuse alcohol. You were born lucky, but that doesn’t mean anything, so take my word for it, buddy! I will give all my instructions to the nurse. See you later!”

In response, Alex waved to the doctor and, plopping himself into the pillows again, began to think painfully about what happened.

The doctor turned out to be an understanding person (or just a naive simpleton, who had been so easily fooled by this tasteless lie). Alex was discharged three days later. And during all those three days he had been thinking endlessly, vainly trying to recall in detail the night of his failed suicide. What happened that night and was a pack of dogs capable of performing such a reasonable and consciously noble act like saving a human?

That's why, as soon as he was discharged, the young man began to stare at every

dog he met on the way home. But none of them seemed strong enough to drag a human through a whole field from the park to the city. Moreover, it was “accompanied” by a whole pack that time, and it was unlikely that its members would now wander around the city.

Having arrived at home, he still could not calm down, distract himself and breathe freely. Every now and then he was looking nervously out the window, as if he was waiting for his new “friends” to run up to the entrance.

This thought didn’t leave him. His whole browser history was filled with a continuous search for stories about dogs and their habits, but, for some reason, there was nothing like his case. Was his situation unique? It couldn’t be like this. Alex was not that kind of man. Nothing exceptional ever happened in his life. His fate taught him that lesson by repeatedly cutting his wings when he was flying too high. So, why would such a miracle happen now?

And it was getting darker outside, where there were no dogs, of course. The search turned out to be fruitless. For a moment, he stood by the window lost in thought, and was watching silently how the rusty solar disk was leaving the horizon and how the blue with the first stars was moving from somewhere behind from the piece of the sky that was not visible from behind the building.

Suddenly, having made up his mind, he began to get ready quickly. He got dressed, took his flashlight (after all, the phone was still lying under that tree, if the rain did not ruin it that night and vagrants did not take it.) He also decided to

take the remains of fresh sausage and bread, which he bought on the way from the hospital and almost finished that day. As long as he did not come up with the idea to buy another meal on time, and all that was left in the fridge had spoiled a long time ago, it was time to act.

Having laced up his boots and fastened his jacket with more determination than ever before, Alex went to the location of his failed suicide without thinking twice.

When he was already approaching, a thought visited him: how stupid was this venture? Alone, in the middle of the dark park, a good few kilometers from residential blocks, with such an appetizing sausage in his pocket (and also being such an appetizing person – it was unlikely that dogs would refrain from diversifying their diet.) In a possible habitat, this time packs of wild dogs wouldn't be as friendly as the first time. What if their behavior, which the doctor could not get to the bottom of, and about which he himself was lamenting the day before, was just a warning sign saying: "We forgive you for the first time, but don't come here again?"

"It is possible, definitely possible," - he muttered to himself, pulling his neck deeper into his jacket, as if this improvised "shell" was somehow protecting him, and was pointing his flashlight through the tops of the withered, long-fallen pines. Yes, the place was mildly speaking, unpleasant.

Especially in conjunction with these rusty pieces of iron, which now, in the

larger radius of illumination from the real flashlight were illuminated in a great multitude. A piece of rope was hanging on a thick branch. It must have been bitten off so as not to drag the branch with the body to the city. But there was not a single soul nearby.

There was a carousel with swings moving in the wind to the left of the abandoned raceway, and their chains were creaking in his ears. Why didn't this vile sound disturb him before? It's no wonder that there were no dogs here either. For the ear of a sensitive animal such an abomination must be torture.

Deeper into the forest, a Ferris wheel towered over what were once the canopies of trees. Previously, it had been the pride of the district, one of the highest points. Alex still remembered the time when there was an amazing view from there. It was before the whole horizon was flooded with high-rise buildings, which irrevocably ruined the scenery.

Suddenly, his heart jumped. Something rustled in the bushes near the steps leading up to the wheel.

"Wind," - Alex tried to calm himself. But, it was certainly impossible to deceive his eyes. Right after the fleeting movement, a pair of amber eyes flashed between the leaves.

- "Good doggie," - Alex mumbled, pulling out the sausage from where it was tucked against his chest and feeling his legs buckle, and his tongue wither in excitement.

But then, something happened that he did not expect at all. Instead of a dog, a huge wolf came out with a heavy tread from behind the bushes, realizing that he had been discovered.

“Damn it!” – a thought flashed in his head, and he froze in horror with a sausage stretched out ahead, unable to move because of the fear that overwhelmed him.

Meanwhile, the wolf was getting closer, and Alex decided to act cautiously. He put the sausage on the ground without bending too far, so as not to expose his vulnerable neck to attack (he heard about this in the show about nature and survival on TV) and began to quietly back away to exit from the forest.

But the hand that was lowering the sausage was shaking treacherously, and before Alex managed to put the delicacy on the ground, the wolf suddenly lunged at him with lightning speed, struck his chest with his legs and forced him to the ground. Did it run away? Judging by the spiteful growl, it was obviously not going to give up.

No longer cautious and slow, Alex rolled over a couple of times and, having got up on his feet as soon as possible, began to rummage through the grass in search of a potential weapon. Finally, he found one. It was a branch with the remains of the loop on it. It was heavy and sturdy. What irony!

As soon as the wolf got close enough for Alex to swing his new “bat”, the beast retreated to the side, spinning away and keeping his eyes on Alex’s face. “Damn”, - Alex suddenly thought, - “this creature has human eyes!”

And indeed, in shape, the eyes and pupils of the wolf were completely identical to human ones. Only the color was different.

Meanwhile, the animal, having gathered strength, jumped again. This time, Alex could repel the blow, though not without difficulty. The branch was heavy enough, and it became necessary to reach the wolf with it. But, the beast did not fumble. It grabbed the branch with its teeth in flight, and when the frightened guy pulled his only weapon on himself, the wolf backed away in the opposite direction without unclenching its jaws. It began to shake its head in a completely wolfish manner, growling and drooling.

The animal had the advantage - the branch had been discarded. Meanwhile, Alex noticed that the second wolf was already sneaking out of the forest thicket. "I'm trapped, there's nothing else to say," – thought Alex.

The first wolf did not wait for him for a long time. It immediately attacked for the third time. This time it did not run away, but very aggressively began to press Alex to the ground, which was soft because of the rain, intending to grab his face. The wet and hot breath of the wolf enveloped Alex with a feeling of horror.

- "Rumbo!" - a woman's voice sounded suddenly through the darkness of the night (the flashlight had already been dropped at the place, - where the beast attacked him for the first time), and then it froze. – "Rumbo, stop!"

The wolf loosened its grip and jumped off Alex's chest.

- "What is it?" – a male voice was discontentedly responding to the woman's voice.

- "It's the same person that was here!"

- "So, how is he better than everyone else?" - growled the male in reply, – "I did not drag him to this freaking city, so I am not going to nurse him!"

- "We are a flock, Rumbo, you must always remember this."

Hardly recovering, Alex looked around in surprise, searching for the source of the voices, but there wasn't anyone nearby, as before.

- "Damn it," - he repeated that evening, and immediately regretted it. Both wolves suddenly turned to him again. However, they did not rush, but were watching him with surprise as in answer to his own.

- "I must be going mad," - Alex chuckled hysterically, frightened, putting his hand to his forehead, - "Maybe there are no wolves at all? Maybe everything around me only appears to me? Or it is just a dream? Maybe it is just a terrible and long nightmare? Maybe I am still in the hospital? Or maybe there was no suicide, and he himself was also a dream?"

Alex pinched himself, but did not manage to wake up. The dream was damn deep!

- "It seems this person understands our language," - the she-wolf said finally. The second one did not find anything to say again.

- "That's the problem," - answered their human interlocutor, still not believing that it all was happening.

Alex could not believe his ears. However, the next moment he doubted what he was seeing too. A minute ago a dark gray beast with glimpses of white spots on its fur was standing before him ready to tear him apart. But, suddenly, it pushed its front paws off the ground and stood on its hind legs, gradually straightening its back. The animal's fur suddenly began to transform into a body and a dirty white shirt and rumpled jeans appeared under it. The wolfish paws clenched into fists, and unclenched in the shape of human hands. Shabby sneakers with torn laces suddenly appeared from under the disappearing fur on its hind legs.

Only its head remained. It was losing wolf features so slowly that for a moment it seemed to Alex that a real man with a wolf's head was standing in front of him. However, soon the darkness dissipated, and a pale, tired, bilious face was looking at him with the same eyes that he still remembered from the appearance of the wolf. On the head of the man, who appeared from nowhere, hairs of indistinct mouse-russet color with white strands, which have not been combed for a long time were tangling into whiskers.

- "Am I crazy?" - Alex wondered, blinking in vain and wiping his face with his hands. This didn't help, and Alex decided to run away as soon as possible. There was nothing else left to do.

- "I think I'll go," - he said timidly. There was fear in his eyes.

- “You won’t go alone,” - the she-wolf responded, having immediately turned into a girl much more quickly and gracefully than her friend.

Alex froze for a moment. A young girl of medium height with copper-colored hair was standing in front of him instead of the animal. Her serious eyes were the color of the autumn sky and there was a slight grin on her lips. It was impossible to say that she had been a wolf just a moment before.

Had she been a wolf? For a moment Alex felt the light fade from his eyes, and he was ready to faint. However, suddenly he thought that would be ridiculous in front of the girl, and tried to stand steadily on his feet. It was difficult to do this, as he was still shaking. It was because it was hard for his body and for his mental state, which was unsteady after the hospital and made to comprehend all the absurdity that was taking place around him.

- “There is probably something I don’t understand,” he muttered, not knowing which his new interlocutors to look at. For some reason his eyes kept turning to the girl.

- “Lily?” - the one who the she-wolf called Rumbo turned to the girl

- “We will tell you everything on the way to the city,” - the girl said. Her voice was pleasant, but there was an amazing firmness in her intonation. It was the spirit of a real leader. Something in her voice and whole being fascinated Alex.

- “Now it's dangerous for you to walk alone,” - she said.

- “Now?” - Alex did not understand again.

- “Oh, you still have a lot to learn,” - Rumbo smiled sadly. And only when his upper lip quivered slightly in a smile, did Alex notice how two sharp fangs flashed from under his lip, and silently agreed with the guy.

Coming out on the path to the city, the trio pressed more tightly together. Alex was walking in the center, and his new comrades were walking on each side.

- “Perhaps, you want to introduce yourself first?” - hinted the girl, grinning again.

- “A-Alex,” - he stammered in reply, barely holding back his fleeing consciousness and not understanding why he had to introduce himself before someone explained to him the laws of nature in which wolves could turn into people.

- “Rumbo and Lily, as you understand,” - Lily responded, - “Most likely, now you will consider us and yourself crazy, but we all have one thing that unites us - we are suicides.”

- “But ... I'm not ...” - Alex began, but hesitated. Having gathered his spirit, he continued, - “I'm alive.”

- “Are you sure”? - Rumbo said sarcastically into his ear.

- “A hundred percent sure,” - he snapped back.

- “Don't listen to him,” - Lily said, laughing over the first squabble. – “Whether

you are alive or not is a rather complicated concept. If the world exists and you feel it, this means you are alive. But if you are dead, but you feel, have you ever been alive?"

Alex thought for a moment.

- "It is questionable whom it is better to not listen to," - Rumbo grunted, and having run ahead, squeezed in between Alex and Lily. - "Here's what you need to know now. Our new nature is a curse, which appeared in this earthly world, when the existence of your forefathers was not even planned. Why did it happen this way? It is necessary to think with your head sometimes. So we are all the same fools here. What can we do now? We can only long to return."

- "To return"? - Alex had already lost count of how many times he had been confused that evening.

- "That's right," - the she-wolf responded, pushing away Rumbo and standing in his place. - "And not only to want, but to do everything possible. You know, it's hard to compare this with the life and knowledge of ordinary people. But you can believe that this is all," - the girl moved her hand around, - "It's one great purgatory, though it looks like the world you knew. The world will never be the same."

Silence reigned for a few minutes. The young guy was straining to comprehend everything he heard, making his unruly ears, eyes and common sense, which still existed in his brain that has already been overloaded with the events of that day,

believe everything that was happening. Rumbo and Lily remained silent, patiently waiting for their new comrade to be ready to learn the continuation of the incredible story. The girl walked silently, absorbed in her thoughts, and the bully wolf walked, smiling absentmindedly.

And, finally, the moment came. It was not that Alex believed so suddenly. Not at all. On the contrary - his head was about to explode, and he himself was ready to laugh at this glorious prank, which was played so well by either occasional passers-by, or by friends who had forgotten or whom he had forgotten a long time ago. No, it was unlikely to be true.

But he decided to convince his inner self for a time: everything is no more than a book, a movie, a computer game. Once it was imprinted in his subconscious mind, and now he was agonizing over the events that happened in a dream to a different hero, who was a completely fictional character. These all were completely fictitious events. Sooner or later they would end either when the imagination of the author or the possibility that Alex's subconscious mind would come to an end, or he would simply wake up - who knows? But until then he had to go with the flow.

- "But now your appearance is human?" – Alex dared to ask, - "Then what is the curse?"

- "It's inside us," - Rumbo explained, - "Our wolf nature is always with us wherever we go. And it only takes becoming out of breath when you run, not

eating from morning till night, or just getting a good shot at some kind of muzzle
- and you're already furious, you're already clawing at your clothes...

- "It's better not to do this, of course," - interrupted Lily, noticing the evil mischief in his eyes with the last words and alerting Alex in time. – "Our life implies secrecy, that's why we live in the forest. I can't say it is much worse than the city. It's just as cold and there isn't a single living soul either."

Alex wanted to argue, but thought about it and found that he agreed on some points. Apparently, there was a reason that he was united with these people by the bitter experience of keeping scores with life.

- "It's a kind of "mana" that all these wizards in computer games have," - he said instead, again reinforcing his own conviction that everything around him was an interpretation of someone's repeated storyline, though he failed in recalling which one. – "The power ends and you cannot use your ability anymore?"

- "Exactly, bro," - Rumbo snapped his fingers animatedly and squeezed Alex's shoulder. His grip was friendly but so powerful that Alex could barely stand on his feet.

- "But I don't feel anything like this inside me," - Alex said thoughtfully, rubbing his bruised shoulder. – "Do I have to feel some "mana" or something"?

- "I'm afraid you'll find this out yourself," - Lily interrupted. Her voice after a long silence crashed into the conversation unexpectedly. – "And it would be

better if people don't see you at the moment of reincarnation. I already told you about it. Otherwise, you will put us all at risk."

- "You and Rumbo?" - inquired the newly consecrated.

- "There are others, too," - the girl answered, - "Felix, Evgen, Marie, Zoe, Ronny".

- "And all of them one day..."

- "Yes." - Lily interrupted him abruptly, making it clear that she did not intend to continue, and Alex hurriedly changed the subject.

- "Is this kind of painful?"

Suddenly he laughed to himself, imagining how he must look, like a first-grader in the school's nurse's office before a vaccination, who looks at the nurse and classmates standing in line with a false boredom, but trembles all over. To his surprise, the "wolves" did not laugh. Rumbo replied seriously:

- "In the beginning it will be hard. In the literal sense of the word it will be as if you are bursting from the inside, and you are growing and growing. It's not an ordinary feeling. But nothing hurts. It is difficult to explain. Later it will be like everything itches at once and sharply. This is how the fur grows. The fur is a separate matter. It is better to take care of it. Otherwise, fleas won't leave you alone!"

- "And what about turning back? - the "newcomer" asked curiously, still

presuming to hopefully not visit the forest too often, at least until the end of this freaking dream.

- “Turning back is the same way vice versa. All your skin is dry and tight as if you washed yourself with harsh soap. But it's fresh on the skin. It is always like this after the fur. Absolute grace!”

- “It's not that easy to turn back,” - Lily interrupted Rumbo again. – “You have to want to do it in a special way”.

- “In a special way”? - Alex asked curiously, feeling a strange need to tell Lily at least something, so that he did not look like a complete idiot.

- “We'll teach you,” - Rumbo broke all the charms of the special silence with which she responded. – “Don't lose contact with us for a long time. You'll get used to it later. Probably, you'll become a part of the community.”

- “The community?”

- “Forget about it!” - Lily said abruptly again.

Finally, they reached the road in the exact place where a few days ago wolves, putting their skins at risk, left the dying guy in the “good hands” of the passing driver. Now, they stopped there again.

- “What community?” - Alex asked cautiously a few minutes later, when the new silence was too long.

“The community is our union,” - Lily explained. – “Those who are still not

indifferent to their own destinies. Those who still have the ones for whom to return, and who haven't lost another chance to save their sinful souls. They all united on a team. This happened even before Rumbo and I reached purgatory, but now I am a local leader. We help each other and protect each other from enemies."

At the girl's last words Rumbo suddenly looked down and all seemed to shrink, become less under the wave of his inner impulse, which was unknown to him.

- "Enemies?" - Alex asked again.

The traveling companions continued to sadly and silently observe the passing cars.

- "Good-bye, Alex." - Rumbo was already holding out his hand to Alex, but Lily stopped him with a puzzled look.

- "We have to help Alex until he gets used to his new nature," - she said. - "Someone must accompany him to the house."

- "But didn't you say yourself you won't let him become part of the community?"

- "Just because it's too dangerous." - Lily winked at Alex. - "After all, no one needs trouble, especially that, which is part of someone else's burden. I would give a lot to get rid of my own troubles. Good-bye, Alex. Rumbo, do me a favor."

One graceful leap, and the upright figure turned into a four-legged beast who dashed off into the darkness of the field on heavy paws.

- “Rumbo, do me a favor! Rumbo, do me a favor!” – fussed Rumbo, squeakily mimicking her, when the she-wolf disappeared from view. – “Damn!”

Together, the two guys crossed to the other side of the road.

- “This all is so...” - Alex began, for some reason feeling that now, without Lily, he was freer to breathe and talk openly. However, he still could not choose the right words.

- “Strange?” - Rumbo suggested.

- “Exactly,” - Alex agreed. – “It seems that suddenly my brain turned off partially, but as soon as it starts to work full-time, you and Lily and your entire story will turn into one big, sick, bad dream.”

- “I suggest you keep your brains together, especially now,” - Rumbo muttered without a trace of a smile. – “Keep your ears open, as they say, and do not let anyone put you down. Trust me.”

Alex frowned involuntarily, beginning to imitate Rumbo. He suddenly began to resemble him in nature, though at the very first instant of their meeting he decided that this guy was a real creep!

- “What are you talking about? I don’t understand. And who are the enemies that you and Lily didn’t want to talk about?”

- “Actually, I wouldn’t...” - sighed Rumbo. – “But, I feel you need to know everything for your own safety.”

Rumbo took out a cigarette and lit it without pausing. They left the road behind a long time ago, and now their long journey was along the wide deserted avenue in the light of rusty street lamps.

- “The problems that Lily mentioned,” - he said after a brief silence, breathing the smoke out through his nose. – “There's one bad guy...”

Thus, on the way home Alex learned a lot more from his new friend. The wolf community, the one Lily told him about, was living in the depths of the forest, which once used to be a park. From time to time they rescued people – someone from a wild beast, someone from falling into a ravine. They also dragged some people out of the river.

But, as Rumbo repeated many times during his unexpectedly passionate speech, it was not that easy to live a life repaying sins to those who “took the right path.” They didn’t have the most pleasant “personalities either, if you can say this about wolves. Once they also could not find any reason to live, like Lily, Rumbo, and Alex. Once they also had a chance at success. But they took a different path.

Day after day, year after year, the wolves were destroying their souls after death. Their human features were disappearing more quickly, their fangs were growing longer being tempered in bloodthirsty raids and fierce battles, their fur was

becoming blackened, being burned with the fire of envy, jealousy, and anger. This was a gang of wolves, - deviants, apostates who irreversibly destroyed their right to happiness and were dedicated to taking it away from those who still had it. Now they hunted those who once walked with them on the way to life, arm in arm. They were called the fishermen of souls.

Meanwhile, Rumbo and Alex were already at the threshold of the Alex's building.

- "Will you come in for some tea?" - Alex smiled wearily. - "I haven't had guests for a long time, you know."

- "I understand you like no one does," - Rumbo smirked back with his wolfish grin, but utterly human eyes. - "I'll come in."

The delusional neighbor who only a week ago was harassing the young man with unfounded suspicions of drug addiction, had felt something wrong that night, too. Either her nose, which could sense scandals felt the wolf's spirit, or during the few days of absence of such a successful object for sneers and plagues, like Alex, the restless old meddling lady was hungry for quarrels. Hiding behind the chute pipe, she watched her neighbor and his unusual guest, who would not have attracted the attention of any ordinary person with anything remarkable until they reached the door of his apartment.

And, it seemed, she muttered, barely audibly, - "Those damn drug addicts!" - while she was dialing the police on her old phone with missing buttons.

- “So, now I'm going to be a wolf, too?” - Alex asked Rumbo while they were sitting and drinking cheap tea in the kitchen of his apartment, which wasn't cozy without the cat.

- “One day yes,” - Rumbo replied, taking a sip from his cup. – “Usually the first power runs out after a week or one and a half.”

- “The first power?”

- “It helps you to remain human,” - the wolf explained. – “Now several days have already passed for you, so I advise you not to leave the apartment. Or, on the contrary, you can do more wandering around the forest. The community is not far away. Lily did not like you, but she will not abandon you to the mercy of fate.”

- “By the way, about the community,” - Alex recalled suddenly and put the cup aside as too many questions accumulated for only a couple of hours of conversation. – “Is Lily's approval the only chance to get to your community?”

- “Actually, yes. But you can also, for example, protect one of the members from the deviants. Or just resemble someone.”

- “Like you?” - guessed the guy.

- “She said I look like her younger brother.”

- “What happened to him?” - Alex did not understand why, but he clearly felt that something happened. Maybe that's how the wolf's flair was revealing itself?

- “He died when he was ten. As Lily said - it was her fault. We do not go into detail, but, you know, Lily is not one of those people who can objectively assess reality ... in some aspects.”

- “In what “aspects?”

At that moment there was a knock at the door.

Puzzled, Alex got up from the table and headed for the door, noticing Rumbo's stiffness. It must have been clear by the decoration and condition of the apartment, that the new guest could guess that the owner was not waiting for anyone. Especially, at such a late hour.

Indeed, the figures of decent people, and the owner of the apartment has always considered himself to be one of them, were seen in the peephole. Policemen stood in the hallway.

Just in case, he waited, not looking up from the peephole. The knocking was repeated, and there was a loud voice: “Open up! Police”!

Alex obeyed, opened the door and with displeasure found out that a gray head of his nosey neighbor was sticking out from behind the back of the guardian of the law.

- “I've already told you! Haven't I told you?” - the neighbor screeched in a voice that was nasty like her character, which hid behind that voice. – “First he comes in almost unconscious, staggers, tells some kind of nonsense, and now – look!” -

the elderly woman insisted.

- “Mam, calm down,” - the policeman coldly tried to calm the complaining woman, who hid behind his back, apparently from the owners of the apartment, where she came to pay such an unfriendly visit. – “We'll figure it all out.”

- “Who are you?” - asked the second policeman, addressing Rumbo. He entered without greeting, having pushed Alex against the wall, and without even taking off his shoes, which carried dirty raindrops along the clean corridor. Alex began to boil with silent anger and felt that nothing good was going to come out of the whole performance, which was taking place that evening.

- “Maxim Shnurov,” Rumbo said, unperturbably taking a sip of his tea. – “Friend of Alex, the owner of the apartment.”

The impudent policeman merely glanced at him coldly for a moment.

- “ID, please”, - asked the first, with austere eyes and a cold, calm voice. He was looking impressively smart, and Alex rejoiced. Clearly, these eyes concealed intellect and justice, such necessary qualities for the defender of citizens and the law.

- “You know; I don't usually bring ID when I'm visiting a friend,” - Rumbo apologized with slight irony in his voice.

- “It's rather late, Mister Shnurov,” - the other policeman grinned, exposing his teeth, which were yellow from smoking cheap cigarettes and narrowing his eyes,

so that with his double chin he looked exactly like a pig.

- “This is not for you to decide,” - the wolf snapped back. – “So I would ask.”

- “And I would ask you to allow me to inspect you,” - the first man replied coldly and Alex was disappointed by him instantly.

- “In honor of what?” - Rumbo removed the cup and was already rising menacingly, looking for ways to retreat.

- “In honor of this neighbor's suspicion,” - the policeman answered, pulling a notebook out of his pocket and demonstratively placing it on the kitchen table, where there were two cups of unfinished tea.

Meanwhile, Rumbo already cautiously passed by the first policeman without making unnecessary movements, ready to leave the apartment safely, but the second “boar,” as Alex had silently nicknamed him, roughly grabbed him by the T-shirt. Surprised, Rumbo bent over and a small package suddenly fell out from the pocket of his wide pants.

The first policeman frowned, the second one whistled maliciously, the old woman muttered under her breath: “Here you are, you scum!” and Alex stared at the wolf, unable to believe what he was seeing.

Rumbo just smirked and nodded meaningfully to Alex, while the two policemen, having grabbed his arms tightly, were escorting him to the exit, though he did not resist.

- "Well, wait for a visit, Mister "dark horse", the fat policeman snickered crookedly as he was leaving the apartment, for some reason putting a bag of loose contents into his pocket. – "We'll get a warrant and return, remember!"

- "Right, don't you forget!" - the meddling neighbor accompanying him, threatened with her thin bony fist.

- "It's all right, Mam," - the "boar" was politely, sincerely and benevolently calming the old woman behind the closed door. – "The warrant is a warrant, but if something happens, call us. We'll take care of him!"

- "We'll take care of him," - said Alex to himself repeating after the uninvited guest, leaning his forehead against the cold door. Now he was feeling completely shattered.

Alex turned around, leaned his back on the door, which was locked by double locks, and slid down on the dirty doormat. Having bent his knees, he rested his head on them and embraced them. It seemed the brain was going to explode.

"What the hell is going on," - he wondered, having closed his eyes, trying to combine words floating in his head into more or less coherent sentences. At first all this worthless life, leaving nothing behind, just ashes flying in the wind after a hopelessly extinguished fire, suicide and a kind of the second birth..., hospital, wolves, deviants and the community... jolly-o"!

On one hand, he believed in everything that was happening. He read many such

fantastic stories in books, met them in games, films and TV shows? A great variety, in fact. And he was never surprised by what happened to all these protagonists. So, why should he be surprised by what happened to him?

And it would not surprise him if everything that was happening formed the amazing patterns of conversion from a wolf into a human and back, of the struggle of the community of deviants, of the funny but aggressive Rumbo and the strict she-wolf leader Lily. However, all this has already tightly intertwined with the escaped cat who never returned, with the good-natured but suspicious doctor from the clinic to which Alex was brought, with the abominable old lady-neighbor and with the policemen, damn them!

Meanwhile, a chill ran through his torn socks. Shuddering, he pulled them closer, and suddenly realized that there was a draught in his apartment. “It's strange, as the window is open only in the kitchen,” he recalled tensely. – “Well, it must be that the wind opened the balcony in the bedroom... Or did the door handle break? Anything could have happened”.

More suddenly, Alex realized that he was deliberately inventing all sorts of options, just so he didn't have to go to the ill-fated room, which was the source of the cold. Was it because of the reluctance to get up from such a cozy rug, which was muddy because of the dirty shoes of the late night guests? No, it was because of fear.

And indeed, for the last 24 hours his nervous system was absolutely at its limit.

He did not remember ever experiencing such psychological upheavals before.

And there was no one to ask. There was no one to share his feelings with. He needed to make sure that this time werewolves weren't the cause of the perfectly normal draught. To somehow unwind and reassure his clearly disturbed mind, he collected all his physical and mental strength in an imaginary fist, got up and went to the room on his padded legs.

Nothing could surprise him this time, even two strangers standing at the balcony door.

- "Who are you?" , - a tall dark silhouette asked. The light in the room was turned off, and Alex did not even consider turning it on. The figures were ominously casting shadows against the background of the starry night sky outside the window, and their eyes seemed to be burning with a scarlet, inhuman fire. However, Alex no longer trusted much of what he saw and heard. Perhaps, that's why he decided not to shy away from the answer:

- "I'm Alex."

The figures exchanged glances.

- "Where's Rumbo?" - asked the second. His voice was hoarse, unlike the first, which was cold and unfeeling. This voice blew hot unrestrained breath, as if after a deep swim or in the heat of a fervent fight.

- "They took him away," - Alex answered shortly, and his voice faded. When he

spoke again, his voice was low and hoarse - whether from fear, or from surprise, which finally began to cover his defenseless soul with warm, unpleasant waves.

– “Excuse me, but what are you doing...”

- “Are you an initiate?” - the first one’s voice sounded cold as if from a crypt. –
“Are you an initiate of the community”?

- “I beg your pardon?” - Alex did not understand and immediately regretted that he did not say anything and did not at least give some answer. The figures exchanged glances again and their eyes-lights narrowed in a grin, hidden by the darkness of the room.

However, Alex's eyes gradually began to get used to the darkness. By this time he was already able to discern the details of the newcomers’ features. The first one was tall and thin. He wore a shirt and jeans, and an expensive wristwatch was on his right wrist. His hand was hidden in his trouser pocket. The other hand was hidden behind his back, but even on the hand, which was partially visible from his pocket, he inadvertently noticed fur and claws.

The other visitor was almost the exact opposite of his companion. He was just below the shoulder of the first one, stocky and strong in appearance, with a head of disheveled hair. His clothes looked more like a carefree teenager’s - ragged baggy jeans and a leather jacket. He was stooped, and he wasn’t breathing well. His breath gurgled like something in his lungs was bothering him during a serious illness.

- “Rumbo does not go out into the town without any need,” - the tall guest in the shirt insinuated something. – “He must have been preparing to recruit you, too. In this case, our meeting is exclusively a sign of fate.

- “You can assume that you were born lucky, since fate allows you to win the jackpot, buddy!” - added the second, and both guests who had visited that night began to giggle.

Alex's blood ran cold and his hair stood on end because of this laughter. Involuntarily, for the first time in his life, he felt himself bare his teeth. Fortunately, his interlocutors could not see it in the dark. This reflex of escalating mimicry foreshadowed something bad.

- “What do you mean by “recruit?” - he asked, trying hard to develop an expression of calm.

- “I bet you've already heard about deviants and the so-called community, haven't you? Utopia, family, the world of kindness, love and mutual assistance, am I right?”

- “I haven't been there and I can't judge,” - Alex answered unexpectedly (for himself) firmly and loudly.

- “At least someone in this crazy world is able to judge objectively!” - the short man admired him and giggled this time quietly into his closed fist.

- “We are here to warn you that you are in great danger, Alex”! - the first one

continued quietly with a slight smile in his voice. His face was not visible in the darkness.

Alex thought for a moment. "Aren't you here to find out where Rumbo is?" - He wanted to ask the guests, having become alarmed.

- "So, what is threatening me?" - he asked, putting his hands in his pockets, so that they could not see how they clenched into fists.

For a minute both visitors were silent - either pondering the answer, or trying to give more weight to the forthcoming words and more persuasiveness to the arguments.

- "You see, not all people - even the damned ones - are who they say they are. And betrayal, which grossly destroys the very nature is an event, which is not at all new for this ancient earthly world," - the tall wolf said (Alex was far from stupid and already understood that his guests were bluffing.)

The short one continued after his friend: "Grim spreads demagoguery, but he means business, Alex. To get to the point: if anyone is a hotbed of evil and vice, if anyone kills the soul, it is Lily and her infamous, dishonorable gang! Covering themselves with the skins of the so-called "deviants," they are likened to their fictional antithesis. They do not give those wolves, which are not a part of their notorious "community" a chance at peaceful existence. To possess souls, to eat away at all the bright things that are in them, to deprive them of the chance of salvation and rebirth, and to revel in the evil that they do, that is their true goal.

If there are real deviants in this accursed world of eternal war and death, then it is them.

Having completed his solemn, ominous speech, the stranger fell silent. It seemed that even his raspy breath died down, and Alex, who closed his eyes for a moment to collect his ideas, thought again, isn't this a dream? Maybe these pretentious words appeared to him in a fever dream?

But, as soon as he opened his eyes, four lights burning through the darkness announced the opposite. It seemed they were waiting for a response and, judging by the brilliance with which they sparkled, they needed it as soon as possible. But Alex frankly did not understand what exactly they were expecting, and openly announced this.

- "Are you deviants?" - he asked, and in his heart, he was suddenly frightened by how boldly he said it. However, the guests seemed to be pleased. At least, his question amused them.

- "You're not stupid and it's commendable," - the man in the shirt spoke again. - "We are what they call deviants. And, I think, you'll understand what I'm offering you. I propose that you join us. Confront Lily, Rumbo and the rest, before it's too late. For your sake and our common good."

Alex did not answer for a long time.

- "What if I do not want to join anyone?" - he asked finally.

- “That is your right,” - the main interlocutor answered freely and calmly. – “This way you will cause everyone to turn against you. Our world is a wolf world, and the laws in it are wolf laws, no matter whom we represent. But I wouldn’t advise you to hurry in making a decision. First, answer the most important questions. First question: what will the community give you? I will answer you on behalf of all the rejected: we will provide you with reliable protection, shelter and strong partnership. In response you need only to be devoted, because it is the basis of our glorious fellowship. The second question: did your new friends call you to their community at all?

The second question hit Alex over the head like a hammer. In fact, if the deviant wolf doesn’t lie (and for some reason he wanted to believe in charisma, though at first glance neither his appearance nor the appearance of his companion called to mind positive associations), being in none of the groups, he is everyone’s enemy at the same time, which means he definitely loses. He will not be able to cope with two packs of wolves. And Lily made it clear from the very beginning that she had not intended to make him a member of the community. Then what choice did he have? Definite death in an unequal battle or cooperation with these strange personalities?

Moreover, who said that they are strange? Lily and Rumbo? Aren’t they suspicious themselves? What, for example, fell out of Rumbo’s pocket? Why did Lily send him to the home of someone she does not intend to take into the

community? To screw up and quickly get rid of a potential enemy? Why not?

For the first time in his life, Alex seriously and deeply thought about the relativity of the truth. One day he became acquainted with the warring camps and did not see in either of them advantages or shortcomings over the other. Both seemed bloodthirsty, cruel, cold-blooded, full of meaningless conventions, so foolishly leading to obvious tragedies and losses. And he did not want to become either loss, nor tragedy in his twenty plus years.

Frankly speaking, now he did not want anything at all. Maybe just to run away from everything: the police, Rumbo and Lily, the deviants, the wolves and the old abandoned park.

Suddenly Alex was struck by something. It was some kind of push from within, like he was about to lose consciousness, but for some reason he did not. Opening his eyes, which closed by themselves, Alex blinked and saw that the rays of pink dawn were slowly but surely creeping up to his feet through his torn socks.

He raised his head, but the guests with red eyes were no longer there. And nothing reminded him of their recent presence - no traces, nothing left behind. Only the open balcony and the curtains fluttering in the morning breeze.

His head seemed to be getting heavier every minute, and he did not even think long about the reason for the pressure. It was obviously lack of sleep.

- "I must have been able to fall asleep standing up," - Alex thought lazily closing

the door to the balcony, and having flopped into the made bed in his clothes, fell into a dream full of absurd images, frightening, hysterically funny, realistic and so meaningless that it was impossible to understand them.

As soon as Alex woke up, it was not necessary to recall what happened the day before. During the night of deep sleep, the fantastic truth, which was beyond reality, seemed to have become firmly established in his head.

In the meantime, questions were creeping into his head without his permission one after another. What happened to Rumbo yesterday? What happened to him? Did he kill half of the police station, having turned into a wolf? Did it ever happen that they ate people? Who were those guests who fell into his life as easily as snow yesterday? What did they want from the community? And what did they want from him? Whom could he believe now?

These and hundreds, thousands of other questions were loading his brain, but there was no one to answer them. And that is why Alex was just staying in place and was sitting on the bed in the clothes, in which he fell asleep, bracing his elbows on his knees and pensively running his fingers through his disheveled hair.

Something had to be done urgently, but what? He was willingly distracting himself from other questions to not answer this one. But the realization that he could sit like this all day long from morning till the night was not enough to comfort him. Especially, since he suddenly recalled one more detail that

occurred yesterday evening.

For the first time his wolf nature began to appear. No, he could not miss it, but did not attach much importance to it yesterday during his conversation with the deviants. Did they notice it? Do they know how dangerous he could be if he learned how to manage his new abilities? And to whom will he be more dangerous? To his enemies or himself?

Alex returned to the beginning again: who could he consider his enemies here?

On one hand, Rumbo and Lily had been with him from the very beginning. They saved him, they inducted him into new realms of knowledge. They told him about the community into which they would never accept him. Why pretend to be friends, who are always ready to help, if you do not guarantee your close “partnership?” Why gain so much confidence that you set yourself up in front of the police? Was it to get rid of a potentially powerful enemy in advance?

On the other hand, the deviants with their red eyes did not resemble people even in their human form. Who are the owners of these eyes or what are they? Their cult offers both protection and brotherhood. But what do they ask in return? Devotedness? What are its limits? Who will respond to this? As a rule, devotedness has no limits, but Alex was not ready for it. To die for another? Would someone die for him? No, not here, not now...

Suddenly, it struck Alex. What if they do not want to take him into the community to not oblige him to sacrifice his life, health, safety? What if the first

ones simply sincerely wish him to stay out of the way, without getting involved in the turmoil, but the latter ones will not leave him anyway?

What if the first members of the community were hatching a plan for his, Alex's, elimination? And the second ones - not sincerely and mentally, like old friends, but clearly and practically, as a clearly verified structure, hierarchical unification, will help him to save himself from the first ones, and will provide him with some kind of protection?

Trying to find the answers, Alex was getting more and more confused. He gradually began to realize what power lies in the depths of his soul, mind, and body. And this force must become destructive to one degree or another, for one side or another. Now it was necessary only to choose on which side to fight.

For a moment, shutting his eyes and moving away from serious mental work, he shook his head briskly, jumped in place, strained deliberately to wake up, and went to wash his face. Now his gaze looked fresh in the mirror, though there were dark circles of fatigue and exhaustion under his eyes. Whatever it was, it was necessary to think about everyday affairs.

Was there a benefit to staying away from all troubles? Alex did not rejoice over the prospect of continuing to live next door to a crazy old woman, when this minute or the next minute he could uncontrollably turn into a wolf? She would definitely have a heart attack. And what will the police, the ambulance and others who come almost every week at the instigation of this crazy woman

think?

And, besides this, after yesterday's misunderstanding, in which Alex himself did not understand anything, he was now almost branded with the infamous status of a drug addict. Now everyone would consider him a drug addict - the whole section of his building, the whole building, the police and the whole district - everyone! Not only one old woman, whom (apparently, except for yesterday's "boar"-policeman) no one was taking seriously. And all because of whom? Because of Rumbo, that damn Rumbo!

The solution came by itself. For the reason of unwillingness and uselessness to go to the police station, Alex decided to repeat his usual route to the old abandoned park.

This time he got there faster and was no longer afraid of wolves and did not bring treats for wild animals. In addition, feeling the unhealthy heaviness in his head from the very minute he woke up, he also was assuming that he would not have to wait long for the first transformation, and let anybody be beside him – the deviants, the community –now he did not care.

However, it was unexpectedly quiet at the edge of the forest. When Alex was leaving the city, the wind was beginning to rage. From his new location it was evident that heavy clouds filled with rain were swirling to him from the opposite side of the city. The wind did not reach him at all. Not a single leaf moved, not a single branch swayed, even when Alex passed almost touching them.

He passed the outskirts, unpretentiously decorated by nature with low, withered bushes, neglected and existence lost all meaning. He passed a bunch of rusty ruins, which were once creaky amusement rides a little more joyful than now. But no one came out to meet him.

Having walked a dozen more steps, Alex felt strange again. He experienced an obscure semblance of insight mixed with *deja vu*, as if something similar happened to him just now... or a month ago. Or, maybe, a thousand years ago?

The premonition would not leave him. Walking faster on the withering grass, which was barely rustling under his feet, instead almost crumbling. He was listening, and with every step the world around him was being filled with sounds, being colored brighter and brighter and filling with scents.

Another half a minute passed and the world was blinding him, stunning and confusing him with scents, which came from nowhere. It seemed that now he could hear everything that happened to every blade of grass that he passed. He could hear the sound of each ant scurrying down the tree trunk, on which he leaned in exhaustion from everything that was suddenly coming at him.

And in this cacophony, a deafening growl suddenly reached him. Convulsively looking around, involuntarily bending to the ground, Alex rushed forward, feeling how every now and then in the heat of the race he wanted to touch the ground with his bare hands. But as soon as he touched the ground, and felt how the surface touched his hands in response, he realized that they were no longer

bare - they were already covered with a coat of fur.

Alex did not notice how he turned into a wolf. “Something serious must have happened, since I was predestined to experience all this right now,” - he thought. Alex believed in the fate, as an endless series of failures, which, as it sometimes seemed, constituted all life, taught him to be a real fatalist.

Having suddenly jumped out into the open space, a clearing in the middle of the deep thicket, into which he came so soon, he squinted against the bright light emanating from the sky. The dull sun was hiding behind a thick veil of cold white clouds, which would soon be replaced by thunderclap streaks of lightning. Opening his eyes again, Alex saw an eerie picture. His feet, which were actually paws now, as he mentally corrected himself, trembled not allowing him either to immediately escape, nor to study the situation, or at least move from the spot.

There was a real battle in the clearing: two wolves mercilessly attacked the third. One was long and skinny, with torn strips of fur in some places and rumped sides. His paws were bony, but strong, and his eyes were burning with a scarlet fire. The eyes of his brother were glowing with the same fire. His bone structure was broad, and he was standing firmly on all four legs, which were placed widely and firmly apart. Both surrounded the third wolf, and Alex already began to vaguely understand who it was. Its wool was a little reddish in color. It was Lily.

He surprised himself by suddenly jumping from behind the tree into the clearing,

right between Lily and her two enemies.

- “What the hell did you forget here, you, rat?” - the skinny deviant yelled.

Simultaneously, Lily snarled angrily:

- “Don’t you dare interfere! This is not your war!”

- “It’s mine too!” - Alex did not lose his head and instantly thought how great it would be to rush now at these bandits, and to punch them firmly! But in reality everything was different: it was not that easy to join the fight as it was to wave fists in the air.

Only now, when he saw two looming, angry faces in front of him, he understood that there was no way back, and did not understand what he himself was counting on? Did he think that they would get scared of him and would run away when they saw him? It was hardly probable.

- “I’m asking for the last time in an amicable way,” - the lanky red-eyed wolf rumbled, - “Mind your business! This is our territory and these are our rules. Standing up against us now, you will put yourself in jeopardy. A mutt won’t enter the wolf brotherhood!”

In response, Alex jumped, but did not calculate his strength. He wanted to hit the wolf’s eyes, but missed the lowered head and, having grabbed the scuff of his opponent, rolled with him on the grass. Having avoided the clawed paws of the downed wolf, he already wanted to bounce off to the side, so that not to be hit in

return and to catch his breath, but he got a treacherous blow from the back from the second wolf. Falling on his side, Alex felt a bloody wound on his shoulder.

But he still could move on three paws, and lifting the fourth one, he limped around, keeping the attention on both of his opponents. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed how Lily was sneaking along with him and felt incredible courage - together they will surely defeat them!

But the first wolf had already gotten up and now his eyes seemed to burn even more angrily. They were so angry, that Alex's courage began to gradually evaporate. Frankly speaking, what would he and Lily do against these two big wolves? Or, to be more correct, only Lily, what kind of soldier is he? A wounded weakling, who does not know how to use his new body.

Meanwhile, the enemies were already approaching. Alex looked around, returning to Lily's side, trying not to take a single step beyond her. The clearing was ending. Only a hopeless thicket was further, and, hence - a short escape, which was clearly destined to end in nothing more than a fiasco.

But another wolf figure appeared from the darkness, and the white sky over the forest illuminated the already familiar mixed hue.

- "Rumbo!" - Alex and Lily shouted out in a chorus, and their friend was already on his way to meet the deviants. One blow - and the strong one whined because of the claws, which stuck in his ears. The second lanky one was snarling, vainly defending himself and waiting for the moment to attack.

- “Retreat!” - the head wolf croaked finally and after a moment the malicious couple disappeared.

Suddenly, feeling a new surge of strength, Alex, as if out of habit, rose to his feet and immediately felt like he was returning to his usual appearance: the tail and fur disappeared, he recovered his height, and his face, hands, and feet regained their human appearance.

Sitting down, he leaned against the nearest tree and touched his shoulder. The wound wasn't deep, however, he needed to be treated, but, what kind of treatment could he get? Alex looked at his new comrades in battle. They managed to regain their everyday human faces.

- “Damn you, Rumbo! Where have you been?” - Lily asked wearily, kneeling next to Alex so that to be with him on one level. – “I let you go to the city for one evening. You know how the whole community is at risk when one of us lingers for a long time!”

- “I just spent the night in the police station, nothing extraordinary,” - Rumbo waved dismissively.

- “Just spent the night in the police station”?! - the girl screamed in horror and anger. And Alex could not stop himself from looking at her secretly from the bottom up, with a kind of apprehension with which the guilty Rumbo must have been looking at her now. She was so beautiful in her spontaneous, truly wolf indignation. In the meantime, she did not cease to chide her ward: - “Was this

mockery now?"

- "Of course, I'd rather mock you than eat, my sister," - Rumbo continued clumsily. - "I wonder how you put up with me!"

- "And how did you get out of the police station?" - Lily asked.

- "You know me. They found me in their database. I've never violated the law previously, never offended anyone, never killed anyone... There was nothing to arrest me for."

He pulled a transparent sachet with an incomprehensible shredded herb that looked like spices out of his pocket and shook them in the air, so that Lily could see:

- "That's what I was arrested for," - he said, and turning to Alex continued, - "You must have thought I was a drug addict like your "policemen"?"

Alex did not have time to reply. Rumbo had already unpacked the sachet, poured a handful of contents out onto his palm and applied it to the wound on his shoulder. For a moment, a wave of heat passed over the hand on his shoulder, and the world in front of his eyes was covered with a flash. It hurt, but the new wolf had to be patient.

- "You'll recover in a couple of hours!" You know, such scrapes are not uncommon here, so there's a lot you have to learn" - Rumbo winked having noticed Alex's perplexed look.

Rumbo rose to his feet and pulled the new companion behind him. Standing up, the guy shook himself and, having put his hands into the pockets of his jacket was silently staring at the ground, not knowing what was necessary to do and say in such cases, when everything has already been said and done.

The silence was broken by the Rumbo's dramatic cough. Pretending to hide from Alex behind his hand, he loudly whispered into Lily's ear so that Alex would hear:

- "If you haven't noticed, the guy has just had a baptism of fire. So, you understand, one way or another, so we should kind of..."

- "Shut your mouth already!" - Lily interrupted her so-called brother, and already softer, with a sincere smile, extended her hand towards Alex: - "Now you are a Wolf, welcome to the community!"

Chapter 2. Life in the forest

Time in the community flew by at an incredible speed. Alex did not expect to have a second family here. He has not been at his apartment in the city for a whole week. His neighbor must have been bored without the main object of her constant biting remarks and ridicule! The brave police were probably looking for him, not as a drug addict, but as a missing person.

And it was not that Alex was somehow worried. Not at all. He was already beginning to seriously wonder whether everything for the sake of which all his

new friends were risking their lives was worth their efforts? Isn't it wonderful to be a half-beast, strong and courageous, virtually invincible, when your strength comes from Mother Nature herself, in which you can indulge an unlimited amount of time! Isn't it wonderful to live and not know what is happening in this ill-fated city full of despicable people? Isn't it nice to not depend on anyone?

Once Alex asked about this from one of his new friends, Felix, from which he got the reply:

- "When there is something to return to, even Paradise doesn't matter."

Felix was older than Alex, Lily, and Rumbo. Many wolves in the community were older than the three of them and Alex often wondered why Lily had become the leader. Was she the most powerful of all of them? It was unlikely. In human form she looked fragile and even somewhat sick. Did she keep everyone afraid? Of course not! She treated the elders with respect. She helped the beginners. Alex became convinced of this because she had helped him. Maybe she was more experienced than the others? But this version was soon rejected, too. Lily had not been part of the community for a long time herself.

He also wondered if she was the daughter of the previous head of the community, but soon doubted it. You become a damned one not through your own free will, he learned this hard way, so, it was unlikely that relatives could meet here.

The secret wasn't revealed right away: it was necessary to "get used" to the

established company of wolves, to get to know each of them more closely and Lily in particular. But what he learned about the girl just a week after he joined the team, struck him deeply. Alex has previously guessed she had leadership skills, but the incident, which he happened to witness, crashed into his memory for the rest of the day - Alex knew that for sure.

One evening she chose him for foraging medicinal herbs. “They must be the ones Rumbo used to heal my wounds so quickly,” - Alex thought. After all, he had to learn a lot from the members of the community.

Without any special preparation, they went to the thicket of the forest. The dark depths of the impenetrable thickets were not frightening Alex now, when he had to go directly into them. Gradually and uncontrollably turning into a wolf in the heat of the sudden wave of insight, he felt the forest attract him with its unsolved mysteries, untrodden paths and unknown depths. That study of his new identity began with this difference in the two states of his new nature.

Afraid to be left alone now, when the community’s camp was far behind, in the clearing, Alex was trying not to lose sight of Lily. He was following her along almost the whole trail, keeping as close as possible, and on the path’s rough terrain he repeated all her movements. And she was striding ahead, undisturbed, only occasionally turning to her inexperienced companion to see whether he could keep up with her, and telling a lot of stories about the life of the community and not even one of her own.

From her stories, Alex slowly recognized the world, yet he was not fully aware of it. Thus, he learned, for example, that from time to time fate gave the community a chance to atone for their guilt - to save an innocent soul from sin. Lily said that it happened this way in Alex's case. For good reason he and the wolves were in the same place that night at the same time. He was saved from death, but the Supreme Power condemned him, like his saviors, to stay here, "in purgatory," as the girl called their new state. Nobody knew how many people needed to be saved to get a chance to return to human life. It also wasn't known when a return to life occurs and how it happens.

Moreover, the new nature of the organism, as it turned out, was not limited to turning into a wolf. Here Alex's reluctance to stay in the city helped him. After all, he, like the rest of them, soon wouldn't have the possibility of staying. According to the she-wolf, the spirit of two worlds, dwelling in each of the damned, was superimposing a special seal on the person's soul, on his consciousness and body. Far away from the forest, the wolves grew weaker, and their vital powers disappeared with an incredible speed.

- "The more we are in the world of people," - Lily said as they crossed the ravine that was on their way, - "the less we belong to it. I understand, it's hard to explain," - she said in answer to his perplexed glance, without waiting for questions, -" and I hope you will never experience such fear inside your own skin. This is a contradictory state: the more we are in a human form, the faster

we lose power and time for life, but, at the same time, the only way to change back is to help people, to do good. How can we do this in the skin of a wolf? How can we be in such a disguise among people?"

- "I recently asked Felix why many of you want to change back so much," - Alex began, but Lily finished the thought for him:

- "Because now we have no chance to. We are not afraid of remaining werewolves for the rest of our lives. The most terrible thing is to be wiped out of this world with our souls and bodies.

For some time they walked in silence. Lily was thinking about something, her companion hardly comprehended the words she said.

- "Is there really no other way out?" - he finally asked in amazement, imbued with an extraordinary sympathy for his cursed fellows.

Lily looked at the interlocutor inquiringly, and he continued:

- "Do good, not knowing when it will be rewarded, and if it will be rewarded at all - it must be so desperate!"

- "Is our community an example of the fallen in spirit?" - the girl asked with a smile ("Charming!" - Alex said to himself). - "There is another way, but it is not easy and it is dangerous."

Alex pricked up his ears, ready to listen to another fascinating legend.

- "Nature itself sent us artifacts in the form of its gifts. As a rule, these are

special stones hidden at different times in different places. Information about their whereabouts is passed from mouth to mouth, hidden in the messages of the ancients, or the forest gives us signs. Sometimes, some of us find artifacts without even knowing what they are.”

- “Can artifacts help us return to the human form forever?”

- “Not exactly,” - Lily answered evasively. – “Often, a special condition, which must be met is attached to the artifact. It may be to help someone in something, mostly to save souls. We try to help people in everything, even without knowing if this is considered a ticket back to life, but this is not the worst thing. The most terrible are artifacts that are traps. Sometimes they incite the cursed person to commit a horrific murder or participate in a terrible ritual.”

- “So, what happens then?” - he asked impatiently, like a child carried away by an unfinished tale.

- “Then the wolf passes to the side of the deviants and irrevocably loses the chance at redemption”.

- “Irrevocably loses the chance at redemption?” - Alex asked dumbfounded.

Lily did not answer right away. She answered with a question:

- “Why are you so surprised?”

- “What motivates them”?

Lily did not answer for a few minutes, and Alex became almost completely

desperate to get an answer, but did not dare ask again. He did not want to seem intrusive. Although enough time had already passed, and Alex found a common language with many wolves, like Rumbo and Felix, communication with Lily was something that did not come easily. For some reason he always wanted to choose words more accurately, but the words were always wrong, and even his voice sounded different when he was talking to her.

- "Resentment," - Lily said finally. – "Many of them were once ready to give up everything for their salvation. And they gave up everything: conscience, honor, devotedness. First they did good, but when they saw that nothing was happening, they began to look for another way. Fate punished them, and they are now deeply unhappy.

- "I remember how those two attacked you," - Alex began hotly.

- "Joe and Noah," - said the she-wolf.

- "They were ready to kill you! For what"?

- "Oh, no, they would not have killed me at all!" - Lily exclaimed laughing at something. – "Once we were good friends with them and with their ... leader." - at the last word Lily stumbled noticeably. Alex noticed this, but did not ask. He only answered sullenly:

- "What kind of friends are they if they snarl this way?"

- "We just have an old quarrel," - the girl answered evasively.

- “Do you make whole clans your enemies because of a quarrel?” – Alex did not cease to be surprised by all the new vicissitudes of strange relations opening to him.

- “One does not disturb another,” - she chuckled unhappily in response. – “We are at war only because they feed on our souls.”

- "They feed on souls?" - Alex didn't understand anything again.

- “Everyone coming to them is subject to strict control and re-education. And in the process of such “dedication” the converted one loses all the good that was in him before: kindness and compassion, love for the neighbor and spiritual beauty. But all these properties need to go somewhere. Until this moment they provide a huge help for the now-lost soul and have a lot of potential energy! This energy feeds the deviants wolves. They literally “divide” the soul of each newcomer among themselves. This makes them stronger and doesn't allow them to disappear longer. And in real life they just die. Their life ends when they choose that side.

- “Stop!” - Lily whispered to Alex suddenly. It happened so suddenly that he almost fell face down, trying to stop as if dead.

Only now, having frozen, Alex heard that a deathly silence was in the forest, not yet asleep (he did not notice this while he was talking with the she-wolf) - an unkind sign of nature. All the innumerable inhabitants of the forest like the whole world suddenly lurked in anticipation of something terrible...

- "They're close," - Lily said, looking straight ahead, while Alex was still looking around fearfully.

- "But we still have not found what we were looking for?" - Alex suddenly felt his throat become dry and his knees buckled. After his baptism of fire he went into the fray more prudently. Especially since this fight was to be deliberate. The first fight was spontaneous. That time Alex was in the thick of events, without hesitation, fervently, without a fuss.

No, he was not a coward. But it was dangerous to go into a fight, when there was nothing to hedge oneself against in case of danger. Especially, when there were only two of them, unlikely against two. Alex was ready to argue that the deviants were not going in small groups after the disgraceful defeat by Rumbo and the "newcomer", whom everyone thought was a sucker before appearing as a wolf.

- "We're not ready, are we?" - he asked Lily, trying to calm the trembling in his voice, however, it worked out with difficulty.

But the answer did not follow. Alex turned to his friend - she had already fallen to the ground in an inhuman pose, ready to transform and to rush into the attack immediately. The sun has disappeared long ago behind the treetops and somewhere beyond the forest. It was leaning towards the line where the water was flowing into the river. And the forest darkness, where the twilight was already thickening, was starting to light up with the glow of sinister eyes.

- "Come out, Bruno!" - Lily finally shouted into the darkness. Now she has

already been “fully armed,” if this could be said about the she-wolf, who was free, proud and strong. This was how she appeared now. It was seen in her eyes that she was ready to fight not for life, but for death.

- “Well, hello,” - a voice finally came from the darkness. And there was something more wolfish in this voice than in the voices of everyone whom Alex had heard before. He would not confuse this voice with the voices of Joe and Noah. His hair stood on end, and a chill ran down his spine and neck from this voice, as if someone crept up and blew their icy breath of death and horror.

Another moment, and already Alex’s amber eyes, penetrating the darkness, saw what stood in front of them. It was the leader. There was no need to tell Alex about this, because this was how he used to imagine the leader of the wolf-pack all his life when he read fairy tales, zoology textbooks, popular science articles and without realizing that one day he would have to see this beast very vividly.

Bruno was huge. Alex, who had already completely turned into a wolf, saw at first glance that the wolf, which emerged, was at least three times bigger than himself. “Impressive,” - he thought, swallowing hard and pressing his unruly tail to the ground to keep it from trembling.

Fangs protruded from the leader’s mouth. Alex had to look closely for a long time to understand that this grin was a terrible smile, sparkling with sharp teeth, which resembled knives.

- “I’m not here to fight,” - the voice of the deviant leader Bruno sounded again.

Alex heard a deep growl, he did not immediately realize that it belonged to Lily. It was dull and suppressed. Throughout her essence, it was clear that she was barely holding back from rushing into battle.

- “In other cases you send the recruiters!” - the she-wolf shouted in response. – “Did you change your own order?”

Bruno laughed quietly, almost inaudibly in response, as if whispering. He shook his mighty shoulders, his glowing scarlet eyes squinting.

- “What if I came to make peace?” - he asked insinuatingly, and his eyes narrowed into two barely perceptible slits.

- “I wouldn’t trust him,” - Alex decided to add his quiet opinion.

Lily did not hear, but Bruno laughed even more sonorously. Alex felt that somewhere in his heart, rage was rising again - how dare they laugh at him?! Was he any worse than that notorious giant? Was his strength measured by his height? Alex grinned to himself in the bottom of his soul. Just a few minutes ago he was sure that he and Lily could not bear this unequal battle - now he was ready to measure his strength against the giant himself.

- “Make peace?” - Lily was already wheezing. – “Make peace?”

Without taking his eyes off his enemies, Bruno bowed his head. At first Alex was surprised by this unusual gesture, but soon he realized what was happening: a cord with a stone, small for the size of the beast, no larger than a human fist,

was hanging on the neck of the huge wolf.

Deafly striking the ground, the stone was immediately sent by the thrust of a powerful, muscular paw to Lily's legs, which were tense in a defensive stance. Alex glanced at the stone, it seemed it was impossible to tear his eyes from it. This unexpected gift was so beautiful.

In the reflection of the expanding crescent rising above the trees, the stone, which was asymmetrically faceted by the hand of nature, shone in its numerous uneven corners with all the colors of the violet spectrum, glowing in places with both blue and green.

In the place where the cord was attached to the artifact, the once-twisted piece of paper unfurled. The words "Let them decide" - were drawn on it with an ornate hand.

- "What does it mean?" - Alex shouted trying to keep up with his leader, provocation in his voice, but his voice was not heard again. Lily and Bruno were drilling each other with their eyes, as if there was not a single soul nearby for many miles around.

- "It's not your business, you little pup!" - the leader said rudely.

Suddenly, a very recent conversation emerged in Alex's memory. On the way to the site of this ill-fated meeting, the girl had been telling him for so long about the rules of the new world, full of mysticism that didn't make sense to his

rational human reason. Condition. In order for the artifact to work, you need to fulfill a condition, right?

He suddenly realized that all this time he has been waiting to be allowed to decide. Plus, Bruno offended him calling him "a little pup." In a blink of an eye, he was already clinging to the broad, strong neck of the Leader. Snuggling into his throat, he was trying to grasp the wolf's ears with his teeth, but a powerful body rushed at him, and Alex struggled not to succumb to inertia, hanging onto the enemy.

- "Alex, what are you doing?" – he suddenly heard Lily's words. Judging by her voice, she was alarmed or angry... or surprised? Alex could not understand this of course, - he could hardly distinguish the words - but he definitely felt it. And the feeling that he was already able to surprise with his little wolf "experience" flattered him.

- "I made a decision!" - he could only shout in the intervals between the jerks of the maliciously growling Bruno, who was trying in vain to shake off his burden. – "Now the artifact will act..."

Mid-sentence, something powerful struck him to the ground. The huge body of an animal hit his chest with its front paws from above. Gasping for breath, Alex tried to crawl away to recover, but Bruno held him tightly to the ground. His muzzle was getting closer and closer. His hot saliva was already almost dripping from his sharp, razor-like canines.

- “Are you sure that you are making the right choice, baby-boy?” - he snarled in Alex's ear, clawing at the fur, which was stained with dirt.

The young wolf whimpered in pain, turning his muzzle away from the pungent breath of the leader. But Bruno continued.

- “You see, my friend, I am more generous than your friends must have portrayed me. And here's an example – I'll give you a second chance. You can still go back to where you will be accepted for who you are. Where you will be accepted sincerely and loyally...”

- “What does it mean to “go back”?! - Alex finally regained the gift of speech, still pressed to the ground in an awfully painful pose. – “I've never been to your camp, and I'm not going to go!”

Bruno giggled silently again in response.

- “I say “come back,” because your true home,” - he explained insinuatingly, without loosening his grip, clawing him until bleeding. – “is not among people and not in the community. Deviation - that's what will reveal the true power of your spirit! Deviation...”

This time, Bruno himself could not finish speaking. Lily crashed into his side so suddenly, that she nearly pushed down his huge body. However, he managed to stay on his feet, but he had to release Alex from under his deadly paws.

Without losing time, though still feeling an unpleasant pressure on his ribs,

which was preventing him from breathing, he rose, slightly shaking, but grinned immediately.

Bruno's reaction did not take long. A moment - and a heavy paw struck him on the side, and sharp teeth dug into his shoulder, flooding the earth with blood. This time Alex did not whine in pain, but roared - evilly, violently, like his opponent. Gathering all the escaping forces into his paws, he struck the head of the wolf with a sharp turn. The wolf caught him in a deadly grip.

He himself did not expect the blow to be so strong. Bruno released his shoulder from his jaws already stained with the stranger's blood, stepped back with an uncertain step. Suddenly he turned around, ready to rush...

- "Escape?" - he thought, but the next moment a terrible insight came over him: no, not escape, but take away the artifact.

- "Lily, the stone!" - he shouted huskily after the fight, which sucked almost all the strength out of him, unable to rush himself to protect the precious treasure, but Lily was already rushing as fast as she could, ready to strike again.

Bruno was wiser this time. He jumped aside and let Lily sweep past, so that he didn't even dream of taking the stone. After running a couple of extra feet, Lily was beside it and was already bending over the string. The leader kissed the ground, and stealthily ran to the edge of the woods. He finally flashed from the darkness of the forest with a pair of evil eyes and disappeared having whispered: "We'll meet again!"

Meanwhile, Alex was already seriously feeling the power leaving him. He suddenly noticed that his legs have not been holding him for a long time and he was lying on his side. His hot breath was burning his own mouth, which had dried up in the heat of battle. He dreaded to look at his own body and he suddenly turned cold. – “The end is near,” - the terrible thought crept into his brain.

It was not just as painful and unsettling as in his first baptism of fire in a skirmish with Joe and Noah, when Rumbo appeared in time (it would be great to have him now too) - now it was just awful. Alex’s whole left side was covered with a long ragged wound, which was oozing with blood, and his shoulder by which Bruno pulled him without letting go along a good half of the clearing, was already blackened with blood. The fur there was torn off in clumps, and the joint was dislocated, judging by how it felt when he moved his paw.

- “Will I die now?” - Alex asked in a trembling voice and would have laughed in another situation, as he himself noticed how childish his question seemed. But now was not the best time to laugh.

- “I don’t think so,” - Lily tried to reply without concern, but he noticed her voice trembled, and he involuntarily smiled again. Did her voice tremble when Felix's or Rumbo’s life was in danger? It should. But is his life in such danger, obviously exaggerated by fear, that her lovely voice trembles for it?

- “What are you doing?” – Alex asked suddenly coming to his senses and

becoming cold either from weakness, or from anxiety.

Lily was standing over him, holding a purple, iridescent stone in her teeth. A cord and a piece of paper with the stupid, foolish condition “Let them decide” were lying nearby while Lily's fangs were crushing the soft rock.

- “You'll destroy it!” - Alex shouted, trying to get up, but only hurt himself.

Meanwhile, the stone was pouring and crumbling, and some substance was pouring from its depths, falling into pieces that were as tiny as shards of glass. It took Alex a moment to realize that Lily was now deliberately biting the stone over him and its powder was pouring onto his wounds.

Another minute of tense silence, and he realized that the effect of this powder was stronger than that of Rumbo's miraculous herbs, in search of which they so unsuccessfully went that day.

- “Is this medicine?” - Alex asked in a surprised, but suppressed voice, when the procedure was complete. Violet dust, shining in the already bright light of the moon, absorbed, having reset the bones and slightly tightened the wound. The blood was absorbed back into his body, and nothing remained from the stone, except the lace and the ill-fated piece of paper.

- “A kind of medicine. You can do it with each artifact. I must have not had time to tell you about it on the way. Now her voice already sounded calm, as if nothing had happened, and she had not saved him just now from the deadly

danger by the cost of her own dream.”

- “And don’t you ... don’t you feel sorry?” - Alex asked, feeling treacherous awkwardness, rising.

- “I made a decision,” - she grinned happily, gradually gaining her human form.

Alex did not notice, as he himself was already sitting on the ground in a completely human pose and guise.

- “Exactly,” - he smiled confusedly, probing his side and shoulder to verify the authenticity. His whole body was once again complete. Only his jacket looked slightly battered and thinned in the locations of the healed wounds.

After a quarter of an hour they were already returning with pockets full of medicinal herbs. It turned out that they could have been collected on the same clearing where the leader had so badly attacked them.

- “Who is this Bruno?” - Alex asked on the way to the camp. Their conversation with Lily was no longer so tense, and the words of the questions and answers in his head were already being selected faster, in a more relaxed manner, as if they had known each other for ages.

- “What do you mean?” - Lily asked more simply.

- “I mean, if he's our enemy, why did he do it? Did he offer to get rid of the curse in return for being given to him? But why?”

- “I think it's different,” the girl became serious again. – “Instead, he offered to

get rid of the curse in return for me”.

Alex did not immediately know what to say. The leader continued:

- “Actually, he didn’t offer. He was just hoping that you won’t have enough spirit to prevent yourself from rushing for the stone immediately. After all, the gift was presented to me. It means that by the privilege of a “friend,” as it was said in the condition, only you could use the artifact - to use it, leave it to me or someone else.”

- “In return for you?” - Alex seemed to miss everything else. – “It means that...”

Lily did not say anything, and Alex understood everything.

- “That is why he left,” - she added suddenly.

- “Why?”

- “Because he would not be able to kill you, wounded, without killing me first. And he does not want my death.”

- “I understand,” - Alex said with feeling. Suddenly, Alex could see in his eyes that Bruno was no longer as terrible and brutal as he appeared at the beginning. He seemed to have been “lowered” from demonic heights to the rank of an ordinary man. After all, he was once a human! He lowered to a man who is capable of feeling love and compassion, albeit they were destroyed by his own hatred.

The rest of the way they were silent.

- “Less than a year has passed!” – a man was sitting at the fire, poking a stick into it. His face, hidden under a hood from the heat of the fire, was not visible, and only because of the long gray strands peeping out from under the fabric, Alex recognized Felix.

- “Without adventures?” - he asked, slightly lowering the hood and looking at the arrivals.

They exchanged glances.

- “Absolutely,” - Lily answered calmly, laying bundles of fragrant, life-giving herbs from her pockets on the ground next to the dancing bonfire.

Chapter 3. Attack

Days went by, and the community was preparing for a new attack. But there were no attacks day after day. Gradually the training grew into something more, and this time it did not take Alex a long time to understand: now the community would attack first. Isn't it the best defense? Especially in the case of such opponents as the deviants.

- “Where do you think Bruno took that artifact?” – Alex once asked Lily after one of the training sessions. Recently she became occupied with training him in combat like no else had. She taught him to fight in the guise of both a man and a wolf, taught him to heal wounds and quickly restore strength after reincarnation.

- “They often find them. And it is not by chance,” - she began mysteriously, as

usual, throwing aside a stick that had served as a sword. She sat under a tree to rest after a long battle. – “The power of their curse actually has many advantages, like those of the community. But these advantages are different. One of them has a scent for artifacts. Ironically, they do not need them as those who neglected the light of the soul will not be saved by any magic. Here is one more reason for our longstanding enmity with them.”

Lily paused at the tone of voice, as if she was ready to start talking again after thinking, but no matter how much he waited, there was no answer. Turning away, Lily completely wolfishly crouched down to the spring, which was streaming right there, near the trees. She often chose this part of the forest for training. It had enough space for a good blow, and for resting after a hot training fight.

Today, as always, Alex got a good scolding. Although Lily seemed to be a fragile girl, she had enough strength and dexterity. It was enough for Alex to hesitate for a second, and punches came at him from all sides, as if Lily was accompanied by a whole crowd of professional ninjas.

Chuckling good-humoredly at him whenever she was giving him the next punch, she helped him to get up and gave him military advice, but Alex rarely listened to her. It was not easy for him to understand the seriousness of the preparations, just as it was not easy for him to realize the great feeling, which was gradually but surely and irreversibly arising in his soul, which was hungry for change and

accomplishments.

This feeling made him ecstatic instead of feeling disappointment whenever, after one of the already familiar fights, he was turned over on his back on the broken deciduous carpet of the forest. And every time, still near the fire, Alex was mentally trying to sort out this feeling. He was blushing, causing Rumbo to wonder what his friend was thinking about, and making wise Felix laugh good-naturedly beneath his graying mustache. This feeling was already getting ready to be put towards a ridiculous, stupid, probably even dangerous act thought Alex in the ever-living silence of forest evenings, poking at the embers with a stick, stirring them and letting sheaves of red sparks out into the night, making the red ashes sigh on the light breeze into the fire, which was ready to fade. “This feeling must be suppressed.”

He came to this conclusion and wanted to start to avoid Lily's company, but he was amazed at how hard it was for him. He was even slightly disappointed in himself, thinking: he can fight with a whole crowd of Bruno's henchmen, and is not able to outwit himself, and make himself listen to common sense?

It was not that he did not believe in love, but it frightened him. And it could not be any other way as there have been so many unsuccessful experiments in his young life, that after all those falls and attempts to repair his heart after another rupture, it seemed to him that after one more fall he would fly into a black, bottomless abyss. It would swallow him up, and would pull him to the bottom,

and it would be impossible to get up from there to the light of life. So, is this notorious feeling desired by everyone worth it?

A few days later, the community was almost ready to meet with the deviant clan. In one of the last, final (control, as Lily called them) battles, Alex, who was already well trained in the skill of fighting, started a new conversation with the she-wolf. Now, a few days before the fateful (as he and many others were considering it) battle, for some reason he was not afraid.

- “So what do you think of him?” –Alex, who was short of breath, managed to insert between Lily's blow and his parry.

- “About whom?” - Lily asked in a firmer voice, evading the retaliatory attack.

- “About Bruno,” - he answered, keeping his eyes on his opponent's makeshift sword. – “I mean, what do you feel when you see him?”

- “Rage,” - she answered without a trace of embarrassment and without pausing for thought. – “Rage and an overwhelming desire to make this world a little cleaner.”

Alex grinned, not demanding an explanation. Rumbo's jokes, with which he was constantly filling his speech, taught him to understand Lily's irony, which he has never seen before because of her cold, unperturbed intonation.

- “Are you afraid of him?” - the girl asked in response, breaking Alex's mental block as he thought about her words.

- "I was afraid at first. Was scared as hell. It was a real horror I would say."

- "So, what about now?"

- "Now everything is different. I don't hate him as much as I could. I mean, not the way you and the rest of the community hate him. He seems to me to be somehow... ambivalent?"

- "Are you asking?" - Lily grinned.

- "I'm not sure. I'm asking about a different thing: won't you suspect me of being a traitor for such words?"

- "I'm not going to suspect anyone of anything," - the girl replied, stopping Alex, who was preparing for a new blow, and throwing the stick aside. Having stayed a little and looking at the gaps of the gray sky, filled with the next autumn rain, she went to the already icy creek. - "My deeds remain on my conscience and your deeds on yours. I'm not going to worry about your loyalty. You're a big boy."

Alex thought for a moment.

- "Aren't you afraid of betrayal?"

Lily grinned, shaking her head.

- "You won't meet anything worse than death, and as you know each of us is already familiar with it!"

Alex responded with a pensive silence. He had been noticing this characteristic in himself more and more recently.

- "I've been thinking too much lately," - he thought, shaking his head in the cold wind, as if helping to shake out all the heavy thoughts.

And, when his head seemed lighter to him, he sat down next to Lily on the ground, which was damp from the frequent rains, and put his lips to the cold water.

The community considered themselves ready for battle by the end of the month. Having gotten up in the morning, without any orders, they understood: it was time. They understood it together as if they had rallied so much that they could read each other's thoughts only through the brilliance of =excited eyes, only to the tune of souls overflowing with feelings.

- "How are you doing?" - asked a familiar voice directly under his ear. Its owner crept so imperceptibly towards him that Alex shuddered with surprise.

- "I'm ok. How are you?"

- "You don't look well," - Rumbo said, ignoring the question. - "Are you sure that everything is fine?"

- "I am not going to retreat," - his friend answered curtly, his gaze severe. He added more gently and reassuringly (although he understood that Rumbo would outwardly laugh at this, but, in fact, would be grateful in the depths of his soul):

- "We'll do it, Rumbo!"

- "Do you think I don't know this"? - he spat derisively over his shoulder and pointedly turned away. – "If you are the one sniffing here, don't involve me! See you!" – said Rumbo and left.

- "Same to you!" - Alex waved.

Even though Alex already knew all Rumbo's tricks and jokes by heart, he was still a mystery. Even when it seemed that the stock of his stupidities has already dried up, he was still able to expose someone as a fool. At other times, when you call him - he doesn't answer, when you joke with him – he turns away as if he did not hear you. He could not tolerate jokes about his self-satisfied nature. He had all his words in reserve, and since the day Alex met him, he never had to search for words.

But some secret sadness was swallowing him from inside. It was difficult to notice it with the naked eye. He did not experience it in weeks of communication, but the essence of thoughts was kept by their owner in deep secrecy. This was making Rumbo such a crazy madman, a daredevil who was ready to attack and fight for nothing at full strength with a friend or with a stranger, an unprincipled, violent scoffer who interested Alex so much.

In response, Rumbo was drawn to him. Alex was an outlet in moments of thoughtfulness. Rumbo kept silent near Alex, rather than near somebody else. As if his silence was a kind of revelation.

Meanwhile, the moment of the battle was inevitably approaching. Each member of the community received the sharp discarded knife —it was decided that the first attack was to be done in a human guise. Despite the differences in size and physical strength, there was also a certain superiority of the human being over the beast, and such a march-off was symbolic for the whole community: no one asked questions, everyone again understood this without words, deeply and sincerely.

Their preparation, not only Alex's and Lily's, to fight with swords and with knives was not in vain. Now they all had plenty of dexterity, strength, and ability to see the enemy's position in advance.

- "We all know what our enemies have, which we do not have. And that they, not knowing how to use it, turn against us as a tool of recruitment or murder," - said Lily, stepping out in front of the "werewolves" arranged in a straight line, now human in appearance. She had the habits of an experienced commander.

They were all so different, not like warriors. But everyone knew that they all valued each other. And each of them was ready to stand for another as a rock. Each of them was strong as a whole group of deviants, because they were friendly. And the power of their spirit was invincible on the scales against the strength of the apostates.

- "So let's fight to the end for the trophies that it is our right to have!" - Lily was broadcasting. - "In the name of peace and light! In the name of all the good that

we have done during all this time! In the name of those who fell from the clutches of deviants!”

- “In the name of friends!” - shouted the clamoring community in response.

They moved as a solid wall towards the camp of deviants, without jokes and slovenliness. However, they didn't remain silent. It was not in the spirit of the community to hide and attack from behind. They were ready to stand, even if they had to fight a pack that exceeded their pack by three times.

- “Look who's here!” - Joe's voice rang out as soon as the community saw the smoke and perked up, dispersing and looking around the rear so as not to fall into the siege.

In a moment, two men, who were familiar to Alex from the first meeting in his apartment, arose from out of nowhere in front of the people.

The tall one and the thin one, the short one and the stocky one, were already standing very close, meeting everyone, just like ambassadors. There was no one else to be seen behind them. The bonfire was smoking alone, as if everyone had assembled somewhere and left the campgrounds

The healed scars from the “baptism of fire” were seen on Noah's face. Having found Alex in the crowd and noting him with a gloomy but gloatingly mocking look, he began to examine the faces of the others, searching for Rumbo. Lily was standing in front of everyone, over the head of the short Joe, looking around the

clearing.

- "So, where is your team?" - Felix asked, and Noah looked at him in displeasure. – "Look, we are all here. We came at once and call you for a fair fight! You can kill us all or fall from our grip! We are all here. It's time to put an end to this exhausting, rotten hostility! We are all tired, and we need to solve this here and now. Either we will return to "life," or you will take our souls forever."

- "Hold your fire, you're sure sharp-tongued!" - Noah husked hoarsely, stroking his stubble, and for some reason looked up at the sky.

- "Come in for bread and salt!" - Joe said sarcastically, flexing his muscles. He wanted to say something else, but Alex suddenly understood everything, and he shouted as loud as he could, drowning out the strong man:

- "Look up!"

And indeed, the enemies began to fall from above, in a literal sense, like snow on their heads. No matter how the community was trying to avoid it, it became part of siege. The clan defrauded them, hiding on the branches of trees in human form.

A second later, Alex had no time to look back at his comrades: a tall but bony man had already fallen on his shoulders. Stepping over his head, Alex left the uninvited rider on the ground, preparing for a mechanic movement to raise a knife, which was trained in dozens of practice battles. However, someone

grabbed him by the chin and by the neck. Then they dragged him across the ground.

Having turned away, Alex bit his fingers, which were clinging to his throat. The owner of the hands released his hold with a cry, but, before Alex could turn around, Rumbo's sweeping kick hit the attacker's head.

- "Here you go, stupid!" - he breathed victoriously, not noticing how a new foe was already preparing to snap him up by his legs.

Having leaped over Rumbo, who was being dragged somewhere in the direction of the gap in the trees ("It is the edge of the forest. There must be a clearing there" - thought Alex, and the hair on his head stirred anxiously,) he flew at the sturdy cutthroat, who was not expecting that, and the next moment a blazing blade in his hand has already pierced the flesh behind the layers of clothing.

Having escaped from the enemy's grip weakened by the Alex's blow, Rumbo in response pushed his friend with all his strength to save him from the next blow of a heavy log, which was being carried by another bully. The target was Alex's head. Carrying a log by inertia, he crashed into a tree that was just behind the victim that he missed, and losing his balance, crashed, pressed by the weight of his burden, which was beyond the capacity of his new position.

- "That was a good job, wasn't it?" - Rumbo threw, breathing heavily after a whole chain of marching and throwing.

- "That's right!" - Alex answered cheerfully with a voice trembling because of nerves.

But then, suddenly, Lily's call came:

- "Wolves!"

The order was understandable and after a moment the community, and after it, the members of the clan gradually turned into wolves one by one.

In less than a minute of calm, there was no a single human left in that clearing in the forest, which was already covered with the bodies of the wounded and fallen.

The battle continued. It was worn-out, but evil. Those who were attacked were not fighting back as successfully as before, and the attackers were not as fast as before. The compositions of both teams were growing smaller. Their strength was melting away before their eyes, their fire was dying down, and it seemed that it would not take more than an hour and there would be no one and nothing left in the clearing, except for dozens of dead bodies and dozens of those whom no one would help.

After several more fights Alex, who had been lightly punched in the face, having turned into a human, ran behind a wide tree and seated between its roots in a deep hollow, covered himself with the sparse branches of the hung-up bush, and decided to take a short rest.

Touching his cheek with his palm, which was dirty from the ground and the

sheet of rubble, he saw a bloody trail and, with vexation that he did it so unhygienically, instinctively ran over the wound with the shoulder of his jacket, which was even dirtier. One of his feet was sore after he rolled unsuccessfully to avoid the blow, and he was afraid that he had dislocated a joint. Although he could still walk and run, it was not without lameness, and he was already much slower.

His comrade Rumbo had disappeared a long time ago, almost immediately after they ran in opposite directions after having turned into wolves. He had not seen Felix and a couple of his friends for a long time, too, and this worried him. He was unable to evaluate his strength and advantage now, as everything was mixed up in one dirty and tired ball of anger. One thing pleased him: Lily was intact and, as far as he could tell, unharmed. Running away, he spotted her aside of the main mass of fighters, deftly knocking one of the deviants off.

- "I should go help her," - Alex thought suddenly. - "Anything may happen."

But when he got up and was ready to get out of the veil of bushes, Lily knocked him off his feet in human form and landed right between the roots. There was not enough space for two, and Alex squeezed into the groove in the ground as best as he could, involuntarily realizing that getting out now would be much more problematic for him. But he didn't care.

- "Is everything fine?" - he asked worriedly, looking anxiously at her face, which was wet from the rain that was just beginning and framed with tangled hair.

There was a slight smile on her face and an insane fire was burning in her eyes.

- “More than that,” - she answered in a loud whisper, peering, in turn, into his face. – “What happened to your cheek?”

- “It’s nothing serious,” - he waved. – “How are the others doing?”

- “We outnumber them by more than three times,” - she said, animated.

- “But where is the leader?” - Alex remembered suddenly, but Lily only waved her hand in response:

- “He must be sitting out somewhere in silence and tranquility, while this cannon fodder is fighting for him. He will not be pleased when he realizes that he is alone.”

- “Do you think he will not even appear, like a coward? It seems to me that this is not in his nature.”

- “How can you know his nature, if you saw this devil only once?” - Lily asked, surprised.

But a loud voice resounding around the district made her stop and erase the certainty from the face of the young she-wolf:

- “I’m here!” - the forest thundered loudly.

Alex was the first to appear from under the roots and see an eerie, but a majestic picture: the bodies of the dead were lying one on top of another in the meadow

beneath the rays of the setting sun. The wounded were groaning with the little strength they had left, trying to hide from the fate in their last breath. And the silhouette of a big man loomed against the background of all this, in the sky, which was painted red.

Something drew Alex to him and he, not hearing Lily's exhortations and warnings from behind, as if from somewhere far away, moved forward, as if he was enchanted, towards the sun and the dark silhouette of the man who was blocking it.

- "So, you were not afraid of coming again?" - Bruno asked with surprise and smiled. - "It is commendable, very commendable."

Alex approached as closely as possible so he could for the first time study his main enemy in his true form. He had slightly graying black, shiny hair - almost like Felix's - but still quite a young face. His body was puffing up. The heat of strength was hidden under a roomy shirt. A light growth of whiskers and beard was on temples and chin. An incomprehensible mind was seen in his eyes, which were pitch black.

He also noticed a new artifact hanging from the cord on Bruno's neck. This time it was an uncut stone, but of amber color. Even being blocked from the sun by the mighty back of the leader, it seemed to shine in the shadows with a mysterious radiance. However, this time there was no twisted piece of paper with a contradictory suggestion on the cord...

- "This time - no tricks," - remarked Bruno noticing Alex's questioning look. – "You cannot imagine how much time and effort it took to find this one. So, it's unlikely you'll ever see the same thing in your life", the leader smirked slyly, grabbing the cord, just in case, obviously expecting Alex to grab it after these words, or, wishing to emphasize its unattainability. – "And it can be yours so simply. I won't even ask you about murder or anything else that would be contrary to morality! Just help me to convince Lily. Let's end the war!"

He spoke the last words completely, insinuating something, watching the girl coming closer over Alex's shoulder.

- "Betrayal is more terrible for me than murder!" – the guy interrupted the leader. – "And I do not betray friends!"

Before he could finish speaking, Bruno casually tossed Alex aside with one motion of his hand. It seemed that he did not even make any effort to do that, as if he did not even notice that he was talking to someone a few seconds ago. Waving Alex away so easily, he went straight to Lily, who was already moving towards him, and said:

- "It is a frenzy to give up what nature offers you! Just think how much we can achieve together! I'm not asking for much!"

- "What will we achieve, Bruno? Are you out of your mind? What you do is disgusting! Look around: blood, meanness, fratricide - it's all on your dirty hands! And is this what you are offering me? You started this war many years

ago!”

- “So what do you want to achieve?”

- “To go back to the ones I love!” - she screamed her appeal in response.

- “But do they love you as much as...”

Rumbo, who appeared as if from nowhere, did not let him finish the most important word of the significant phrase, flying over his mighty shoulder and vainly trying to knock him down. Hanging on him, the wolfish creature looked like no more than a sheepdog or, even worse, a mongrel, attacking a burglar, as if he was born to be shot mercilessly, prudently, and coolly.

Rumbo was thrown aside like Alex, who had already risen to his feet and turned into a wolf again. But whether he was already too weak before this decisive blow, or whether Bruno hit him harder against the ground, for some reason Rumbo did not get up again. Alex's heart sank, his eyes darkened, but neither the time nor the situation allowed him to become distracted for a minute.

Lily had already rushed to the lingering Bruno from the front, and he was carried away five full steps back. Swaying on the very edge of the already falling precipice in an attempt to keep his balance, he furiously grabbed the fur on Lily's scruff and his features began to take on wolfish outlines again.

- “If I die, I'll take you with me,” - he said, retracting the pressure, which was inexorably pushing him closer to the edge.

- “Are you so sure about that?” - Lily shouted, jumping back abruptly.

Surprised, Bruno collapsed forward, and Lily was ready to deliver a crushing blow, when suddenly...

- “Lily, behind you!” - Alex screamed, already running at a full speed, but the deviant was clearly ahead of him.

One of the deviants with a long spear in his hands was running towards Lily from behind. And when Alex had to run just a few feet, Bruno suddenly jumped forward, taking a blow with his body.

It seemed that for a moment silence reigned over the field. The bustle of the attacker and Alex, running to the rescue, stopped, although he saw for sure that he was still running, but he could not hear a sound. Lily's breath stopped, intercepted by the desperation. The leader's howl stopped at the end of the spear. Only the dripping of blood could be heard: drip-drop.

Bruno broke this silence, fumbled and grabbed the throat of his own henchman. A spear was protruding from his shoulder, but his feet were still firmly standing on the ground: so much power and health was present in that body.

- “What, do you think I'm defeated?”

- “How about taking me with you?” - Lily, who wouldn't surrender, asked in a trembling voice, obviously amazed and confused by what had happened, like everyone, who was alive and conscious in the clearing in the forest.

- “Who said this wouldn’t happen?” - Bruno growled, leaning forward again.

- “I did!” - Alex shouted.

- “Don’t you dare stand in my way!” - Bruno threw himself onto his hind legs, ready to dive at him, as he did it at their first meeting, but Alex, who was trained during long hours of practice battles, twisted deftly under the enemy's paws and struck at his shoulder, which was not affected by the wound.

- “So you are smart!” - Bruno hissed in response to this, imperceptibly stepping a couple of inches away. – “But are you strong enough?”

Another blow was aimed, perhaps, at Alex's eyes, but he, realizing that it would not be possible to dodge it this time, at the last moment framed the scruff of Bruno’s neck with the blow of a strong paw. Bracing his head against his paw weakened by the bloodshed, he lunged forward, and once again managed to push Bruno back into the fatal abyss. Another movement - and the end was inevitable.

He did not have to wait long after this initial movement. When the leader attacked for the third time, he grabbed Alex’s fur. Surprisingly, Alex did not even consider resisting. Pulling his opponent to his side, Bruno realized too late what a mistake he had made. Under the weight of two wolves the ground swam and, with a crash of falling stones, pulled both rivals down.

- “Alex, no!” - Lily managed to shout after him, and then the whole world, except for Bruno and the stone hanging on his neck, disappeared.

There had been only a few seconds but many feet to the ground. It seemed that an eternity was in Alex's eyes, which already knew no fear.

But Bruno did not know fear either. There was the scarlet trace of small drops in the air behind him, but the struggle was continuing. He was trying to turn Alex's back to the ground during the flight, but he was clearly heavier than his rival, who reliably fell to the breast of his sworn but not hated enemy, firmly clinging to his fur.

The blow against the ground came in a wave from the legs all through his body. It threw Alex's head back so forcefully that something crackled in his neck. The blow threw him into the air for half a foot and dropped slightly crumpled but still unharmed just next to the defeated enemy. The leader was lying motionless, without showing signs of life.

Waking up after a couple of minutes, Alex looked up. No one was there. Lily must have been already looking for a way out, not yet knowing that he was ok.

Thinking about this, he looked at Bruno. He approached him very closely, carefully bit the cord around the leader's neck and removed the stone.

Meanwhile, Lily was already rushing to him, coming down the cliff at full speed.

- "Oh my God! You're alive!"

Turning into a human during the run, she fell to her knees, rushing to his wolfish neck. He turned into a human in these embraces, clutching the stone in his

hands.

- "He is dead."

- "It was supposed to happen," - she answered, without opening her arms.

- "He knew how to love. He loved you!" - Alex objected.

- "It was too destructive."

He had nothing to say to this. Having withdrawn, Alex silently showed her the stone.

- "Only one," - he sighed.

- "I don't think it will be useful to anyone now," - Lily replied sadly. - "There are not so many of us left."

- "But was the result worth the losses?" - Alex asked hopefully.

Lily quietly, but firmly answered, looking over Bruno's body:

- "Of course."

For a moment they were silent.

- "Take it."

Lily stood up, without saying a word.

- "What are you talking about" - Alex was horrified.

- "This stone... it... with this stone...you'll go back to a normal life."

- “But what about you?”

- “Someone has to manage the community,” - Lily tried to smile, but the desire to cry from everything that had happened was clearly stronger. Alex got up and pulled the she-wolf towards him again. They were standing in the midst of a silent forest full of death and pain.

- “You have those who love you - go to them! I will manage the community; we will find more stones. There will be enough for everyone!”

- “There will never be enough for all of them, Alex,” - the girl interrupted his idyllic monologue. – “There will always be people like us. Those who once despaired, and was doomed to despair many more times.”

- “Don’t say that!” - he exclaimed. But Lily motioned to him to remain silent. And, taking his hand, still clutching the stone, put it to his chest.

- “All you need is: tears, blood, and heart.”

For just a moment - one finger brushed over her cheek filled with tears, and the other - his cheek, which was cut in the battle. Just another moment - and all that was needed was on the surface of the burning stone, which was pressed against Alex's chest. The light illuminated the area and blinded him. It wasn't clear what was happening, but it was supernatural.

Blinded by the surrounding light and feeling the irreversibility of the process, Alex grabbed Lily's hand more tightly, as if he could take her with him. He

clasped her hand tightly, but could not hold it.

- "I'll miss you!" - Lily's voice came from the distance, and Alex woke up.

Chapter 4. Back to life after death

Alex woke up in the hospital bed. There was a doctor with a beard and kind eyes behind glasses above him.

- "Really?" - the doctor complacently greeted the patient.

- "Have I been sleeping?" - Alex asked in a hoarse voice, marveling at his own voice, which suddenly changed after a conversation with Lily, which seemed to have ended just a second ago.

- "A whole two days!" - the doctor announced solemnly.

Raising himself upon the pillow, Alex plopped back again. Two days... Two days?!

Alex recalled the weeks, which were imprinted in his memory so well with horror and reverence for the unexplored capabilities of the human brain and the mysteries of life. The first deliberate meeting with Rumbo and Lily, the meddling neighbor and police, Joe and Noah, the baptism of fire, the acceptance into the community, the meeting with Bruno and long training, alliance with the team, wise and kind Felix, the fate of a dozen of the comrades unknown after the battle that had just died down. Where was all this? Was it a dream? It couldn't be!

Alex glanced at the doctor again, he could not avoid blinking often, as if he was becoming blind. He even noticed the doctor's wary confusion.

- "Forgive me, déjà vu," - replied Alex in answer to the doctor's inquiring look.

- "Have we, by chance, met before?"

- "I don't think so, unless you have already been in my ward."

- "I think I have been," - Alex said thoughtfully. - "A month and a half ago. Two wolves dragged me to the road with a loop around my neck, and a driver who was passing by frightened them and called for an ambulance..."

The doctor was silent for a long time before answering:

- Maybe. You still have a long recovery after all the stress. Rest..."

- "But what has happened?" - Alex stopped him.

- "I am familiar with your medical history. There have been no recurrences of such a case in your history, as well as among your relatives. We contacted them. The ambulance was indeed called by the driver at the road, and you really had a loop around your neck. We still have to find out what was it doing there... But there were no wolves! I think your memories are slightly confused and flavored with imagination, which played out over the past two days, which you have spent in a deep sleep. However, it is not worthwhile to load your head with all this nonsense, buddy. Rest! We'll talk afterwards, but for now, I wish you a speedy recovery, my friend!"

A few days later, Alex was discharged. He found the runaway cat near his building, coming to the entrance, and for a long time could not get enough of him. He walked up to his floor and found a letter under the door. It was an answer from the company in which several weeks ago he was unsuccessfully trying to get a job, the one from which he did not receive a call, and could not reach by phone. Now they were offering him a good position. However, now he was not up for it.

On the very day of the discharge, Alex went into the forest, regardless of the note in the personal file, saying “under medical supervision” because of that ill-fated loop, regardless of the neighbor, silently looking at him after such a long absence, as at something that she has never seen in her life.

He went to the place where a piece of cord was hanging on the tree. It was hanging there!

After a few more feet, Alex reached the point where he happened to meet with Lily and Rumbo. Only now there wasn't a single soul there.

Alex jumped on the spot to warm up and decided to run along the familiar forest to the last tree. No one was there. There was no one even in the ill-fated clearing, where he had recently been fighting for his life.

It took a lot of time to find a good place to go down the cliff. It must have been the path Lily had taken down. Alex found the place of Bruno's death and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the bush of bloody scarlet roses, which were

standing apart from all other bushes. So it was real. It was!

Alex climbed back and found the hollow between the roots, where they sat with Lily after a long battle. The sun was starting to set, but no one appeared on his way: neither a community member, nor a deviant, neither a wolf nor a person. He was confused. All these places, which he had just seen, were already in his “imagination,” although he was visiting them for the first time in his life. It was impossible that he saw this all in his coma dream!

Lowering his head and putting his hands into the pockets of his jacket (still wrinkled and faded on the side, where Bruno struck the unprepared Alex at their first meeting,) Alex plodded home in meditation. Being a half wolf, he had no problems seeing the truly living neighbor, the doctor, and the police. What was preventing him now, when he was alive, from seeing Lily and the others? Maybe they went to another place? Maybe...

In his meditation Alex reached the road in its very site near the wastelands, where his friends dragged him from a distant park on that terrible night of the suicide attempt. The first suicide attempt.

Smiling at the flimsy conjecture, Alex went out onto the road and was in such a hurry that he did not even hear the approaching car. The squeal of the wheels and the buzz of the car signal were the last things that Alex remembered clearly. Alex flew a few feet and hit his head on the asphalt. The car stopped obliquely, and the headlights were directed at the guy, who was lying on the ground. He

was seriously wounded, blood poured from his head. The driver of the car, not knowing what to do in such a situation, simply ran away with fear, leaving his car. Maybe he was afraid of responsibility, maybe he thought that the guy died from such a blow and wanted to hide from the scene of the crime.

Alex was lying motionless on the cold asphalt. A big man in a cap approached him from nowhere, easily lifted him up and put him on his huge shoulders. He walked towards the forest very slowly, and only when he turned back to see if anyone was following him, his face became clearly visible. It was Bruno.