

The library

By Ayelet Abraham

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Daria

Daria sat in a patch of pale winter sunlight, eating her midmorning snack. She lifted her eyes to the sky, vast and intensely blue. Just as she imagined golden dragons gliding across it, Eran suddenly appeared around the corner and hissed, "Get lost."

Daria felt her heart flutter with fear. She already knew better than to argue with him. Quickly, she gathered her schoolbag and water bottle and gave up the spot. When she glanced back, she saw Eran—the most handsome boy in the school, tall, with a thick mop of golden curls and blue eyes—sitting down in the very same corner with Asaf and two girls from the parallel class.

Only that morning, Eran and Asaf had cornered her by the back entrance to the school. Once they found themselves alone with her, they had groped her, laughing that she still needed to "develop." When it happened, she had gone completely silent. Afterwards she was overwhelmed by shame and angry at herself for not resisting them, for not shouting or striking them with her umbrella, for not doing something. Instead, she had simply stood there, frozen, and let it happen.

Maybe she should tell one of the teachers?

No. There was no chance she would tell anyone. They would make a big fuss over it, and afterwards Eran and Asaf would get back at her in an even worse way. Or worse still, they would flatly deny anything had happened, and no one would believe her.

"I'm such a fool," she muttered to herself as she climbed the stairs to her classroom.

She hated the breaks between lessons. Anything could happen during recess.

There were several other boys in the class who also delighted in tormenting her. One of their favorite tricks was to place a half-eaten sandwich on her chair just before she sat down. She felt something sticky and wet against the seat of her trousers, and when she reached behind her, she found what looked like white cheese and a slice of cucumber clinging to the fabric.

Humiliated, she ran out of the classroom and burst into tears in the girls' restroom while desperately trying to clean her clothes. By the time she finished, her trousers

were damp, but she hoped the large white stain was gone. She hurried back into the classroom and sat down at once before anyone could see the back of her trousers.

At last, the lesson began.

It was the advanced English class for students who already spoke English, and Daria liked the teacher, who had come from South Africa and was always full of enthusiasm for teaching them the language. That day, as always, the teacher entered the classroom cheerfully and announced that she had finished grading their compositions and was very pleased with them.

She handed the papers back, and Daria's heart leaped when she saw the grade at the top of hers: **100**.

Her story was about a girl with magical powers who performed miracles in the neighborhood where she lived. She rescued a child from drowning and stopped an outbreak of plague. Daria had wondered if she had gone too far in the powers she had given her heroine. When she had told the plot to her grandparents, her grandfather had said that people ought to keep their feet on the ground instead of having their heads in the clouds.

She was glad that at least her teacher had appreciated what she had written.

Alice, the teacher, came over while the other children were busy with their assignments.

"Your composition is beautiful," she said. "It's full of imagination. I'd love for you to read it to the class."

Daria hesitated. She wanted very much to read it aloud, but she knew there was still a cheese stain on the back of her trousers.

"Maybe another day," she said.

The teacher looked at her for a long moment, reading the conflict on her face.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Daria replied, biting her lower lip.

"All right. Another day, then."

That day's lesson was about *The Seagull* by Chekhov.

When the class ended and the teacher left the room, Daria remained seated until everyone else had gone. Only then did she put her notebooks and textbooks into her bag and leave the school.

She walked to the bus stop, which was already empty, and waited for the bus, which was late once again. A cold wind swept a plastic bag and candy wrappers through the air, spinning them into little whirlwinds before Daria's tear-filled eyes.

The bus finally arrived, and Daria took her usual seat behind the driver, a habit she had adopted after all the bullying from the other children.

When she got off on the street where her grandparents lived, seagulls circled overhead, gliding on the currents of wind. It was cold, and she shivered despite her coat.

Her grandparents' apartment stood at the edge of the neighborhood, beside the municipal park near the seashore, on the second floor of a block that had been hastily built thirty years earlier for newly arrived immigrants. When they had first moved in, the building had been brand new. In those days, owning a modest two-room apartment was considered a luxury, at a time when many people were still living in tents and tin shacks in the transit camps.

But as the years passed, those who had the means moved away. Those who had nothing remained behind, living in leaking, crumbling apartments. The neighborhood acquired a bad reputation—a place people avoided after dark.

Daria climbed the stairs to her grandparents' two-room apartment. When she opened the door, she found her grandmother in the tiny kitchen, preparing lunch.

Her grandmother greeted her with a warm smile.

"Hello, my little darling. How was school today?"

"It was nice," Daria replied. "My teacher liked the composition I wrote. I got a hundred."

"That's good. You deserve it. You worked hard. Now go wash your hands. Grandpa will be back soon, and then we'll eat."

Daria went into the bathroom, which contained a sink, an open shower, and a toilet with a flush tap. She scrubbed her hands with soap just as her grandfather had taught her. In his youth, he had been an officer in the Romanian army, and he was meticulous about cleanliness and order. He was also extremely frugal. He insisted that Daria never spend more than five minutes in the shower and use no more than two squares of toilet paper each time she went to the bathroom. Wastefulness was something he detested with all his heart.

She dried her hands on the cloth towel just as she heard her grandfather come through the front door.

"Shalom Aleichem," he called as he entered and sat down at the table, already set for lunch.

He poured himself a glass of semi-dry white wine and topped it off with soda from the siphon bottle that stood on the table.

Her grandmother served the first course: bread and carrot salad with egg. Then came potatoes with chicken and *tzimmes*, and for dessert there was compote made with apples, peaches, and plums.

"Daria got a hundred on the composition she wrote," Grandma said as they ate.

"Very good," Grandpa said. "In a week's time you'll be fourteen. How would you like to celebrate?"

"I don't know," Daria replied, pushing her fork into a steaming piece of potato.

"Would you like to invite some friends over?"

"Not really."

She said nothing more. She could not bring herself to admit that she had no friends at her new school and that the friends she had left behind in Haifa had most likely forgotten her.

"It is a good day," Grandma said. "One whole year since you came to live with us."

Daria nodded.

A year since her father had been killed on a flight to the United States, and her whole world had been turned upside down.

That evening she lay curled beneath the blankets on the fold-out sofa in the living room, longing to go to sleep. Her feet were cold, so she pulled her socks back on. She wanted desperately to fall asleep and forget everything, but the black-and-white television stood in the living room, and Grandpa watched every program until the very end of the broadcast day, including the closing religious reflection, *Verse of the Day*. Only then would he switch off the television and go to bed.

Daria never actually watched it. She only listened to the sounds drifting from the set, but even that was enough to frighten her—gunshots, screams, suspenseful music. She knew all the series by heart: *Starsky & Hutch*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Kojak*.

While watching television, Grandpa would work through the accounts for his shop on small index cards. Only he knew how to decipher the long columns of numbers covering each one. Sometimes he took Daria with him to collect money from customers. She always felt embarrassed standing beside him while he asked people

to pay what they owed. She wondered if he brought her along because he was afraid someone might hit him—and wouldn't if a little girl was standing there beside him. A pretty girl with two braids tied with pale blue ribbons. People in that neighborhood did not like paying their debts, and Grandpa's ledger was full of lists of goods he had sold on credit but had never been paid for.

Even before her father died, Daria had spent her school holidays with her grandparents. One of the things she loved most was going to Grandpa's shop. It was a textile store where you could find every kind of clothing or fabric a household might need, from tablecloths and housecoats to school uniforms.

Grandpa bought large rolls of diaper cloth and sent them to his seamstress, who cut and sewed them into cloth diapers. He taught Daria how to fold each diaper neatly and slip it into a crisp cellophane bag before he sold it at a profit. Whenever he spread a garment across the counter, Daria loved hearing his broad fingernails tapping against the wood. In one corner of the shop stood a drawer where he kept balloons to give children. There was also a novelty pen with a picture of a glamorous model on it. Whenever you turned the pen upside down, the model's clothes disappeared.

Grandpa was always impeccably dressed, and every evening he polished his shoes for the next day. When they walked home together after closing the shop, his shoes squeaked with every step. Daria loved arranging the display window. She dressed the mannequin in a floral dress and lined up school shirts in different colors side by side. Grandpa had a loyal clientele who respected him because he was a man of his word. A promise from him was a promise kept.

But during the past few months, ever since Eran and Asaf had begun tormenting her, she had stopped visiting the shop. After school she preferred to stay home, reading or doing her homework. The hardships of school left her drained. She tried to gather strength for the next day by retreating deeper and deeper into a small, silent place inside herself where nothing ever changed, where each day resembled the one before it.

In that sense, she was glad she lived with her grandparents. Everything in their home was fixed and predictable, routines repeated day after day. It was nothing like living with her father, where she had never known when he would come home or whether there would be anything to eat in the refrigerator when she returned from school.

At last her grandparents wished her good night and went into their bedroom. Daria lay with her eyes closed. Then she remembered Eran, his hands groping her body, and a wave of nausea swept over her, along with the desperate urge to crawl out of her own skin. She pulled the blanket over her head and breathed heavily. *Why didn't I defend myself? Why did I let it happen?* If she told anyone, they would probably say

she had enjoyed it, that she had wanted it. Then the humiliation would be twice as great. She knew she wasn't strong enough to fight him. Maybe she needed something to protect herself. Scissors? A knife? No. That was too extreme. If she hurt him, she would only get herself into trouble. Maybe tomorrow morning she'd think of something better.

Eventually, she fell asleep.

The next morning Grandpa woke her early, as he did every day. Together they went through a series of exercises he had learned in the Romanian army. Afterwards, he put on his *tefillin*, while Daria packed her schoolbag and chatted with Grandma, who was preparing oatmeal porridge. Grandma stirred butter—or sometimes margarine—into the porridge, along with sugar and a pinch of salt. It tasted wonderful and always left Daria wishing for another bowl. After breakfast, Grandpa and Daria left the apartment together. At the intersection, their paths parted. Grandpa headed toward the shopping center where his store was, while Daria walked to the bus stop for the ride to school.

As soon as she arrived, she hurried upstairs to her classroom before Eran and Asaf could catch her in the corridor. She set down her schoolbag and sat reading while she waited for class to begin. No one came over to speak with her, and she made no attempt to strike up a conversation with the other girls. When she had first arrived, she had tried, but she'd had the feeling they didn't like her, that they had no patience for her. Around them she always felt awkward and foolish. The things that fascinated her meant nothing to them. The girls liked talking about clothes and whispering to one another about the older boys. During recess they sat on the bleachers overlooking the basketball court, watching the senior boys play while chewing gum and dissolving into fits of giggles while Daria preferred to sit quietly by herself, reading or doodling in a notebook. She filled its pages with creatures that were half human and half animal—seahorses with human heads, a dog walking upright on two legs, a fish holding a fork, and countless other strange beings.

After class, Daria left the classroom and went to the girls' restroom. She stepped into one of the stalls, trying to ignore the cold and the smell of urine hanging in the air. She relieved herself, and then suddenly noticed Eran's head peering beneath the stall door. She screamed.

"Quiet! What are you screaming for?" he snapped, disappearing from view.

She hurried to her feet, pulled up her trousers, and flushed the toilet.

When she stepped out of the stall, Eran was standing there, waiting for her.

"So, we've finally got a little privacy," he said with a grin as he moved toward her.

She noticed that the restroom door was closed.

"Asaf's guarding the door. Don't worry. We can do whatever we want now."

He stepped closer, his hand reaching out to her breasts.

Something surged up from the depths of Daria's body—a force that refused.

She shoved him with all her strength. He hadn't expected it.

She watched him fall as though in slow motion, the way people did on television. He staggered, trying to keep his balance, then lurched backward. The back of his head struck the porcelain sink. The sound reminded Daria of someone thumping a watermelon to see whether it was ripe. Eran collapsed onto the floor. His eyes were closed. A pool of blood spread steadily around his head. Daria stared at him in horror. She had no idea what to do. If she walked out the door, Asaf would see her and know she had done it. Her eyes darted toward the restroom window.

Could I fit through it? She would have to try. She lowered the toilet lid and climbed onto it. Then she forced herself through the narrow window. It overlooked the school's vegetable garden, and at that moment no one was there. Twisting and wriggling, she squeezed herself outside, dropped onto the soft muddy ground, and rolled across the earth, crushing young shoots of green onions and parsley. She sprang to her feet and ran. She raced toward the school gate, past the guard, and kept running with every ounce of strength she had. Away from that dreadful school. Away from this life without her father.

But where could she go? She entered the park and ran along its winding path beneath the towering eucalyptus trees. The crows called after her. *Caw... caw... What happened?* they seemed to ask. She kept running until she reached the gate that led to her grandparents' apartment building. Maybe Grandma would know what to do. She darted across the road without looking either way. A passing driver caught sight of the girl suddenly leaping into the street. He slammed on his brakes and leaned on the horn again and again, but Daria never even noticed. She kept running until she reached her grandparents' building, bounded up the stairs, and burst into the apartment. Her grandmother was in the middle of applying a face mask made from crushed tomatoes.

"What is it, my little darling? You look like you've seen someone dead."

"I think I killed a boy at school," Daria sobbed into the hands covering her face. "I didn't mean to."

"Wait... slowly, slowly. I not understand. You tell me?"

Daria bit her lower lip.

"I can't tell you."

Her cheeks burned. "I want to be alone."

She walked into the living room and sank heavily onto the sofa, burying her face in her hands. Hearing her sobs, Grandma made her a cup of tea and set it beside her.

"Daria, my little darling," she said softly, "I think now I give you birthday present. Present your father tell me before he leave for America to give you on your fourteenth birthday... if he not come back. I think now is good time."

"What is it, Grandma?" Daria asked, lifting her tear-streaked face.

Grandma said nothing.

Instead, she walked to the large built-in wardrobe and took out a small cloth pouch.

"You give me your hand."

Daria held out her hand.

Grandma placed the pouch in her palm.

"You keep this safe. It yours forever."

Daria loosened the drawstring and emptied the contents into her hand.

A silver ring. Something was engraved upon it. She lifted it closer to her eye.

The engraving depicted a strange creature that looked like an octopus with eight tentacles—but with a human face.

"You put it on your finger," Grandma said.

For the first time, Daria heard something in her voice beyond its usual gentleness.

Authority.

Daria tried slipping the ring onto her middle finger, but it was too small. Then she tried her ring finger. It slid effortlessly into place, as though it had been made especially for her hand.

In that instant, her grandmother—and the living room—vanished. Daria found herself standing in a vast room with soaring ceilings, surrounded by oak bookshelves filled with books. One entire wall was lined with tall windows overlooking a lush green garden. Warm sunlight poured into the room, illuminating crimson carpets spread across the floor. In the center of the room stood an armchair beside a reading lamp. Nearby were a writing desk and a chair.

Daria looked around in astonishment. How had she come here? She glanced down at the ring on her finger. Then she removed it. In the blink of an eye, she was back in the living room with her grandmother.

"What... what was that?" she whispered.

"That the Library," Grandma said with a smile. "Your father guard it all his life. And me too, when I young, before I marry your grandfather. Our family guard the Library many, many years. Grandfather of grandfather of grandfather guard the Library."

She paused.

"In the Library are all the stories."

"The Library is the mother of everything people imagine... and everything they write. And now you come to the age when you also become guardian of the Library."

A heavy pounding suddenly echoed through the apartment.

Bang. Bang. Bang. "Mrs. Ashkenazi! Open the door! Police!" Grandma's smile vanished.

"Quick, Daria! Go to the Library and stay there until I call you."

Another thunderous knock shook the door.

Daria slipped the ring back onto her finger. In an instant she was standing once again inside the Library.

The library

The Library was now bathed in the light of early evening. From the garden outside came the calls of birds settling before nightfall. The reading lamp cast a warm pool of light, and the room was pleasantly warm.

Daria stood for a moment, taking it all in.

Bookshelves climbed all the way to the high ceiling, while one wall opened onto a lush green garden. Heavy crimson carpets covered the floor, and gilded wall sconces shaped like curling flowers encircled the room.

Curiosity drew her toward the shelves. She studied the books whose spines bore unusual titles: *Until the Last Breath. Take Me With You. Wherever You Go, There I Shall Be. Contours of Longing.* And many others. Every one of them seemed to tell a story about love.

She also noticed that the room had two doors. She wanted to open them and discover what lay beyond, but she hesitated, afraid to find out.

Night fell quickly. Daria settled into the armchair in the center of the room. The events of the day had exhausted her. A deep silence filled the Library, and fear quietly

crept into her heart. She hoped her grandmother would call her back soon. She did not want to spend the night in this strange, unfamiliar place.

"Hello, Daria." A woman's voice suddenly filled the room.

"Who's there?" Daria asked, startled.

"I am the Library. The sum of all these halls and all the books they contain, together with every idea and every thought hidden within them. I Welcome you. I have waited a long time for you to arrive within my walls, and now the time has come. This is a moment of celebration. You have reached the proper age. Your family has guarded me for many generations, and now you join that chosen company."

"I'm hardly fit to guard anything," replied Daria "I can't even protect myself. How could I possibly protect you?"

"There is strength within you of which you are completely unaware," the Library replied. In time, you will discover it. I promise."

Daria shook her head. "I can't protect you right now. I'm sorry. I have enough problems of my own. I think I killed a boy at school today."

"Everything will find its proper place in its proper time," said the Library gently. "Do not be afraid."

"But now that you are here, come and help me welcome Fania Holtz and receive her story."

A red lamp above one of the doors flashed several times.

The door opened.

An elderly woman entered slowly, feeling her way with a white cane. Daria realized that she was blind. "Come this way," she said, hurrying over. "There's an armchair here."

The old woman took Daria's hand, allowing herself to be guided across the room. She lowered herself into the chair with a sigh of relief and sat silently for a moment.

"My dear Fania," the Library said warmly, "please share with us the story of your life."

The old woman nodded.

"I was born when the war began," she said. "I was an only child, precious beyond measure to my family. Every wish I had was granted, and I grew into a spoiled woman who believed everyone owed me whatever I desired. I squandered the inheritance I received on jewelry and fine clothes. I married four times and divorced four times. And in the end, when I was seventy years old, I found myself alone and helpless,

living in an old house that was falling to pieces. After I had sold all my jewelry and stuffed my expensive furs into the cracks around the windows to keep out the cold, I went out into the street and begged for bread. An old acquaintance happened to pass by. He saw me, and his heart went out to me. He took me into his home. There I spent the rest of my days, grateful to those who had shown me kindness. I died peacefully at the age of ninety. And so I have come here."

When she finished speaking, she leaned her head back against the chair. "I am tired of holding my head upright. My soul is weary. I see now how selfish I was all my life, and how a single act of generosity and compassion from a stranger saved me. And now, Library, I give you my story."

"You have told it beautifully," the Library replied. "It is a fine coming-of-age story. Your story will be placed in the Wing of Coming-of-Age Stories, where it shall be preserved forever."

"And now, go on your way—free, and enriched by the wisdom of your life."

Before Daria's astonished eyes, the old woman slowly began to fade.

Within moments...

...she was gone.

"The storytellers rise from the depths," the Library said, "and after they have told their stories, they return to the depths from which they came, until the time arrives for them to return clothed in another body."

"Look at the table."

Daria turned toward it.

A book now lay on the small table beside the armchair where Fania had been sitting.

It had not been there before.

"You see?" said the Library.

"That is Fania's story."

"Please place it on the collection shelf, so that one of the librarians may carry it to the proper wing."

Daria rose and searched until she found a shelf marked for newly arrived books. She placed the volume there and returned to her chair.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" asked the Library.

Only then did Daria realize how hungry she was. She had eaten nothing since morning, and everything that had happened had driven all thoughts of food from her mind.

"Yes," she said. "I'd like something to eat and drink."

For several long minutes the Library gave no reply.

The room fell completely silent.

Then one of the doors opened, and a waiter in a perfectly tailored suit entered, pushing a silver serving trolley. On it rested a plate covered by a polished silver cloche. He stopped beside Daria and lifted the cover. Beneath it was a sandwich, a salad, and a steaming glass of warm milk.

"Enjoy your meal," said the Library.

Smiling for the first time that day, Daria began to eat. The waiter silently left the room and Daria was alone once more. When she had finished eating, she wiped her mouth with the linen napkin lying beside the plate.

"My grandmother told me," she said, "that my father studied you for many years, and that my family's fate is bound up with yours."

"It is," the Library answered. "For many generations your family has protected me from those who would invade me. Your father's death was no accident. I have an enemy that seeks to destroy me, to erase me, and to replace me with a new order."

Daria frowned. "I don't understand. My father was flying to America. His plane crashed into the ocean."

"That is indeed what happened," said the Library. "But it was not an accident. My enemy sent one of his servants aboard your father's flight. He caused the crash."

The words settled over the room like cold ash.

"For some time now," the Library continued, "the enemy has been invading my halls. He has been setting fire to my books, and there has been no one left to defend me. He has already destroyed four wings. The Wing of Reconciliation Stories. The Wing of Defeat Stories. The Wing of Heroic Stories. And the Wing of Repentance Stories. What remains untouched are the Wing of Coming-of-Age Stories, the Wing of Love Stories"—the Library's voice softened—"where you are sitting now, the Wing of Loss Stories, and the Wing of Quest Stories."

A long silence followed.

"Now that you have reached the age of fourteen," the Library said at last, "you are old enough to undertake the task of defending my walls against this enemy."

"Me?" Daria stared in disbelief. "I'm only a child. I don't know anything about defending libraries from enemies. I can barely protect myself."

Despair settled over her. She had thought, if only for a moment, that she had escaped the nightmare waiting for her at school. Instead, she had stumbled into something even worse. Here she was, expected to defend a mysterious being from a terrifying enemy who had already succeeded in killing her father.

"I would not have called upon you if you were incapable of doing it," the Library said. "Your family has been blessed with unusual gifts. Over many generations, those gifts have been carefully strengthened through marriages with people who possessed complementary abilities. You are far more remarkable than you know."

The Library paused before continuing.

"Your imagination can bring entire worlds into being. You write stories almost effortlessly. Here, within the Library, stories become reality. And your sensitivity—the way loud noises overwhelm you, the way strong smells disturb you—that sensitivity is not a weakness here. It is a gift. It will allow you to sense where the Arsonist is at any given moment. And then you will be able to stop him."

Daria lowered her eyes.

"I don't feel capable of stopping anyone. I can barely speak. Even saying '*Stop*'... I can't manage it when it really matters."

"Here in the Library," the Library replied gently, "you need not use physical force to stop anyone. It is enough to imagine what will happen and it happens."

Daria fell silent. The thought was astonishing. Whatever she imagined would become real.

"You must use this power with great care," said the Library. "Let us try it. Imagine something happening in this room."

Daria looked toward the darkened windows. Then her gaze drifted to the crimson carpet covering the floor. She thought for a long moment. A tiny furrow appeared between her brows.

Suddenly—

a white rabbit with long ears appeared in the middle of the carpet.

"Very good," said the Library.

The rabbit stood upright on its hind legs.

It began to dance.

Then it clapped its front paws together.

Daria couldn't help laughing.

"Excellent," said the Library. "Now make it disappear."

Instead—

five rabbits appeared.

They joined paws and danced together in a circle.

"I can't make them disappear!" Daria cried in alarm.

"Do not be frightened," the Library answered calmly. "At this stage, the mind does very much as it pleases. It must be trained through daily practice. Now imagine a door. Then imagine the rabbits leaving through it."

Daria closed her eyes.

A moment later, a small door appeared in one of the walls.

The rabbits formed a line, hopped through it one after another...

...and vanished.

"Well done," said the Library.

A brief silence followed.

"Can you feel the Arsonist somewhere within the Library at this moment?"

Daria looked bewildered.

How could she possibly sense someone in a place she barely knew?

"I... I don't know."

She perched uncertainly on the edge of the armchair.

"I have no idea."

"Pay attention," the Library said softly. "Notice the sensations upon your skin. Throughout your body."

Daria closed her eyes.

After a few moments she spoke.

"My whole body feels cold..."

"...but the fingertips of my right hand feel warm."

"Excellent."

"That means the Arsonist is at the far end of the corridor leading to the Wing of Coming-of-Age Stories." The words echoed through the quiet room.

"Go there," said the Library. "And stop him."

Daria rose stiffly.

"What am I supposed to do if I meet him?"

"Stop him."

The Library's voice was calm and certain. "You will know how."

The Angry Bear

The Angry Bear believed the world was saturated with injustice and humiliation. Having grown up in a poor neighborhood, he had felt from an early age that the world was against him. Even more than the violence and deprivation that marked his childhood, he bitterly resented the way his teachers had failed to notice him—or his gift for writing. They criticized his work mercilessly and refused to publish it in the school newspaper.

Poverty followed him throughout his youth. His father abandoned him and his mother when he was eight years old. He never forgot the winters when the electricity was cut off because his mother could not pay the bills, or the bitter cold that drove him to huddle beside the fires lit by homeless people, simply to warm himself for a few minutes. The stories he wrote in those years were dedicated to the homeless who froze to death in stairwells after nights of drinking.

But it was the indifference toward his writing that shattered him, again and again. As a child he was promised a different fate. His grandmother, who had come from a mountain village, used to read cards for him. She had told him that a great destiny awaited him. None of it came true as the years slipped away. The magnificent dreams of his youth dissolved like a mirage. He became a middle-aged man who spent his mornings unloading crates of beer from delivery trucks which he drank in afternoons in the neighborhood tavern.

He barely earned enough to pay the rent. His stories were not published. He never married. He never had children. Angry and embittered, he sat in the tavern with friends who hated the system as much as he did, men consumed by helpless rage against the cruelty of an existence that always seemed to take more than it gave.

He nursed a deep grudge against the welfare system that had made his mother's life so difficult. She died of a long illness when he was twenty-five. He missed her funeral as in the final days of her life, he had dropped into an alcoholic blackout. By the time

he surfaced again, she had long since been buried and all that remained was to visit her grave.

So he drank again.

Sometimes, however, there came days of sobriety. On those mornings he would wake unexpectedly early and find himself strolling beside the river, quietly humming a tune to himself. Those were the days he wrote stories. He sent them to literary magazines. Most of the time they were met with complete silence.

He envied the writers who sat at their desks composing one story after another without needing alcohol to loosen the words. Though he often wanted to, he could never stop drinking. He was frequently drawn into fights. The police arrested him more than once, and he would spend several days in jail. Hence the days devoted to writing grew fewer and fewer.

By the age of forty-five he had already been hospitalized several times with broken limbs and knife wounds. He thanked God that, ugly as the scars were, they marked only his face, arms, and legs. Nothing more vital. Each time he swore he would never drink again yet there he was after a day or two drinking again although long ago, alcohol had ceased to bring him happiness. Now he drank merely to survive the day without shaking, without feeling unbearable.

He looked ill. He felt ill. No one smiled when he entered a café each morning for coffee and a pastry. Unlike other customers, he was never greeted with a friendly smile or a polite "Good morning." Over the years he destroyed countless relationships that might have helped him. Many places in the city eventually barred him from entering.

Layer upon layer of accumulated pain and humiliation filled him with rage against the world. Sometimes that rage pushed him to take action. He gathered together all the stories he had labored over for years and sent them to a publishing house with renewed hope. At last, he thought, he would be discovered. He imagined himself standing in the spotlight. He was convinced that publication would make him so happy, so completely fulfilled, that he would never drink again.

For months he waited for a reply. He told his friends that his success was only days away. Soon, he said, they would hardly see him anymore as he would receive a generous advance, quit his job, and devote himself entirely to writing. He painted vivid pictures of this vision for anyone willing to listen. Yes, he would sit day and night at his desk, writing masterpieces with a bottle of fine whisky beside him.

Then, on the last day of March, on a cold rainy morning, the email finally arrived.

We regret that we will not be able to publish your stories. They lack a sufficiently developed plot and require extensive revision that would demand considerable

editorial work. We therefore cannot offer publication. We wish you every success in the future.

He read the message again.

And again.

The words burned inside him. A fury so overwhelming seized him that he hurled the only intact coffee mug left in the apartment against the wall. Coffee splattered across the plaster. He felt as though flames were consuming him. He paced the apartment, cursing aloud.

"Those pompous bastards. The whole literary elite, wasting their lives writing criticism...They ought to burn. All that pretentious high culture."

At that very moment he decided to burn down the local library. Truthfully, he wanted to burn down the whole world. He had grown impatient with life's slow pace. He wanted immediate relief. Anything standing in his way deserved to be destroyed.

That very night he went to the neighborhood library. Using tricks he had learned in high school from his old friend Mark, he broke inside and poured two tanks of gasoline between the shelves. Then standing on the threshold of the library he struck a match, through it inside the library entrance hall and fled.

Climbing onto the roof of a nearby building, he watched the pillars of fire and smoke rise into the night. He savored the firefighters' desperate attempts to save the building. They never had a chance. By dawn, nothing remained but ashes.

He went to work that morning in unusually good spirits. To hell with the literary world. To hell with books. To hell with all those smug snobs who ruled the literary world. He imagined them choking on their foie gras and chuckled. He discovered that hatred had given him a new source of strength. He was filled with energy and decided he would never write another word. From now on, every book he could lay his hands on would burn.

It was, in truth, a great tragedy that the Angry Bear abandoned writing. For despite his lack of education and despite never being published, he was genuinely gifted. His friends—the ones who drank with him—loved his stories. They were filled with violence and suffering. They always ended badly yet they held a poignant truth in them. Listening to one of the Angry Bear's stories was like watching every ounce of despair and rage hidden in one's own heart gather into a single voice.

A few days later, the Angry Bear once again stood on the roof of a building in Paris, watching flames devour another library he had set ablaze.

Each window that burst from the heat filled him with delight.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" A man's voice near him suddenly spoke "I don't think I'll ever tire of watching this."

Startled, the Angry Bear spun around. In the red glow of the fire stood a bald man. He looked ordinary enough to have been a dentist or an accountant, with his clean shave and perfectly pressed white shirt.

"By the way," the stranger said with a dry smile, "I think you did an excellent job. It doesn't look as though there'll be anything left to read."

"How do you know I had anything to do with it?"

"My job," the man replied, "is knowing about every little act of mischief people commit. I'm responsible for such matters."

"And who are you, if I may ask?"

"You'll have to guess my name. But let's just say I'm the lord of vengeance. The collector of debts. The clerk of punishments. The man who knocks on your door in the middle of the night."

The Angry Bear scratched his beard. "And what do you want with me?"

"Well," said the stranger, "you've just burned down a library full of humanity's cultural treasures. I must say, I was impressed by your talent for destruction. And I'd like to offer you a task. Something to occupy you for a while. Something that will give you a rare opportunity to repay society in kind."

The Angry Bear straightened. His curiosity was piqued. "What sort of task?"

"I want you to burn a library greater than any you've ever seen. The Library of All Stories. It is no ordinary library. It is the source from which every story springs. The place where stories—and consciousness itself—are born. The great womb of all legends. It is an ancient being. A terrifyingly vast one. And I want you to destroy it for me."

"And why should I do that?" the Angry Bear asked, his hands tightening into fists. "Do it yourself."

"Easy there, my good man," the stranger replied. "I want *you* to do it because I have no power to do it myself. I can only give you instructions. But I have no ability to act to be more precise..." A faint smile crossed his lips. "I'm only an idea in your head."

The Angry Bear frowned. "So you're saying I'm imagining you?"

"It hardly matters," the man replied. "After all everything is a dream."

"And why would you want me to destroy this Library?"

"Because I have a better plan for the universe." He folded his hands behind his back as though delivering a lecture. "You see, there is an egg. A cosmic egg which one day must hatch. It is inevitable. And I want to generate enough heat for it to do so so that something entirely new may emerge."

The Angry Bear stared at him. "What's inside this egg you're talking about?"

"Ah..." The stranger smiled. "That is the great mystery. No one truly knows. Perhaps goodness. Perhaps absolute evil." The man shrugged. "I've simply grown weary of all these endless stories. All these countless variations on life. I would rather the egg hatch and leave only a single truth. One unified truth. No more arguments. No competing points of view. No need to concern oneself with other people. The world would become one again. Wouldn't that be wonderfully orderly?"

The Angry Bear considered this. "And who would be in charge of such a world?"

"Ah!" The stranger laughed. "You're a clever man. You notice the fine print immediately." He reached into his pocket and produced a small coin.

"You see this ? There are always two sides to every coin. Always. When the cosmic egg hatches there will be unity. One great zero."

The Angry Bear frowned. "Zero is nothing."

"So... would there even be people in this world?"

The stranger chuckled. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. It makes very little difference. Human beings are secondary. The great truth is what matters."

The Angry Bear slowly nodded. "It sounds peaceful. I imagine a universe of zero beings would be very quiet."

"Precisely. Quiet. Peaceful. Pure. No great storms of clashing desires. No competing wishes."

"And what do I receive in return for helping you?" the Angry Bear asked.

"As my assistant..." The stranger smiled. "...you might become a kind of high priest in such a universe. Perhaps you'll receive an entirely new planet of your own. Fresh and untouched. A world filled with fruit trees and animals roaming freely. You could build your own civilization there."

He paused. "And who knows? If you succeed in hatching the cosmic egg the Great Power might even grant your deepest wish."

"It might publish your book."

"With—or without—a plot."

The Angry Bear stiffened.

The remark stung.

Was this man mocking him?

How could he possibly know about the manuscript?

"I told you," the stranger said calmly. "It is my business to know such things. I've been watching you for many years. Since you were a boy. Since your father left. I know your hardships. Your disappointments. Society has undoubtedly treated you cruelly. You deserved more than you received. You are talented. You work hard. I have watched many people like you crushed beneath the wheels of the system."

The Angry Bear felt tears threatening to rise. Was this meeting fate? Or was it proof that he was finally losing his mind? Was this the moment his life would change? The moment he would spread his wings above the city and show everyone who he truly was? A longing unlike anything he had ever known ignited inside him.

At that moment he made his decision.

"I'll do it," he said. "What do I have to do?"

"Excellent." The stranger smiled his dry smile once more. "A wise decision. I shall send you now to the Great Library. You must be careful not to reveal yourself. Only four wings remain. They are still filled with books. It will take time to burn them all. The previous messenger succeeded in destroying four wings before he fell while carrying out his mission. He died above the Atlantic Ocean. The Library is already badly wounded. It needs time to recover. I have no intention of giving it that time. I trust that you will finish what he began."

He stepped closer. "You must understand. The Library is alive. It feels everything that happens within it. It senses when a story dies...and when another is born. The moment you begin burning books it will know. You must move silently through its corridors without allowing it to discover where you are."

"And how am I supposed to burn all those books?" asked the Angry Bear.

"You need learn only a single word. A word that will kindle fire at the tip of your finger."

"And what is this magic word?"

The stranger's smile widened.

"Nedao Moira."

"First look at the tip of your index finger. Hold the image of fire clearly in your imagination. Then speak the words...'*Nedao Moira*.'"

The Angry Bear raised his hand, stared at his finger, and did exactly as instructed yet nothing happened. He sighed. "I suppose not everyone is meant to perform magic."

"I assure you," the stranger replied, "that you can. When you say *Nedao Moira*, hold in your mind the image of a great fire."

He tried again.

This time...

...a thin wisp of smoke curled from his fingertip.

"We're making progress," the stranger said with satisfaction.

The Angry Bear tried once more. He looked toward the blaze that was still burning two streets away. He fixed the image of those flames in his mind. Again he whispered: "*Nedao Moira*." Smoke rose from his fingertip.

Then—

a tiny flame sprang into life.

"There."

The stranger nodded approvingly. "Now you can burn anything you wish." He paused. "But be careful. If you're caught...I cannot save you."

The Arson

The Debt Collector snapped his fingers. In the blink of an eye, the Angry Bear found himself standing in a room lined with glass display cases. Inside them were masks and small carved figures that seemed to come from distant civilizations. Through the tall windows filtered the pale gray light of early morning.

The Debt Collector stood before him in his neatly pressed white shirt, clean-shaven and smelling faintly of lemon cologne. He looked as though he had just stepped out of the shower.

"Come," he said. "Time for your mission."

The force of the Debt Collector's will seemed almost physical. For a moment the Angry Bear swayed beneath it.

"All right... all right," he muttered.

He spoke the magic words.

"Nedao Moira."

A flame sprang to life at the tip of his finger. He approached one of the display cases and opened the cabinet door and touched the flame to the straw hair of one of the masks.

It caught immediately. Within moments the fire spread across the mask and leapt to the one beside it.

"Very good," said the Debt Collector. "Keep going. I have other matters to attend to elsewhere. Good luck. Give it everything you've got."

Then he vanished.

The Angry Bear continued setting the masks alight one after another. Though he felt a pang of regret. These were not books. They were the creations of another culture.

Even so...A task was a task. The Library had to burn. Soon the room filled with smoke and every display case was ablaze.

He opened the door and stepped into the corridor beyond. Bookshelves stretched away on both sides, crowded with volumes. He began setting them on fire as well. From shelf to shelf he moved. The greedy flames seized thick tomes and slender booklets alike. Now and then a title caught his eye and stirred his curiosity. For an instant he wanted to stop. To open the book. To see what it contained. But he forced the impulse down.

"No more books," he muttered to himself. "Enough."

"The age of books is over."

"A new age is about to begin."

"Hurry, Daria," the Library cried. "The Library is burning."

Daria's heart lurched. She sprang to her feet and rushed through the door, emerging into a long corridor lined with bookshelves so endless that she could not see where it ended. The air was thick with smoke and the acrid smell of fire.

She hurried down the corridor until, far in the distance, she caught sight of a large, bearded man setting the shelves ablaze.

"Hurry! Stop him!" the Library called after her.

Her heart hammered against her ribs.

She ran toward him.

"Stop!" she shouted.

"And who are you?" he asked with a mocking smile, looking her up and down.

Daria did not answer.

Instead, she imagined a bucket of water.

Then she imagined the man lowering the flame burning at the tip of his finger into the bucket.

Like a mechanical puppet, he obeyed the image in her mind.

He walked to the bucket, dipped his finger into the water, and the flame hissed out.

"What just happened?" he demanded, his face twisting with anger and bewilderment.

Daria said nothing. Instead, she imagined him imprisoned inside a locked iron cage...

...with herself holding the only key.

In an instant, a large iron cage stood in the middle of the corridor and the burly man was inside it. He seized the bars and shook them furiously. "Get me out of here at once!" he roared.

Smoke now filled the corridor so densely that Daria could barely see.

She imagined vents opening in the ceiling to draw away the smoke.

Then she imagined a fire hose. Suddenly one appeared in her hands. She squeezed the handle and a powerful jet of water burst from the nozzle. She swept it across the blazing shelves. At first the flames resisted. But Daria kept spraying. At last the fire yielded. One by one, the flames died.

Only then did she walk over to the cage. The Angry Bear stood gripping the bars, muttering curses through clenched teeth.

"You little brat," he growled. "I worked hard to build that fire. What business is it of yours?"

"It's my job," Daria replied. "You're trespassing. Why are you burning these precious books?"

She surprised herself with the confidence in her own voice.

"My name is Jean-Claude," the man replied. "My friends call me the Angry Bear."

"And who are you?"

"Daria."

"You're rather young to be wandering around here by yourself."

"It didn't stop me from preventing you from burning this wing."

"For now."

He smiled.

"You won't be able to keep me caged forever. Sooner or later you'll have to sleep. Or go home. And then I'll be free."

"Tell me why you're burning the Library."

"I am the servant of powers far greater than either of us. They commanded me to burn the Library so that a new and better order may emerge."

"What kind of order?"

"The Cosmic Unity. The return to the One."

He gestured toward the endless shelves. "This Library is overflowing with strange stories. Most of them are nothing but the bloated ramblings of vain, self-important people. I serve a force that seeks to cleanse the universe of this endless flood of words...and replace it with a single truth. Simple. Pure."

"But stories help us understand ourselves," Daria said. "They let us experience lives we could never live ourselves. They carry us into other worlds. How could anyone want all of that to disappear?"

The Angry Bear gave a weary smile. "Your mind is full of noise. You think that's how the world truly is. But beneath all this human chatter there is another sound. Deep. Piercing. Perfectly clear."

"That sounds beautiful," Daria admitted. "I just don't understand why it has to come at the expense of every story people tell and every life they live."

"Enough." He shook the bars impatiently. "We've talked long enough. Now let me out."

"I don't think so."

"If you don't release me willingly," he said, his voice hardening, "I'll find a way out of this cage. And when I do...I'll make sure I repay you."

His dark eyes, shadowed beneath heavy brows, locked onto hers.

A cold shiver ran down Daria's spine.

The last thing she wanted was to become entangled with yet another bully. And this one was a grown man. He looked dangerous.

"If I let you go," she asked quietly, "will you leave the Library of your own accord... and never come back?"

"Of course."

He smiled pleasantly.

"Of course I will."

"All right."

Daria stepped to the cage door and unlocked it with the key in her hand.

The Angry Bear squeezed through the opening and stopped beside her.

He reached out, caught her gently beneath the chin, and lifted her face until she was looking into his eyes.

"Here's something you should learn, young lady."

"Never believe the promises of strangers."

He whispered the magic words.

"Nedao Moira."

A flame blossomed at the tip of his finger.

"I could burn this lesson into your skin."

"So you'd never forget it."

Daria swallowed hard. She struggled to pull away.

His grip did not yield. For a long moment he seemed to consider it. Then, without another word, he released her. He turned and walked away down the corridor, disappearing into the haze.

Daria remained standing where she was. Then all the strength seemed to drain from her body. She sank heavily onto the wet stone floor.

She knew she had failed. She had failed to protect the Library.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into the silence. "I should have left him in the cage. But I was afraid."

Paradise

The Angry Bear tried the first door he came to in the corridor.

To his surprise, it opened.

He slipped inside and quickly shut it behind him. The room was lined with books and as he drew closer to the shelves, he noticed the titles on their spines:

Gone with the Wind. The American Civil War. Drums Along the Mohawk. The North Against the South. On the shelf below stood *Scaramouche, A Tale of Two Cities, Ninety-Three, Perfume, Marie Antoinette* and in the middle of the room stood a marble bust of Marx, his great beard carved in meticulous detail.

The Angry Bear looked through the window. Outside, it was late afternoon. The ground glistened as though it had just rained. He walked over and pushed the window open. Cool air poured into the room. After hours spent breathing smoke and stale air, it felt wonderfully clean.

Then, without quite understanding why, he felt an irresistible urge to climb through the window into the garden beyond. The sun had emerged from behind the clouds. Its slanting rays warmed his back. The scent of citrus blossoms drifted through the air. The Angry Bear let out a long sigh.

I have a mission, he reminded himself. *But surely... surely I can rest for just a little while.* The Debt Collector had never told him how quickly the task had to be completed. And he was tired. So very tired.

He walked across the freshly cut grass. Before long he had wandered a considerable distance from the Library. When he looked back, the windows of its reading halls gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight. The farther he walked the farther away his mission seemed. Less urgent. Less real. Like a book he had once read and long since finished, while the present moment beckoned with entirely new experiences.

Eventually he reached a stretch of woodland. Exhaustion overcame him. He removed his coat, spread it upon the forest floor, which was carpeted with leaves, lay down upon it and within moments fell into a deep sleep.

Birdsong woke him. The first light of dawn filtered through the branches overhead. He felt the coolness of the morning through his clothes. Oddly enough, he enjoyed it. He stood, stretched, and looked around. The forest was filled with ferns and enormous flowers whose colorful petals slowly unfolded with the rising sun. Towering trees swayed gently above him. Ahead, the path divided. One trail led deeper into the forest. The other led back toward the Library, whose distant outline he could still make out between the trees. He had to decide. Return and continue his mission or follow the forest path.

He chose the forest. Something about it seemed to whisper for him to come farther in. He followed the winding trail. After some time, hunger began to gnaw at him. He looked around for something to eat. A few paces away he noticed bushes heavy with

large, dark berries. He plucked a handful. They burst inside his mouth, sweet and full of juice. He gathered another handful. And another. He ate until he was full.

The Angry Bear did not know that these were the Berries of Forgetfulness. When he had finished eating the Library vanished entirely from his mind. So did his mission. He looked around with childlike wonder. Beyond the rustling leaves and birdsong he heard the cheerful murmur of running water. Suddenly he longed to bathe in the stream.

Never in his life had he seen such lush greenery. Never had he stood beside a wild river. The closest he had ever come to nature was the city park—a carefully designed landscape where even the rocky island in the lake had been engineered by human hands. But here everything was the work of creation itself. Ancient. Untamed. Alive.

Fruit-laden trees surrounded him. Dense shrubs sheltered brilliantly colored birds whose calls he had never heard before. He felt intoxicated. Not by alcohol but by the beauty and clarity that filled the world around him. For the first time in his life, it was not liquor that had made him drunk. It was the world itself.

He felt alive. Awake. Joyful. He stopped beneath a tree and stretched luxuriously. A melody from his childhood drifted into his mind. He began humming it softly. As he walked deeper into the forest, realizing that no one was there to laugh at him, his voice gradually grew louder. Soon he was singing with all the strength of his rich baritone. His voice echoed through the trees. Then he laughed. A full, carefree laugh.

Towards noon clouds drifted across the sun. Within minutes, rain began to fall once more. The Angry Bear continued along the trail, searching for shelter. The rain grew heavier and wet him. He felt a familiar anger beginning to stir deep inside him.

"Damn it," he muttered. "So even in this paradise you still need an umbrella."

He pressed on. Then, through a tangle of undergrowth, he noticed a patch of darkness. *A cave?* He pushed through the bushes. Branches caught at his trousers, tearing the fabric. "Damn it," he muttered again. But a moment later he discovered the opening to a cave whose floor was covered with soft sand. A foul smell hung in the air. The unmistakable odor of death.

He also heard faint growling. Grateful to have found shelter from the rain, he stepped inside. The cave appeared empty except for a small recess near the back wall. He approached it cautiously. The recess was deeper than it had first appeared. Inside lay the body of a lioness. Beside her huddled two tiny lion cubs, no more than a month old. They puffed themselves up and growled at him with all the ferocity they could muster. They were so small and helpless his heart softened immediately. They were painfully thin. Obviously starving.

"First," he said quietly, "we have to bury your mother." He set to work. Stepping back into the rain, he tore two enormous banana leaves from a nearby plant. With one of them, he returned to the cave, grasped the lioness by her hind legs, and dragged her outside. He pulled her some distance into the forest, away from the cave entrance.

"There," he murmured. "The scavengers will have something to eat today." Then he returned to the cubs. Now he faced a more difficult problem. How was he supposed to feed them? If only he had some milk.

He stepped back into the rain, ignoring the heavy drops soaking him to the skin. He marked the cave entrance with a small pile of stones so he could find it again. Then he set off in search of food. He did not have to walk far. Within minutes he came upon a forest clearing. In its center grazed a peaceful herd of cows, chewing contentedly on the grass. He approached them. None of them showed the slightest fear. Several calves stood beside their mothers.

Now another problem presented itself. How was he supposed to bring fresh milk back to the cubs? Just then he noticed a large coconut lying beneath a palm tree. With both hands, he smashed the coconut against the sharp edge of a rock. It split cleanly in two. The coconut water splashed across the ground, but the Angry Bear smiled with satisfaction. He now held two hollow halves—the very vessels he needed.

He approached one of the nursing cows somewhat timidly. "I'm about to milk you," he said. "Please stay where you are and don't make things difficult." The cow regarded him for a long moment as she chewed thoughtfully, then lowered her head and went back to grazing on the wet grass. The Angry Bear sat down beside her and did his best to milk her. At first, nothing happened. He tried again, summoning every television scene he had ever watched in which someone milked a cow. This time, a warm white stream flowed from the udder.

"Bravo, Jean," he congratulated himself. He continued milking until both coconut shells were full of warm milk. He took a sip. It was rich and sweet. "Thank you, Mrs. Moo," he said with a grin. The cow looked back at him with an expression so simple and kindly that he laughed.

He returned to the cave and placed one of the coconut shells before the cubs. They sniffed the milk. Then they drank eagerly. The Angry Bear smiled with quiet satisfaction.

"Well done, my friend," he told himself, taking a few swallows from the second shell. When the cubs had finished drinking, he lifted them one by one and stroked their soft fur. "I ought to give you names."

He studied them thoughtfully. "You..." He pointed to the spotted cub. "...shall be Tequila." Then he turned to the lighter one. "And you..." "...shall be Whisky."

"Tequila and Whisky." He chuckled. "Perfect." He felt absurdly pleased with his own inventiveness. Only then did he realize how thoroughly soaked he was. He took off his wet clothes and sat naked upon the sandy floor of the cave while they dried. The rain had stopped and the sun emerged once more from behind the clouds. He draped his clothes over bushes outside the cave. Then he went into the forest to gather broad leaves and made himself a bed in one corner of the cave. When evening came, he settled down upon it and the cubs curled up beside him.

At dawn, the Angry Bear awoke facing the cave wall. Still halfway between sleep and waking, he noticed something he had not seen before. The wall was marked. A painting. Rendered in ochres and earth pigments, it depicted several strange beings with human bodies and the heads of rams, great crowns of horns rising from their brows. Around them stood animals in pairs. Among them were also a man and a woman.

The Angry Bear gazed at the painting for a very long time, puzzled by its meaning. At last he stood, scratched the back of his neck, and returned to the meadow to milk the cow for his two furry companions. The lion cubs were much like kittens, except for their size and their clumsy movements. Their oversized paws seemed too large for them. They toddled and stumbled. They rolled over one another. When he scratched behind their ears, they purred with delight.

As he prepared to leave, they rubbed themselves affectionately against his legs. "Stay here," he said. "I'll be right back."

He followed the path to the meadow, where the herd of cows was peacefully grazing. He filled the coconut shells with fresh milk and hurried back. The cubs drank greedily. On his way, he passed a banana grove heavy with fruit. He returned to pick several ripe bananas for himself. They were so sweet he ate one after another until he felt pleasantly drowsy. Then he stretched out upon his bed of leaves and surrendered himself to a peaceful morning nap.

He awoke with a start. A persistent buzzing filled the air. Opening his eyes, he discovered that he was no longer in the cave. Instead, he lay inside what appeared to be a transparent, circular tent through whose walls he could dimly make out the surrounding forest. The walls were soft and flexible, rippling gently whenever he moved. A figure appeared outside the translucent enclosure.

It looked almost human. But not entirely. Its head was that of a ram crowned with sharp, branching horns. The creature raised a hand in greeting. The Angry Bear noticed that it possessed only three long fingers, spread like the tines of a fork.

"Greetings, human," the being said. The Angry Bear was too startled to speak.

"We are pleased to see that you are awake. We have a number of questions for you. We have been observing your actions for some time."

The Angry Bear groaned. "You too? It seems there's an entire crowd following me around. First the Debt Collector...and now you."

He narrowed his eyes. "Are you allies of the Debt Collector?"

"No." The creature shook its horned head. "Not at all. We come from the planet Sergov. It lies one thousand light-years from here. We have observed your species for thousands of years. And we noticed the alliance you entered into with the Debt Collector."

"So what if you did?" the Angry Bear shot back. "My affairs are my own."

The creature did not answer immediately. Instead, two shimmering bubbles drifted from its mouth and floated into the air. Then it spoke. "We specialize in probabilities and we would like to offer you another path."

The Angry Bear's ears seemed almost to perk up. "What path?" he asked.

"We can clone you," the creature said, "and from one of your ribs create a woman who will complement you. You could live here in the forest together in peace. What do you think?"

The Angry Bear blinked. "Why would you do something like that for me?"

"It is not for your sake. It is for the sake of humanity. We wish your species to survive. Your alliance with the Debt Collector places the future of humankind in danger."

The Angry Bear flinched. Until that moment, it had never occurred to him that burning the Library might threaten the human race. All he had really wanted was revenge on the literary establishment.

"I do like the idea of living here in the forest," he admitted. "But I'm not so sure about the cloning. Does it hurt?"

"No. Not at all. We merely take a small sample of your tissue and replicate it."

The Angry Bear hesitated. "Will she be going bald like me?"

The creature emitted another pair of shimmering bubbles. "No. We shall give her a magnificent mane of hair. A little compensation."

The Angry Bear took a step backward. He was still uncertain.

"You should decide quickly," the creature said. "The window of probability for this possibility is about to close."

The Angry Bear lowered his eyes. "I'm afraid of getting into trouble with the Debt Collector."

"The Debt Collector can interfere only when you follow your darker impulses. As long as you remain here in the forest, choosing what is good he cannot touch you."

The creature seemed almost to smile.

"All right," the Angry Bear said at last. "I agree."

"Excellent. A wise decision. Come closer to the wall of the shelter. So that we may begin."

With some apprehension, the Angry Bear stepped toward the transparent wall.

The horned being extended one of its long tendril fingers. It passed effortlessly through the membrane of the bubble and into the Angry Bear's ribcage.

With astonishing gentleness, it drew out one of his ribs as though it were nothing more than a thin sliver of wood. The Angry Bear felt no pain. He watched as the horned creature cradled the rib in both hands. Then it breathed upon it.

Once. Twice. Again. Blue smoke poured from its breath. It swirled around the rib until it completely disappeared from sight. For a moment, the Angry Bear could see nothing at all.

Then a transparent bubble appeared in the creature's hands. It slowly expanded.

Larger. Larger still. Within it, he could make out a figure taking shape. The transformation happened with astonishing speed. Within minutes, another transparent shelter stood beside his own. Inside it stood a human form. He could not distinguish its features through the layers of shimmering membranes separating them.

"There," the creature said. "She is your feminine counterpart." It pressed the two transparent shelters together and the membranes merged becoming a single enclosure.

The Angry Bear looked up nervously. The figure now stood beside him.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She wore no clothing. Her eyes were closed. Her long dark hair fell over shoulders the color of ivory. For a moment she seemed asleep. Then she stretched. Yawned softly and opened her eyes. She looked directly at him.

She studied him in silence. He stared back and they simply looked at one another.

"Hello," he said at last. She did not answer. Instead, she smiled and inclined her head ever so slightly.

"I'm Jean."

She responded with a curious clicking sound of her tongue, followed by a low growl deep in her throat. The Angry Bear grinned revealing his decaying teeth. He took a step toward her. It was a mistake. She flinched. Stepped backward. Then burst straight through the wall of the transparent shelter and fled into the forest.

"Wait!" he called after her. "Don't run! I won't hurt you!"

But she had already disappeared among the trees. The Angry Bear cursed himself. Why hadn't he stopped her?

Perhaps I should go after her. He stepped through the transparent wall himself. Now he stood face to face with the ram-headed being.

"My work here is finished," the creature said. "Farewell."

"Wait!" the Angry Bear called. "I don't understand. What am I supposed to do now?"

The creature did not answer. Instead, it folded its long arms around itself like a bat wrapping itself in its own wings before sleep.

A heartbeat later it vanished.

Jean-Claude stood alone in the silent forest clearing.

The remnants of the transparent shelters dissolved into the air, fading so quickly that within moments nothing remained of them.

Only the sounds of the forest filled the silence. A deep longing welled up inside him to see his companion again. Angry bear set off into the forest in search of her.

Some days passed and one morning, as he Angry Bear climbed a winding forest path, he suddenly heard a human voice calling out:

"Hola! Hola!" He followed the sound.

The trail led him to a great tree. High among its branches hung a sort of hammock woven from young limbs and vines. Beneath it dangled a ladder fashioned from branches. Perched upon the limb beside the hammock sat the woman. She looked down at him and called something he could not understand.

"I found you!" the Angry Bear shouted, smiling.

She sprang lightly onto the ladder and climbed down with astonishing agility.

His heart began to pound. He had not realized how deeply he had longed to see her again. She reached the last few rungs, released her grip, and dropped lightly to the ground, landing with effortless grace.

Turning toward him, she repeated, "Hola... hola."

Then she placed one hand over her heart. With two fingers she touched her lips.

"Jean," she said in a deep, husky voice. The Angry Bear caught his breath.

She had spoken his name. Smiling broadly, he pointed toward her.

"And what's your name?"

She nodded, as though understanding exactly what he meant. "Aya," she said and smiled.

"Hello, Aya," the Angry Bear said warmly. "Has anyone ever told you how beautiful you are?"

She looked at him blankly, not understanding. Instead, she walked over to a peach tree laden with fruit. She picked two peaches and handed one to him.

The Angry Bear accepted it. They stood together eating in silence, the sweet juice running down their chins.

Above them, the sky darkened. A light rain began to fall. Aya beckoned for him to follow. She led him away through the trees along what scarcely seemed a path at all when suddenly she disappeared.

"Aya?" he called. Then he felt someone tug gently at the leg of his trousers. Looking down, he saw her crouching inside a small hollow almost completely hidden by ferns. It was a perfect shelter from the rain. He bent down and settled beside her, smiling.

The rain grew heavier, drumming softly upon the branches overhead while they sat together in silence, gazing out at the forest. After a while, they turned toward one another. They were so close now. The Angry Bear felt a peace he had never known. A happiness unlike anything he had experienced before.

Slowly, he leaned toward Aya. He kissed her. She kissed him back.

Things Grow More Complicated

Daria waited in the Library's entrance hall for her grandmother to call her back. A day passed and no call came. Although she spent the time reading books from the Library's shelves, the waiting became increasingly difficult. She was afraid she might never be able to return home. If she did, perhaps they would send her to a juvenile detention center.

At last an idea occurred to her. She could remove the ring for just a moment, go home long enough to see what was happening, and then put it back on before

anyone caught her. Gathering her courage, she took a deep breath and then slipped the ring from her finger.

The Library immediately vanished and she found herself standing on the street below her grandparents' apartment building, hidden behind a police car whose red and blue lights flashed through the gathering dusk. Inside sat a police officer speaking into his radio.

"The girl's disappeared, and the family has no idea where she is. Menashe is searching the area now, looking for any clue where she might have gone. It'll be dark soon, and these streets aren't safe after nightfall."

The radio crackled "How's the boy?"

"He's been admitted to the hospital. His condition is unstable, so he's in intensive care."

"All right. Keep searching. I'm sending you three more patrol cars. If you haven't found her within twelve hours, we'll notify the media and launch a wider search."

"Roger that," the officer replied. The transmission ended.

He climbed out of the patrol car. As he glanced behind the vehicle, he immediately spotted Daria.

"Hello, Daria." His voice was friendly, but the friendliness sounded forced. "Where have you been? We need to talk."

Daria took a step backward. The officer stepped toward her. Panic seized her. She turned and ran.

"Stop!" he shouted. She kept running, hearing his footsteps pounding after her. Daria was a fast runner. In gym class she always came second only to Shirley in the fifty-meter sprint but he was a grown man, trained to chase criminals. She could sense him gaining on her. At the corner she darted toward the apartment blocks on Rashi Street, slipped into the stairwell of one of the low-ceilinged buildings, and before he could catch up she hurriedly slipped the ring back onto her finger.

She found herself once again in the dim entrance hall of the Library. Only the reading lamp was lit. Breathless she collapsed into the armchair. "He almost caught me," she whispered.

"It's good that you've returned," said the Library. "Someone wishes to see you."

"Who?"

"Close your eyes." Daria obeyed. At once she felt herself sinking into a strange haze. It was as though she were floating across an immense body of water, drifting farther and farther away. Then a familiar voice broke through the silence.

"Open your eyes Daria."

Tears welled up before she even looked. When she opened them her father was standing before her. He was wearing the very suit he had worn the last time she had seen him.

"Dad, you're here."

"I'm here..." He smiled "...and I'm not."

"I've missed you so much." She hurried toward him, arms outstretched.

But when she tried to embrace him, she passed straight through him. He was made of air. Visible yet without substance.

She stepped back in confusion. "Where are you, Dad?"

"I no longer exist. What remains of me is only the memory preserved here in the Library."

Daria's face fell.

"Hey, little one," he said softly. "Don't look so sad. As long as the Library survives you'll always be able to meet me here." His familiar smile shone with the quiet wisdom she remembered so well.

"Dad..." The words burst out before she could stop them. "I've gotten into trouble at school."

"What happened?" She wanted desperately to tell him. But she couldn't. The shame was too great. She bit her lower lip.

"I can't tell you," she whispered at last. "I'm afraid no one will believe me."

"Why wouldn't they believe you?"

"I don't know," Daria said quietly. "I'm afraid people will say terrible things about me."

"Yes," her father replied gently. "I understand. But sometimes you have to stand your ground and insist on telling your own truth. Otherwise, the other person's version becomes the only truth that survives."

He looked at her with great tenderness. "You can't stay here in the Library forever."

"There's something trying to burn the Library down." Said Daria

"Yes," he said. "I know. He has been an enemy of our family for generations. His name is the Debt Collector. He was the one who sent the saboteur who brought down the plane I was on. He was responsible for your mother's death when you were four. He has been hunting both our family and the Library for centuries."

"Why?" Daria asked. "Why does he do it?"

"You have to understand that there are two forces at work in the universe. The force of multiplicity and the force of reduction. The Library, our family—we belong to the force of multiplicity. The Debt Collector leads the force of reduction. If it were up to him, the entire universe would become a single black point suspended in the heart of infinity."

Daria shivered. "That sounds terrifying."

"It is. It would mean the destruction of everything we love. Everything we believe in. And at the moment he is winning. He has already burned half the Library's wings. Only four remain. You must keep him from destroying them. You must give the Library time to heal. The stories never stop flowing into it. It only needs time. Given enough time, new wings filled with stories will grow."

"I'm frightened, Dad. It's too big a task for me."

"Yes," he said softly. "I know. You'll have to make friends with your fear. Accept that it's there and keep moving anyway."

"But how am I supposed to stop the Debt Collector?" Daria asked. "I'm not a superhero. I don't have magical powers."

"No," her father said. "But you do possess the imagination and the sensitivity needed to stand against him. Together with the Library you can defeat him. I believe that with all my heart."

She looked at him for a long moment. "Then why couldn't you stop him? You're so much older and stronger than I am."

A shadow crossed his face. "Because of my pride. It wasn't enough for me simply to serve the Library. I wanted recognition. I went to university. I earned degrees. I became a professor and I wrote a book about the Library." His voice grew quieter. "In doing so I revealed its secrets."

"Where can I find that book?" Daria asked. "I'm curious."

"I believe there's a copy somewhere here. Look among the books about archives and libraries."

Daria walked over to the shelves. Her eyes moved along the spines. She noticed that the books bore no catalog numbers. Instead, each spine carried a symbol. An acorn. An apple. A hedgehog. Countless other shapes.

"How are the books organized?" she asked.

Her father smiled. "It's an associative system. It's different for every person who enters the Library. Those symbols are visible only to you. The arrangement of the books changes from one visitor to another."

Just then Daria noticed a spine marked with the image of an octopus holding a book. She pulled it from the shelf.

"I think I've found it." She opened the cover. At the top of the first page was a dedication. **To my beloved daughter, Daria.** Emotion flooded through her.

For a moment she thought she might cry. She turned the pages.

The book was filled with notes, maps, diagrams and meticulous drawings of book covers. On the first page of the book, Daria read:

After Cain slew Abel, he wandered the earth, an outcast wherever he went. He longed for death and made his way into the wilderness. For many days he neither ate nor drank, afflicting his soul because of what he had done.

His body grew so weak that he lay beneath the blazing sun in the bed of a dry stream, knowing his life was nearing its end.

"God," he prayed, "please take my soul back to You. I have done enough evil in this world. I no longer wish to harm anyone. Let me return to You."

As soon as he had spoken these words, darkness fell.

In the blink of an eye, he found himself immersed in a warm pool whose waters embraced his broken body and restored it.

He climbed out into a circular chamber flooded with sunlight from tall windows overlooking a green garden. Then he heard the voice of a woman:

"Welcome, Cain. You have suffered enough. What you have done has been forgiven. From this day forward, you and your children, and your children's children after them, shall serve God for many generations. Your task is to serve Me and this place, called the Library—to guard it and its gates against every threat.

"From this day onward, you shall no longer be called Cain. Your name shall be Guardian."

And so Guardian became the first keeper of the Library.

He was clothed, fed until he was satisfied, and married a young woman named Menuchah. They had a son named Magdiel. Magdiel married Peruma, and they had a daughter named Tovah, who married Yirmuel. They in turn had Ganzach and Ashmoret, who married Isar and Alvah. Their children were Yakum, Malka, Nimrod, and Peretz.

Each of the four married and had children of their own: Kichli, Pithom, Puah, and Ben. Then a great plague swept through the land. Kichli, Puah, and Ben perished, but Pithom survived. He married the only young woman left alive in his village, and together they had Dardar and Mohel.

Thus the House of Guardian continued through many generations, until the time of the Great Wars, during which Maxime was born—the Miracle Bearer, who performed signs and wonders and defended the Library against the Debt Collector, who sought to destroy it and establish a new order.

Maxime was a dreamer. He devoted his life to studying the human soul and its hidden ways.

Maxime married Batya, and together they had a daughter named Daria.

When Daria was four years old, Maxime's wife died, and from that day on he raised their daughter alone.

Across the generations, an enemy arose against the Library—one who sought its destruction. Over the years he succeeded in sabotaging and destroying a significant portion of its books. The Library has struggled ever since to recover from that devastation.

The enemy, the Debt Collector, still threatens its existence, and the House of Guardian continues to protect it.

Four wings have already been destroyed and are now undergoing a slow process of renewal. While the Library heals itself, those wings remain closed to visitors.

When she finished reading the first page, Daria looked up at her father.

"What will happen to the Library if no new stories are ever created?"

"It will die," Maxime answered. "The Library lives on stories. Without them, it cannot exist."

As he spoke, the door opened. A teenage boy wearing athletic clothes stepped inside.

"What is this place?" he asked, bewildered. "A moment ago I was at home. I flipped a light switch, got an electric shock... and now I'm here."

"Welcome, Mati," said the Library. "Come in. Tell us your story."

Mati walked over to Maxime and Daria.

"Please," Maxime said warmly, "sit with us."

Daria remained silent. Suddenly she felt shy.

The boy was tall, with handsome curls. He sat down beside her on the sofa. He looked at her for a moment. Her cheeks flushed.

"I was born in Ramat Gan," he began. "I spent my early childhood there. My father was an architect, and my mother taught in an elementary school. When I was four, my sister Hila was born. My grandmother became a widow while she was still young, and she looked after us. She was very cruel. We were terrified of her. She beat us many times and threatened that if we ever told our parents, she would punish us even more severely. So we kept quiet. When I was nine, my parents, my sister Hila, and I moved to England so my father could do a doctorate at the university. A year later my sister Shoshana was born. My father was very quick-tempered. He shouted and smashed things. We were afraid of him too—but he was still better than Grandma. At school I did well. I stood up for weaker children against the older bullies. I loved reading science fiction, and I even wrote two stories that I sent to my favorite science-fiction magazine for young readers. One of them was published. When I was thirteen we returned to Israel. While preparing for my bar mitzvah, I discovered Judaism—washing my hands before meals, putting on *tefillin*—and I loved it. I kept putting on *tefillin* even after my bar mitzvah. My father hated that. He was completely secular, and we argued a great deal. I tried to make peace with him by throwing myself into sports, especially basketball, which he loved. I wanted him to be proud of me.

"And then..."

He lowered his eyes.

"...the accident happened."

"I was trying to plug the radio into the wall while I was barefoot. I was electrocuted."

"And now I'm here."

He fell silent.

"Thank you, Mati," said the Library. "You faced life's challenges with courage."

"I'm sad I'll never see my little sisters again," Mati said quietly. "I loved them very much."

"That is indeed a sorrowful thing," Maxime replied. "Your life ended far too soon."

He turned toward the Library. "Couldn't you send him back?"

"It is impossible to return to the same body," the Library answered. "The old body has been destroyed."

"Then perhaps..." Maxime said, "there is another way?"

Mati and Daria waited anxiously for the Library's reply.

"I can send you back...as your family's pet. A Labrador puppy they will one day adopt. You would be born with one eye...and a broken tail."

Mati smiled. "I think I'd like that."

"But you will remember nothing of your previous life," said the Library. "That's all right. I'm willing."

"Then you must leave through the little door."

Mati and Daria looked around, searching for it.

"There," Maxime said, pointing behind the bookshelves.

Mati stood.

"Goodbye," he said to Daria and Maxime.

"Goodbye," they answered together.

He turned and disappeared behind the shelves.

Silence settled over the room.

Daria looked at her father.

"What am I supposed to do now, Dad? I can't sense the Angry Bear anywhere in the Library." She hesitated. "Do you think...I could go home now?"

"It's possible," Maxime said. "The Library will summon you whenever it needs you."

He smiled. "But wouldn't you like to explore more of the stories it has to offer?"

"Go on. Choose one."

Daria walked over to the shelves and pulled out a volume.

The title on its spine read:

The Adventures of the Flying Woman.

She returned to the sofa and opened the book.

As she began to read, the story unfolded before her eyes like a waking vision.

It told of a heroine from a distant planet who was adopted by an elderly couple and raised in a small rural town.

As she grew older, she gradually discovered her extraordinary powers and devoted herself to helping others.

Yet she could not save her adoptive parents when an armed robbery ended in gunfire.

Later she moved to a great city, where she became a lawyer and fell in love with a handsome young attorney.

Then came the appearance of a sinister enemy carrying a crystal from her home planet.

He lured her into the cellar where he and his lover were hiding.

The moment she arrived, he hung the crystal around her neck. She fell into the underground pool. She sank helplessly toward the bottom.

Daria felt the heroine's strength ebbing away. She felt the air leaving her lungs. Her life slipping away.

Then—

her father's figure appeared beneath the water. He removed the crystal from around her neck. She floated back to the surface. Little by little, her strength returned. She rushed from the pool to stop the villain before he could detonate a nuclear bomb.

But she was too late. The bomb exploded. A catastrophic earthquake shook the earth. The lawyer she loved was buried beneath the ruins. She flew into space. There she circled the Earth faster and faster, against its rotation, until time itself began to flow backward. When history rewound, she reached her beloved in time and saved him.

Daria awoke from the story as though emerging from a deep sleep. She found herself lying on the sofa in the Library. A soft blanket covered her. A pillow rested beneath her head. The simple comfort filled her heart with warmth.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Daria." Maxime stepped out of the shadows.

"I'm worried about what's happening at home. It keeps bothering me. I have to face the consequences of what I did."

"Sometimes," Maxime said quietly, "time heals things. Perhaps you should wait a little longer."

Daria shook her head. "I think I have to tell the school what happened. I need to tell my truth."

For a moment, her father simply looked at her. Then his face lit up. "I can't tell you how happy I am to hear you say that. That takes great courage."

"Thank you, Dad."

She slipped the ring from her finger.

"I'm going home now."

In an instant she was back in the living room of her grandparents' apartment. It was evening. Her grandparents were sitting at the small dining table. Grandpa was eating boiled potatoes with margarine and salt. Grandma was darning socks.

"My little sweetheart!" Grandma's face brightened. "You've come back!"

"And it's about time," Grandpa said. "You've landed us in terrible trouble. The police have been searching for you. And Eran's family is threatening to sue us over what happened to their son."

"But it was an accident."

"You'd better tell that to the school," Grandpa replied. "Eran regained consciousness yesterday. And until someone proves otherwise, everyone is listening to his version of events."

"What is he saying?" Daria asked, suddenly frightened.

Grandpa lowered his eyes. "I'm ashamed to repeat what they told us."

"But it's a terrible lie." She felt helpless anger rising inside her. "He's been bullying me all the time. I can't stand him." She drew a deep breath. "All right. Tomorrow morning I'll go to the school and tell them exactly what happened. I just hope they'll believe me."

"Good," Grandpa said. "I've been too embarrassed to show my face to my customers."

Suddenly Daria's resolve collapsed. "I'm so frightened." She burst into tears.

Grandma hurried over and wrapped her in a warm embrace.

"Oh, my little darling. Everything will be all right. Tomorrow you go to school and speak to the principal."

The Temptation

The Angry Bear was no longer so angry. He and Aya lived peacefully together in the forest. Long ago he had cast aside his clothes. He wandered naked as on the day he was born—simple, unashamed, and content. By day they gathered fruit from the trees and drank fresh milk from the cows. By night they curled together in the cave, wrapped in one another's embrace. The Angry Bear had completely forgotten his mission to burn the Library.

Who would want to burn libraries when everything was so whole, so good? He moved through the forest with confidence. He felt as though years had fallen away from him. Indeed, this new way of life transformed him. The excess weight melted from his body. Constant walking and climbing strengthened muscles that had long grown soft. He became a broad-shouldered, upright, vigorous man. The days of alcohol had faded into oblivion.

The juice of ripe fruit, the clear water of the stream and Aya's kisses were enough.

But the forgetfulness that had settled over the Angry Bear was intolerable to the Debt Collector. He watched as the Bear lived happily in the forest while the Library slowly recovered. Its wounded wings healed. New stories filled its shelves.

The labor of centuries—the Debt Collector's labor—was steadily being undone. He resolved to bring the Angry Bear back to his appointed task.

There was one tree in the forest whose fruit was forbidden. Its branches were laden with luminous white fruit. Many times the Angry Bear had passed it where it stood alone in the middle of a clearing. He knew, without knowing how he knew, that he must never touch its fruit. The prohibition seemed woven into the fabric of his being. Aya, too, never approached it. Day and night the tree stood surrounded by a dazzling white radiance.

The Debt Collector clothed himself in the appearance of a handsome man with a neatly trimmed mustache and stationed himself beneath the tree. When Aya happened to pass by, he called to her.

"Aya. Come here." She approached cautiously.

He spoke to her with warmth and charm. His words were sweet. Little by little, she yielded to him. Beneath the forbidden tree they became lovers. When at last they grew weary, they fell asleep.

Aya awoke hungry and thirsty. The handsome stranger smiled.

"Come," he said. "Let us eat from this tree. Let us satisfy our hunger together." He plucked one of the shining white fruits.

Aya smiled back. She bit into it. The instant the fruit touched her lips understanding flooded over her. She realized what she had done. And she began to weep.

At that very moment the Angry Bear came upon the clearing. He saw Aya with the stranger. A terrible jealousy burst into flame within him. Aya pleaded for her life. But he rose against both of them and stuck down both of them.

Aya fell lifeless to the ground. Yet the handsome stranger did not.

Instead the Debt Collector rose calmly back to his feet. He looked at the Angry Bear.

"So my dear friend. Your ways have not really changed"

The angry bear's wrath immediately cooled down and he looked at his dead Aya than at the Debt collector.

"Now you remember. " laughed the Debt collector coldly "This happened because you forgot the task I entrusted to you. You are banished from this forest. You murdered the woman you loved. There is no longer any place for you here. Return to the Library. Continue burning its books, as I commanded."

"Fool. You thought you could forget your past. You believed you could live peacefully in this forest forever. But you are a cursed man. You will always return to your true nature. Just look how with your own hands you have killed the woman you love there is no redemption for you."

The Angry Bear heard these words and a wave of grief unlike anything he had ever known swept over him. He struck his chest with both fists and then he fled. He ran wildly through the forest paths, searching for a way out. He no longer believed himself worthy of living in such a place. He was condemned forever to bring destruction into the world. That, he thought, was his nature.

For many days he searched the forest without finding a way back to the Library. Then, one day, he discovered the entrance to a tunnel. He entered it and walked through the darkness for a time that seemed like eternity, mourning Aya. So long did he remain without sunlight that his body became covered with worms. His heart filled with the smoke of grief and remorse. He neither ate nor drank.

Still he walked.

On the thirtieth day he saw a circle of light ahead. As he drew nearer, he realized it was the tunnel's exit. He stepped outside, dazzled by the light and the cool air.

Before him stretched a green meadow dotted with trees and a distance away beyond it stood the Library. It shimmered on the horizon like a mirage in the desert, trembling and subtly changing its form from one moment to the next.

The Pool of Life

He drew closer to the Library, walking along its stained-glass windows. Before his eyes, the Library changed its shape. The windows vanished, replaced by wooden shutters through which he could no longer enter.

He began running around the perimeter of the Library, passing one changing form after another. One moment there were graceful arches through which he caught glimpses of shelves laden with books. The next, they became a honeycomb of white circular chambers where books lay stacked in untidy piles. Then he noticed an arched doorway.

Beyond it lay a room bathed in a soft light whose source he could not see. He stepped through the opening in the wall and slipped inside the Library. At the center of the chamber was a pool. Its curved stone sides had been sculpted to form what looked like a large white womb. Before his eyes, a human figure began rising from the depths. The water was a deep blue, as though an entire ocean lay hidden beneath the surface of that pool. The figure ascended slowly from the depths. It broke the surface.

It was Aya. She took a deep breath and looked around, but did not notice him. She climbed out of the pool and disappeared through one of the doorways in the wall. The Angry Bear wanted to hurry after her. But more human figures began rising from the depths. As they climbed from the water, they blocked the doorway through which Aya had gone.

At last Angry bear managed to slip past them and follow her. The moment he crossed the threshold, an alarm sounded. The entire chamber flooded with flashing red light. The Library had discovered him. This time, however, it did not send the black smoke to stop him. In the crimson glow, he saw a man standing beside a wardrobe, handing Aya a white robe. She put it on. Then she passed through another doorway.

The man noticed the Angry Bear. His face hardened. "Who are you? You must leave immediately. You are trespassing in the Library's Holy of Holies."

The Angry Bear knew he could not hesitate. He had to escape. He darted through the doorway Aya had taken and entered another chamber. Inside sat a group of women, all dressed in white robes, waiting in silence. The Angry Bear concealed himself behind the door. When the man entered the room searching for him, he failed to find him. The man, whose duty was to receive those who emerged from the pool, eventually returned to the reception chamber. The Angry Bear remained standing among the seated women.

His Aya was there. She sat quietly among them. He longed to speak to her. He walked over and said,

"Aya...At last I've found you. Come with me. Let's run away and return to the forest together."

But she did not notice him. She continued sitting perfectly still, gazing straight ahead. Her face was blank, her gaze empty.

"Aya...Look at me. I'm here. Your Bear." He pleaded with her. But Aya could not see him.

"My Aya...Please. See me."

The Angels

Then another woman entered the room.

Unlike the others, she wore a white dress beneath a pale blue tunic. A silver crown rested upon her head. In her hands she carried a scroll. She unrolled it and began reading names aloud.

"Angel Veronique," she called.

One of the women rose and approached her.

"You are to go to Ravenna, in Italy, and help a little girl named Francesca."

The woman listened, nodded, and left through the door behind the crowned woman.

"Aya," the woman called again. Aya rose and came forward. "You are to go to Turkey and help a refugee named Hashim." Aya also nodded and departed.

The Angry Bear moved to follow her, but the woman with the scroll stood between him and the door.

"And who are you?" she asked, her voice piercing. "Why are you naked? Why are you wearing no robe? How did someone covered in worms and reeking of decay manage to enter the Holy of Holies of the Library?"

"I... I'm here by mistake," he stammered. "I'm Aya's companion. She just left. I lost her. I'm trying to find her again. I want to go wherever she's going."

"That is impossible," the woman replied. "Angels travel alone to their destinations."

"What is your name?"

"Jean-Claude."

"Did you also rise from the depths?" she asked.

"I came from the forest," he answered, immediately realizing it was the wrong response. "I want to go where Aya went. Let me pass."

"I know of no roads leading outward," said the woman. "Only roads leading downward. Would you like a child to be assigned to your care?"

"I'm far too busy for that. I have a mission of my own."

His impatience was beginning to show. He stepped toward her. He towered over her. If only he could reach the door behind her. The woman took a step backward.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I want to leave this room through the door behind you."

"Move aside."

"I'm afraid I cannot. This passage is reserved for angels alone."

"I only want to reach another room. I simply want to leave this place."

"Then you must return the way you came. This passage is exclusively for angels who travel between worlds."

"I understood that the first time you said it. Now let me through."

"No."

She stood firmly in his path.

The Angry Bear was now only inches away from her.

Without warning, he struck her hard across the face.

She fell to the floor. Holding her cheek, she looked up at him. "You have desecrated the sacred sanctuary of the Great Library. There will be consequences."

"We'll see about that," the Angry Bear muttered. He strode toward the door.

"Don't do it!" she cried after him.

But it was already too late. He crossed the threshold. At once he found himself swept into open air, suspended among vast white clouds. He looked around anxiously.

"Aya!" he shouted. "Aya!"

No answer came. In despair, he allowed himself to quickly drop lower and lower through the cold air. *Now what?* he wondered. *Where is all this leading?*

Aya was lost. And with every passing moment he was drifting farther away from the Library. Suddenly he saw the crowned woman floating nearby. He reached out and seized her sleeve.

"Let go!" she cried. But he held on tightly. Together they plunged downward. Until they passed through a strange substance like translucent jelly. The woman struggled to free herself. He clung desperately to her pale blue robe.

Finally, to escape him, she slipped out of it. Beneath it she wore only the white dress. Two great wings unfurled from her back. She soared away, leaving the Angry Bear falling with the robe still clutched in his hands. The wind whistled in his ears. Cold surrounded him. He wrapped the robe around himself.

Immediately he felt its magic. A profound calm settled over him. A sense of complete safety. Though he continued falling, he was no longer afraid. An idea came to him.

"I wish I were back in the Library," he said. In the blink of an eye, he found himself standing in one of the Library's rooms. A window overlooked the familiar lawn and the distant trees. The robe was still draped around his shoulders. He felt refreshed. As though he had grown twenty years younger.

The robe grants wishes, he thought. That could be very useful.

"Burn this room," he commanded. Nothing happened.

"**Nadau Moira.**" A flame sprang from the tip of his finger. He set the books on the shelves ablaze. By now he had become practiced in burning books. It was easy. He set the room on fire and moved on to the next.

The Basement

When he had finished burning the room, he stepped out through the door and found himself at the top of a staircase. He decided to go down. So that he would not lose his way, he marked the wall with a black cross using the flame at the tip of his finger, so he would know he had already passed that way if he came upon it again. He descended the stairs until he reached a heavy iron door.

Drawing on a strength he had thought the years had taken from him, he pulled it open slowly. Beyond it lay a vast basement. Books were piled everywhere across the concrete floor in untidy heaps.

"These must be the books they couldn't find room for upstairs," he muttered. "The outcasts. The unwanted ones." He picked up one of the volumes.

The Story of Malki.

Autumn Love.

Those were their titles.

"These must be self-published books," he thought. "Books that were never properly edited or approved by the establishment. Books written by people the system rejected or simply ignored. Books their authors didn't have the money to pay for their publication so they printed it themselves. People like me."

For a moment he hesitated. Should he really burn these books? Just then the Debt Collector appeared beside him. "Don't hesitate. Burn them."

"But these are books written by people who were rejected just like me."

"They all feed the system with their ideas. I'm telling you—burn them."

The Angry Bear growled. "I don't like being pushed around"

The Debt Collector smiled sweetly. "Then please...I beg you...continue burning them. If we want to finish before the Library recovers, you'll have to work much faster."

The Angry Bear relented. He resumed setting the books ablaze.

The Debt Collector vanished as suddenly as he had appeared.

So the Angry bear continued burning the books.

Yet it no longer brought him the satisfaction it once had. He thought of Aya. His heart ached. Tears streamed down his face while he set one book after another on fire. The room filled with smoke. *What meaning does my life have now that Aya is gone? I killed her with my own hands. I am a cursed soul. Condemned only to suffering. A creature of darkness.* He despised himself. He longed to cease existing. His sorrow became so overwhelming that he stopped setting the books on fire. Instead he sat down upon one of the heaps of books. Burying his face in his hands he began to sob.

A moment later, the Debt Collector appeared again.

"What's the matter now, Angry Bear? Where has your fighting spirit gone? Why have you stopped working again?"

"I am cursed," the Bear whispered. "I killed the woman I loved. Out of a single moment of jealousy."

"She deserved it. She betrayed you."

"No." The Angry Bear shook his head. "No. She was innocent. Too eager to please everyone. She had a gentle soul. She only wanted to make other people happy."

The Debt Collector frowned. "What is this? You've become soft-hearted? You gave her exactly what she deserved. Now get back to work. We have no time to waste mourning some love affair."

"I don't want to burn books anymore. I'd rather go home. Back to my job unloading trucks."

The Debt Collector laughed. "You have nowhere to go back to. Capisce? It's all burned away. You have only one thing left to do. Finish the job. Only then can you move on to the next stage. You cannot stop now."

"I don't want to. I'll stay right here. Among all these unwanted books."

The Debt Collector's voice turned cold. "Fool. You'll sit here forever buried beneath piling books that no one reads, books no one wants, gathering dust."

"Yet I'm offering you an escape. When you've finished this task, you'll evolve into a new existence. You'll discover new worlds. You'll finally climb out of the pit you're trapped in. Get up. Leave this despair behind. I'm offering you hope and the possibility of a new life."

"I don't want it. I want to die."

The Debt Collector smiled. "You already are dead. I'm offering you a way out of the dead end you're living in. All you have to do is keep burning the books. And you'll find redemption. You'll find a new path."

"Oh..." The Angry Bear groaned. "Nothing matters." He stretched out on the basement floor. Covering his face with his arms.

"Idiot." The Debt Collector disappeared.

The Library summoned Daria while she was making *kneidlach* with her grandmother.

One moment they were standing in the little kitchen, rolling small balls of dough between their palms. The next her grandmother and the kitchen vanished. She found herself standing in a vast windowless basement. The concrete floor unsettled her. Books lay scattered everywhere in towering heaps and there was the strong scent of smoke in the air. She knew the Angry Bear is close by. She wandered cautiously between the piles of books until she suddenly caught sight of the Angry Bear lying on the floor. Quickly she hid behind one of the stacks and watched him.

He broke into sobs that shook his entire body. Compassion welled up inside her. She stepped out from behind the books.

"Jean-Claude...Why are you crying? Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Startled by her voice, the Angry Bear hurriedly wiped away his tears Embarrassed to have been seen.

"You again. You spoiled little girl."

"That's not very nice," Daria replied, sitting down on a nearby pile of books. "I'm trying to help you."

"Life is rotten to the core," the Angry Bear muttered. "There's no hope."

"Yes," Daria said quietly. "Life is hard. I have my own troubles too. But I don't give up. I still get up every morning. I make my bed. I brush my teeth."

"Good for you. What a great heroine. What do you know, spoiled little girl?"

"You're always trying to insult me," Daria said.

She paused.

"I've been thinking about what you said the last time we met. About books. About why you burn them."

She looked around at the piles surrounding them. "To me, books are the jewels of human consciousness. They help us understand ourselves. They can make us better people."

The Angry Bear let out a bitter laugh. "You're too young. And far too trusting. I've lived in this world a long time. I've seen the men and women who worship these books. They're all the same. Corrupt bourgeois. They drink the blood of authors while sitting on their literary committees."

"I don't trust too much," Daria replied. "I read books because they teach me about life."

The Angry Bear snorted. "You look like a child from a comfortable little bourgeois home. I grew up in the slums. That's where people learn about life. Out on the streets. Where every mistake can cost you everything. I never had the luxury of learning from books while eating an apple."

His words stung. Daria felt hurt that he dismissed her life as though it were trivial.

"What made you hate books so much?" she asked quietly. "And the people who love them? It's such an innocent love. It doesn't hurt anyone." She felt tears filling her eyes.

"There are too many words in this world," he answered. "It's time for a revolution. For a new age. For new ideas. I'm the servant of forces far greater than either of us. So don't stand in my way."

He rose to his feet and turned to set fire to another pile of books.

Daria hesitated. Then she said, "Wait. I'll help you."

He looked at her in surprise. "Why would you want to help me?"

"Because I can see the truth in some of what you're saying. My father died in a plane crash while he was traveling to promote his book. If he hadn't been so determined to promote his writing at any cost perhaps I'd still have a father. And even when he was alive he was always reading. Always writing. He hardly paid any attention to me. In many ways I raised myself."

The Angry Bear gave a dry laugh. "So. You carry your own burden of pain."

"Yes. So please let me help you."

The Angry Bear scratched his beard. "Very well. You can stack the books. It'll make things easier for me. Arrange them in piles of six. That way I can burn several at once with less effort."

Daria walked over and began piling the books together. The Angry Bear set each stack ablaze. After a while Daria gradually worked her way toward the door, careful not to draw his attention. For a long while they worked in silence. More and more piles caught fire. The basement filled with smoke.

Then while the Angry Bear was distracted by the rising flames Daria slipped quietly out through the door into the stairwell. The instant she was outside, she slammed the heavy iron door shut. She dropped the bolt into place. Nearby stood a massive wooden table. With all the strength she could summon, she dragged it across the floor until it blocked the doorway completely.

A moment too late, the Angry Bear realized she was gone. He rushed to the door. It would not open. He pounded on it with his fist.

"Open the door! You cursed girl!"

The basement filled rapidly with smoke. He doubled over, coughing violently. His head swam. He felt himself close to losing consciousness. Leaving the door, he stumbled blindly through the smoke, searching for a window any opening at all. He covered his face with his shirt. Eventually he reached the far wall. Near the floor he noticed a small opening covered by an iron grate. He tore it away and with great difficulty he squeezed himself through. For a moment he was wedged between the smoke-filled basement and a dark tunnel running beneath it. He pulled with all his strength. The rough stone scraped his chest and stomach raw. Then, with one final desperate effort he dropped onto the damp earth of the tunnel below.

He lay there on his back, breathing heavily. His chest and belly burned where the stone had torn his skin. Yet beneath the pain he felt relief. *That girl tricked me. Next time I'll know better. I have to get rid of her. If she finds me again, she'll expose me. I have to find her before she finds me.*

Daria hurried up the staircase and found herself once again in the Library's entrance hall.

"Library," she called. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," the Library replied. "I'm here. Well done. You captured the arsonist. I hope we've finally rid ourselves of him. Now I can begin to heal."

"I hope so too," Daria said.

"I have a small favor to ask."

"Of course, my dear."

"Can you recommend a book about a girl who survives abuse and overcomes it?"

"Certainly. I would recommend *Speak*, by Laurie Halse Anderson."

"Do you have it?"

"Of course. I'll ask the librarian to bring it to you. Sit down and rest while you wait."

Daria settled into the armchair. A few minutes later the waiter appeared again, this time dressed as a librarian, wearing thick spectacles with heavy lenses.

He handed her a book.

Daria opened it and began to read.

Releasing Mother

The Angry Bear stood in a tunnel tall enough that he no longer had to stoop.

He walked along it until he came upon a large iron door.

He pushed.

The heavy door slowly swung open.

Beyond it was a small chamber illuminated by hundreds of lit candles.

At the center of the room stood a throne carved from the rock it lay on.

A woman sat upon it, bound with ropes.

The moment she saw him, she cried,

"At last. Someone has come. Please Set me free."

"And who might you be?" the Angry Bear asked.

"I'm Batya, Maxime's wife. Daria's mother. The Debt Collector captured me. I've been imprisoned here for many years, waiting for someone to come and free me."

"And why should I do that? That girl Daria keeps interfering with my work."

"If you release me," the woman replied, "I'll take Daria back to the ordinary world. She won't trouble you anymore."

The Angry Bear stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Interesting."

After a moment's consideration he walked over to the throne and untied the ropes binding her.

The woman stretched her limbs slowly. A smile spread across her face.

"Freedom of movement...What a wonderful thing. I never appreciated it enough."

"Well then," said the Angry Bear. "Be on your way. And get that Daria out of my path."

"Thank you." Batya left the chamber.

The Angry Bear suddenly felt compelled to extinguish the candles. One by one he blew them out. When the room lay in complete darkness, he made a wish.

"I wish to return to the Library's wings and continue my work." In the blink of an eye he found himself in a section of the Library he had never seen before.

Here the books hung from the ceiling on hundreds of enormous hooks, swaying gently in the breeze drifting through an open window.

Daria's mother found her way back to the Library's entrance hall by climbing a staircase carved into solid rock.

As she entered, she noticed a delicate, bespectacled girl sitting on the sofa, absorbed in a book.

"Excuse me," Batya said.

"Yes?" the girl replied.

"I'm looking for a girl named Daria."

"That's me," Daria answered.

"Daria?"

Her mother smiled. "Look at you! You've grown so much. And you've become so beautiful."

"And who are you?" Daria asked, puzzled.

"I'm your mother. I've just been freed after spending ten years imprisoned in those tunnels."

Daria stopped breathing for a moment.

"Mother? I thought you had died."

"I didn't die. The Debt Collector kidnapped me and imprisoned me. Now I've finally been released."

"We all thought you were dead," Daria whispered, rising to her feet.

"My sweet Daria...I've missed you so much. I lost your entire childhood while I was trapped down there in those tunnels."

Daria looked at her mother, searching for some trace by which she might recognize her.

The woman standing before her was tall. Her face was lined with suffering. Deep creases of pain ran across her forehead and around her eyes.

"Mother," Daria said again, feeling uncomfortable and shy.

"Come," her mother said softly. "Let me hold you."

Daria walked toward her hesitantly. The two of them embraced.

"Tell me about yourself, Daria," her mother said. "What are you doing these days?"

"What fills your life?"

Daria shrugged "I have some problems I still haven't managed to solve."

Batya took Daria's shoulders in her hands and looked into her eyes. "Tell me. Tell me everything."

Daria loved the way her newfound mother looked into her eyes. She felt she could trust her. "There's a boy at school who keeps harassing me. He touches me whenever no one is looking. When I tried to stop him he fell and was hurt. They took him to the hospital. He's in serious condition. And now everyone says I'm the one who started it."

"Oh, sweetheart, that's terrible."

"I don't know what to do." Daria sank onto the sofa. She burst into tears.

Her mother sat beside her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Daria cried and it felt as though she would never be able to stop.

But after several minutes the storm slowly passed.

A quiet place returned inside her. She grew calm again.

Her mother smiled gently and looked into her eyes.

"There."

"I'm glad you let it out."

"Now tell me what do *you* think you should do?"

"I think I have to go to the school. I have to tell them exactly what happened."

"Excellent. Would you like me to come with you?"

"Yes. I'd like that very much."

"Good. Then let's go home."

"Since Dad died I don't live in Haifa anymore. I live with Grandma and Grandpa."

"Dad died?" Batya whispered.

"Yes. But he's here in the Library. You can meet him if someone calls him." She paused. "Would you like me to?"

Batya's voice trembled. "Yes. Please."

"Dad...Could you come? Mom's here. She wants to see you."

In the blink of an eye, Maxime appeared in the room. The moment he saw his wife he froze.

"Maxime...It's me."

"I thought you were dead," he said cautiously.

"I missed you so much," Batya replied.

"You came back from the dead."

Batya lowered her head. "I'm sorry. I lost so much. The Debt Collector imprisoned me for years in those tunnels. And now Jean-Claude released me after I promised to take Daria back to the ordinary world."

Both of them turned toward Daria, who sat awkwardly on the sofa.

"But Daria still has to defend the Library against the Debt Collector," Maxime said. "I suggest the two of you go to the school first and then come back here."

Daria nodded.

"Come," Batya said. "Take us home."

Daria slipped the ring from her finger.

An instant later they were standing on the street outside the school.

It was still early. Students were just beginning to arrive.

"We've come at the right time," Daria's mother said.

Daria hesitated. "What if they don't believe me? What if they lock me up?"

"They won't imprison you so quickly. And if you tell your truth they will listen."

"I hope so."

"And I'm with you. You're not alone."

Daria looked at the school for a few moments longer.

Then her decision settled firmly within her. She began walking toward the school gate. Her mother followed beside her.

Together they entered the school grounds and walked straight toward the office and the principal's room.

When they entered the school office, Batya approached the secretary.

"Good morning," she said. "We've come to speak with the principal. Would you please let her know that Daria and her mother are here?"

The authority in Batya's voice made the secretary swallow nervously. "Yes... of course."

She hurried into the principal's office. From outside, Daria and Batya could hear the secretary whispering to the principal. A moment later she returned.

"Please come in."

Batya walked into the principal's office. Daria followed close behind.

The principal sat behind her desk, watching them with a stern expression.

"Good morning, Daria and Daria's mother."

"My name is Batya," Daria's mother replied.

The principal stared at her questioning. "We were told you died many years ago."

"I was missing. I've now returned, safe and well." Batya spoke in a tone that left little room for argument.

"I see." The principal gestured toward the chairs. "Please, sit down. I'm glad you've come. We've all been deeply concerned these past few days about what happened between Eran and your daughter. This morning I was informed that Eran has been discharged from the hospital. When I visited him there, he told me some very serious things about you."

She looked directly at Daria.

Batya spoke before Daria could answer. "Daria would like to tell you what really happened that day. Please listen to her before you reach any conclusions."

"I'd be glad to," the principal replied. "Eran told us that you've been harassing him for quite some time."

"No." The word burst out of Daria before she could stop herself. "That's not what happened."

The principal raised an eyebrow. "Then tell me."

Daria swallowed. She tried to speak.

The words caught in her throat.

"Go on, Daria. You can do it." Her mother gave her an encouraging smile.

Daria bit her lower lip. Then she gathered all her courage.

"For a long time Eran and Assaf have been cornering me in different places around the school and at class parties. They touch me. They grope me." She stopped. The memory made her feel sick.

"Keep going. I'm here." Batya gently squeezed her hand.

Daria took a deep breath. "I was afraid to tell anyone. I thought nobody would believe me."

"That day Eran followed me into the girls' bathroom. He tried to touch me again. I pushed him away to protect myself. He fell and hit his head. I never meant to hurt him. I was only trying to stop him from touching me. Her lips trembled as she finished speaking.

Silence filled the room. At last the principal cleared her throat. "I hear what you're saying. This is very different from Eran's version."

"You can ask Assaf. He was standing outside the bathroom door. He was making sure no one came in. I was trapped."

The principal looked at Daria for a long moment over the rim of her glasses. Then she called out. "Miriam. Please bring Assaf to my office."

The secretary hurried to the classroom.

Several minutes later she returned with Assaf. He entered hesitantly. He was a wiry, strained-looking boy. The moment he saw Daria, he lowered his eyes.

"Good morning, Assaf," said the principal. "I expect you to answer my questions."

"The truth. The whole truth."

"Yes, Principal." His voice was barely audible.

"Daria says that you stood outside the girls' bathroom while Eran went inside to bother her."

"Is that true?"

Assaf remained silent. "I asked you a question." The principal's tone hardened. "I want an answer."

Still he said nothing.

"If you don't want me to summon your father for a disciplinary hearing and if you don't want to be suspended again I suggest you answer me."

Assaf finally spoke.

"Yes. I was standing outside the bathroom."

"And what happened?"

"I don't know. I only know that Eran went in looking for Daria."

The principal's expression grew even sterner.

"And why were you standing outside the girls' bathroom?"

"So no one would come in," Assaf admitted. "Eran wanted to be alone with Daria."

"I understand much better now what happened," the principal said. "Why on earth would you block the entrance to the girls' bathroom so another student could harass a girl? I continue to be astonished by some of the things you young people do."

"You may return to class. We'll discuss this again another time, and your parents will also be informed. I trust you understand that you will be disciplined for your part in this incident."

"Yes, Principal," Assaf said, hurrying out of the office.

The principal turned back to Daria.

"Well, Daria, I now have a much clearer picture of what happened that day, and I understand that you were defending yourself. The girls' bathroom is strictly off-limits

to boys. The fact that Eran entered it and harassed you is a very serious matter. I will deal with him and his parents myself."

"You may return to class."

"Thank you very much," Daria said, lifting her head with a smile of relief, looking first at the principal and then at her mother.

"Go on, Daria," Batya said. "Go to class. I'll see you this afternoon at Grandma and Grandpa's house."

Daria straightened her back and took a deep breath. Relief spread through her whole body as she walked out of the office with her head held high. When she entered her classroom, English class had already begun.

"Oh, you have come back to us," the teacher said warmly. "Come. Sit down. We're just beginning Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*."

Daria took her seat. Every student in the room stared at her.

A moment later, the principal entered the classroom. "Good morning, everyone."

"As you can see, Daria has returned. I know there have been many rumors about what happened to Eran. The matter has been investigated, and Daria has been found innocent. I expect all of you to welcome her back and not make her life any more difficult."

The students lowered their heads and fixed their eyes on their notebooks.

The Angry Bear Completes His Mission

The Angry Bear devoted himself to burning the books, and with Daria no longer there to stop him, his task was completed with ease.

He set fire to everything he could lay his hands on, including ancient manuscripts.

From time to time, the Debt Collector appeared to encourage him.

"The mission will soon be complete," he said. "A fine reward awaits you in the world to come."

The Angry Bear did not answer. He felt nothing. His heart had become numb. The sweetness of Aya's companionship had long since faded from his memory. He carried out his work mechanically, like one of those wind-up toys that begin moving the moment someone turns the key in their back.

On the fifth day, the Bear reached the library's entrance hall. He prepared to burn the few books that still remained. The moment the Library sensed his presence, it

summoned Daria to defend it. She had been in the middle of doing her homework when she suddenly found herself standing in her socks and house clothes, face to face with the Angry Bear.

At first she barely recognized him. His eyes and clothes were blackened with soot. He pointed his burning finger at her. "So you've come back to stand in my way again."

Daria trembled. Then she gathered herself.

"Hello," she said quietly. "I wanted to thank you for freeing my mother."

The Bear looked momentarily confused. "It was nothing."

"Perhaps you'd like to come home with me for dinner at my grandparents' house. It looks as though a bath wouldn't hurt you either."

"I don't want any dinner. And stop being so damned nice."

He turned his back on her and walked toward the shelf holding the last few surviving books.

"Please don't do this," Daria pleaded. "Isn't there anything in this world that you still find beautiful or precious?"

"I've already lost everything that was precious to me," the Bear replied. "It's better if this world ends. It's full of pain and evil. It would be better to begin something new."

"But that 'something new' is so small." Said Daria "Look at all the stories people tell. Look at all those worlds. Such rich, endless imagination."

"That same imagination also creates atomic bombs," the Bear answered. "And massacres innocent people."

"That's true. But the Library isn't like that. It is good. It preserves humanity's most beautiful, most useful, and wisest memories."

"I've heard enough. Let me finish my work."

With those words, the Bear ignited the last three books on the shelf.

He and Daria stood together, watching them burn...

...curling into ash.

Then the Library around them faded and disappeared.

They were suddenly standing upon a platform suspended in the heart of space, surrounded by deep darkness and the distant glitter of stars.

For a long moment, both stood in silence, overwhelmed by the beauty around them.

Then Daria realized that her entire world was gone and she began to weep.

"Stop crying," the Bear muttered. "I can't stand the sound of little girls crying."

"You destroyed my world. I'll never see my father again. Or my mother. Or my grandparents."

She sobbed uncontrollably.

"Now you'll learn what pain feels like," the Bear replied. "Just as I did."

Still crying, Daria turned her back on him. She walked to the edge of the platform and sat down, staring into the endless expanse of space. She cried a little longer. Then she realized the tears accomplished nothing.

She wiped them away.

"What now?" she asked herself. Then she heard the Library's voice inside her mind.

"Tell me a story."

Daria was silent for a moment.

Then she began.

"Once there was a boy named Jean Paul. Jean Paul loved books. He had been reading since the age of four...and began writing stories when he was six."

Upon hearing Daria's words, the Angry Bear stepped closer to listen.

"Jean Paul wrote stories and read them aloud to his mother while she was ill in the hospital. His stories encouraged her so deeply that she recovered."

"How dare you tell my story?" the Angry Bear said. "Stop that immediately."

But Daria continued.

"Jean Paul went to school and excelled there. He received a scholarship to study at the School of Language and Literature, where he studied literature, linguistics, philosophy, and history."

"That isn't what happened," the Bear protested.

"I'm telling a new story," Daria replied with a brave smile. "Come, sit and listen."

She motioned for him to sit beside her.

He hesitated for a moment, then sat down.

She continued.

"Jean Claude excelled in his studies, and after graduating he found work as an editor at a respected literary journal. He began publishing stories in prestigious magazines, and later, with the encouragement of his literary agent and fellow writers, Jean Claude became overnight a well-known figure in Europe's literary circles. He was invited to lecture before audiences across the continent. He won prestigious literary prizes and earned generous royalties from his novel, which sold millions of copies around the world. At last, he was able to devote himself entirely to writing.

"At one of the parties he was invited to, he met a kind editor. A few months later they were married and had two children. Jean Claude went on to publish many more books, enriching world literature with his imagination and remarkable talent."

The Angry Bear listened as tears slowly streamed down his face.

"How did you know..." he whispered. "How did you know that was all I ever wanted?"

"Well," Daria said gently, "now it will become reality."

She smiled.

At that very moment, a crack opened in the darkness of space.

Out of it rolled an egg.

The egg split open, and a radiant light poured from within.

"You only have to step inside the egg," Daria said, "and there you will find everything your heart has ever desired."

The Angry Bear stared into the brilliant light with awe and wonder.

"Really?" he asked.

For the first time, he sounded like a little boy who could hardly believe he had truly won the prize.

"Yes," Daria replied. "Really. Go. Your future is waiting for you."

The Angry Bear rose to his feet and walked toward the opened egg.

He climbed over its rim...

...and disappeared into the light.

"Farewell, Angry Bear. Farewell, Jean Claude. I wish you happiness."

Then, out of the silence, Daria heard the Library speak once more.

"And what about you, Daria?"

"What story will you tell—for yourself, and for the future of the world?"

Daria smiled.

"I love the world that was. I will tell the stories I know. I will tell about my grandfather and grandmother. My father and mother. Our neighborhood. And the children who made my life difficult, but in the end came to understand. I will tell those stories. And I will write them."

The moment she uttered the words *I will write*, a writing desk appeared upon the platform.

On it stood a fountain pen, a stack of blank paper, a chair, and a reading lamp.

Daria walked over, sat down at the desk, picked up the pen...

...and began to write.

"Once there was a library..."