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Prologue

“Nox here,” snarled a deep voice.

Mrs Moa stood up sharply, almost banging her head against the office ceiling. Finally. The call she had been waiting so long for.

“What’s the news, Nox?” she asked excitedly.

“We’ve got him.”

The headmistress let out a hiss of relief. She had almost given up hope that they would ever find the boy again. After the incident in the mountains, Noël had disappeared without a trace, as if the earth had swallowed him whole. The scouts had been searching for months, in vain.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“Still in Germany,” replied Nox, curtly. “Not far from the spot where we discovered him in winter.”

“What about Uko?”

“No trace of him.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. Uko is crafty.”

“We know he’s crafty,” barked Nox. “We’re hardly beginners after all!”

“Well, you could have thought of that last time,” Mrs Moa countered, pointedly. “You led Uko straight to him. He nearly killed him.”

The caller was quiet for a moment. “This time, everyone is safe,” he explained, slightly peevishly. “We were extremely careful.” He cleared his throat. “How shall we proceed?”

“Organise the transport,” hissed the headmistress. ‘And inform the guards. I’m sure I don’t have to remind you that the highest level of security applies now. Noël must get here safely at all costs.” She stretched her scaly body. “No risks, do you hear me, Nox?”

“What is there that’s completely without risk?” asked Nox in return.

“You know exactly what I mean,” said Mrs Moa. “Something like the incident in the mountains can never happen again.”

“I had nothing to do with that assignment,” growled Nox. “Hora screwed up. But this time we did everything right. It’s going to work. Don’t worry.”

Don’t worry, thought Mrs Moa. If the situation weren’t so serious, she would have laughed out loud.

Nox was right, anyway. Nothing was completely without risk.

The whole school was a risk.

But she had to take a chance.

After all, the world was at stake.

Part 1

The Journey

“Do you see that, over there?”, Ben’s voice was so quiet that Noël could hardly understand him. “The window next to the staff room’s still open. Those losers didn’t even notice that we opened it.”

“And?” asked Noël. “What’s it to us?”

Ben jabbed him in the side with his elbow. “Come on, man! We can get in there!”

“Why would we want to do that?” asked Noël. “It’s bad enough that we have to hang out at school all day. I don’t need to go there at night too.”

“Mate, think about it. We get into the staff room. The lock on the door is no problem, I can break it. Next week we’ve got maths and physics – maybe we can find the worksheets. Or even better: the solutions.”

“Forget it,” said Noël. “I’ve already got a warning. If they catch us, I’ll get kicked out of school.”

“Who’s going to catch us?” Ben spread his arms wide and turned around in a circle. “The school’s empty, there’s nobody here. And if someone does come, we’ll just leg it.”

Noël shook his head. “No chance.”

“Come on,” said Ben. “I’m on a five in maths and physics at the moment, if we find the work it’ll save my arse.”

Before Noël could reply, a small ball suddenly fell from the sky and landed right at his feet. Involuntarily, he bent down to pick it up and looked at it in the light of the lantern at the edge of the schoolyard.

It was a ball of wool, grey and soft, but something hard and white was poking through the delicate fabric.

Noël pulled on it and released a small bone. He stared at it, bewildered. And then he saw the long, thin mouse tail, which was also hanging out of the ball.

“Ugh! What’s that horrible thing?” asked Ben.

Noël dropped the ball and stared up into the darkness from which it had fallen. He jumped when he saw the yellow eyes. A large bird was sitting on the school’s gutter, staring down at Noël. Despite the poor lighting, Noël recognised him immediately. The sharp, curved beak, the feathered ears protruding from the head, the round face – no doubt about it, it was the owl from the ski trip.

The bird had thrown the hairy ball down at him. A mound of feathers, fur and bones that he had choked out of his stomach.

The yellow eyes seemed to pierce through Noël. He wanted to look away, but he couldn’t take his gaze off the bird. And suddenly, that voice was in his head again.

“Nooo-eeeel,” it rasped.

The bird hadn’t moved its beak, but Noël was sure the voice had come from it.

“Go away,” Noël said, softly.

“What?” asked Ben.

“Not you,” said Noël.

“Is something there?” Ben looked up, but he was standing directly under the gutter – he couldn’t see the bird.

“Nothing.” Noël used all his willpower to wrench his gaze away from the owl.

“It’s time, Noël,” whispered the voice.

“What is it?” Ben asked at the same time.

“I don’t know,” replied Noël. Even though he wasn’t looking up, he could feel the owl’s razor-sharp gaze on him.

“I do,” said Ben. “I can’t do it without you, you’ve got to help me. I’ve done stuff for you before.”

“It will begin in a few days’ time,” whispered the voice. *“Get ready.”*

What the hell did that mean? Noël didn’t ask this time. He didn’t want to hear any more. He wanted to cover his ears, but that was pointless since the voice was in his head.

“Go home now, Noël,” murmured the voice.

“Leave me alone,” thought Noël. Get lost! He picked up a large pebble from the ground and hurled it towards the roof. The stone slammed into the gutter and hit the floor right next to Ben, who sprang to the side, startled.

“Are you crazy?” he hissed, shocked.

“Go home,” Noël heard the voice whisper again. When he looked up, he saw the owl spread its huge wings and float silently into the darkness. Noël watched it go with a mixture of relief and unease.

“All right then,” he said. “I’m coming with you.”

Ben climbed up first and Noël followed him. When he jumped off the windowsill in the hallway outside the staff room, he saw Lennart. He was leaning against the wall, arms folded, and smiling.

Noël reacted immediately, turning and attempting to get back outside, but before he could escape, Ben and Lennart had grabbed him and were dragging him down the hall.

“Are you mad? What’s going on?” Noël tried to kick them but he had no chance.

There were two of them and he was all alone.

Ben threw open the door to the chemistry lab, Lennart shoved Noël inside and then they slammed the door, locking it behind them.

“Say hello to Sandrine!” Noël heard Ben shout, as their footsteps faded away.

“Come back, damn it!” Noël pounded the door with his fists. He knew it was pointless. They would never turn back.

The chemistry room was on the ground floor, but of course, the window was closed. Noël was stuck. He leaned back against the wall and slipped down into a crouch.

If only he had listened to the owl. Or trusted his own gut. He’d suspected that Ben was up to no good. But even so, he had let him get the better of him.

“We should get up to something together again,” Ben had said to Noël during the break that morning. “Are you up for it?”

Noël had not been up for it. He and Ben used to be friends, but since Lennart had joined their class and he and Ben had started hanging out all the time, Ben had completely changed. Noël didn’t want to get up to anything with him anymore. But after the Sandrine thing, he felt like he owed Ben. So he had said yes.

He had gone to Ben’s in the evening, they had gambled a bit, and then, after it got dark, Ben had persuaded Noël to go to the school with him.

“I’ve got a great idea for what we can do there,” he had said. “Doesn’t take long either.”

But how did Ben and Lennart get the key to the chemistry lab?

“Doesn’t matter,” thought Noël. He was stuck and he had to get out. That was all that mattered.

He had to get these stupid windows open. Had Ben and Lennart removed the keys and taken them away with them? Unlikely, Noël thought. They were in the room somewhere. And he would find them.

To do this, however, he would need light. But if he turned on the ceiling lights, they might be seen from the apartment buildings behind the school. What if one of the neighbours wondered who was visiting the school at night and called the police?

He couldn’t do that. After the incident on the ski trip, Noël’s number was up. If anything else happened, he would be kicked out of school.

On one of the lab tables stood a Bunsen burner, which would be almost as good as a torch. If you had a light.

Mr Meuser, the chemistry teacher, always threw his lighter into the drawer under his desk. Noël opened the drawer and felt around inside. Bingo!

He connected the gas hose to the outlet in the wall, turned on the tap and then opened the valve on the burner. When he held the lighter over it, a blue and yellow flame blazed. He turned the valve down – the flame grew smaller. Perfect. Now all he had to do was find the keys.

Noël opened the cabinet next to the window. The top compartment was full of pens and notebooks. He closed it and started searching the lower compartment.

At the same moment, a dull thud against the windowpane made him jump. The owl was sitting on the window ledge, just half a metre away, staring at him with its yellow eyes.

Frightened, Noël jumped back. As he did so, he knocked over the Bunsen burner. It fell off the table straight into the bin, which immediately caught fire. Before Noël could react, the fire spread to the curtains.

The fire devoured the fabric curtains, spreading to the shelves and consuming the books there. Within two minutes, everything around him had gone up in flames.

Smoke filled the room. It stung Noël’s eyes, crept into his mouth and crawled down into his lungs.

Coughing, he backed up to the door, wondering for a moment whether he should try to kick it in, but he saved himself the trouble. He couldn't open the door that way. And Ben and Lennart were definitely gone.

His eyes darted around the room, which was no longer dark at all, the flames immersing everything in a hellish, flickering, orange and red light. Soon all the paper had been burned, but the fire was hungry – it blazed, crackled, sizzled, wanting more.

The smoke burned Noël's eyes. He forced himself to keep them open.

The sink next to the teacher's desk. Maybe that was his salvation. To reach it, he had to pass the burning shelf. Noël held his breath and ran across the room, ducking his head. He felt the scorching heat on his face.

In the corridor, the fire alarm finally started going off – a shrill, penetrating howl. Water was always pouring from the ceiling in films, but there was obviously no sprinkler system at this school. Hopefully, the alarm was at least directly connected to the fire brigade. But by the time the fire engines arrived, it would be too late for Noël.

He had reached the sink and wanted to turn on the tap. But when his hand touched the metal, he recoiled with a cry. It was burning hot.

He tore the towel off the hook on the wall and wrapped it around his right hand. Using the towel to protect him, he turned the tap on. Water hissed out of the tap and he soaked the towel, holding it under the stream.

As he was doing this, he noticed the trail of flames creeping up along the wall towards the tall, metal locker where the teachers kept chemicals. Noël had no idea exactly what was in it. But he did know that if the locker caught fire, everything was going to blow.

Pressing the wet towel over his nose and mouth, Noël ran. Into the flames, towards the only way out. The locked window.

Noël dropped the towel, clenched his hand into a fist and smashed it into the windowpane with all his strength. He didn't feel the pain when the glass shattered under the impact. He hastily made the hole bigger by pushing the shards aside. A few sharp splinters pierced his skin, but he didn't feel that either.

Cool night air streamed into the room through the broken window, food for the fire that roared with enthusiasm inside.

Noël jumped onto the windowsill and dived headlong out of the window.

In the same moment, the chemical cabinet exploded behind him.