

Owlient



Bucephalus

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Prologue

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On the day of Alexander the Great's birth, another event took place that had a profound impact on humanity. One of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) was burnt to the ground by a man named Herostratus. Under torture, he confessed that he had sought glory and fame at any cost, and had seen no other way of achieving this. He was brought before the courts, and before the people, who looked on him, filled with hatred and disgust.

But if the judges and the crowd had been less blinded by anger, they would have noticed the Sibyl, lit up in the surrounding darkness by the dying glow from the burning temple. The old woman's eyes rolled back and she began to convulse violently, crying out in a prophetic trance. A priest who had survived the blaze took her in his arms before she collapsed into a coma that was to last for several days. He later engraved the Sibyl's words onto a copper tablet. She had spoken with what seemed to be the voice of the gods of Olympus:

Great is the wrath of Artemis, daughter of Zeus. She would have punished the perpetrator of this mortal sacrilege herself. She would have pierced his heart with one of her silver arrows had an urgent duty not kept her away. The goddess even now watches over the birth of the child who will enforce respect for the gods throughout the earthly kingdom. Artemis, goddess of the hunt, of wild animals and the wilderness, goddess of midwives and goddess of the Great Bear constellation, took a star from the Centaurus constellation and offered it to the child in order to guide him to his glorious destiny. He will thus fall under the protection of that mythical being, half-man and half-horse, and his destiny shall be linked to Chiron and to horses.

But this insult by Herostratus must never be permitted to happen again. Man must never again compete with the gods. Delusions of grandeur and glory are human weaknesses that must not be allowed to jeopardise the realm of the gods, nor of man. Artemis then gifted the star with another power: if, by misfortune, its bearer were to succumb to madness or rage, or should his ambition exceed reason, the star would lead him to ruin.

For as long as he keeps this star, no man will be able to defeat him. As long as he remains humble and honest in his deeds, as long as he remains moderate and wise, he will be invincible. But if he falters, he will be consumed by the wrath of Zeus.

At that moment, the child who would one day become Alexander the Great, one of the greatest conquerors in the world, uttered his first cry.

Through the pain of childbirth, Queen Olympias, priestess of Zeus and the ambitious wife of Philip II of Macedonia, heard the oracle of Artemis as an omen. But despite the exhaustion, a victorious smile played across her lips. What mother does not dream of an exceptional destiny for her child? With the help of the gods, she would do everything she

could to educate Alexander and elevate him to the rank destined for him. He would accomplish her own dreams of power and eternal glory. She did not believe the Sibyl's warning. If Alexander were to enjoy the protection of the gods, why should he show moderation and restraint? He would be the greatest of all men, a leader of armies who would be revered until the end of time.

When the midwife handed the newborn to his mother, Olympias took him in her arms and embraced him tenderly. She then felt a sharp point digging into the crook of her neck. Holding him away from her, she noticed a bronze star clutched tight within her child's fist. Then and there she recognised the power of this star, an object that was intended for Alexander and Alexander alone. Thinking that the Oracle had addressed her alone, she believed that nobody else knew about the star. However, the midwife had seen the star of Artemis and Olympias could not risk the secret being disclosed. The midwife who posed such a threat died swiftly at the fangs of the snakes that watched over Olympias as she slept. The star belonging to Artemis, daughter and messenger of Zeus, would be the secret symbol of the gods' covenant which was to render Alexander both invincible and immortal.

A second Temple of Artemis was built in the middle of the fourth century BC on the remains of the first. The temple would later be pillaged by the Ostrogoths in 263AD, and then burnt by the Christians in 401AD. Emperor Justinian destroyed it definitively by taking away some of the columns in order to build the Great Palace of Constantinople. Like so many after him, Justinian spent much time trying to decipher the meaning of the words engraved on the copper plaque he'd found on one of the stone columns. Who wouldn't dream of possessing the star of the all-powerful gods? He would keep the engraved prophecy in his palace, rolled up inside a huge Byzantine carpet, which would be hidden in his extensive library along with all his other treasures.

As luck, or fate, would have it, Alexander passed through Ephesus when he was twenty-three years old and even offered to give the Greeks gold to rebuild the temple. But the populace were afraid and refused his offer. So he continued on his journey, never once setting eyes on the copper plaque fixed to one of the columns in the Naos, the inner sanctum of the temple.

The Network

“*Flee Babylon across the sands, and follow the water, the divine tears of white gold and the blood on the stone temple of Zeus’*... Professor Temudjin, if the last rider from Alexander the Great’s army entrusted the star fragment to priests from a temple of Zeus, it doesn’t match our reconstruction of the route we think he took. Circa 326BC and up until the Empire was divided among his generals in the years after Alexander died in Babylon around 323BC, we can’t find any historical or geographical trace of temples dedicated to Zeus in the area. And in any case, it would take years to unearth any remains we found under the desert, like Jerash in Jordan, for example!”

“John, the Temple of Zeus in Jerash is Roman, not Greek, like so many of the so-called Greco-Roman ruins after Alexander’s death,” explains the professor patiently.

“I know, Professor, I’m just starting to despair. Hannibal has four of the five fragments of Alexander the Great’s seal, and I don’t think we’re going to get to the last fragment before him...”

The members of the Network, who are exhausted after their extensive research, seem completely overwhelmed by John’s conclusions. Then a female voice breaks the heavy silence.

“Professor?”

“Yes, Leyla?”

“Let’s start from the beginning. We are confident that the rider, still carrying the fragment, crossed the Syrian desert. We know he crossed it to the south-west, after starting out from Babylon, without getting as far as either the Mediterranean Sea or the Red Sea. That means the search area is limited to the region between the south of Syria, the north-west of Saudi Arabia and Jordan. To survive in these desert lands, he must have taken a path where water was likely to be found, seeking out the few wells and oases that were often several days’ walk apart. He must have come across nomadic tribes, who were travelling in their caravans from one distant city to another, and spreading their beliefs as they went. Is it possible that the rider, wandering lost across these unknown lands, could have met the representatives of another god similar to Zeus?”

“Leyla, you’re a genius!” cries Salonqa. “The caravans were transporting “*divine tears of white gold*”, precious incense from the present-day Sultanate of Oman, to Egypt and Mesopotamia. The wealthy Nabataeans, the nomadic people whose name comes from ‘nabat’, meaning ‘water coming up from the earth’, had the monopoly on the incense route. They had mastered the techniques of locating, storing and concealing water in the desert.”

“What god did they worship?” interrupts Pablo. “Is there a temple or a statue there for a local Zeus?”

“The supreme god was *Dushara*, the god of the mountain,” answers John. The Nabataeans didn’t have humanized representations of their gods, but they erected squat rectangular standing stones in areas considered sacred to them. They called these ‘baetyls’, meaning ‘sacred stones’.” In their ceremonies, thirteen priests would sprinkle the sacred stone with the blood of a sacrificial animal. This would explain ‘*the blood on the stone temple of Zeus*’.”

“And the main place of worship was Petra in Jordan,” adds Leyla, quivering with excitement. “Petra, the UNESCO World Heritage Site, ‘the Rock’ of golden and rose-red sandstone where the Nabataeans stored their riches. An inaccessible city hidden within a labyrinth of granite chasms. Isolated from natural thoroughfares, surrounded by towers formed from knobs in the rock, rearing above breathtakingly sheer walls, its narrow valleys and passes make it impregnable...”

“I’ll send you the maps of Petra,” says John. If the *Dushara* religious ceremony took place at the top of the mountain, the procession of priests and worshippers would bring the baetyl and countless offerings to the temple located in the lower town, where I’ve put an arrow. If our deductions are correct, there’s a good chance that the seal fragment is still there. Professor Temudjin, tell the members of UNESCO to prevent anyone from entering the temple!”

At this very moment, the professor, who is usually so unshakeable, suddenly shows signs of distress. He raises a hand, motioning the members of the Network to be silent, his eyes focused elsewhere. After what feels like an age, he makes an announcement.

“There’s just been a terrible newsflash. A number of unexplained explosions have just destroyed much of the ruins of Petra. I’m sorry...”

At this exact moment, a conversation is taking place high in the sky.

“Good work. The amount that was agreed on has been transferred to the specified account.”

The man’s blue eyes crinkle with satisfaction as he ends the call on his satellite phone. An evil smile plays across the lips of John Fitzgerald Hannibal as his private jet flies over Jordan. With the tip of his index finger, he caresses a triangular piece of bronze metal, the sole contents of a reinforced case capable of withstanding the impact of a next generation missile. The value of the UNESCO World Heritage Site was of little importance to him; its destruction allowed the corrupt archaeologists of the “Hannibal Human History” Foundation to retrieve the last fragment of the star of Alexander the Great. Now nothing and no one would stop him from carrying out his plan...

Bavaria, Germany

As his jet finally begins its descent, Hannibal looks out of the window at the towers of his castle, Schattental, “the valley of shadow”. It is a building with a rich history and previously belonged to a descendant of the family of Louis II of Bavaria, before it was bought for a tidy sum by Hannibal Corp and converted into a laboratory. The jet finally enters the deep valley hidden between two mountains, and heads towards a castle dating from the Romantic era but featuring a somewhat eclectic architecture; originally constructed in the Romanesque style, the castle had since been added onto and now sports a variety of neo-Gothic and Byzantine additions. The castle is nestled in the heart of a forest of tall black pines, and is surrounded by an immense terraced garden featuring a number of fountains. On the right side of the huge castle is a structure made from wood and stone, resembling a large barn but with a ceiling much higher than those normally found in the mountains. The green grass surrounding this building has not been cut, but is ragged and uneven and shows bare patches of broken ground, suggesting the likelihood of nearby animals, and confirmed by the presence of electric fences. Although bereft of life at this very moment, this area has obviously undergone work to accommodate animals. At the back of the castle there is a locked, dark, stone building which looks similar to the barn and appears to be just as empty.

Overlooking the castle, a landing strip which clashes brusquely with the landscape has been built to facilitate the round trips of the Hannibal Corp employees and Hannibal himself. As his henchmen rush out to greet him, Hannibal waits patiently at the top of the jet’s unfolding staircase, enjoying the damp, clean air and the smell of sap, moss and grass that is so characteristic of the Bavarian region. He quickly returns to reality, however, when a vibration on his wrist alerts him to an incoming message. He glances at the screen of his smart watch, which is currently showing a photo of Nadja with her aunt and her uncle at Vladivostok Airport in Russia.

“Good work, Filipe,” he responds.

Hannibal then heads to the entrance of the castle where a kind of automated drawbridge provides access to a huge Gothic lobby. Menacing gargoyles watch overhead as visitors enter, and their footsteps echo off the high ceiling. Hannibal’s muddy feet dirty the Byzantine carpet that covers the floor in its entirety, a find he’d brought back from one of his expeditions to the former Constantinople while following in Alexander’s footsteps. Empty chairs lining the walls await non-existent guests, crystal chandeliers hang the length of the path marked out by a semi-circle of pillars, illuminating a room that is no longer lit by the natural light shining in through the old stained glass windows, as these have been replaced by opaque armoured panes.

Hannibal then makes his way down a spiral staircase, dimly lit by bulbs mounted into the wall, and enters a security airlock requiring three separate keys to open it. Hannibal first presses the tip of his right index finger against a scanner, then taps a code into a digital

interface, before finally enunciating in a clear voice,

“John Fitzgerald Hannibal.”

The door unlocks slowly, opening to reveal a circular corridor that runs around the central staircase. Hannibal walks hurriedly down the corridor, closely followed by one of his gorillas wearing a black suit, passing a huge room filled with screens in which three employees are carefully monitoring the actions of every living person in the castle, and every room, as well as the local vicinity thanks to dozens of cameras hidden everywhere. The group of men continue along the circular corridor, arriving at a second fully glazed room that appears to be a laboratory. There are tables and oversized surgical equipment everywhere, people in white coats wearing masks, test tubes, microscopes, computers and panels with diagrams of genomes and equations with arrows connecting them. Without glancing once at all the activity in the lab, Hannibal walks to the end of the corridor and turns around. The guard stops and stands with his back to Hannibal to give him some privacy.

To his left, the staircase continues down to a secondary basement level. In front of him is a door similar to that of a safe, complete with a number of pistons and mechanical bolts as well as a lock resembling a ship's wheel. Hannibal walks closer, carefully avoiding one of the paving stones in the middle of the corridor. From out of his shirt he slips a key the shape of an eighteen-pointed cross, attached to a platinum chain, and inserts it into the keyhole in the middle of the lock. Then, with his guard waiting patiently behind him, Hannibal seizes the wheel of the safe door and executes the opening sequence by turning the wheel in a series of movements to the right and to the left. A quick staccato of clicks rings out through the corridor, revealing Hannibal's desire for haste.

Slowly, with a loud hiss, the door unlocks and slides open, revealing a small circular room with metallic elements. In the middle of the room is a cylindrical machine on top of a black volcanic stone table. The edges are lit by a soft golden light, and in the centre is a hollow in the shape of a five-pointed star. The machine is surrounded by a number of electronic stands, topped with glass domes that contain display units no larger than a human hand.

Hannibal walks around the central machine towards the stand at the back of the room and moves a small lever on the side of it to reveal a numeric keypad.

His fingers hurriedly tap in a code which soon unlocks the interior of the dome. Inside there is a small triangular hole into which he places the fifth and final fragment of the star, which he has just removed from the case. He then addresses the guard, his voice trembling with excitement,

“Christian, fetch some champagne.”

He takes a step back and his hand grips the empty case as the dome closes slowly. Hearing the lock click shut, he sighs in satisfaction.

“Everything is finally ready.”

Someone knocks on the office door where Hannibal is once again reading the copper tablet stolen from Emperor Justinian's treasure trove. Should he trust the ramblings of an ancient, mad old woman and take these warnings seriously? No, surely not, he tells himself as the knocking on the door increases in intensity. Hannibal decides to answer and angrily sets down the tablet on the pile of diagrams and maps covering his desk.

"What?! What is it now?!"

"Sir, it's seven o'clock."

Hannibal had almost lost track of time. He hauls himself out of his brown leather chair, and quickly tidies the mass of papers on the oval, solid oak desk standing in the middle of the room. He turns off the small floor lamp tucked away in the corner of two walls that are lined with book-filled shelves and heads towards the source of the voice. He closes the large, metal-reinforced door carefully behind him as he does so. Hurrying down the stairs of the tower behind his henchman, he takes no notices of the arrowslits and irregular stones which form the walls of the tower, nor the marks of age on the steps whose edges have worn smooth after the passage of so many feet. He only has one thing in mind; the final accomplishment of his plan after all these years of work, research, struggle and violence.

But nevertheless, Hannibal tries to clear his head, because he knows that when too many thoughts cloud his mind, when he is worried or anxious, the animal will sense it immediately and will not let him approach. The staircase opens onto a large reception area dominated by a ceiling fresco inspired by the Sistine Chapel. It fills the walls, and extends down the length of the archways all the way to the white marble floor. The chests of drawers, tables and chairs from another era stand with pride of place, even though they have remained unused for many years. Hannibal's footsteps echo off the marble as he heads towards the central staircase.

"Christian, go check if everything is ready outside."

On hearing this order, the henchman hurries out through the back door, also only accessible by code like all the others. Christian then enters the building at the rear, which houses a large wooden riding school or manege, filled with ochre sand and linked to a corridor leading to a stall on the right side of the castle. Everything is in order, nothing has been disturbed. Christian doesn't detect any threats, either from inside or outside.

Reaching the second basement floor, Hannibal opens yet another door and enters a huge room the size of the castle, where the ground is bare soil planted over with grass. Mountainous forest and rolling landscapes have been projected onto the walls, which have electrical wires running along them, and are kept permanently magnetised by Hannibal's technicians. They automatically repel any figure or object that approaches them. A human would feel hemmed in by such a ploy, despite the numerous shrubs and flowers placed arbitrarily here and there throughout the huge room. The light seems

natural but rather pale, like that of a grey, cloudy day.

Hannibal picks up a halter hanging from a hook at the back of the staircase and whistles, hoping to attract the attention of his target. The sound of hooves echoes off the stone ceiling and Hannibal gradually makes out the silhouette of a horse among the trees. A stallion, almost adult and entirely black except for a white star on his forehead, suddenly rushes forward. He is a specimen of enthralling strength and elegance. His black mane, fluttering as he gallops, is sleek and without a hair out of place, his muscles flex under his shining, even coat, and his bright eyes stare at the intruder with unparalleled determination.

“Bucephalus, come to me,” calls Hannibal in a whisper.

As the animal approaches slowly, Hannibal holds out his arms and presents the horse with the halter as a sign of peace and goodwill. Bucephalus stops, suspicious as he senses the thoughts flooding into Hannibal’s mind and the underlying nervousness, aware of the stress and haste of the man in front of him. Hannibal approaches step by step, but each time he advances, the horse retreats, stamping the ground. Hannibal tries to avoid any sudden movements and focuses on appearing as calm and affable as possible, but to no avail. Bucephalus continues to move backwards, walking in small circles and stamping the ground repeatedly with his hooves. With his ears pinned back and his tail lashing the air, anxiety finally overcomes him as Hannibal’s patience also fades. The wretched stallion seems impossible to control, but Hannibal makes one last attempt. He turns around and pretends to walk away, which seems to reassure Bucephalus. The man takes two steps towards the stairs, slipping the halter down his arms and holding the leading rein firmly, then spins abruptly so he can spring up and grab onto the horse’s neck.

Hannibal then tries to slip Bucephalus’ muzzle into the noseband of the halter, but the stallion rears up furiously, throwing Hannibal to the ground. Then he gallops off to hide among the trees, far from this man and his deceitful tactics.

Hannibal, who is frustrated and in the throes of rage, such a rare thing for him, furiously throws the halter on the ground. Then he turns and goes to find the only man capable of controlling the animal, Sergei Tkachev, who had once taught him to ride a horse as a child, so long ago...

Sergei, interrupted while reading in his room at the top of one of the castle's many towers, obeys Hannibal's orders immediately. He knows that he has no choice, that the sooner he accomplishes his mission for the "heir", the sooner he will be able to go home and be reunited with his daughter and family. He grits his teeth, thinking back to the oath he swore to Hannibal's father before his death, remembering that day in Moscow when the heir had come to tell him about his father's passing, and finally that phone call, laconic and imperious, urging him to return to the Basque country, and the site of that terrible accident. Sergei had always been a silent man, and a man of his word. But the oath sworn to Hannibal's father, to always protect and serve his son, is costing him dearly. He consoles himself by thinking that at least his daughter Nadja is now safe with her aunt and her uncle.

Sergei walks down to meet Hannibal, in the same place where the latter had just experienced bitter failure a few moments earlier. Without showing any sign of surprise, Sergei takes a long look around the artificial garden before spotting the outline of a black stallion who is hiding in a copse. Sergei asks Hannibal to walk backwards until he is against the wall of the staircase. Then he takes the halter and heads towards the sounds of worried panting behind the illusory protection of the trees. He walks slowly, taking his time, and taking deep breaths in and out to regulate his breathing.

He spots the black stallion between two beech trees, all four hooves planted firmly on the ground, alert and wary. It's the first time that Hannibal has allowed him to see the animal; until now, he had always managed to control him by himself. He had struggled to help break in the foal, had taken care to get him used to his presence, and the young stallion was now willing to be led to the meadow or to the arena, to work on his muscles while under the restraint of the lungeing rein. But today Bucephalus seems too concerned about Hannibal's state of mind to let him come near him.

Sergei gradually makes out the magnificent creature, picked out by the cold light of the basement. The stallion is the most beautiful horse he has ever seen, perfectly proportioned, and with a shining coat and silky mane, his eyes sparkling with intelligence and determination. A powerful steed, proud and brave, worthy of the great warrior kings of old, and resembling those so much admired in antique statuary. The stallion displays perfect symmetry, without any apparent defects, almost too much so in fact; there is something strange and almost unreal about this horse. Sergei is overwhelmed by a feeling of unease, the disturbing sense that something is wrong, that this horse just doesn't belong. The stallion contrasts with his environment so much that he almost seems like an actor against a green screen. But the horse whisperer has neither the choice nor the time to give this any more consideration; he must obey Hannibal and bring the horse to him.

Sergei instinctively understands the stallion's desire to flee, or fight if flight is impossible. He decides to show that he is not a threat and that he will not push the stallion into a corner. Sergei advances slowly to reveal himself to the stallion without overwhelming

him, then stops and calls out softly. Bucephalus, intrigued, begins to trot in a half circle, head down, remaining at a safe distance from Sergei. One ear pointed towards the horse whisperer, now standing to the side so as not to be looking at the horse but without turning his back, the stallion watches to see how responsive the man is. Sergei whispers, and adjusts his demeanour to fit his words, uttered in the low, rasping tones of the Russian language, which is, nonetheless, soothing. The stallion stands, both ears erect, listening.

“Bucephalus, I’m not going to hurt you. Watch and see, I’m not going to invade your territory. I respect you as I would ask you to respect me. You can come to me without fear.”

Little by little, he feels the horse begin to relax, curiosity outweighing his mistrust. Bucephalus takes a step forwards, then a second, then another and another, until he finally reaches Sergei who is waiting patiently. Then he snorts gently before resting his forehead against Sergei’s shoulder. The latter strokes him, thanking him for his trust. Then he slowly takes the halter in one hand and moves his other towards Bucephalus’ neck, reassuring him and encouraging him, before slipping the halter around the horse’s head.

Sergei turns to Hannibal, holding Bucephalus by the leading rein, hoping that he won’t harm the horse. He knows that the anger and madness he has detected in this man can provoke him into terrible acts towards others, man and horse alike, as he has shown in the past. Once they are next to each other, Hannibal orders Sergei,

“Hold him a while longer, as I don’t want him to run off again. Then I want you to follow me.”

Sergei nods and walks behind Hannibal, who heads briskly... towards the wall! Nonplussed, Sergei continues to follow Hannibal without understanding. Hannibal reaches the wall and pushes against one of the irregular stones. The stone sinks into the wall a few inches, triggering the opening of a secret passageway. It reveals a lift that could fit at least twenty people in it. Hannibal walks in followed by Sergei, still holding Bucephalus by his rein. The lift is filled with the sweet scent of essential oils. The doors close and Hannibal fiddles with a small control panel. The lift seems more like a high-tech goods lift than anything else. The fragrance seems to soothe Bucephalus, who has been flinching at each strange sound made by the lift, and even Sergei and Hannibal relax as they move upwards towards the surface.

There is a brief beeping noise and the doors open inside the barn, which turns out to be some kind of large stall, Sergei is surprised to discover. The floor has been sprinkled with pristine beige sawdust, the wooden walls have been given a wax finish and there is not a single cobweb or insect in sight. Hannibal opens the outer door of the stall, takes the leading rein from Sergei’s hands without asking and drags the horse behind him. Bucephalus realises that he is now at Hannibal’s mercy and begins to tug at his halter, but Sergei murmurs some words of reassurance, managing to calm him down and getting him to move forwards.

The last ray of sunlight is slowly fading from the valley, leaving only the mountain range to the west still bathed in light. Several minutes pass as the three wait patiently and in silence, without looking at each other. When the last ray fades into darkness, Hannibal pulls Bucephalus towards him and walks with a determined tread into the now dark meadow.

Sergei doesn't understand Hannibal. Why is there an artificial meadow underground when the castle has such huge grounds? Why is he only letting Bucephalus out when the sun has left the valley? Then it suddenly dawns on him. He'd thought that the light in the basement had been rather dark. It had given him the feeling of being in the countryside, but a countryside devoid of sunlight! Hannibal was doing everything he could to ensure that Bucephalus wasn't exposed to sunlight. Sergei remembers the story of the first meeting between Alexander the Great and his horse and connects the dots. Chills run down his spine. The stallion is called Bucephalus, just like Alexander's mythical horse, and Hannibal is acting as though it really is the horse from the legend. He is worried about Bucephalus being frightened by his own shadow, so Hannibal is preventing such a situation from ever occurring.

Sergei wonders how Hannibal got to this stage. What had been a childhood passion for the Conqueror has turned into an obsession, into madness. Stunned by this discovery, he suddenly dreads what this man has in store. There is no longer any limit to his paranoia or to his all-consuming ambition. As soon as Hannibal unties Bucephalus' halter, the stallion gallops off straight ahead, whinnying loudly, bucking furiously upon reaching the electrified borders of the meadow, and rearing up as though to challenge whomever is preventing him from leaving this prison. Then Hannibal turns to Sergei, a haunted look on his face and a twisted smile on his lips.

“Now you understand. You are going to have to work with me until we have managed to settle this small... problem. We will start tomorrow.”

So Hannibal wants control over this stallion, to become its master, and he can't do it alone. Just like Bucephalus, Sergei wants to rear up in anger and flee from this prison, but he knows that he won't do anything. He can't afford to risk anything in case this man were to take it out on Nadja or his family.

Professor Temudjin's office, University of Ulan Bator, Mongolia

Nadja rubs her eyes feverishly. Even during the flight from Vladivostok to Ulan Bator, she hadn't managed to get a wink of sleep. She is obsessed with the idea of finding her father, Sergei the horse whisperer, who has fallen into Hannibal's clutches. She can't count on anybody but herself. But how can a young Russian girl, who's penniless and alone, guess where in the wide world the elusive Hannibal has hidden her father and her stallion, Zaldia?

"Have some tea, Nadja. And please, try to eat something," insists Salonqa, handing her a plate of doughnuts.

The girl stifles a sob. She pushes away the pile of paper she has clumsily drawn on, remembering the terrible moment when she had found herself prisoner in the control room in Hannibal's castle in the Basque Country.

"There were so many screens, images and sounds. I was so afraid. I can't remember anything I saw and heard on those screens. I'm sorry..."

Professor Temudjin smiles at her kindly and gathers up the sheets of paper, before handing them to a young man who is sitting with a graphic tablet in front of him.

"This information is really useful, Nadja. Our colleague Kushi will carry on making models from your drawings and we will be able to create a digital version of them. We will be able to use the skills of Kushi and all of the other members of the Network to move forward. I suggest you get some rest."

"I can't!" laments Nadja, running her hands through her shock of red hair. "My father is in danger. When Hannibal is finished with him and Zaldia, they'll be of no more use to him than an old pair of socks. He'll get rid of them!"

"You can't help them if you are completely exhausted," says Salonqa forcefully. "Come and lie down on the sofa in the next room. If you fall asleep then I'll wake you up in twenty minutes."

Feeling defeated, Nadja gets up from her seat to follow Salonqa. All of a sudden, a girl's excited voice bursts from the speakers above the computer screens.

"Wait! I've got a great idea!"

Everyone turns to Leyla, videoconferencing from Cairo in Egypt. On another screen, John's face suddenly looks much more attentive. Leyla's American boyfriend is very familiar with the "great ideas" his ball of energy and spontaneity comes up with; her ideas are really ingenious... sometimes!

"I could give her a Sweet Kiss!"

The other members of the Network, gathered around Professor Temudjin's desk either in

person or virtually, look stunned. In Massachusetts, Battushig asks,

“Leyla, you want to kiss Nadja?”

“Noooo! “Sweet Kiss” is the name of my aunt’s beauty salon. When a client is terrified at the thought of being waxed, we offer to hypnotise them! The client completely relaxes and lets herself go, and then she often talks about her life or tells us her guiltiest secrets in minute detail! My aunt says that I’m very talented and...”

“I don’t want to tell anyone my life story!” protests Nadja.

“I can guide your photographic and auditory memory, Nadja, and create these sort of selective “stills” to allow your subconscious to describe what you saw on the screens. Your brain would have recorded tons of information when you were in the control room, stored in the depths of your subconscious. I could bring it to the surface. Professor, could you direct the questions and, Kushi, could you update the models you’ve made from Nadja’s sketches with all the new details?”

Kushi glances quizzically at Professor Temudjin, who nods in assent.

“So if Nadja agrees to trust me and allows me to hypnotise her, all you have to do is find me a sofa!”

Nadja looks extremely fragile and rather lost. She looks towards the professor as though he were a lifeline, and the trust he inspires in her makes her lower her guard. She shrugs her shoulders gently.

“If it’s the best chance of finding my father, I suppose it’s worth risking revealing my most shameful secrets!”

Salonqa lays a blanket over Nadja who is lying on the sofa. On the other side of the world, Leyla focuses, eyes half closed, breathing slowly. Although in everyday life she is full of energy and ideas, she is also capable of intense concentration.

“I’m ready,” murmurs Nadja.

Leyla begins the process of hypnosis, speaking in a slow, deep voice.

“Your breathing is becoming deeper and deeper. With your mind, you follow the air moving through your body, inflating your stomach, your ribcage, the top of your chest. Then you breathe out slowly through your nose, expelling the air from the top of your chest all the way to your stomach. You’re becoming heavier and heavier, you feel all of the tension in your body disappear, from your toes to your fingertips. Now you feel your face relax, then the back of your head, your neck and your entire spine. Your whole body has now relaxed...”

Leyla checks that Nadja is breathing slowly and regularly before moving on to the phase of getting her to relax mentally.

“Nadja, now I’m going to ask you to focus on a positive memory, something pleasant. Swimming in a warm ocean, riding through the tall grass, the audience’s applause after

you've done a particularly good circus performance..."

A happy smile appears on Nadja's face. She looks like a little girl, confident and radiant. She murmurs in a child's voice,

"I did it, Dad! I'm a big girl now. I rode the tiger and we jumped through the ring of fire and I wasn't even scared!"

Leyla, who is moved, smiles too but resumes her professional voice to encourage Nadja to leave behind this pleasant memory and direct her thoughts towards Hannibal's control room in the Basque Country.

"Now you are in the room with all of the screens. You're not afraid, you know that you're going to get out of this room. The screens turn on, one after another. Choose the ones showing the forest where the black stallion is, buildings or maybe a castle..."

After a few moments, Nadja speaks in her normal voice.

"Huge dark pine trees, lots of them. A deep valley, nestled in the mountains. At the bottom, a square castle with four towers. Large gardens. There are people speaking, I can't understand what they're saying."

In Leyla's earpiece, Salonqa asks,

"Can she repeat what the people were saying? Maybe I could work out what country the language is from."

Leyla nods silently and asks Nadja. The girl frowns in concentration and, with great difficulty, utters some guttural sounds.

"That has to be German!" exclaims Salonqa. "Get her to describe the castle a bit more if you can."

Piece by piece, an image begins to take shape on Kushi's screen, closely watched by all of the members of the Network. Nadja's voice is becoming weaker and weaker, exhaustion taking over, so Leyla asks Professor Temudjin whether they have enough information and if she should release her from her hypnotic state. Suddenly, John cries out,

"I think I know where this is! One of my uncles lived in southern Germany, and when I was a kid we used to go skiing and hiking in the Bavarian mountains. This forest, this castle hidden in the valley, I think I've seen them before!"

As John launches into his conscious memories, Professor Temudjin signals to Leyla to "free" Nadja. Leyla releases her gently from her trance and Nadja begins to mutter softly, before quickly falling into a deep sleep, snoring gently.

"I'm a tiny bit sleepy..."

John pulls up a map of Europe on their screens, which zooms in on the castle in Bavaria as well as the location of the now uninhabited home of his late uncle.

"This will be our base camp. It's a twenty-minute walk from the castle. We will meet at

Munich Airport. I'll send you the plane tickets!

Bavaria, Hannibal's castle

“Nooooo! Owen, no!”

Hannibal awakens from his recurring nightmare with a start, his heart pounding and his body dripping with sweat. He sits up suddenly in his chair, clapping his hands to increase the brightness of the lights in his office, as though they might chase away Owen's ghost, who has emerged from his childhood to torment him.

“When will you leave me in peace?” he shouts, hurling everything that is near to hand: documents, a paperweight, books, a jug and a glass of water.

But the ghosts of the past exist to torture us, mercilessly reminding us of our baseness and our guilt. Even repentance cannot appease them. Nothing can stop them from returning, for they have eternity on their side...

“You couldn't even if you tried!” mocks the brown-haired child with his strange eyes, one a different colour to the other.

Owen turns to his big brother, smiling, his big blue eyes glittering with defiance.

“I'll soon be better than you, Sergei said so. I'll show you how good I am!”

He blows a lock of blonde hair out of his eyes and decides to face his fear. His older brother regularly challenges him so that he'll push himself and become ever better. In the manege, the obstacles are higher and there are more of them, and Owen is afraid of failing. But as always, he refuses to disappoint his big brother, so he grabs the reins of his Connemara pony and kicks his flanks with both heels. The pony takes off at a gallop, heading straight for the first bars.

“Ya! Ya!” cries Owen to encourage his steed.

They clear the first obstacles without any problems. The pony, trained by Sergei Tkachev, the riding instructor employed by his father, doesn't overly appreciate the “caress” of his rider's heels, but he has a good temperament, he always tries his best and is a relaxed jumper. He trusts the little boy completely, he likes the way he feels. But this time, the course laid out in the manege has changed slightly. There are more obstacles, and they are getting higher and higher as well as wider. He begins to falter. The corner is too tight, he slips as he tries to change leg too quickly, then gets his balance again.

Riding down the diagonal, there are a series of three upright fences, then a wall and then just afterwards and much too close, a square oxer. The Connemara lands just the other side of the wall, collects himself and launches himself at the obstacle to clear it. But his front legs touch the first rails, which fall to the floor, crashing into each other. Owen clings to the reins, pulling on them like a madman to try and help his horse recover, but it only hampers him. The pony drops his neck and rolls over on himself, cartwheeling. The horse gets up again with difficulty, his legs caught in the jump's rails, which are all lying all over

the place like a game of pickup sticks. He can no longer feel the weight of the rider on his back. Worried and bewildered, he turns around, breathing heavily, trying understand why the little boy hasn't got up yet to climb onto his back again after his fall. The boy is still lying on the ground between the rails and the knocked over wings, his head bent at an unnatural angle in comparison to the rest of his body. And yet, his eyes are wide open and there is still a smile on his lips.

“Nooooo! Owen, no!”

The brown-haired child is crouching over his little brother, shaking him like a puppet whose strings have been cut, sobbing uncontrollably. The Connemara comes closer, nudging Owen's body with his nose and whinnying desperately. Hannibal rains down violent blows on the horse's head, screaming,

“Go away! I hate you, it's all your fault, you stupid animal!”

The memories become disjointed, as though a dark, heavy, horrible veil has fallen over them. The repeated blasts of a shotgun coming from the stables. Their father slapping Hannibal, making his nose bleed, never to say another word to him. Their mother who will never overcome her grief. Owen was her favourite son. The other, with his eyes of different colours, makes her blood run cold. The boarding school for boys in the north of England which felt like a punitive and definitive exile; the silence, the denial, the loneliness and the nightmares...

And then there was the professor of history at the university, who rebuked a student for mocking Hannibal's mismatched eyes. He explained the physiological principles of heterochromia, long considered to be the distinguishing feature of sorcerers who possessed “second sight”, which allowed them to see much further than mere mortals. Then he spoke of Alexander the Great, who was said to have had eyes that were both a different colour. By explaining that one of the greatest conquerors in the world had been able to overcome the superstitious fear of others and his own fear in order to transcend this physical abnormality, and that by making himself stand out from others he had earned the respect of all, the professor had rekindled a light in the darkness that had engulfed Hannibal.

This was the moment when he began to identify with this great strategist and conqueror, the moment when his obsession first took root. He began to research the history of Alexander the Great, trying to gather as much information as possible in order to understand the man. The more he learned, the more he wanted to learn. Hannibal's fascination had no bounds. Upon finishing his studies in ancient languages and the history of the world's antique civilisations, during which he specialised in the Greek history of the classical and Hellenistic period (before and after Alexander's conquests), he created the Hannibal Human History Foundation and started to scour the four corners of the globe to find and collect everything that had anything to do with the great conqueror.

Hannibal takes a deep breath, unclenches his fists, whose knuckles are white with tension, and feels under his eyelid with his index finger to readjust the blue contact lens which

conceals his brown eye. He makes his way to the jacuzzi room, seeking to drive away the scenes burned into his mind, images that have haunted him for so many years and which are always the same. These images have turned him into an insomniac, and he now only snatches brief spells of rest during the day. It is impossible for him to give himself up to the supposedly comforting embrace of sleep. He can't allow himself any weaknesses, any flaws. Never.

Without even needing the guidance of a lungeing rein, Zaldia the Andalusian stallion gracefully circles at all three gaits around Sergei the horse whisperer, the man who had saved him from the farm where he had been so horribly mistreated. Sergei had taken him in, nursed his wounds and soothed away his bad temper, and had then taught him respect and trust. His long mane sways in rhythm with his gait, his muscles flex and make his coat shine like silver in the light of dawn. His ears are pricked forwards, alert to the inflections of the man's voice, now asking him to slow down and come towards him. He obeys immediately, pushing his nose into Sergei's outstretched hand, whiffling, happy to be praised and stroked.

Then the man whispers a few words that he can't translate, but Zaldia understands that he is going to try something new and that he must continue to trust his human companion.

"You can come in now," says Sergei aloud.

Zaldia raises his head. He has heard the rustling of the grass wet with dew, and catches the scent of another man, recognising it not without resentment. He pins his ears back, his breathing quickens, his muscles stiffen. If he were a tiger, he would snarl through his teeth to show his displeasure, he would growl threateningly. But Sergei whispers a few more words, insisting on this, so the stallion finally gives in and lets the man, whose sour scent is mixed with fear, enter his territory, then pass his hand along his neck, stroking him. He doesn't make eye contact, for his eyes are hidden by a black blindfold. Sergei strokes his forehead, trying to get him to relax, to stay still, to lower his guard. He is reluctant, but lets the man pat him, stroke his back, then his rump and afterwards move closer to his side. Sergei encourages them both, moving to the man's side and helping him to climb onto Zaldia's back. The stallion agrees not to move, for Sergei's sake. He gradually gets used to the weight on his back, the legs rubbing against his flanks and accepts his neck being stroked without balking. When Sergei moves away, slowly taking a few steps away before stopping, he gives him a questioning look: should he allow himself to be guided by the man on his back?

"Go on," says Sergei calmly.

Zaldia feels a slight pressure against his flanks and movement on his back urging him forwards, so he takes a few steps, trying to return to the safety of Sergei's presence. But he has turned to the side, as though uninterested in the horse. Perplexed, Zaldia stops, waiting for a clue, or any indication showing what is expected of him. Then he feels the other man giving aids and recognises the request to move forwards, the weight of the man's body tilting to show him which direction to go in, and without opposition from Sergei, Zaldia decides to respond to the aids. He walks, all his senses on the alert, performs a half-volte, then walks in a circle, steadily, and still attentive but already less tense. Each time he responds correctly to an aid, he receives a stroke and begins to relax. Now he trots slowly, moving in a circle again. Then he slightly extends the trot, keeping a steady pace, in harmony with the swaying of the body moving flexibly on his back. He

notices Sergei looking on approvingly from the other side of the circle before returning his attention to the other man, now asking him to change gait. In a smooth motion, he begins to gallop. He feels the man tense up on his back, and becomes anxious. He accelerates, but the tension soon disappears, and the man's weight soon moves backwards again, as he tries to move in time with the horse rather than rushing him. The horse slows to a steady canter. He listens and responds to the aids, slows down, changes rein, gallops faster, turning again and again, before finally slowing down and stopping when given the aids to do so by the rider.

“Good, he's starting to trust you. Don't stiffen up, otherwise you'll unsettle him. Most of the time, the horse isn't to blame for an accident; it's the rider who tenses up and then makes a mistake with his riding partner.”

Then Sergei places two wings in the centre of the school, and places a pole on the ground between them.

Zaldia understands that they are going to have to overcome this obstacle together, and after being encouraged by his rider, he breaks into a walk down the centreline towards the rail. The man is on his back, his hands resting on his withers, his legs squeezing the horse's flanks as though he's afraid of falling off. But everything goes well and Sergei asks them to move into a trot, then a gallop. They return at a walk. Sergei then raises the pole fifteen inches, transforming the pole on the ground into a real jump, an easy challenge for the powerful stallion.

The horse can hear the rider's rasping breathing and stiffens, snorting.

“Come on, you can do it. Let go, trust your horse blindly, be one with him, like a centaur... You just have to let go,” murmurs the horse whisperer next to the stallion. It's the final test.

Zaldia understands that the obstacle is not for him, but for the man on his back. Breaking into another lap of the school, he begins to trot, then gallop, and turns to line himself up with the obstacle. They approach the pole, the stallion's regular stride giving him a perfect run-up, but when his hooves leave the ground, he feels his rider panic and violently grab his mane, perching on his neck to keep himself from falling, his feet wrapped around the horse's barrel with all his might. When they land, the man is incapable of letting go of the mane or relaxing his legs. But Sergei encourages the pair again.

“Come on. Trust him. He won't let you down. He is capable and so are you. If you can't move with him without transmitting your fear to him, you'll never manage it.”

He feels the rider gradually start to relax. The minutes pass by, and when the stallion feels the rider's calves squeeze slightly to indicate that he is finally ready to attempt the challenge again, Zaldia takes off at a gallop. He heads towards the obstacle, but this time he feels that something is different. His rider is moving smoothly with him, looking at the pole in distance. Although he can feel the rider's legs, they are not squeezing his body. The man has taken his hands out of his mane. When Zaldia shifts his weight to jump, the rider is moving as one with him, arms outstretched like an eagle soaring through the sky. He

moves with him, flying over the bar, holding his breath. After what felt like minutes rather than seconds, Zaldia's hooves finally touch the ground. After landing smoothly, the rider does not slump back, but continues to move with his steed.

Zaldia gradually slows down, stopping a few metres away. Suddenly, the man on his back slumps forwards, hugging his neck, rewarding him. He feels his warmth; the human no longer smells of fear. He relaxes and patiently waits for the next aid.

Then Sergei begins to clap, breaking the horse and his rider out of a moment that seemed suspended in time. Then the rider dismounts, and removes the bandage covering his eyes, before leaving the school with a huge victorious laugh.

“I did it, thanks to you, Sergei!”

“You are finally ready. You don't need me any more. So Zaldia and I can leave then, just like you promised.”

“The jet is ready to take Zaldia back to Russia shortly. But you, Sergei, you have to wait just a little while longer. I want you to be there when I ride Bucephalus!”

Bavaria, John's late uncle's house

At Munich airport, the six young people immediately recognise each other from the video conferences. They stare at each other, surprised at the physical differences between what they had seen on their screens, what they had imagined, and what they are seeing in real life. They see individuals who are taller or shorter than expected, confident or shy instead. Somebody's aftershave or perfume reveals a unexpected character trait, somebody else has an unusual accessory or item of clothing. But they keep their remarks to themselves, because in spite of the long flights and their jet lag, they're all focused on the same goal: preventing Hannibal from becoming omnipotent.

The minibus that picked them up from the airport drops them off five hundred yards from the entrance to John's late uncle's house. They have to walk the rest of the way, hauling all their luggage with them down a path overgrown with vegetation. As they pass a creek with crystal clear water, they discover a solid-looking building constructed from stones in shades of beige, pink and ochre in what must have once been a clearing. The slate roof is valiantly resisting the pressure of the branches from nearby trees that have made themselves comfortable. There is grass growing between the patio's octagonal slabs, hewn from the same stone as the house. Everywhere they look, they see nature has tried to reassert itself, but the walls of the house have held strong.

"May I present our base camp," says John, opening the heavy front door.

The house smells musty. They open the windows and shutters to air out the rooms. All of the furniture is covered in white sheets, giving the impression that time has been standing still here. One room is full of skiing and hiking equipment for all ages. John smiles upon finding his childhood skis. Battushig installs, plugs in and connects up the IT equipment on the large wooden table in the dining room, which is large enough to seat twenty people. The teenagers all gather together around this table.

"Okay," says Battushig. "Now we have to find a way to get into the castle and retrieve the star, as well as finding out exactly what Hannibal's plan is so that we can stop him."

"And I would like to see that beautiful black stallion," interrupts Pablo.

"Okay," says Salonqa. "But first of all we have to find a way to get in."

"Hannibal would never leave such a place without surveillance or security. There are cameras everywhere, otherwise I would have never found this place. Not to mention all the traps, and all the codes the doors are locked with..." says Nadja.

"So how are we going to do it?? It's a real fortress..." says Leyla anxiously.

"I'm going to try to infiltrate and take over the castle's IT system," answers Battushig.

"Once I've disabled the security measures that are sure to be protecting the star, we can get inside the castle and grab it. I think I'll be able to give us a window of a few minutes by hacking the system, but then I assume that Hannibal's defence system will kick in and I

don't know how long we'll have."

"Just give me enough time to get to the command room and take over," says John. "I'll control the surveillance cameras and guide you to the exit."

"You're mad!" shouts Leyla angrily. "You're only thinking of the IT systems. What will you do about the armed guards in and around the castle? If there are no more cameras to show us where they are and to allow us to slip through their net, they'll make short work of us!"

"And if I were to sneak in our own cameras?" asks Pablo. "I've brought my little drones with me. I thought we might need them... and apparently I was right!" he adds with a smile.

"So, to sum it all up," says Leyla impatiently, "Pablo will launch his drones, Battushig will hack into the castle's defence system and we will enter the castle and find our way round the guards. John will go to the command room and the others will head to the room with the star. Then Battushig will help us to disable the system protecting the star, we'll grab it, and John will guide us all out of the castle. Have you thought about how we're going to take down Hannibal in all this?"

"And what about my father?" interrupts Nadja. "We can't leave him in Hannibal's clutches!"

Pablo clenches his fists; Hannibal's cruelty has no limits. He is more determined than ever to destroy this monster. As for Nadja, she tries to hold back the tears at the thought of her father. She is trying not to lose hope, but she's afraid of arriving too late and discovering something terrible.

"I want to go," she says icily. "I want to be there, to free my father and to look Hannibal in the eye when we finally beat him. I reckon I can use the acrobatic skills I learned in the circus to climb up one of the towers and sneak in through a window. I'll find my father. He's got to have some useful information."

"I'll go with you," says John. "I know this forest, I can find us a path through the trees. I think it'll only take twenty minutes.

"Me too," adds Leyla firmly.

"Very well," says Salonqa. "While Battushig hacks into the security systems, I will stay here to guide you."

"And as soon as the drones have arrived, I'll join you and look for this black stallion," adds Pablo.

A voice interrupts from one of the computers.

"What about us? What can we do to help?"

The members of the Network, who have become impatient, are making it clear they're also volunteering to help with the raid.

“I’ll give you a code to enter on your computers. It will open up a dialogue box, the castle’s intranet, and you will all send messages to this inbox. If there are enough of you, you can help me to crash the system,” responds Battushig.

And if you find anything, I will be your relay!” adds Salonqa.

John then grabs his large suitcase and fishes out equipment that’s worthy of a CIA SWAT team: miniature cameras with helmet mounts, mini display units, headsets, torches, lock picks, grappling hooks and diamond-pointed glass-cutters. Noticing the surprised expressions on the others’ faces, he says with a smile,

“I was a big fan of spy movies as a kid. These accessories could come in handy!”

“I’ve launched the drones,” says Pablo.

His fingers are dancing over the complex controls that look like they belong in an aeroplane cockpit. Salonqa and Battushig wait with a mixture of impatience and anxiety, staring at the drone control monitors and at Battushig’s screen full of code. Through the drones’ cameras, they can see the landscape flying past at high speed, the black tops of pine trees, lush valleys and vast expanses of greenery dotted with hills.

“Where are you?” Salonqa asks John.

“We’re almost there. I can see the clearing about fifty yards away. We’ll wait for your signal in the cover of the trees.”

Eventually the drones detour around a mountain and Schattental castle finally comes into view, looking like a building straight out of a fairy tale. But it looks more like Bluebeard’s castle than Prince Charming’s... At the edge of the forest, Leyla, John and Nadja watch the drones’ progress on one of John’s miniature screens. Amazed, Leyla cries out,

“Wooooow, it’s beautiful! It’s so much better from above.”

She immediately stops talking, her comrades looking daggers at her after she’s broken their intense concentration.

“We’re almost there. I’ll scout ahead,” says Pablo.

“I recognise the fountains!” exclaims Nadja. And that’s the dark building to the side, and the gates! The room with the star is underground, but I don’t know where exactly.”

“Let’s take a closer look!” cries Pablo.

He brusquely pushes forward on the joysticks, treating the audience to the view of a nose dive straight down towards the ground.

“I’m going to throw up...” complains Salonqa.

“We’re almost there, Salonqa,” responds Battushig tenderly, tapping furiously on his keyboard. “Just a few more yards and we’re good! Friends of the Network, I’ve just sent you the code. Get your keyboards ready!”

During all this time, Hannibal, who is entrenched once more in his office, has been consulting the plans scattered over his solid wood table. The five-pointed star, broken up into five triangular pieces each with an irregular base, has been drawn on a huge piece of paper covered with overlapping arrows, equations, legends and annotations. Then Hannibal grabs a second sheet, with another star of the same dimensions, but this time in one piece, as though the puzzle had been put together. The various annotations show how this must be done.

A shrill wail shatters the silence; the alarm has been triggered, alerting Hannibal who jumps up and runs out of the room. His henchmen, scattered in and around the castle, all

rush to the central staircase to meet their leader and receive orders. His mind racing, Hannibal makes his way to the ground floor and shouts,

“Christian, lock Sergei in his room. He mustn’t use this as a chance to escape!”

Knowing he can’t risk the intruder or intruders meeting Sergei and discovering what is going on in the basement, Hannibal runs to the control room, where one of his henchmen informs him,

“The intranet is under attack, sir, and flying drones have penetrated the security perimeter.”

“Destroy them, you idiot!” replies Hannibal, shouting over the wailing of the siren, his eyes creased with rage and his mouth twisted.

The technician in front of him begins tapping away at the control panel at breakneck speed and the siren stops.

“There!” shouts the technician, waving at one of the control monitors.

Hannibal stares at the screen, showing the feed from one of the external cameras, and watches the drones gradually dropping like flies in clouds of smoke. His lips curl into a satisfied smile, but he can’t waste any more time. His assailant or assailants could strike at any moment and he has only moments to get everything ready in the event of an intrusion.

“Stay here, and lock down all the entrances! Go get everyone who’s still in the lab and lock yourselves in the control room.”

Hannibal runs to the end of the corridor, unlocks the entrance with the ship’s wheel lock and rushes into the star room.

When the drones have almost made it all the way to the castle towers, there is a sizzling sound and one of the camera feeds becomes scrambled before turning completely black. Confused, Pablo desynchronises his drones and uses one of them to investigate the area where they have just lost contact with the drone.

As the group watch on in panic, the first drone, which has burst into flame, begins to spiral slowly towards one of the walls of the building, trailing a cloud of smoke in its wake. Then there's a second sizzling sound, then a third, then a fourth. One by one, all of the drones' monitors switch off. The five drones burn up like mosquitoes caught in a bug zapper.

In shock, none of the group say a word. Overwhelmed by disappointment and then fear, the failure of their only plan seems to leave no hope for the success of their mission. In a sudden rage, Pablo stands up and dashes the drones' controllers to the ground, roaring with anger.

Leyla, Nadja and John, who are sitting at the edge of the clearing in which stands Schattental castle, are also frozen with horror at what just happened. If Hannibal's defence system has been able to react so quickly, it means he must be aware of their attempted break in and is most likely preparing to counterattack or to escape, meaning they would lose any chance they had of stopping him.

Nadja grasps the small glass cutter given to her by John and bounds out of the forest, shouting back at her friends, who are too shocked to move a muscle,

"I'm going to climb the tower! I have to find my father before it's too late! I'll meet up with you later!"

Nadja sprints towards the castle, opting to get in via the roof of the dark building at the rear of the castle. When she finally reaches the wall, she can't help but take one last sad look back at the edge of the trees where her two friends are waiting helplessly, gripped by fear and indecision.

She takes out John's grappling hook, coils the rope and takes it in her left hand. She hurls the metal claw skywards, hoping that it will land on the roof of the small building. She hears a metallic sound followed by a scraping noise. Nadja grits her teeth, hoping that the grapnel will hook onto something. The noise finally stops with a thud. Nadja pulls on the rope to ensure that it is holding fast. After a couple of seconds of doubt, she decides to go for it. She grasps the rope firmly in her hands and swings it slightly from left to right to make sure its prongs are securely in place. She takes one step up the wall, then another, and then continues her ascent towards the roof. As her feet hammer along the wood at a rapid pace, she wonders what the building, which seems rather new, is used for. When you have a castle this big, why would you need to build a huge extension, and why make it out of wood of all things?

When she arrives at the roof she notices some small opaque windows running along the walls, as though to allow only a small amount of light to filter through. Still holding on by one hand, she takes the diamond-pointed glass cutter from her pocket and makes a hole in the glass. She removes the glass cutter and taps against the circle cut into the glass. It falls inside the building without making a sound.

“Are you seeing what I’m seeing?” asks Nadja into the microphone in her ear.

“An arena! The horse must be somewhere around here. It looks like someone was here recently: there are hoofmarks in the sand and there is a jump in the centre,” responds Pablo. Okay, continue climbing, Nadja!”

The young girl hauls herself onto the roof, picks up her grappling hook and looks up towards the sky.

“Jeez, I’m high up,” she thinks aloud nervously.

“You can do it,” says Salonqa’s voice in her ear, trying to reassure her. “Remember the circus!”

With fresh determination, Nadja launches the grappling hook up towards the parapets that protrude from the wall behind the battlements. The grappling hook lands perfectly between two merlons. After making sure it is firmly in place, she continues her ascent. Once she reaches the rampart walk, all that’s left is to climb up one of the towers. She chooses the one on her left and, by squeezing her small feet and delicate hands into the arrowslits, climbs along the circular wall like a spider.

When she has almost made it to the top, after having only glimpsed staircases and abandoned rooms lying in darkness through the arrowslits, she begins to despair of finding her father in this tower. As she reaches a window that has been left open – probably by mistake or by someone in a rush – she discovers a large room containing only a desk, a comfortable leather armchair, a floor lamp and huge book cases filling the walls.

“That must be Hannibal’s office. Go in. There has to be something interesting there!” urges Salonqa, eager to fully understand what has been going on in this castle.

Nadja hesitates for a moment. She had wanted to find her father first. That was her priority and the reason she went off by herself, leaving her friends behind.

“Look, there’s something shining on the desk!” exclaims John.

Curiosity and solidarity prevail, so Nadja enters the room. When she has both feet back on solid ground, she takes a look around the room and in the corner she notices the top of a crumbling staircase which has been deemed unfit for use and probably leads nowhere. Her father isn’t in this tower. She walks towards the desk and all of the teenagers see at the same time the mysterious copper tablet, engraved with Greek letters, sitting on Hannibal’s desk.

“Nadja, hold it in front of you and I’ll translate it,” asks Salonqa, squinting at a screen. She begins to read the Sibyl’s prophecy aloud to the rest of the group.

“... For as long as he keeps this star, no man will be able to defeat him. As long as he remains humble and honest in his deeds, as long as he remains moderate and wise, he will be invincible. But if he falters, he will be consumed by the wrath of Zeus.

“Do you think this is talking about the star that Hannibal has all five pieces of?”

“Probably”, responds Battushig. “The Human History Foundation has spent years collecting hundreds of items relating to Alexander the Great. But I doubt Hannibal would take the Sibyl’s warning seriously. He deserves to be struck down by Zeus!”

“Okay, can I go?” asks Nadja.

“Yes, try another tower!” responds Salonqa.

Nadja squeezes through the window and leaves the office. She grabs onto the rope with the grappling hook at the end of it and rappels down the tower. Then she runs along the rampart walk towards the second tower in the back wall and begins to climb as fast as she can...

A determined voice pipes up in the forest next to Schattental Castle.

“John, we can’t just sit here doing nothing. If we can’t get in through the castle’s front door or climb the towers like Nadja, then we have to find another way. Follow me!”

Without giving him time to protest, Leyla races off into the forest, following Nadja.

John catches up with Leyla under the cover of the trees before cautiously approaching the arena. He spots a sliding door and opens it. They sneak into the stands overlooking the deserted arena floor. They stay there a moment, struck by the darkness and silence of the vast building, before Leyla tugs at John’s sleeve and points in the opposite direction to the stands. There is a large, wide metal panel set into one of the wooden walls. The pair jump from the stands onto the immaculate sand and head over to the metal panel. They look for a handle or a mechanism that would allow them to move it. They push it and try sliding it to the side, but the heavy panel in the timber wall appears to be sealed tight. Then they hear Salonqa’s voice in their ears.

“John, the wood next to your right shoulder looks slightly lighter to me. Check if there is a switch or something underneath it.

When he puts his hand on the area of lighter wood, John feels the wall sink and slide to the side revealing a metal box that looks like a door code input device: It features ten buttons with numbers on them and an enter key.

“Er... does anyone know the combination to open it?” asks Leyla.

“This door isn’t part of the core network,” says Battushig apologetically. “I can’t control it. Try some simple four-digit patterns. The most common are: 1234 - 0000 - 1111 - 5555 - 2222 - and so on.”

“Nope,” says John after a few unsuccessful attempts.

“Okay, let’s try some patterns based on the keypad. 2580 – 0852, then the right column, then the left column.”

“Still nothing.”

“Try using my PIN: 5683,” suggests Leyla. “It spells out ‘LOVE’ if you’re sending a text in dictionary mode.”

Faced with these initial failures, Battushig frowns.

“We can’t know for sure that it’s even a four-digit code...”

“Why don’t you try Hannibal’s date of birth? interrupts Salonqa.

He’s such a narcissist, there’s a good chance the code has something to do with himself.”

Unfortunately this combination does not work either. Then Professor Temudjin offers a suggestion.

“Salonqa, you were right to think of Hannibal’s obsessive side. Try this code: ‘2107356’.”

Flabbergasted, John and Leyla hear a series of clicks and the metal panel slides to the side, revealing some kind of high-tech lift.

“Well done, Professor!” cries Salonqa. “How did you figure it out?”

“It’s the date of birth of Alexander the Great: 21 July, 356BC. Leyla and John, please be careful.”

Once the lift door closes, John and Leyla breathe in the relaxing scent of essential oils while the lift slowly descends underground.

“Fingers crossed we don’t end up in a ditch filled with snakes...” murmurs Leyla.

But when the dull sound of the lift door opening again announces that they have arrived, it’s not snakes that welcome them, but serene birdsong and lush countryside. A dusky light reigns in this unexpected garden, throwing the outlines of the luxuriant vegetation into sharp relief. Hesitantly, they take a couple of steps across the soft, mossy floor, on the alert for any signs of a threatening human presence.

“Wow, you’re so handsome!” cries Leyla suddenly.

“Um... is this really the time or the place?” mumbles John, embarrassed.

“I’m not talking about you! Look at him. He’s magnificent!”

A beautiful black stallion is standing a few yards away, observing them with curiosity rather than suspicion. He seems weary, and breaks out into a whinny of heartbreaking sadness. Leyla rummages through her pockets and finds the sugar sachet she took from the plane. She rips it open, pours the contents into the palm of her hand and holds it out towards the stallion, murmuring,

“John, stay perfectly still. And you, my beauty, come and get this little treat from good old Leyla, come on...”

The scent of these humans is reassuring, as is their bearing, and the girl’s soft, singsong voice draws him towards them. He only hesitates for a second before approaching to nibble at the sugary crystals in the girls’ outstretched hand, licking her palm where the taste of sugar mingles with the salt of her skin... Leyla raises her other hand and gently strokes his forehead, his cheek and then his neck, continuing to talk to him all the while.

“What are you doing all alone down here, you poor thing? Why are they hiding you away in this artificial garden when you should be galloping outside, happy and free, just like Amira, my Egyptian princess. You would make a beautiful couple, you know...”

At the same time, the sound of repeated blows against one of the tower’s windows can be heard throughout the castle.

“Father! Let me in!”

Sergei’s incredulous face appears from behind the glass. A second or two elapses before he

recovers from his shock sufficiently to run over to the window and take the acrobat dangling there above the void into his arms in a warm embrace.

“Nadja! It’s madness for you to have come here. I thought you were safe in Russia!”

“You thought I was going to leave you at the mercy of that monster? Come on, let’s get out of here and make a run for it,” she adds, leaving her father’s embrace and turning to the open window.

“Wait, Nadja. There are a few things you should know...”

It is as though a dam has burst inside this man who has always been so silent, so secretive. The words begin to pour out. Sergei tells her all about his first meeting with Hannibal's family in the Basque Country, the tragic accident that robbed Hannibal of his little brother who had shown so much promise and which had destroyed the stability of the family, the oath to John Fitzgerald Hannibal's father before his death, the unexpected request many years later to teach Hannibal how to ride, or rather to teach him mastery over horses, the discovery of the gradual madness that had taken hold of him to the point where he now identified himself with Alexander the Great, Hannibal's naming of the black stallion down in the basement Bucephalus after the Conqueror's legendary steed, his decision to allow the horse outside only when the last ray of sunlight had left the valley.

In her ear, Nadja hears a clamour of voices from the members of the Network who, shocked by Sergei's revelations, bombard her with sombre questions before they all come to the same disturbing conclusion:

Two thousand, four hundred years ago, Bucephalus, the horse who was reputed to be untameable, feared only one thing in the world: his own shadow. Alexander, barely twelve years old at the time, had intuitively understood this. Alexander had mounted Bucephalus and, after a fierce battle of unyielding wills, had managed to turn him to face the sun, at once hiding his shadow and soothing the beast. Bucephalus was one of those horses who will only obey a single master. He allowed himself to be led by the young boy and accompanied him faithfully throughout his many years of conquest. Hannibal, however, who was unable to get horses to trust him and who had developed a superstitious fear that the black stallion, also named Bucephalus, might break free of his control, had decided to prevent him from encountering any sunlight whatsoever.

So Hannibal was getting ready to ride his own Bucephalus, bearing the newly-mended star of Alexander the Great, in order to achieve absolute power and immortality. And no one knows what this man, who already has so much economic, political and scientific power and yet who is so clearly mentally disturbed, will do once he gets a chance at total omnipotence...

Professor Temudjin tries to calm them down:

"Let's think about this practically. You've found the stallion, but not the star. So our first move must be to find and steal the star."

"Leyla and I are closest to the heart of the castle," says John. "We'll look for the star."

"I'll back you up," adds Pablo. "Before the drones crashed I saw what looked like an air vent by the castle's foundations. I'll try to get in through there. Battushig and Salonqa, I'll need you to keep an eye out and warn me if there are any traps or anyone waiting for me."

As for Sergei, now that Zaldia is back in Russia and he has been reunited with his daughter, he wants to leave the castle as soon as possible. Nadja hesitates; she has

managed to find her father and has nothing to gain from staying here any longer. But her friends and Professor Temudjin have become like a second family to her. Is she going to abandon them now that it's their turn to risk everything?

While Nadja and Sergei leave the castle through the window and climb down the rope, Leyla reluctantly leaves the black stallion and follows John up the central staircase.

As for Pablo, he's already started to race through the pine trees, determined to carry out the mission he has set himself. He is filled with so much resentment for the man who shot his mare, Tormenta, so coldly and gratuitously that he has vowed to destroy him. The members of the Network seem too pacifistic, too cowardly. He will carry out his mission alone...

Pablo reaches the lower part of the castle. He cuts away the vegetation using his *facón*, the large knife that Argentine gauchos keep in a wide belt strapped to their backs. He takes off the vent cover and crawls inside the dark, damp, narrow duct that slopes steeply down into the ground. He estimates that he must be below the basement with the artificial garden where the black stallion is penned up. As he crawls further, he begins to notice an antiseptic smell. He reaches the end of the vent. In this artificial twilight he sees behind the grating a room filled with shut cupboards and shelves filled with medical supplies, such as gauze, compresses, bandages, bottles and tubes in bags. He listens for the least sound, checking to see if there are any guards nearby. Nothing, just a background murmur of mechanical noises, as regular as a beating heart. The room is empty and it seems as though the coast is clear. He removes the grating quietly and slides out like a snake into the room below.

The door isn't locked. He opens it silently with one hand, the other clutching his knife tightly. The mechanical noise is louder here. He moves down the corridor and enters some kind of underground stable. Mares in various stages of gestation are lying about in individual stalls. Not one of them is moving. But they are breathing. They are connected to drips and machines measuring their biological functions. Instead of names, there are only numbers and graphs on the doors of the mares' stalls.

Pablo is overwhelmed with a sense of unease. He tries to ignore it as he continues his exploration. He enters a huge, deserted laboratory. It looks as though everything has been dropped suddenly, as though the employees evacuated the laboratory in a hurry. Pablo, whose nerves are on edge, glances around the room and is unable to stifle a cry of horror and disgust on discovering the aquariums built into the walls; particularly their contents. Inert horses in various stages of development, from embryos to newborns, are floating in the translucent liquid.

"Can someone explain to me what I'm looking at?" he asks, his voice weak from the shock of this grisly sight.

It is some time before the members of the Network hear Professor Temudjin's voice break the silence in their headsets.

"I'm afraid that these are examples of experiments in genetic engineering..."

"Professor," cries Pablo, outraged, "I know that genetic engineering can be used to modify a tomato to make it keep for longer, or to make GM soya more resistant to pesticides, but this! Hannibal is carrying out genetic experiments on baby horses?"

"Babies that all look the same..."

says Salonqa, her voice weak. "Professor, could these be... examples... of attempts at cloning?"

The members of the Network listen to the professor's explanation of animal cloning with a

knot in their stomachs. “You take a piece of the adult donor’s skin and extract the fibroblasts, which contain all of the donor animal’s genes. The fibroblasts are then preserved in liquid nitrogen, in a sort of “cryo-bank”.

Then an ovocyte, or future egg, is removed from a living mare... or one that’s just left the abattoir. You replace the nucleus containing the DNA with that of a thawed fibroblast to create an embryo. This works in one out of every two thousand, five hundred attempts. After developing for seven days, the young embryo is transferred to the uterus of a surrogate mother. Eleven months later, the mother will give birth to a cloned foal carrying all of the genes of the donor animal. But these pregnancies are much riskier than with normal gestation, and in spite of scientific progress, animal cloning unfortunately still has a ninety-five percent mortality rates in embryos and fetuses.”

“So,” continues Salonqa, trying to focus on the numbers and rationalising things in order to try and prevent herself from giving way to her emotions, “if the cloning is successful, the foal will be a perfect twin of the donor, even though it has been born much later.”

Pablo is overwhelmed with a giddiness that is impossible to overcome. Between the sight of these “failures” floating in the aquariums and the mares penned in like lab rats, with Hannibal’s monstrous creations gestating in their bellies, his fury and disgust begin to overwhelm him. He rushes out of the laboratory to continue his search for Hannibal. Now he has even more reason for wanting to take care of him for good!

Pablo comes to another door. Hands trembling with rage, he opens it. A wave of ice-cold air washes over him. It’s a refrigerated room, its walls completely bare. Salonqa tells him that this room is not on the castle’s camera network, and that they won’t be able to warn him if there is an emergency. Pablo grits his teeth and enters the room, condensation billowing from his nostrils. Behind a thick window is some sort of strange... sculpture. Battushig eyes widen as he sees on-screen the images transmitted by Pablo’s camera. He grabs Salonqa’s arm, his fingers squeezing so tightly that it hurts.

He’s thinking of the ice horse, and the incredible resemblance between this “sculpture” and the horse that fell with his rider, one of Alexander the Great’s soldiers, down a crevasse in Mongolia, after which the horse was preserved in the ice for almost two thousand, four hundred years. Hannibal had bypassed the Mongolian government’s research teams and had transported it in his refrigerated plane to his United States-based company, Hannibal Corp, who specialised in cryogenics. Since then, no one had heard anything more about the discovery. If this horse was the real Bucephalus, and if Hannibal had managed to extract some DNA from the ice horse, was it possible that he had created a clone of Bucephalus?

With some effort, Salonqa manages to remove Battushig’s fingers from her arm. She shakes her companion, who looks as though he too has turned into a statue.

“What is it? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“You won’t believe me,” he responds after a moment. “The horse trapped in the ice, the one that fell down the crevasse in Mongolia with Alexander’s soldier, I’m sure that’s him!”

The members of the Network are sitting frozen in front of the image of the ice statue, realising that it is indeed Bucephalus, the original Bucephalus. In the aquariums, and in the bellies of the mares lying in their stalls... They are all clones of Bucephalus, and the black stallion in the artificial garden in the basement must therefore be the one successful, perfect clone.

A shrill alarm suddenly begins to ring out throughout the castle, probably triggered by an increase in temperature in the refrigeration room due to the door remaining open for too long.

“Get out of there, Pablo!” screams Salonqa. “We’re losing control of the cameras. You mustn’t get caught by Hannibal’s guards.”

The young man obeys mechanically. He closes the door and heads back, stunned by the recent revelations about Hannibal’s experimentation with cloning. He is tormented by a nagging question. If he himself had access to this technology and was able to carry out genetic manipulation, would he be able to recreate his mare Tormenta from her DNA if she were to succumb to her injuries?

John and Leyla mount the stairs from the artificial garden to the top floor four at a time. When they arrive, two of the three doors are locked. The last one, with the ship’s wheel lock, stands wide open. With the alarm blaring in their ears, they can only communicate using gestures. Flattening themselves against either side of the door, they sign to each other to enter the room simultaneously. But it’s empty. In sheer fascination, they approach the complicated cylindrical device in the middle of the room.. The machine is surrounded by a number of electronic stands, topped with glass domes that contain display units no larger than a human hand... all of which are empty. In the middle of the machine they find a complete five-pointed star, fashioned from bronze metal and engraved with Greek letters and symbols, just like the computer reproductions Battushig had created. John, ever cautious, takes a closer look at the machine. He is afraid that the star may be safeguarded by a protective system that could turn out to be deadly. Leyla, however, decides to take a more direct approach, grabbing the star with her bare hands. She shouts at John,

“Quick, we have to meet the others outside!”

The alarm suddenly stops. John grabs Leyla before she goes through the door to the star room and pushes her against the wall just in time; three armed guards are rushing towards them. For a second John and Leyla think they are done for, but the first henchman walks onto the small slab in front of the door, at which the floor gives way beneath him and the horrified guards vanish into the depths of the castle. They can hear cries of distress from below, but John and Leyla decide they have to ignore them and instead rush towards the exit, giving the edges of the pit a wide berth.

In their headsets, where the sound has been cut off since the siren first went off,

Battushig's imperious voice can suddenly be heard, crackling unpleasantly before becoming audible again.

"Everyone, mission accomplished! Get out of there immediately!"

Salonqa suddenly asks an unusual question of Battushig, who is battling to maintain communications with the members of the Network:

"If you could keep the seal of omnipotence for yourself, what would you do with it?"

But Battushig, too preoccupied with his digital battle, doesn't hear her. Salonqa's face darkens. She knows what she would do if she had to choose. She would never agree to keep the star and its powers. She couldn't bear the thought of being immortal and yet alone forever. She would prefer to enjoy the present, and perhaps the future, with Battushig...

The thought is short-lived, however, because as John and Leyla run to join them, Leyla stumbles over a protruding root and cries out in pain, her twisted ankle giving way beneath her. She falls painfully to the ground and John stops running to help her up. Leyla grits her teeth to stop herself crying out as she puts some weight on her ankle. John slides his arm under her shoulder to help her walk, but Leyla pushes him away, pointing at something shining between the rocks and pine needles. When Leyla had put her hands out instinctively to break her fall, the star had fallen out of her grasp. It now lay shattered into pieces on the ground, dusted in whitish powder. John tries to pick the pieces up so he can slip them into his shirt pocket, but Leyla limps towards him and says,

"Leave it, John. It wasn't the real star... it was just a copy made from composite or painted plaster of Paris. Hannibal tricked us."

John straightens, dismayed.

"Did everyone hear that? Hannibal must have the seal on him. He tried to get us away from the castle. We have to go back and stop him from using the star!"

Battushig gets up from his computer in a rush to get to the castle, but Salonqa grabs him.

"No offence, but you're hardly in the condition to take on Hannibal in a physical fight. If you guys could help me, you right here and Kushi in Mongolia, I think I have an idea. It's our last chance..."

The sky is starting to darken outside. Leyla, whose sprained ankle is clearly going to slow them down, is arguing with John.

“Leave me and run. It’s almost night-time. Hannibal and Bucephalus will be able to get away and fade into the woodwork like cockroaches in a jar of black olives.”

Pablo pants into his microphone,

“Somewhere without any shadows... the underground garden is empty... Head for the arena!”

But when Pablo reaches the arena, joined shortly after by John, it is already too late. Hannibal is mounted astride the clone of Bucephalus, and stands motionless in the centre of the arena, whose lighting cancels out any shadows. It’s as though he was waiting for them.

“You finally made it...” he says in a voice dripping with arrogant pride as Battushig and Salonqa enter the arena just behind the others.

And then Hannibal coldly announces that he could have killed them all, but that he preferred to gather them together instead. He wants them to witness his triumph, now that he has both mastered the stallion and repaired the star. Pablo cries out with rage, unsheathing his *facón* and starts to run towards the centre of the arena, but Salonqa throws herself in front of him and holds him back.

“No! Don’t do it! John, help me!”

Hannibal laughs wickedly, his mismatched eyes flashing with glee. He undoes the top of his shirt and brandishes over his head the seal of Alexander the Great, which is attached to a cord around his neck. He doesn’t see the shadow moving behind him. He doesn’t understand why Bucephalus has suddenly reared up, why the arena sand in front of him is flooded with bright light, why a horse’s shadow appears to be attacking his Bucephalus, and why his steed is panicking and struggling against the hand that holds the reins, against the spurs digging into his sides. Hannibal howls in frustration, striking the panicked stallion with the telescopic crop he had slipped into his boot, leaving bloody welts over the horse’s body. He ignores the pleas of Sergei, who has suddenly arrived at the arena with Nadja at his side, and who is asking him to stop hitting the stallion. Instead he lashes out even more viciously. He refuses to give in when he is so close to achieving everything he’s ever dreamed of!

Mad with fear and pain, Bucephalus struggles, unseating his brute of rider and escaping as far as possible from the evil shadow that is attacking him. The moment Hannibal hits the ground, some kind of electric wave seems to run right through him, and all of a sudden he bursts into flame like a dry tree that has been struck by lightning.

As the teenagers stare transfixed at the smouldering ashes of what was once Hannibal on the arena floor, Sergei, a few yards from Battushig, tries his best to reassure the stallion

and calm him down. Then, as if speaking to himself, and staring into the distance, a miniature holographic projector dangling from his fingertips, Battushig utters the following words:

“If, by misfortune, its bearer were to succumb to madness or rage, or should his ambition exceed reason, the star would lead him to ruin.” The prophecy came true...
Forgive us, Bucephalus...”

Salonqa’s intuition had been right all along. Hannibal had taken so many precautions to ensure that the clone of Bucephalus never saw the sun, that this had become the weakness that proved his undoing. As they’d been unable to emulate the sun, they’d used photos of Bucephalus to create and project an animated holographic shadow of a powerful ‘mirror-stallion’ and then made it look as though it was attacking Bucephalus. By breaking the bond that Hannibal had managed to establish with his steed, they forced him to reveal his madness and excessive ambition.

Epilogue

Sergei has finished gathering up their belongings from the house they used as their base camp. As he closes the door, he thinks he hears a wistful goodbye whinny in the distance. He knows that he will remember the sound of Bucephalus' hooves trotting into the dark forest for the rest of his life. What will become of this exceptional stallion, the horse that was so proud and indomitable, now that he's been released into the wild by Sergei himself? No one will ever know... And perhaps that's for the best.

Gathering together at the top of the valley a safe distance from the castle, the teenagers instinctively observe a minute's silence, a minute of contemplation before carrying out one last act. The castle and its horrific contents are to be destroyed. As soon as their employer disappeared, Hannibal's henchmen had no compunctions about taking to their heels. The mares have all been released into the immense expanse of forest. All that is left is to press the button and trigger an online-activated series of remote controlled explosives. But before turning the page on the secret shared by Hannibal and Alexander, they still have one last difficult decision to make. What should they do with the five pieces of the star that Nadja had picked up from the arena floor after Bucephalus had trampled it into bits again?

John is the first to speak.

"We'll all take a piece and hide them somewhere secret, just like Ptolemy's riders. We'll never tell anyone where we've hidden them, not even each other. It's the best way to make sure it stays secret."

John's suggestion is greeted with a heavy silence. They all know that he is right, and that whoever takes responsibility for a piece will have to shoulder that burden for the rest of their lives. Battushig breaks the silence, his tone serious.

"I think we've all felt it... deep down. The temptation of absolute power and immortality is too great, in spite of the best intentions. If we stay in touch, if we try to see each other again, I'm not sure that we will be able to prevent ourselves from wanting to reforge the seal and use its power."

"Which means we can never see each other again," concludes Salonqa.

"Um..." interrupts Leyla, her throat tight, "there are five fragments and six of us. So who...?"

The six of them raise a hand in the air immediately. Then after a moment, Leyla's eyes meet John's and Battushig's find Salonqa's.... Pablo, secretly, is happy for once to be single, and Nadja suddenly realises that she will never be able to see her father again. This is an impossible choice to make!

Departure lounge, Munich Airport

Professor Temudjin walks towards the tired teenagers gathered in the lounge, shakes Sergei's hand and exchanges a few whispered words with him. They turn to the group, their eyes full of affection and understanding.

"The two old bachelors will each take a fragment. Leyla and John, Salonqa and Battushig, we don't want to separate you from one another. Love conquers all..."

"Father?" mumbles Nadja, distraught. "If Pablo takes a fragment, the couples take one each and you and the professor take the last two, does this mean I'll never see you again?"

"Can you think of anyone quieter than your father?" responds Sergei, a hint of mischief in his voice.

Nadja bursts into tears and throws herself into her father's outstretched arms.

When the call to board their planes resounds throughout the airport, Professor Temudjin embraces each of the adventurers warmly.

"Goodbye, my friends. You have made the right decision, even if you must pay the price of living with the burden of this secret forever and you must never see each other again. I hope your lives are all as long, happy and wise as Ptolemy's..."

Memoires of Ptolemy I Soter, King of Egypt, approx. 285BC

... I took the seal of power from Alexander and broke off each point with my sword. Five trustworthy riders were each entrusted with carrying a part of the star as far away as possible, so as to ensure that nobody would ever be able bring them all together again. The fifth horseman, my best lieutenant, mounted Bucephalus... and he in turn set out to one of the far corners of the earth.

... Alexander was never the same again. We abandoned the conquest of India and retreated. Alexander died of malaria in Babylon, just before his thirty-third birthday.

... I have just celebrated my eightieth birthday, and in all my long life I have never once seen any of those five riders again. The world is much too vast for a single person to attempt to govern it without causing its destruction. I pray to Zeus and Amun that, until the end of time, no one will ever succeed in reuniting the five fragments of the seal of Alexander the Great...

The end

If you enjoyed this story, come to meet Bucephalus and discover the other legendary horses on www.howrse.com