

CHRYS ROMEO



***AFTERGLOW***

# AFTERGLOW

by Chrys Romeo

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## The Prison

Everything happened so fast, events rolled out from one another overlapping time and scenes, like loops engulfing each other in fast forward speed.

Thomas was an aspiring pilot in the army, but one late autumn day or early winter, he couldn't recall exactly, he saw himself like in a dream, being taken up inside a van, handcuffs on, feet dragging along and stumbling on the high steps of the vehicle, a hand pushing his head down to bow for the entrance, the edge of the door and then the hard shuddering sound of heavy locks. The engine coughed, the winding streets swept by in unexpected turns, and then he was taken inside a detention center of a town he barely knew or recognized. He didn't have time to look around. He was instantly brought into a bright room with gray metal walls and white sliding doors where everything smelled of chemicals, disinfectant and dangerous instruments. He was told to strip completely.

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

The order left no space or time for explanations and choices. Thomas complied, taking off his clothes to the last piece that might have given him some dignity, as if he had to throw away many layers of who he was, becoming vulnerable and exposed to the naked truth

of not having the option to decide what was going on.

He went through the quarantine shower and then was given a navy blue outfit that he had to jump in quickly. He was told to wait for the medical check-up. Then the doctors came. One tall man and one short and slim girl, both wearing uniforms, staring at him attentively, carrying files with data about him. Looking at the girl, Thomas immediately wondered what a female doctor was doing in a military prison for men. He sneaked a glance at her badge. "*Isabel*" he read silently.

The tall imposing doctor spoke with authority, as if evaluating his x-ray, while Isabel kept watching:

"We'll just check a few things for the records."

He stood there as they did routine consultations: blood pressure, breathing, heartbeat, eyes and reflexes. Then they left and the guards came to take him to a cell with other three detainees. He just sat there on the bed, looking around, as the others started to chat. Thomas still felt dizzy from the snowballing events that had rolled by too fast for him to wrap his head around them. He heard the questions as if through some dissipating fog, coming from somewhere far away:

"What are you here for? What did you do?"

He blinked, recollecting his thoughts to answer:

"I drove under the influence. I was coming from a birthday party and it was raining, so the road was slippery. It seems I hit a military truck with ammo. The crash ruined many boxes of that load. Stuff got

broken..."

"How much did they give you for it?"

"Seven months."

"No way! Why so much?"

He shrugged.

"Well, apparently running into a truck was not the only thing I did. I also got into a fight with the officers that were on that truck. They were higher rank and I ignored that. They didn't forgive me and sent me to martial court."

The inmates laughed.

"Boy, what a troublemaker! You've been having fun, haven't you."

"I don't remember all the details of that night. I wasn't very clear headed. I lost my cool in the heat of the moment, so one thing led to another... after that, here I am."

"Guess your career in the army is over. You'll have to reorient yourself in a new field."

"Yeah... too bad I wanted to be a pilot on one of those supersonic eagles."

"Ouch. That must hurt you."

Thomas knew he had to consider it eventually, but for the moment he didn't want to think about it – freedom seemed somehow far away, unreal, illusory.

"What other skills have you got besides running into trucks?" the

detainees joked, giving him pats on the back.

“Give me hi five! You've got some nerve to wreck that truck and defy the officers too!”

He tried to divert the focus of the conversation from himself:

“What about you guys? What did you do?”

“Never mind about us... let's say armed robbery to a bank. We took millions and billions and stashed them under a mattress.”

“I don't believe you.”

“Look, we'll share some of it with you if you dig us a tunnel outta here...”

They were laughing so hard it was no point in continuing the discussion reasonably. He lay his head on the pillow and allowed his thoughts to wander. He had all the time in the world to sort out everything. Yet for some reason, the doctors' visit had remained in his mind – and especially her. The girl's presence in that place was contrasting like a colorful flower springing from the cement of the sidewalk, a daring little tree growing on the dry edge of a cliff above an abyss, a golden light streaming through dark menacing clouds or a white immaculate seagull floating gracefully and skillfully on furious stormy waves. She was, no doubt, strong enough to face that environment. Thomas could see her training was showing in her determined posture, the precise gestures and the steel glance that would cut through the room – but there was something delicately unpredictable underneath her active professional attitude: a restless

alert attention, something like a sensitive perception in gentle refined understanding of the most subtle aspects of a situation. He could almost swear that she knew how he felt, without asking anything, just by looking at him observantly. She seemed different from that environment because, unlike the uniform she was wearing, she actually felt more than nothing during the automatic consultations: her beating heart and sensitive eyes were hiding warmth that made her more alive than the others around. She was not made of stone, despite the impersonal attitude. Thomas felt that about her and wished he could see her again. He wondered what he could do to get to the medical unit. He had just arrived there, but was already making plans in his mind how to reach that unusual flash of sunshine, that breath of spring in that dark and strict place.

As he was resting his head on the pillow, he closed his eyes and dozed off. His sleep was short and uneasy. He had a dream where he couldn't distinguish if the visions were real or not, impressions reaching his perceptions in a flood of unexpected sensations. He was flying a plane through clear blue sky. The freedom expanded, so overwhelming, and he was genuinely essentially happy. It wasn't just the total detachment from the earth, from any worries, from any burden of reality. It wasn't just the endless sky, the immense space and the complete liberty of movement: he had a sense of safety, a strong certainty that everything would be positively great and the outcome of any situation, of anything from his future would only be beneficial

to his life, no matter what would happen. And he also knew that Isabel was on that plane with him, and the feeling of happiness was deeply connected to her presence. He smiled at her, as the plane was rising above cotton candy white clouds. She smiled back at him, but the vision was interrupted abruptly.

“Time for lunch Thomas! Stop dreaming and wake up!”

He opened his eyes to find himself back in the cell, which seemed like a steep fall from a bright height where he felt he would rather remain. The desolation was soon replaced by plans: Thomas decided he wasn't going to just sit around resigned about his fate. He was going to do his best for that dream of seeing her again to come true.

In the following months he requested to work in various places in the prison facility. He figured if he did well, he would later be given a chance to ask for a favor and would be allowed to talk to her. Besides, they might also let him off sooner if he worked hard.

At first, he was admitted in the tool shed, where he could carve and assemble pieces of furniture: window frames, chairs, curtain bars, coffee tables. Working with wood wasn't very hard, but it requested attention, persistence and notions of geometry. He integrated in the carpenters team quickly and after a while of carrying things around they trusted him enough to let him use sharp or heavy tools. Things were going well when he had an incident with a coffee table. The chainsaw that was supposed to cut the board slipped. The chain was loose, it jolted, got stuck in wood and then suddenly slid off and cut



through his arm. The sight of flooding blood sprinkling through the open wound in an instant alarmed the guards immediately. Thomas put down the chainsaw and tried to keep the flesh closed, covering the cut with his hand. However, blood was flowing beneath his fingers, splashing down on the planks of wood, the floor and everywhere he turned.

“You've got to go to the emergency room” the guard said and grabbed his elbow, dragging him along the corridor.

He was already calm when the door of the medical unit opened and the guard shoved him in. His heart started racing in a second, finding himself face to face with Isabel, just one meter away. She saw his arm and briefly picked some instruments. For a moment, she looked in his eyes and the direct glance went straight to his soul, as if she really saw him and who he was, beyond the prisoner status he had. The bright flicker in her eyes flashed instantly, as intense as lightning in a clear blue sky. Then she averted her stare, but the vision still remained in his heart: a sense of endless happiness and freedom like the absolute blue sky in his dream.

Isabel did what was necessary to close the wound and bandage it. He kept watching her in a daze, smiling in his mind while discovering how beautiful everything about her could be, the way she moved and the way she just stood there by his side, preoccupied by determined actions that needed to be done.

“How did this happen, Thomas?” she asked without looking at

him.

*She knows my name*, he thought ecstatically. It sounded so reassuring to hear his name spoken by her voice, as if there was something familiar and new at the same time that he was learning about himself, from her. Just her simple presence made everything seem different: suddenly, it was no longer the same building, the same room, the same town or the same world. Everything had moved, reinvented and renewed itself into another level where light, warmth and safety were spreading around undeniably, overflowing, lifting and erasing the boundaries of reality. He realized it was all because of her: that brightness, that calm and sense of safety, that reliable invisible guarantee that things would be better, a certainty that life was full of light and hope. He remembered she had asked something.

“The chainsaw was not adjusted in tension and it slipped”, he explained simply.

She wrapped the bandage tightly.

“Don't worry, it will be alright.”

Thomas had no doubt about it. Her presence was enough to ensure that.

He enjoyed every second of being in the same room with her. Time could have stopped and it wouldn't have mattered.

Leaving the medical unit a few minutes later, he felt as if he had also changed into someone new, along with the reality around him. He walked lightly, as if stepping on fluffy clouds and his mind was

serene, his spirit exalted and redeemed as if he had been saved in a way he couldn't explain. He felt lifted above the restrictions of the building, away from anxiety and dark thoughts, happily higher, feeling he had been taken out of himself and set free in a level of existence where nothing bad could ever happen. And that was only because of her. It was her power and influence upon his inner world. There was something uniquely astounding and miraculously magical in the simple yet totally conquering way she could do that by just being there with a caring, determined and preoccupied attitude.

Going back to his cell, he ignored the throbbing pain under the bandages. It was as if he didn't feel it: his heart was so light and his mind so far away. He stood there staring at the white walls, drifting in serene thoughts and just enjoying the afterglow of her presence in his head, the memory of her aura warming up in his chest with every breath.

The state of bliss lasted just one day: then he started longing for her, missing her and wishing he could get near her again.

In the following weeks he got to work in the kitchen. The guards were somehow suspicious of the chainsaw incident, so they let him work in a less dangerous environment. He got to peel potatoes and carrots for the soup, move the crates of bread or sacks of corn and flour. His days went by the same. The joy of having met her was definitely being replaced by darker visions and restrictions, prison bars and meaningless hours. He was already addicted to the

exhilarating feeling of ascending to a different reality around her, to that eternal moment in time when everything was bright and positively assuring, where life was beautiful and promising. Dreaming about the somehow frail but strong creature that had miraculously appeared in that stern, callous environment changed the chemicals in his brain instantly. Thomas felt a sense of unexplained happiness just by imagining he could meet Isabel again. And in one of those reverie moments, as he was chopping potatoes for the soup, he didn't watch where the knife was going and hit his fingers with the blade, cutting the flesh to the bone.

He didn't know what to feel for the first seconds: be confused that it had happened, be gladly thrilled at the idea of visiting the emergency unit where he could see his beloved doctor again, or be amazed that he suddenly had the opportunity to reach complete happiness through suffering that was totally insignificant and paled in the light of Isabel's fascinating aura.

He wrapped a kitchen towel around his fingers and went to the guards to request medical attention. The guards frowned and were not very quick to agree to take him to where he wanted to go.

“Is this serious? It doesn't look so bad.”

“I could get an infection. I must have it disinfected and bandaged”, he negotiated.

The guards reluctantly agreed and escorted him to the emergency room.

She was there, but a bit uneasy at the sight of him, for some reason avoiding to look in his direction, as if she had already guessed his amplified interest in her and it was something dangerous for that place and circumstance. She kept her composure anyway.

“You again”, she said calmly. “What happened now?”

“I had a kitchen incident.”

“Let me see.”

Isabel looked attentively at the wound.

“It's nothing to worry about”, she said casually, with the same reassuring certainty. “It's not as bad as the last time.”

She took care of his hand just the same, with equally preoccupied gestures. Thomas was sneaking glances at her, feeling like a hungry thief, trying to sink in his mind every detail about her, hoping he wouldn't skip anything from her amazing presence, to imprint his thoughts with everything she was, as if losing that chance would have meant missing out on the last and only precious opportunity to witness something astounding. It was also a chance to be saved, because in her absence he felt totally lost and life turned meaningless. Time with her was so short and yet so significant.

Thomas felt it was unfair that going in and out of the medical unit had to happen so fast each time. He wanted to stay a little longer with her... just one more minute... just a few more seconds... just a little forever more.

The guards didn't like to see him going too often to the

emergency room, so they decided to keep him confined to the cell. The boredom and the need to be near that beautiful amazing doctor named Isabel soon became unbearable for Thomas. He felt she was already a part of his soul, anchored so deep in his heart that he couldn't stand one day without her anymore. He felt he would go crazy and throw himself against the walls. He was beyond fascinated with her. He knew he had to see her again, no matter what.

As weeks went by, the idea of her being forbidden to him was driving him insane. He knew he had to do something: he asked for access to the computer room in the prison library. He browsed through the files of the institution, hacking some passwords to get in the officers accounts. He found pictures of her in the image gallery of history of the institution. It wasn't the same as meeting her in person, but the images carried some sort of healing power too, radiating through the screen, lifting him to a state of happiness, as if he had found a little hope in an ocean of desolation. He could see her eyes, contemplate her smile and dream there was hope to find her. Darkness dissipated from his mind as he was looking at her. He could believe, upon seeing her, that the world was a wonderful place as long as she was in it, despite the prison walls - those slowly disappeared around him.

However, that virtual happiness didn't last long either. It didn't take the computer engineer of the prison more than half an hour to find out someone had hacked into the system and was browsing

pictures with the officers. They tracked the source and busted him in the library, taking him immediately back to his cell. His access to the computer or the library was denied from that day on.

Thomas was desperate again, diving in the darkest thoughts that crowded his troubled mood. The obscurity was more a sense of perception of restlessness and confinement. He felt the space was stifling his mind. In her absence reality was desolate, reduced to limitations and emptiness. It clouded his heart with every passing day in the cell. He knew one thing for sure: he had to escape that room, or he would bang his head on the walls just to get out.

He figured out another way: since nobody wanted to deal with the bathrooms, he decided to ask to work with cleaning. They let him wash the corridors and toilets. As his cell buddies were mocking him for moping around with a bucket of dirty water, he had other plans in the back of his mind. He got his hands on a bottle of detergent and poured the content down his throat, gulping on the disgusting liquid with obstinacy. When he felt he couldn't stand the burning of the chemical anymore, he let the bottle roll on the floor and sat down, crouching in pain. His stomach was turning inside out and everything was spinning around him. The nauseating sensation had made him dizzy, overwhelming until he started throwing up. He could hear voices in the distance, as the prisoners were yelling from behind bars, but he could not get up. His stomach was trying to get rid of the poisonous chemical. He realized he had ingested much more than he

had estimated.

“What is this?” he heard somebody shout in his ear and a hand shook his shoulder. “Did you just do something stupid?”

He almost passed out, breathing heavily. He felt arms lifting him on a stretcher and an oxygen mask covered his nose and mouth. He ripped it away with one hand, to free himself to speak. He didn't know where they were taking him, but he had to ask one thing. Through the spinning walls around, the flickering of faces, the sound of steps and mumbling, he knew he wanted one thing for certain. That was the clearest thought in his mind, the most determined decision, at the same time it was an aching need so deep that it surpassed the dizziness and the half unconscious inert state of dissipating awareness.

“I must see doctor Isabel” he said loudly, demanding whoever was there.

He got no answer, so he repeated with the only power he had left, stubbornly and trying to speak as clearly as possible:

“I must see doctor Isabel. I must speak with her. I need to see doctor Isabel!”

Somebody talked to him from somewhere in the room:

“She will come when she finishes the surgery. One of the prisoners broke his skull in a fight.”

He understood she was in the operating room of the emergency unit. He knew he only had to wait: she would come. She would not let



him down. They said she would come. He tried to hang on to that assuring thought, but in the meantime the perfusions with sedatives sent him to oblivious sleep. Not knowing how many hours later, he opened his eyes. It seemed to him that she was there in the room, right in front of him, at the monitoring desk behind a computer, focused on the screen, with the medical uniform and the cap still on. Thomas was too feeble to speak and mostly unsure if the vision was a delirious dream or Isabel's real presence. He couldn't tell if she was really there, but he felt she must be - she had come to him. She must have come for real. He wished he could have gotten out of bed to walk to her, but he couldn't move. However, knowing she was there was so comforting that he relaxed and felt drowsiness overcloud his mind. He closed his eyes and fell asleep again, before he could find his voice to call her name. Many hours later, he woke up in the middle of the night. There was no one around him anymore. He was alone in the dark, nauseous, and started throwing up again, interminably, as his stomach was wriggling inside, defending itself against the chemicals running through his veins.

He didn't see her the following days. The tall inquisitive doctor came instead to check on him, while he was recovering. Her absence was frustrating and Thomas saw it as a punishment: they wouldn't let him see her because they already knew his fixation had become too addictive and obsessive, in their view. They also considered him emotionally unstable, with dangerous self destructive thoughts. Yet he

knew what he felt for her was so hard to describe, a love so absolutely bright, it made the world heavenly when she was there and in her absence reality lost its meaning.

Thomas remained isolated in a room of his own for the rest of his time in prison. He had no more access to any outside activities. He was monitored closely by strange unknown people who didn't give a damn about how he felt or who he loved. He counted the days until his time there would expire and he could be free. He knew he only needed to be free to find her. He would turn the town upside down to reach her. If only he could be free to look for her...

And when the time came to be released from the implacable prison walls, he had a strange feeling of mixed regret and relief, at the same time. He was glad to taste freedom again, but his heart was ripped in two at the thought that he was leaving the building where Isabel existed. Looking at the tall concrete walls with barred windows, he plunged into an undeniable sense of injustice. With every step he felt liberated and yet in a contradictory way, devastated, deeply sad, torn apart by a pain in his chest, as if he was leaving his soul behind. *"Isabel, my love..."* he whispered in his mind.

## The Top Floor

Thomas was given the choice to rehabilitate himself in a month and prove that he could behave again as a responsible citizen. He received accommodation in a tall building, the highest building in town that was used both as a hotel, rented apartments and a former casino in the basement. It was tall and imposing, its front side covered by a huge black poster with a wristwatch and a quote: "Time is your greatest treasure". In front of the massive building there was a square and a fountain. At night, the lights around it would start changing colors, so the water springing up to the sky seemed magical. It contrasted with the somber building, making a lively atmosphere of that square where traffic was interminably moving.

Thomas was given a room at the top floor.

The top floor of the highest building in the city was apparently in another world, above the real one. It was in such a high space overlooking the entire town, at such altitude where only pigeons would reach, where insects like flies or mosquitoes didn't even bother to go, where clouds swept lazily by the windows, lashing fast raindrops on the glass and metal in a solitary rhythm, where the heat and the noises of the agitated world below seemed to rise in chaotic chanting, sounding as if from very far away. The panoramic view

from the dusty windows of the building that needed restoration was powerfully reigning over the most distant corners of the town. At dawn the sun would appear slowly beyond the sleepy scattered blocks of white, gray and brownish cubes, spreading in the distance to the hills, with a patch of green foliage here and there. The reddish crimson sun would glance steadily, sometimes wrapped in a veil of purple or gray shredded clouds. In those moments of dawn when the entire city was asleep, it seemed as if the sun was the only living apparition with an awake conscience, blinking over the silent buildings. At night, the dark city was sprinkled with thousands of colorful lights. The streets came alive with countless rows of cars, loud voices of people, fireworks and the distant silvery blue moon. Even with the spectacular dazzle of colors, noises and lights, the top floor of the tallest building was still in a separate world, the height plunging it in darkness. The windows rattled solemnly and solitarily while the high currents of air constantly dangled the pieces of tin, wood, cardboard or metal that would hang loose somewhere on the roof or on the sides.

The building needed restoration, and it needed it badly, but it was so big and heavy that it would have involved massive investment and time, so the owners kept using it as it was, in the deplorable state of half desolation.

Its four elevators functioned well enough, despite their eroded aspect and the slow sound of rusty cables and rolls that resembled a

shipwreck and could give in at any time. There were no major incidents with the elevators, except for a few times when they remained stuck, trapping temporarily some people between floors.

And yet, there was something grandiose, something majestic and dignified about the huge building, despite its precarious interior aspect. The top floor had access only by elevators, stairs didn't go that high. The wallpaper in the hallways was torn in places, the windows were stained by rain and dust and some workers had left long ago some cans, rubble and other remains from construction materials. The fire escape was locked, but it could have been accessed by breaking the glass door – if only one had something to break it with. The black metal rows of stairs were descending dizzily on the side of the building, partly out of reach and without end, the ground being so far away that it couldn't be seen.

Otherwise, there was comfort in that secluded, privileged place high above the world, with a view to the entire horizon, dominant over each corner of the city.

Thomas could see everywhere. And yet the irony was that he could not see her in that panoramic expanse of the town. That was why he climbed down from that tower and started tracing the map of every place she could have been, every corner he had seen in pictures in the prison library, as if walking by the same spots could have given him a better chance at finding her, or at least be closer to her even in absence.

A huge river split the town in islands and bridges. It moved slowly, imperceptibly, with boats and ships, curved around the medieval walls of a castle on a hill, spread to widen and get decorated by thicker and denser patches of trees, weeds and other green life that smelled of wet wood and forgotten logs. Inside the city the river banks had been cemented on both sides to become a walking and recreational spot for citizens, but further away where the buildings were only abandoned halls and small ruined factories, the cement was overcome by green grass and wild plants growing through the crests of the square tiles that covered the pavement. The freedom of nature was more powerful than the attempts to limit it.

Sometimes Thomas felt it was useless to keep walking around the city, hoping to find a trace of her. Even that far out along the river, he thought it was possible, but still he didn't encounter her anywhere. At least she must have been there one time, under the same sky, walking along the same paths, stepping on the same ground, watching the same view... it was as if the only way to share something from her life, in her absence, was to go everywhere she might have been. Every corner of the streets, every piece of stone or wall from the buildings seemed to keep him away from her, offering at the same time the torturing thought that she might have been very close, yet out of reach.

Sometimes Thomas felt the hostility of the town against his attempts to find Isabel. There was a silent war between his hopes and

the immovable denial of the town. It took him a while to realize that the silence was something she took part in: it was also her refusal to be available and visible. She behaved just like the town: hiding out of sight, in frozen stubborn silence. The entire city had become a giant prison that played the game of hide-and-seek, defiantly rejecting him and keeping him roaming in vain, wandering for interminable hours in the labyrinth of the streets, without answer or result.

Thomas knew that nobody in that town would consider him good enough for her: not the officers, or her friend and her family, not even random people in the streets. He wondered if at least she had a better opinion of him. He knew, being a former prisoner, that he was far from her position in the structure of that town, so differently far from how he was perceived in the world. He was aware of it as an undeniable obstacle, and yet his heart made him ignore the facts and keep looking for her. It was from that belief that love should have mattered more than anything, that he found resources to keep searching. He was convinced that love had to be above anything, just like that top floor of the unrestored building, above the world in a separate level of higher existence, where there was nothing that could stand in its way.

After many days of walking around the town without being able to find her, Thomas realized the only place he could be sure to see her again was in the medical unit of the prison he had left behind.

So he returned to the barbed wire gates of the detention center, as

much as he wished he wouldn't see those again.

He was greeted with suspicion, doubt and resentment.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came for medical check-up. I have an appointment with doctor Isabel.”

The guards at the gate were showing disbelief.

“Why do you need check-up? You're not mentioned in any schedule. You're not on the list of appointments.”

“I must be. I have to get in.”

Seeing his insistence and determination, the guards picked up the phone.

“Wait a moment, we'll call doctor Isabel.”

They spoke briefly on the line. Thomas waited anxiously, his heart beating like crazy, his fists clenched in his pockets. She had to see him. She had to say yes.

Eventually, the guards returned with a more neutral attitude and unlocked the gates.

“Okay, she said you can come in for check-up.”

Thomas was glad that she had more authority than those guards at the gates – and happy she had agreed to see him.

One of the guards escorted him through the halls.

The sight of the gray walls, the sliding white doors, the smell of chemicals and metal instruments made him uneasy. Being in that place again recalled so many memories and a chill went down his



spine. He didn't want to be there, but he knew it was the only place where he could see Isabel.

He was taken to an elevator and then a hallway. There were many doctors and nurses in the corridor, but Thomas was looking for one person only. He had been waiting for so long to see her, he needed so much to see her, he knew she just had to be there.

He was sent in a room with other detainees brought for consultation.

“Wait here”, the guards said and left.

He sat down, his heart already racing. He knew she had to be close – maybe in the other room. He could feel it. He knew his heart would go crazy when she was really nearby, it was a signal that her presence was close.

And then the door opened and she came in: like overwhelming sunshine, suddenly lighting up the space around her. She looked at him and smiled:

“Hello”, she said and he felt his heart melt in an instant, splash under the table and sink on the floor.

“Hi”, he managed to answer.

And then she turned away and left.

That was it – just one second of her smile, but it burned in his soul like an eternal truth of his life: there was nothing more beautiful, more impressive or exalting that could light up reality in such an absolute way.

He didn't know how much of seeing the beauty of someone – not just in exterior features, but a radiant presence illuminating through the skin, through the slightest gestures, through every movement – how much of having this stunning insight was a free gift from the exterior, from an outside existence and to what extent did the mind and soul, the anticipation, the enhanced emotions and sensations contribute to contouring, shaping, giving meaning, transferring an essence of perception so ethereal it got mingled with the support of a real presence and how much of it was coming from a distant angle or was it an inside projection of an ideal frame?

Thomas was convinced of the authenticity of Isabel's unique radiant light. By one look at her and that second had remained eternally suspended in his mind as a revelation. Her beauty was so intense, the flashing eyes so hypnotizing, everything amplified by the added time of so many months of ceaseless thinking, dreaming, wondering about her, that the tension of the moment became a total exposure to the burning brightness of her presence, more than he could have ever imagined. Her smile and her simply saying “hello” had lit up the whole room. The lightning of the clear blue eyes struck directly to his heart. He'd warmed up at once and had almost forgotten to answer, staring at her – and after she turned and left the space, the afterglow of her presence and the short interaction unfolded an entire abyss of another level of perception, engulfing and erasing his thoughts by a single unspoken secret truth: she was

indescribably beautiful, irradiating like sunshine from inside out. And that was so abrupt, it felt like a sharp pain in his chest because that kind of beauty could not be portrayed in colors, features or anything from the dimension of reality, but it was the complete gift of her presence, the total impact of her existence, a moment so close in front of him after so many months of not being allowed to get near her, it surpassed his capacity to withstand the intensity of it. The rising wave literally brought tears to his eyes, the feeling of being so amazed, so uniquely lifted to a state of wonder, so kneeled by being that close to an extraordinary vision until his eyes got foggy and his chest heaved in a secret sigh, blazing with so much love. He was left with that choking feeling of realizing she was beautiful beyond his ability to describe it, or to be happy about it... or to ever have her in his life in any way. The happiness of seeing her surpassed the line of bliss and drove the impact to the edge into the zone of painful amazement. She was a creature of heavenly brilliance. She was more than that: she was a miracle of life that he had the chance to be close to for a moment and even have a smile from her. A smile only for him. A smile that could last forever. A smile so graceful, warm and bright, it could erase everything in the world and change the weather, the seasons, the planets and the universe itself.

And yet it had been just a second. She was gone. She had left the room. He could only imagine how much happiness would have meant to spend a day – a week – a year – a lifetime with her... to see

her daily would have been a total, indescribable blissful dream. But he was aware the chances for that to happen were few to none: he was there as a former prisoner and nothing more.

In her absence, the light of the room dimmed significantly. And yet he could not distinguish if it was her he had seen or the dream that he'd kept in his head for the past year. He was afraid to ask himself if he really knew her, he refused to think there were things about her he wasn't aware of, that she might not be as she seemed.

The door opened again. The tall doctor appeared inside and he addressed Thomas speaking seriously and concisely:

“Isabel is busy today, she'll see you another time. The rest of you, come with me”, the doctor told the other prisoners who were waiting in the room.

Thomas stood up, not really figuring out what had happened and why there had been a change of plans. A guard came to escort him outside. He went in the corridor where he saw Isabel at the desk, staring at the computer screen, typing something, focused on it as if not noticing anything around. Nothing in the immediate reality seemed to matter to her anymore: she was only attentive to her work, filling in data about the patients or whatever she was doing there. He passed by her chair and kept walking without looking back: she belonged to that place and remained out of reach. Her eyes no longer had that shining spark, her face was not moving and not smiling anymore. Her features were almost swallowed and erased by the

objects in the room. How she could change so drastically, so fast, it was beyond his comprehension. And yet that was another aspect of her life - and maybe the most important – that he had to acknowledge. Most of the time she was an addition to that building, to the action and focus of those rooms, to the sobriety, austerity and emergency of the instruments, equipment, substances and decisions. That was her life, yet her light shone so brightly, she would have fitted in another scenery, without worries, in the freedom of meadows and silent refreshing energy of nature. However, the gray halls smelling of disinfectant, chemicals and freshly wiped floors, the clinking of metal, the opaque sliding doors, the sound of life supporting machines, the tired endless hours of being responsible for an outcome to many human lives, the discipline of getting up early and having a clear mind to do the right thing at the right moment – that was how she lived and where she belonged. He thought about that truth while trying to figure out what motivated her and what explained her behavior.

He wanted to know her better, but he realized she wasn't accessible to him, a former prisoner. He wondered if it was true that doctors only preferred to talk to doctors, date other doctors and keep company mainly with people from the medical field as if they'd become a different species that could only understand one another in a closed environment by themselves, separate from the rest of the world. He wondered if that was their main rule - an implacable truth

that he would never get around to change. Isabel didn't seem to him a person with a limited mindset that would follow social restrictions or prejudices. At the same time, he knew he didn't have any guarantee that she wouldn't have some fixed frames in her mind about how to be seen socially, or what standards her childhood had made her grow up with. And then he wouldn't matter to her as a person she'd known in prison.

Returning to town, Thomas was faced with that unchanging situation: she was nowhere to be seen and the city was stubbornly keeping her hidden somewhere in silence. He could scratch his fingers on the massive wall bricks and he still would not find her. She was forbidden to him. She had a life that would not accept him as a part of it – nowhere else except at the clinic where he was allowed to see her for very brief moments.

Thomas couldn't give up, so he decided to try something new and take a risk. He had to let her know how important she was to him. He got a box of heart shaped chocolates, included an *"I love you"* note inside and brought the package to the prison gate. The guards were reluctant to take the present to her, but eventually they did.

Thomas waited there, for her confirmation to let him in. The box had already went ahead. He was almost sure she'd like the gesture and would stop regarding him as a patient or a prisoner – already freed, but nevertheless a prisoner. Maybe she could see him as a person with qualities, that she would like to know and spend more

time with.

The moment came and the guards took him to the medical unit. He waited by the door of the same room as the day before. She appeared for a moment in the hall.

“Come in”, she said but the words sounded icy and having opposite meaning.

It was her, but she seemed completely different. Her cold attitude, her distant detached tone and the way she averted her eyes struck him from the beginning as signs that something was wrong. She was upset. He wondered what had happened and what had triggered in her the attitude of speaking formally, impersonally, strictly professional.

“The wound is healing well”, she told him shortly, after looking at the scar.

And she moved around the room impatiently, as if wanting him to leave.

He felt confused. He looked at her, not willing to go yet, not like that.

“Are you upset about something?” he asked, hesitating to initiate a dialogue that she clearly did not want.

She defied his glance in a calm but cold response, raising her chin up indifferently.

“No, everything's fine.”

He couldn't understand, but he knew he had to leave. She

seemed to not want him there anymore, not even want to be near him. She looked like a totally different person from the caring one he used to know. He realized there was also a side of her that he hadn't seen before. Maybe she was more like this and less like that. Was it worth trying to see her again, if she made it so clear she didn't want that? Could the box of chocolates be guilty for that abrupt change in attitude? Was it the chocolate shape of hearts? Was it the *"I love you"* note that she hadn't approved of? Thomas felt lost for explanations. Which part of his present had been such a bad idea that turned her against him all of a sudden? In what way had he threatened her daily routine with his feelings?...

He stood bewildered in the tramway station. Who was she? Where was the breathtaking, beautiful and sensitive creature he had seen as a heavenly vision? Where was the light in her eyes? How could she behave so distantly cold? Had she pretended to be nice only to show her real thoughts about him in the end? Where was the girl whose name he had asked for again and again in a state of drowsiness, with such a deep love as the ultimate most amazing truth of his existence? Where was the girl whose name he had breathed second by second, month by month for the past year? What had happened to that person? Had she been only in his imagination? Thomas didn't know what was worse: the torture of not seeing her or the realization that she didn't like him and didn't need him there, the emptiness of not finding anything but a distance in her eyes, looking



at him as if he was a total stranger. How could she consider him a stranger? He didn't understand.

He felt that reality was shifting the ground from under his feet, destabilizing him with blows and challenges that messed with his mind and drove him up the walls.

He returned to the solitary world above the city, on the top floor of the black building with a huge poster of a wristwatch on it. Even the colorful fountain had something sorrowful about it. He kept thinking. She didn't want anything from him: no souvenirs, no sweets, no cards, no confessions, no love... nothing. "*Maybe it's forbidden to her, as an officer, to receive that kind of attention from patients or prisoners*", he thought as a glimmer of hope that an external authority would make her behave like that and not the possibility that she didn't really like him, not even a little... and she didn't want him in her life in any way. He didn't know any better. But the most tormenting doubt was about the essence of her personality: was she that girl he used to dream of, was she truly that one, or had she been just an idealized vision that his imagination had invented? Maybe she was cold hearted and insensitive. Maybe she needed to be like that in that environment where she worked. He couldn't believe he'd been wrong about how she was. The only way to know the answer would have been to talk, spend more time with her in another place, not just move like automatic robots around each other, for fragments of minutes at a time. He wished he could know her thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams,

her soul... and yet it seemed like such an inaccessible, impossible dream, to just go on a date together and learn about each other, it was so simple and so unattainable. *"She'll never get out of that building with me. She might not even want to know me"*, he thought, looking at the implacable city through the rain stained windows of the solitary, silent top floor.

The curtains kept dangling by the dusty glass. The sunset reflected its crimson beams in the windows of the city, making it seem alight with fire. So many sleepless nights wondering about her, Thomas thought. The big town seemed like a trap, a prison, a war zone, a fortress of rain and dark stones. It had been a hostile labyrinth of people, cars and noises. It had also been a display of panoramic galaxies, with its twinkling lights, but always distant and mysteriously hiding something inaccessible: the dream of love.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized he had to give it up. If there was any dignity left, any clarity of mind, any sanity, he would just give up trying to chase a dream that kept slipping away, that remained locked behind walls, forever inaccessible. His troubled thoughts had become unbearable, erasing hope after hope until there was no hope left. He felt he could have moved mountains and still it wouldn't have mattered: she would still be inaccessible, unwavering, somewhere in the city or spending long hours in the clinic, as an unattainable ideal.

There was nothing but a closed road of an implacable truth: it

had been a beautiful dream, but he knew he had to accept that it would remain just that: a dream, separate from the world, high up in a different level of existence, somewhere only pigeons could reach, seagulls and dispersed clouds...

## The Elevators

There was something unusual about the elevators: even though they were four, placed two on the left side and two on the right, they sometimes gave the impression of functioning alternatively, only one on the left and only one on the right. Thomas also noticed that whenever he pushed both buttons at the same time, only a single elevator would come up, on either side. The square button lit up, the cables could be heard rolling slowly on both sides, but only one of the four elevators would appear. There was never a time when more than one would show up, even if they were moving vertically in their shafts, mysteriously and simultaneously, but never coming at the same time in the same place. Their heavy metal doors could be heard opening and closing on various floors, then again cables moving, but only one elevator would respond when called.

Thomas also noticed that whenever the left side elevator would come, the town would look in a certain way. When the right side

elevator came for the ride, things would be slightly different. The left and right side on the top floor never coincided with the right and left on the ground floor. He never knew on which side he would get off, no matter if he was sure he knew which side he got on, up at the last floor.

The town seemed brighter when he was coming out of the left elevator. The main building in the center with the green round roof, the huge flags and the statues of emerald horses standing up, everything was gleefully vivid against the clear blue sky. The colors had a different intensity and the massive buildings of dark gray tiles covered in graffiti in some corners didn't seem so menacingly somber. The streets were wider and the people walked with a more carefree attitude, smiled more easily and didn't stop to judge each other. At night, the lights spreading on the round panoramic horizon flickered with denser brightness. Colors on the buildings appeared more spectacular, shining in multiple spikes.

The town didn't look quite the same when he went out through the right side elevator. Reality was gloomier, more opaque and darker. The silent buildings seemed dusty, closed and hostile. People's glances were unfriendly and rejecting; they were burdened with worries. Colors were faded and the main building in the center appeared crouched under a cloudy sky. The statues of the two green horses didn't look so majestic and lively. Even the huge flags would hang down in resignation.

Thomas remembered that even Isabel had seemed like two different persons a few times. He wondered if it was the same city and the same world that he was experiencing. If there was really a correlation between the elevators and the aspect, the atmosphere of the town, if everything was in fact connected to Isabel and her power to change reality in the blink of an eye with her smile or the direct lightning of her glance, then there could be an explanation to the way she behaved. Or there were two versions of her in two different cities.

The moment he became aware of it, Thomas started to distinguish between the two worlds and to look for clues that would confirm there were really two distinct towns. It made sense in his head that things were not random: the two realities switched alternatively, from one day to another. He remembered how everything in the city seemed to reject him on certain days. In every corner and every shop people were hostile, judgmental, grumpy and frowning. On those days Isabel had also seemed worried about something. He could almost sense her fear: she was afraid of talking to him or looking in his eyes. She was focused impersonally on her tasks, not looking over her shoulder, as if she was constantly watched and threatened by something. Had she noticed there were two different worlds? Was she two different persons too? Thomas couldn't figure it out.

If there were two parallel worlds, almost identical universes, did they connect in the elevators? Were he and Isabel going back and forth

from one world to another, from one elevator to another? He realized he had never seen her in town. She was always confined to the clinic. There could have been an implacable oath that kept her in that building, an invisible thread that wouldn't let her meet him outside of the prison walls. The other places were deserted, empty, silent, devoid of meaning in her absence, like an unfinished painting. In the brighter version, Isabel had smiled, more relaxed, had been friendly, had listened to him carefully and not avoided his eyes in any way. She might have been the same person, since her power of changing everything could have influenced both worlds – and maybe there was more to the entire truth that Thomas couldn't grasp from the fragments of perceptions, impressions and clues that were never enough.

To fill the long hours of being alone, he went for long walks, exploring the city randomly – the clouded, cold one or the brighter version of it, depending on what elevator came first on that particular day. The possibility of a split reality in two parallel universes implied that he would also have to exist in both, as a double Thomas. Was there another version of him? Was that other Thomas the brighter or the darker one? Were the two Thomas inside his mind and the world reflected the one he happened to be on a certain day? Was someone else getting out of the elevators, instead of him? Could his consciousness exist as a single unit that would alternatively transform like a ghostly vision as he travelled between the versions of reality

with left and right elevators?

So many questions filled his mind as he was walking in the streets. The brighter city remained bright even during rain: it wasn't about the clouds. There was something deeper, more basic, more substantial, more structurally definite than the weather. If it rained in the bright city, water seemed to have soothing powers, gathering in small rivers by the sidewalks, reflecting the trees, chanting calmly on the buildings, cars or umbrellas. There was something peaceful and relaxing about it. Something poetic and beautiful. There was the richness of hope, floating down the streets, that things would become better, that something wonderful could happen, that any dream was possible to come true.

Yet in the darker city, even when the sun hovered over the buildings, it still couldn't bring enough colors to them. The tramways, buses and cars would go impatiently, angrily through traffic and the heat would dry and scorch the dusty sidewalks to a silent exasperated emptiness, burning down any hope and refusing to let life flourish, to let dreams expand, setting restrictions and stifling every thought he had with limits set in stone. The rainy times were stormy and ruthless, raindrops were lashing heavily, without remorse, on anything they would find.

Thomas could not comprehend the dissonance and the dissimilarities in perception of a place that was supposed to be one and the same, and yet it definitely looked like two different

dimensions.

He wondered if he gave the same impression to the people around him. Was he hostile, frowning, angry and consumed by despair in some moments and was he lovable, calm, understanding and happy in other circumstances? He was absolutely certain he didn't depend on the two elevators to change his moods or personality in any way. And yet, he thought there could be a slight possibility that two of him were walking in different parallel worlds, just as he had met two versions of Isabel.

He realized he might have frightened Isabel with his repeated accidents, troubled feelings and risky declarations. He suddenly became aware of the impact he had on her life. Everything about him was inappropriate for her. Their lives collided in a way that would bring her no advantage. He was just trouble for her, disturbing her daily activities and peace of mind, her place among other officers and her ability to deal with the unpredictable person that he was. He suddenly saw it so clearly, as if a Thomas from another universe had started to understand: maybe her reactions had been triggered by this truth – that he was just inappropriate and non-beneficial for her. He was moody, with deep feelings, hard to read and not able to conform to the limitations that were stifling the love he had discovered. It had seemed the most important thing, to tell her about it, and yet he suddenly considered the idea that to her it was least important. He didn't make her happy with it - on the contrary, he troubled her.



Maybe the best he could do for her was NOT to say how he felt, NOT try to find her and NOT be a part of her life in any way... and maybe NOT love her anymore – but that was just impossible to him.

The only logical choice was to give up looking for her. She clearly did not share his fascinated attachment and was obviously better off in his absence. Thomas had to admit there was no reason for Isabel to have equal feelings for him. He was just a stranger that she really didn't need to know. And who knew what other perfect man she had met in her life. “I must go”, he thought, but the idea of never again was cutting his chest through his heart. He couldn't bear it. A stifling knot rose in his throat, where tears were gathering to come to his eyes, stinging sharply. He clenched his jaws, but his eyes still got foggy and tension rose to his head. *“One more time. One more day”*, he thought, allowing a glimmer of faint hope to appear in his mind. *“I'm going to meet her one more time and see what happens”*.

He was determined to give himself another chance and see if he could find that heavenly girl again – the one that surpassed his ideals and dreams by being more than he could imagine.

On that day, he woke up early. From his room at the top floor of the tallest building he could see the city colorful with a new sunrise. The red eye of the globe seemed encouraging and cheerful. He went out in the hall, reaching the four elevator doors, two by two, parallel and waiting. He could never tell left from right or guess which one would come up. On that morning, he noticed one elevator was stuck

between floors. The door was dangling open to the shaft and the light was on. The cables weren't moving as usual. The elevators were silently and mysteriously still.

He pushed both buttons several times, insisting on left and right sides simultaneously. He needed one elevator and it didn't matter which side. For a while, there was silence. And soon enough, the cables started rolling. The sound of metal screeching upwards seemed to take forever to reach the top floor.

One elevator had arrived. Which one was it? Left or right, he had to step inside anyway: there was nothing to do but take the risk. Watching nervously the floors going slowly one by one, the numbers lighting up in countdown, he wondered towards which of the universes he was headed. Out in the street, the atmosphere of that morning appeared calm enough. The traffic was not chaotic, people were passing by without any negative vibes around them, just casually walking. The air was fresh and clear. He started to feel more hope building up in his soul: maybe it was the right time, the right city and the favorable universe. And maybe it was also the better version of himself too.

He didn't have to wait too long for the bus. Everything was going well. He felt more confident with each step. He knew he would have good luck.

The guards at the medical unit were not hostile to him and did not try to prevent him from meeting her. They actually let him go

upstairs at the first floor to wait for her, because he had arrived too early and she wasn't there yet.

It was indeed the better version of reality, the better version of everything. He felt the universe was in his favor on that morning. He found a small balcony with columns that led to the front of the building, so he thought of happily waiting for her there, to see the moment she would arrive. It was the best place to be in that moment.

As he was looking around, in the morning light, he could feel anticipation build as a rising heat. As usual, the thought of her would make his heart race to an insane rhythm and he felt it descend in his stomach where it would beat heavily while his mind was rolling in tangled threads and fragments of thoughts and visions, anxiously trying to reason with emotions. The happiness of the total certainty that she would come and the opportunity to see her arrive were speeding his heartbeat and overwhelming his breathing. However, he knew he would calm down the moment he would see her. She had that undeniable effect on him: when she was there, everything was absolutely, perfectly and totally right. He believed that more than anything and knew he would be just fine around her. There was something so powerful in the way he felt about her, that it could surpass any circumstance: she made him better just by being near him.

Minutes were going by. Thomas watched every car and every person in the street with distracted attention, enjoying immensely the

chance to see her appear. *“Not this one, not that one, no, still not her...”* And then he saw Isabel. There was no doubt about it. The small car arrived in the alley and stopped slowly. Through the windshield he could see the thin arm on the wheel and the strands of hair going down her shoulders, while she was still inside. *“Yes, that’s her...”* he smiled happily.

She got out of the car and started walking towards the building: a dreamy beautiful vision in the morning light. She seemed so frail, so ethereal and surreal, and yet he knew she had so much strength above reality, that she could decide to mold it in whatever way she wanted. He watched her walk and felt again so amazed at how wonderful she was, with her entire presence. She looked up and noticed him at the balcony, smiled briefly and waved. He smiled back at her, even if he saw she made that gesture a few times for other people too, before entering the building. He knew he was not special to her in any way, but it didn't matter. He was happy to see her walking around... it was such a rare chance to see something so devastatingly beautiful in a way that could alter the universe completely. The only thing that cast a shade on his thoughts was the sense that she was a little afraid of him – because she didn't know what to expect and he also regretted having troubled her with his inappropriate attempts to be more than an outsider to her journey in her world. He didn't know the cause of her fear, but he knew that anyone who was afraid in some way had something to lose. As much as he was sure he loved her, he sensed she

did not return that feeling and avoided it. And yet even these thoughts didn't dim his joy and happiness of being there with her for what seemed endless and precious moments.

He watched her in dreamy contemplation as she was walking along the corridors, almost not touching the ground but flying effortlessly above it, sliding weightlessly like an astounding vision, an unusual apparition for that hard environment. He didn't see anything except her... She went inside the office and he waited to be called. He was calm, until another man came along and went in her office without asking permission. He heard them talking as if they knew each other well, in a familiar tone and he couldn't help thinking that he had lost the advantage of the moment again. He sensed the balance of the situation was already tipped against him. Thomas frowned: who was that man and why did he come at that very moment? Why did he go in her office like that? Was he a colleague or more?

Isabel seemed comfortable with that man, while Thomas was just a crazy prisoner to her, someone who felt too much, said too much, did too much, wanted too much while not being good enough... Maybe she was telling the man that Thomas was just a complicated patient who showed up at her door even if he had no medical reason to do that.

Something wasn't right anymore. He couldn't ignore the man in her office. He couldn't prevent the angry Thomas from taking over with defensive feelings, doubts, uncertainties and resentment for that

person who had appeared to scatter the joy of that morning from him. He felt betrayed by the situation: even in the brighter universe, wrong things happened. Why had that man come exactly at that particular moment, when he was having a beautiful morning with Isabel? Thomas felt his head get clouded and his hands tied up, as if in handcuffs again. How long would that man intend to stay in her office? Where would they go afterwards? It was completely out of his will or knowledge. There was nothing left to do but get up and go. There was nothing to be said anymore.

Thomas left the medical unit reluctantly. He knew he was still walking in the bright universe, where the elevator had sent him that morning, and yet something from the peaceful atmosphere had already faded away, as if a huge invisible hand had scattered the order of things like a castle of cardboard cubes, stealing and snatching unpredictably half of the light that was flowing above the city, while depriving him of the joy and happiness he had encountered for a brief moment earlier.

That shattered somehow the notion that the two realities were totally parallel and separate: they met somewhere and intertwined. He wondered what was the weak link between the good and not so good universe.

Thomas thought about himself from a new perspective. He had always considered himself as doing his best and being right in his decisions. Yet recently, he had started to doubt that he was only made

of qualities that would benefit someone else – and the love he thought would make someone happy was proving to do the opposite. He realized that his deep need for affection, his reckless courage, his impatience and daring attitude could impact unfavorably the very person he loved. It was hard to admit, but he wondered if she might have been better off in his absence.

Thomas would have liked to portray himself as a positive character, and yet he was very much aware of his own dark side. That man he had seen going that morning in her office – he hardly knew him, but already felt a rising resentment against him, a burning anger. His first instinct had been to evaluate his rival: not taller, not stronger than him for sure... but what about the rest? What if she liked that man a lot more for other reasons? Of course he must have been interested in Isabel – who wouldn't want to win the attention and heart of such an amazing girl as she was? It seemed so unfair to Thomas, he couldn't help being angry about the whole situation. He wondered: if there was a better version of himself in another universe, would that Thomas have more chances to mean more in Isabel's eyes?... In another world, would she like him better?

Sometimes Thomas felt that dreams were lives and pieces of reality from his existence in another universe – and then, the dream of flying with her could have been a memory, not an invented vision.

## The Tunnel

One condition for his rehabilitation was that he had to find work in that city. He had been given that time to stabilize his situation. They let him rent the room at the top floor of the tallest building in town, but within a month he had to find something to do. His days in the army were over after everything that had happened. He had to look for something else. He would have liked to still be a pilot, maybe for civilians, and transport people to places they dreamed of. He would have liked to do that for others: take them everywhere in the world, around the globe, make their dreams of traveling come true. He sometimes wondered if that would be his ideal life: to become a civilian pilot and share flying with Isabel too. She could go around the world with him. They could fly everywhere, free and happy...

And yet so many things stood between him and that dream. He had not finished his aviation studies and the army had kicked him out anyway. He didn't have a flying license or diploma. He had ruined his chances before he started. He had to look for something else as a job.

Work was not easy to find in that town. There were so many people and his skills did not cover areas that the adds in the newspapers requested: economy, computer programming, management, sales... Nothing he could provide qualification for. He



was good at working outside, tasks that required effort, concentration and handling tools. He knew he would have to find some underpaid work that didn't need a fancy diploma. Besides, with his record, he doubted he would be accepted by big companies. He walked along the streets by the river, passing each restaurant and small shop that could hire without many demands. He finally found an add of an underground tavern that was looking for waiters.

He wasn't sure which of the universes was giving him that chance. The two parallel worlds had started to overlap each other, confusing him about where he was every day. The brighter city had become a little tricky and unpredictable, while the stern, darker one had started to mellow, softening its walls, people and traffic, as if it was finally letting him be a part of it. He had begun to sense something familiar in both worlds, while he would walk along the streets it would be as if something around him belonged to him too. He wasn't a stranger anymore, in either one of the universes.

He started to look back on his life, analyzing what had brought him to that point. He couldn't envision a future without Isabel, but he knew that it was also out of the question: a doctor would never love a former prisoner – and even if she could, she would never let it happen. It was just not the best option for her and he knew it very well.

Thomas was accepted as a waiter at the tavern. After a few nights of serving tables, he got the hang of it and managed to wear the black

vest and white apron, moving around the tables without breaking any glasses, plates or spilling drinks. He carried the trays skillfully - he had equilibrium from the many exercises of walking with guns through mined fields, rope bridges or moving logs. His hands were also fast at setting tables or pouring drinks. The only thing he disliked was the obligation to be nice to everybody, even rude customers that he wanted to punch in the face or tell them to go to hell. Some were arrogant, some were provoking, especially after a few drinks. And some of them were asking for a fight. He had to throw out a few troublemakers.

Generally, he was doing fine with the job, even if he had to work at night. However, he didn't feel it was something he would do for many years in the future. He was certain it didn't represent him and wouldn't make use of what he was capable of doing – but what was he capable of? He hadn't found out yet.

The way to the tavern passed through a long tunnel with many stairs made of stones. The tavern was in the basement of the medieval castle on the hill, by the wide river. Every evening he would climb the stairs through the tunnel, cross the wooden bridge, turn around the walls and then descend to the cold underground where the floor was wet and the lamps lit up mysteriously the bricks of the medieval castle.

One night, as he went to the bar to pick an order of exotic cocktails, he heard female voices and one that he recognized. He lifted

his eyes and saw her: just as breathtakingly beautiful as ever, no longer in uniform, walking around in an elegant dress, accompanied by another girl that he was sure she would work in the medical field too. Isabel stood only a few meters away from him, eyes shining in the night, making his heart speed intensely. He watched them sit at a table, chatting relaxed and unaware of his presence there. He didn't know what to do: go up to the table and take their order, or avoid the possible contempt from them, for his work in that place. Whatever chances he might have had with Isabel, he knew he had blown them completely with the box of chocolate hearts. He didn't want to make a fool of himself again appearing yet in another unfavorable situation - as a waiter.

Thomas was tempted to get a closer look, so he stepped out of the corner and approached their table. In that moment, something unexpected happened: he was no longer in the same place. The two ladies were still at the table in front of him, but the room was different. It was a restaurant with glass walls all around, at the top of a building overlooking the city lights and the square with the colorful fountain that was in front of the tallest building where he stayed. He didn't understand how he had arrived in that restaurant and where the tavern had disappeared. Another waiter approached the table and asked the ladies what they would order. Thomas looked at the waiter: short hair, athletic build. Could it have been his double in the other universe? Had he stepped into the parallel universe where Isabel was

having a night out right in front of the building where he stayed, but at the moment when he wasn't there?

Someone put a hand on his shoulder, as if waking him up from a vision.

“Thomas, the people are waiting for their cocktails!”

He turned around. It was the bartender of the tavern, handing him the tray with drinks.

“Are you taking them or not?”

He looked around: the restaurant and Isabel were gone. He also knew she would never go out with him to such fancy places. The more he thought about it, the more inaccessible she appeared.

Having a glimpse of the parallel universe in that tavern made him question the stability of the two dimensions. If they were overlapping so profusely, it was becoming dangerous to keep track of the meaning of things. It was also getting hard to distinguish the boundaries of each world, which was confusing to say the least. Thomas didn't know if he had dreamed seeing her there, or he had witnessed it for real, stepping in a parallel world for a few minutes.

The top floor seemed above everything, every part of any universe. It was a separate level, from where he could see the most distant horizon. He would often just sit there by the window, looking away and wondering where she was... what she was doing... who she was with... what she was feeling... wishing... dreaming... Was she looking at the same multiple lights of the city, like an upside-down

night sky, splattered on earth, mirroring on a smaller scale the mysterious immensity of cosmic arrangements in light speed movements? Was she looking out the window into the night, in a direction where he stood, by his own window? Thomas couldn't help imagining her out there, beyond the darkness.

Thinking of her, he wondered what made somebody seem so sublime, the way Isabel was for him each time he saw her. In what way human perception mixed shapes, lines, movements, smells, colors, outside appearance, glances, words, attitudes and what percentage of the personal presence contributed to having an impression of someone. It wasn't just the physical aspect, for sure: she could be wearing snickers, jeans and a simple t-shirt and she was still just as sublime as she would have been in any elegant dress. Her beauty and stunning impact did not rely on external factors, but included them as a consequence. She had a unique aura about her, simply by being herself, the way she was. Something extraordinary made her stand out from anyone else in his eyes, making her presence in the world an absolute wonder. It went deeper than superficial emotions or likes. Thomas wondered how much subtle information would a person transmit in an instant about who they were inside, at first glance? Her image carried more than a vision: it was much deeper than exterior aspect. He was trying to figure out why he loved her so much. It was the way she smiled, how she cared and felt about things, the way she moved, what she did and the essence of her soul

that had gotten him completely addicted. It was not an esthetic contemplation, but a heartfelt certainty, the way he loved her presence and enjoyed watching her in the world. It was that crazy feeling that made her shine so irresistibly in his eyes.

At the same time, Thomas was aware he could not get her to feel appreciation, attraction or love for him, no matter how hard he would have tried – unless she definitely and undoubtedly liked him for who he was. And that was something he didn't know. He wasn't sure if he could try to see her again, but he decided he had to do it. Otherwise, he would miss an opportunity to turn the situation in his favor, or simply be near her for a while longer. He would have done anything for just another moment with her.

He arrived at the prison clinic just as early as the other day. He was there before her and glad about it: he could wait for Isabel to arrive and see her again walking to the door. He went to the balcony, leaning on the edge and looking at the passing cars and people, anticipating the moment of her apparition. The sun was calm and the atmosphere seemed serene. He didn't know which elevator he had taken – favorable or unfavorable – but somehow he knew the elevators didn't matter anymore. He also sensed something was not completely right in that morning light. Something cold, unspoken had crept in the essence of things. In a few minutes he saw her come and watched her park the car. She took a long time to get out of the vehicle. He didn't know why. But something was not right. For some

reason, although he was sure she had seen him, when she got out she didn't look in his direction anymore. She smiled at other people, but ignored him at the balcony. It was not the first time she avoided to look at him, so he tried not to worry too much, even if her cold distance made his heart feel a chilling shadow. He still enjoyed watching her walk around, just as beautiful and amazing as a day before, but she kept avoiding his eyes and entered the office. Thomas waited, in a way not able to understand what had changed in her attitude from one day to another. She clearly showed she did not have his interest at heart that morning.

And then the other man came again. Thomas frowned. It couldn't happen like that. But he remained determined to face the situation.

Isabel came to call him, after a few minutes.

“Come in, Thomas”.

She had spoken casually and he was happy for a moment that she remembered his name and who he was.

But then she did something unexpected: she let the man in her office consult him.

Thomas saw the man put on the plastic gloves and felt abandoned, betrayed, sold.

He sensed a complicity between the new doctor and Isabel. He didn't like it one bit. He stepped back.

“Let me see how your wound is healing”, the man spoke as if wanting to take control of the situation.

Thomas took another step back, defiantly. *“No way in hell you’re touching me”*, he thought.

“You're not my doctor”, he said.

“He's a part of the team, so let him”, Isabel said a bit coldly, turning away with indifference.

“I don't remember you as a part of the team”, Thomas protested again, stubbornly, not willing to comply.

He was there for her, and only for her. It had been only her name he had called. It was only her he wanted - as a doctor, as anything and everything. It was only her he trusted. And yet she was betraying him, throwing him away, turning her back to him. But that was not all – he had no idea what else she was about to do, how far she would go in denying him from her life.

In the confusion of the moment, Thomas heard her say something even more unexpected. She spoke clearly and without remorse:

“Your wound is fine and you have no reason to be here anymore. Please go and never look for me again, unless you have a medical emergency.”

Thomas stood there, freezing. Darkness fell on his mind. Her words left no choice, no hope, nothing. The only thing to do was turn around and go, disappear from her life forever and ever. He went out of the room.

He had finally received an answer: she didn't love him, couldn't



stand him and was annoyed and inconvenienced by his feelings of adoration and admiration. Isabel had no need for his love, attention or existence. There was no other truth. No other question. No doubt about it anymore.

Thomas felt like dying in that very moment. He left quickly, without looking back, as his heart had sunken somewhere under the ground he was walking on.

The world around him was suddenly spinning violently. He had to wake up to the truth that she had been cruel, heartless, indifferent to him. He couldn't avoid getting it through his head that she absolutely didn't give a damn about who he was or what was happening to his life. And that was the end of it. Forever. It was a nightmare unfolding before his eyes. He was speechlessly shocked, but walked on mechanically to the elevators, returning to the top floor of the tall building.

He realized she had probably been offended that he would consider himself good enough to fall in love with her and dream of them together, while being a prisoner that she treated. Handling the scalpel, syringes, needles and other instruments certainly required precision and cold blood. One would probably have to diminish unnecessary thoughts, detach from emotions, desensitize impressions, depersonalize perceptions. Thomas knew her work would have the inevitable consequence of influencing how she behaved. It could also be that he didn't mean very much to Isabel. *"I was just a broken toy for*

her", he thought remembering her defiant cold stare that seemed to say "*Nothing of what you see is or ever will be yours*".

It wasn't that he'd been so amazed by her in every way, but he'd also felt a connection he couldn't explain. He hadn't shared with anyone that level of trust, surrender and exposure, placing his life and his soul in her hands, letting her decide to save or kill, love or hate, know or ignore, accept or reject. It almost didn't matter what she had chosen to do: he couldn't stop loving her, despite the pain he felt in his heart. He knew he was just a complicated patient to her and she didn't like him if she had decided to cut him out of her life so radically. Thomas finally understood that her kindness had been a professional routine, a superficial circumstantial mask, her smile had been a simple formality and her attention a random obligation amplified by his feverish imagination. She'd been bothered by his love the whole time and he had no idea, until her annoyance escalated to the point she had to tell the truth in a harsh unexpected way.

It was the end of everything, in his mind. And as a confirmation, reflecting the truth, a terrible storm started at once over the city. The infernal night was announcing itself, rolling its veil upon everything, tumbling down in his thoughts, dragging him in the abyss of darkness, deep, irreversible, merciless, implacable as the most appalling nothingness of the universe. Heavy rain started pouring on the imposing black building with an immense poster of a watch on the front. Thunder and tons of water were threatening to break the

windows, hitting the metal frames with speed and force. The entire city was drowned in gray water: the buildings had resigned their colors under the storm and traffic could hardly be seen moving through the curtains of thousands of endless rattling raindrops.

Thomas stared at the storm: it was just as decisive as a condemnation. It was like the end of everything. The feeling of emptiness and darkness had settled above that unstable world. He was sure the elevators had nothing to do with it anymore: a higher, darker power had taken control of the universe and was bringing it to an end.

The colorful fountain in the middle of the square had shut down. It no longer had any colors or sprinkling water. Thomas could see a total obscurity falling over everything. He sensed the meaning of the past month had brought the rotating universe to a dead road, to an ending of the whole mystery: life was being drained out of it in a terrible storm.

Thomas had to go to the tavern that night, even if his heart was heavy and his mind burdened with the realization that Isabel was gone from his life forever. He went by the river as usual, even if he could hardly move his feet in the night. Every step seemed useless and lifeless to him. He saw no point in anything anymore: no future, no past, no nothing. There was nothing left in her absence. He felt it like a knife through his heart, draining him of any hope or will to live. He was moving along the streets like an empty carcass, a shadow of a

man with a permanent pain in his chest and a stifling knot in his throat. Words were gone. Dreams were gone. Purpose was gone. There was nothing left. No motivation, no reason to try anything anymore.

He arrived at the tavern. The tunnel was wet and cold. Rivers of rain had flooded the stairs and drops of chilling water were sliding down the bricks. There were no people on that night. He kept descending through the tunnel. The lamps on the walls were humid and flickering with unstable pale light. The inside of the tavern was also empty: no guests, no visitors, no clients. Only the bartender came to him with a menu in his hand.

“Are you going to order something?”

Thomas stared at him. The man behaved as if he didn't know Thomas.

“No. I work here.”

“Not possible, sir. If you're not going to order anything, you must get out.”

He looked around: the lights were extinguished in the silent room. Thomas shrugged: after having lost Isabel, he felt as if he had lost everything, so being there didn't matter anymore. He didn't need any explanations from that tavern. He didn't want anything, anyway.

He turned around and left.

Upon exiting the room, he entered the tunnel again, where the lamps were going out one by one, leaving total darkness around. He

could feel water on his head, damping his hair, sliding down his neck in cold shivers. The last lamp finally went out and the tunnel became completely dark. Through the obscurity he could hear something approaching: it was the sound of an engine. For a moment, he wondered how a vehicle could go through such a narrow tunnel, where only two people could walk at a time. Outside, thunder was roaring again, tearing everything to nothingness. And then he saw the headlights. It wasn't the same tunnel anymore: the walls weren't made of bricks, but of cement. And something was coming through the darkness, in high speed. It was indeed a vehicle. He wondered if it was a train, but there were no railways underneath his feet. There was only a road and a chilling draft like winter, cutting through his skin, to his bones and soul. He stopped there, determined to let the vehicle crush him to pieces. What was the use of resisting his destiny when everything had gone wrong. The ghostly engine approached suddenly, and the headlights blinded him. In a second, the big truck collided with his body, but somehow went through, and in that fraction of a moment he had a glimpse of the people in the cabin: they were the officers who he had gotten into an accident with, many months ago. He looked at their faces and realized he knew them: it was the tall doctor, some other guards from the prison and of course, Isabel herself, who was behind the wheel. He stared in their eyes, as they drove right through him, disappearing in the other end of the tunnel.

He remained there, still standing. In complete darkness, he realized what the vision meant: he had collided with them that night long ago and he probably had not survived. The tunnel where he was, the parallel worlds, the prison walls, the tall black building with a huge poster of a wristwatch on its front, the top floor, the elevators... none of it had been real as a part of the world where he'd been alive. By some unexpected twist of the moment, the memory of the night of the accident came back to him. He recalled hitting the truck and going unconscious afterwards. But the rest of what had happened must have been a dreamy hallucination or a trip through another dimension, an afterlife tour of an underground universe where light and darkness were mixing, where nothing was predictable and possible to explain.

He suddenly realized why there was no future for him with Isabel: he was already dead. He had been dead for a long time, ever since the accident. Either that, or he had gone completely mad. And the other alternative would have been that he was still unconscious, while no time had actually passed since the accident and he was still on the road.

Thomas was inclined to believe that he was already inexistent and everything had been just visions, flashes of a movie-like sequence of events, meant to show him one last truth about his life. He knew he had to get some last meaning, wisdom, something to cling to in that tunnel of darkness. Yet he couldn't grasp it: what was the ultimate conclusion? What was the direction to go? What was there left?

Everything had crumbled: planets, stars, worlds, universes, and most of all - above all, love.

What was there left to do? What else to be?

As a mystery itself, just as life and death intertwined without any answer to why, how and why not, Thomas knew that whatever revelation, discovery or wisdom would rise beyond the meaning of that ultimate experience, whatever he was about to reach if he ever got out of that tunnel, it would not bring him any solace or comfort for having lost what he never really had – but in a way, love had belonged to him for a while. Even if it had been just a dream, ending too abruptly, it had contained the most brilliance, brightness and intensity of light, of life, of infinity. It had been everything, in such a brief and absolute way.

Thomas felt that something from that shiny sublime intensity still remained in his heart and it dawned in a flicker of light: if everything had ended in that dark universe, maybe there was another universe, the brighter one that still remained somewhere, as an open window. Maybe there was a better version of himself and of Isabel in another better world. And maybe there, they could still have a chance of flying together, to meet on a day that would never end, with a happiness that would be eternal as light itself, and in that other life he could still be a pilot, sharing the sky with her. In that universe love would be their truth, freely and undeniably. If there was the slightest possibility, Thomas was willing to close his eyes, only to open them again with

the promise that the dream could exist in that other world, as a brighter alternative, as an endless option. He was ready to believe, despite the undeniable ending he was confronted with, that life could become a dream in a better way, in another place and time, in a better version of the truth, even if it was just an idea, a vision of a lost hope. He didn't hope for it. He just envisioned the chance. And by the simple fact that he could imagine it, he knew it was possible to exist in another new universe, in a unique and secret light.

Whatever awaited – or not – ahead of him at the end of the tunnel, if the tunnel even had a way out, he knew he would never return to tell about it.

And it didn't matter.