

Alice in Southern Badlands

a collection of stories from
post-dystopian Niederösterreich

(preliminary and incomplete version)

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Any resemblance to real characters, both dead and alive, is purely coincidental.
Yeah, right.

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An Introduction to Alice

Many years back, about a thousand actually, Alice was just a regular kid. She'd catch mice in a satchel trap, and then she'd organize cage fights for them. But she can't remember that now.

At night, she'd climb the walls of the village church, or the pillars inside, all the way to the sculpted baroque angels, and she'd put little colored socks around their penises. For protection, she'd like to say. But she can't remember any of it now.

She'd transport whole anthills, with a shovel and a cart, placing them next to each other, and she'd stage miniature wars of epic proportions. She wouldn't remember.

She'd collect useless weeds, dry them in little bouquets over the stove, to make potions: love potions, healing potions, balding potions, lazy potions, I-don't-give-a-shit potions, and other incredible stuff. Just like her mum; but hers smelt of lavender, thyme and cinnamon. She can't remember that, though.

She dreamt she could fly, and then she tried, when awake, determined, bruising her chin over and over. She's got no idea.

She would talk to people who were not there. Except that, they were. And when those non-existent creatures weren't around, she'd just talk to herself. Yeah. She was just a regular kid.

One night in the early December, she got woken up by smoke. Rising from her bed, like a missioned spirit, and walking to the window, she touched the handle and it burned her hand. Outside, beyond the smoke screen, jubilant cries were heard. A pitchfork and a shovel rang against each other, in a celebratory toast, just as Alice jumped back from the handle. Many things happened after that. From the perspective of centuries, she didn't lose much. Half her hair, some skin. Her mother. A virginity, of sorts: she'd never killed anyone. These days, people call it a debut. Sounds kinda upbeat. It was not, and she remembered that.

Yes. The one thing Alice remembered from her childhood, much later, was that night. In the following weeks, she crossed the continent, sleeping rough, wrapped in a stolen blanket, dug in the snow. But she can't remember that. She outran the stories - of a girl who butchered a whole village. She couldn't quite outrun the suspicion: a girl traveling alone. But she can't remember that. A learning curve, steep and swift: which berries turn your stomach inside out, which ones make you last a day. One more, and one more again. She can't remember that.

She remembers lying in the snow, the house beside her a big, smoky oven, slowly running out of fuel. Looking at the stars above. There had never been so many. Her sense of smell, it was suddenly broader. Every corpse lying around: she knew what they had for dinner. The clothes, how long they were worn, the types of sweat - hayfield, barn, kennel, two bodies rubbing against each other. Like there'd been a blanket over her head and someone had pulled it off. Alice touched the burned skin on her forearms, and learned she could force it to mend itself. And then, she discovered something else about her body. It felt tough, and strong, and fast. Like a kid who'd just had her debut, with a whole village. Sounds kinda upbeat.

All the things she could do, they were not like memory. They did not erode. They stayed, and Alice stayed, for a thousand years.

Staying and living, they're quite similar. Aren't they? The first four hundred years, she'd call them childhood and puberty. The next six hundred, caretaker work. Right now, she was a policewoman. Her half sister, Niki, was also a policewoman. And a god. Yeah. Things got just a teeny bit complicated after the end of the world.

Oh yeah, the end of the world. Noone remembers that, not even Alice. Six hundred years ago, the world went poof, and started all over again.

And now, centuries later, on a day in the late August, Alice staggered across the platform at the Sun City railway station. Trying to focus on the ticket in her hand. Her forehead hit against something hard and unyielding, she looked up.

"Man, what's that doing here," she growled. It was a train.

She glanced at the ticket again. 'Southern Badlands', it read. Sure it must have had a different name. Back then. Before the end of the world. Sure it did. Southern something. There was always a southern, northern, and then some other silly word, like reich or republic or something else public. She wouldn't remember.

The Armwriter from Southern Badlands

I.

The first sound the writer heard was a thud. She was a bit younger than him, perhaps in her late twenties. Pretty, sure, within the generous boundaries of the term, but far from cute. Sad, isn't it - the writer remarked to himself, with that familiar tinge of guilt - that a man's first thoughts always take that shape, when confronted with a young woman. No escaping them now. No, not cute: her face, even now, when it was relaxed, it didn't seem welcoming. No, not welcoming at all. A brunette; her eyes, if open, they'd most certainly be chestnut brown.

He never saw her enter his compartment; it was the sound that brought him back, from an inner world of thought, and the commotion in the station. She'd collapsed in the seat opposite, tucking her bag underneath her feet. And now, she opened one eye, just a quick glance his way. He was right - they were chestnut brown. Or well, one was.

"You wake me up, you die," she said, and closed the eye again. And the writer, he tilted his head. What a peculiar young woman, he thought.

"Sun city station, last call." The announcement came from outside the train, through a creaky megaphone, with the high pitched sounds pleasantly toned down by the mica windows. And then, there was the familiar nudge, and the multi-carriage steam behemoth slowly headed forward. Terminus: Southern Badlands.

II.

"Your tickets, please."

This was an unwelcome intrusion. When a character is born, a writer likes to spend some time alone with them. Study and imagine them, in depth. In a room, preferably. Undisturbed, definitely.

The writer, he wasn't always lucky. In fact, he wasn't lucky most times. Few people wanted to be lured into and trapped in rooms, only to become characters. Fewer yet wanted to be studied in depth. Maybe, generations ago, the "in depth" part of you was reserved for your loved ones. These days, it was reserved for your faith healer, witch doctor or Niki priest. And anyway, most people these days would maintain there's no "in depth" to them at all.

The conductor snapped a ticket from the woman's fingers - she'd held her hand outstretched for that purpose. As he studied the ticket, the hand waited, patiently, for two seconds. Then it turned over, with the index finger contracting in a familiar gesture: give back. He nodded his head and slipped the ticket where it came from.

"Ticket, please." After a short while, the writer noticed the conductor was speaking to him.

"Oh. Well, the Academy said it will reimburse the ticket."

"What academy?"

"The Academy of Old Music and Brass Instruments in Marille Heights. They head said I would be reimbursed."

"Mister...." the conductor looked through his passenger list. "Armwriter, is it?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Mister Armwriter, I don't seem to have any record of your ticket being paid for."

"But that is impossible! They said they would reimburse me for the journey."

"Ah, well let me educate you on a subtle distinction here. If you are reimbursed *for* a journey, it means you need to collect the money from the reimbursor and pay for your ticket."

"I'm sorry, but that was not specified. They only ensured me they would reimburse the ticket."

"See, they clearly didn't reimburse, so..."

"Man." The woman opened her eyes. They were, most positively, both chestnut brown. "Anyone says reimburse one more time, and I will...I mean, what's the worst thing you can do on a train? Yeah. I'm gonna puke all over the compartment. Alright?"

"Madam," the conductor said, maintaining the same emotionless voice as in the previous conversation. "Do you have a phobia of that word?"

"Do I have what?" she said, rubbing her eyes. "No, I've got a phobia of dumb." She tried to focus on the conductor's name tag. "Alright. Mr...Kosmić...Kosmicenko...nah, I'm not gonna read that. He's going from Marille Heights to, what?"

"Southern Badlands."

"Alright how much is it."

"Twenty-four coins, madam."

"Yeah that's two beers at the fucking Needle. Now, how long are you two dicks gonna argue over two beers."

"The gentleman hasn't..."

"Fuck. I didn't ask who where what, I asked, how long you're gonna argue over two beers."

Her voice was suddenly louder, and the conductor took an instinctive step backwards, within the safe space of the doorframe.

"Madam, are you inebriated?"

"Inebriated, fuckwit. And that's another forbidden word, so don't even try and say it right. Niki damn. Man, I hope they got cheap beer in them badlands." She fished in her pocket, counted the change and handed it to the conductor. When the conductor was gone and she closed her eyes again, Armwriter thought the best approach would be a whisper. He leaned across the compartment.

"Thank you."

She raised her index finger. "Repeat after me. You wake me up..."

"You die," Armwriter whispered, slowly leaning back.

III.

People like the conductor would always get back at people like the chestnut girl. One way or another. Even if a good deed was done, albeit carelessly and with a bit of swearing on the side. Still, there was a nagging feeling in the back of the conductor's head, and he knew it wouldn't go away, in weeks and months. Unless he stood up for himself.

"Madam.." he glanced at the passenger list as he stuck his head in the door. "Henderson. Alice Henderson. Is it?"

She opened her eyes again.

"On a good day. This is not a good day."

The conductor, being on a mission, chose to ignore that feeble attempt to muddle up things set in stone, like names and such.

"Ms Henderson. We are nearing the southern border. Have you got anything to declare?"

"Yeah, Kosmić. I declare a hangover, and a fucking craving for sleep. Now go back to your bedsit and cum in a hankie."

The conductor took exception to people who made fun of his name, and others who disrespected his job. For people who did both, he had no exceptions. He took a deep breath.

"I obviously meant, anything physical to declare. Unless you are mentally challenged, Madam."

And Alice Henderson, she'd scarcely raise her heartbeat to a hundred. Unless she was being killed, fucked senseless, or patronized.

"Yeah sure. Got several items of military grade weaponry, and some remote-controlled explosives. Right here."

With a self-satisfied grin, the conductor pulled on a handle right above the door, and the train worked itself to a slow halt. Alice tilted her head.

"Oh. That's what it does. I always wanted to try."

"Madam. I will need to ask you to step out of the vehicle."

He never took a step back, even when she opened the bag and started throwing stuff on the seat beside her.

"Alright. Panties, panties, man, what is this? And, stuff."

"Madam," the conductor said, all straightened out, "you will be fined a hundred coins for stopping the vehicle."

That moment of victory, of mind over matter, vanished quickly, as Alice stood up and walked up to him, speaking but a few inches from his face.

"Let's make two things clear here. One, I'm not paying up for someone who can't take a joke. Two. If you come here, ever again, and wake me up, I'll show you my police badge and we take it from there."

"Y...you are in the Badlands now."

"Felicidad García, District Two. Don't play with me, fuckwit. The last thing I'll see of you is your ass crack. Off you go."

With a thud, Alice landed in her seat and sank her head in the assortment of panties, stuff and the thing she never remembered taking with her, and fell asleep.

IV.

"Is it really. Alice. Alice Henderson." The writer tried to whisper, but the realization took hold of his voice. A split second later, the tip of a katana blade was hovering an inch from his neck. Drawn, swung and stopped, carelessly, with no effort or guidance, even in a confined space like this one.

"What did I say."

"I do apologize, deeply and thoroughly. May I offer you a cookie. To reim....to make up for your discomfort?"

Alice realized the man was not afraid, just intrigued. With a scoff, she hid her katana in the sheath on her back, with the same swift, measured move, and this time, the writer actually noticed that.

"Let me tell you something about sleep," she said. "There is alpha. Alpha something. It's when you calm down, your heartbeat gets mellow, your breathing, it slows down. Your whole body gets ready, for that amazing thing, called a nap. And then, one asshole or another, wakes you up. And then..." Alice was grinding the words through her teeth, leaning forward, and the katana blade was less scary than that. Well, to some. Not to people from the Badlands. "And then," Alice continued, "your heartbeat quickens, which is due to the cortisol that gets pumped in your brain. And that cortisol, it's there to stay. For a long fucking time. So, you can forget about going to sleep again."

"I am really sorry."

"No, you're not." Alice spread her arms on the window-side table. "So, tell me. What do you do for fun in the Badlands?"

"Well..." the writer said, trying to wake up from the situation. "We play brass music and say polite things to one another."

"Hell of a holiday."

"It is a popular destination, with people all across the continent. Great for families."

"Yeah. Armwriter. What the fuck's that?"

"It means," the writer stretched out proudly, "my arm guides my writing."

"Yeah right. Like in the Badlands, everyone writes with their feet, but you were born different."

"No...uhm, I mean..."

"Hate writers. Why don't you, do normal. Be a, dunno. Radio phone operator. Or something."

"I...why did you want to travel to the Badlands?" Anything, really, to divert Alice from the topic of writing. Being with Alice Henderson in one compartment, that was weird enough. Being with Alice Henderson in one compartment, and talk about his writing, that was beyond weird.

"On a whim, of course. I mean, who doesn't? I got drunk, and thought, Badlands. Sounds badass. I'll go. I mean, who doesn't. Show me one tourist in your country who decides to go when they're sober."

"Gotta tell you something," the writer said, suddenly remembering himself, and the two of them.

"Forbidden opening. No no."

"I still do. Whenever I read about you, I felt like hugging you."

"Ground rules. No hugging. No touching. Alright? Stay where you are, don't move, and talk. Sparsely."

"But..." The writer's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sight of a man falling out of a train window.

V.

"There's..."

"What."

"Uhm. I mean. A man appears to have fallen out of a window."

"Fuck."

Alice jumped up, pulling at the handle over the door. In that distorted space-time continuum, as the train was slowing down, Armwriter felt that the conductor appeared beside Alice the very moment she pulled the handle, or even before that.

"Now, you will reimburse..."

"Man overboard, dumbass."

The conductor just stood there, with his mouth open.

"Is he from the Badlands?" Alice inquired, shooting back a glance.

"Given his accent," Armwriter said, "I would say he most certainly is."

"Accent. Okay. How do you say this in Badlandese." She leaned sideways, towards the conductor's left ear. "A man appears to have appeared outside the window, and fallen down. Sir."

When the conductor didn't move, she just waved her arms in the air.

"Alright, can this thing go backwards, or do I run? Fuck. Forget it. I hope it's both." And with that, Alice Henderson jumped, crashing through the mica panel in the compartment, and was gone.

When the train arrived in her position, she was propping up the back of the old man's neck with both hands. People like Alice, the writer reminded himself, could do things like that. The legend was on the extreme end of nutty, especially when it came to her. She was a thousand years old. She could fly. Heal people, or mend them, like she'd say, and herself. She was faster than other humans, stronger. And, she could drink for three.

"I do hope it is nothing serious," the conductor said, already having come back to his senses. The man on the ground seemed asleep, or dead.

"Nah, just a broken spine," Alice said and fished for her police badge. "I want everyone off the train, right now. Everyone."

The conductor wanted to say something about the Sun City authority, but swallowed it. In a few moments, all the fifty-odd passengers were scattered around Alice and the injured man.

"Armwriter, you here?"

"Yes."

"Talk to Kosbitch. Find the compartment. Tell me what you see. Got it?"

"Yes. Will do."

In a short while, Armwriter's voice was heard from one of the two windows that had recently been broken, from the inside out.

"There are travel papers...issued for one Heinrich Rottenschweiner. I know the man! He is an accomplished writer, from the Badlands."

"Yeah, what a coincidence," Alice said with a sigh. "Anything else?"

"A book on the floor. Torn in half. It is...*On the Nature of Peaceful Communication*, by Heinrich Rottenschweiner."

"Ah. I suppose you know it."

"Indeed I do."

"Is it as shitty as it sounds?"

"My apologies, but we do not say that in the Badlands."

"Oh. Well what do you say when a book is shit?"

"We say it is interesting."

"Right. So, is it interesting?"

"Yes."

"Good. No travel luggage, no signs of struggle?"

"No. That is all."

"Okay, Armwriter, what do you think. What happened there."

The writer leaned out of the window and rubbed his chin.

"Well I suppose, there is indeed the possibility that the poor man read his own book, and having realized how sh... how interesting it is, he jumped out of the window, attempting suicide."

"Yeah. Right. Do we have a more likely scenario, maybe?"

"Or...well, he was thrown out."

"Smart." Alice turned to the old man, placing her hand on his forehead, then looking up at the crowd of passengers. "He's gonna be in a coma for a bit, and a while before he can talk. And that's kind of a...what'd you call it. Socially unacceptable situation. Something. Alrighty. Let's try a little mind sweep."

Alice stretched her neck muscles, closed her eyes. And immediately, the writer knew what was coming. He'd read about Alice, pretty much all there was to read, by Kamienski and others. People like her, they could scrape the surface of other people's minds. And in a moment, he could feel this almost unnoticeable nudge, at the back of his head.

"Listen up," Alice said, with her eyes closed. "Everybody. Think of a blonde joke. Or a fat joke. Or any other fucking joke. Now."

With an immediate feeling of guilt, the writer realized he'd remembered a particularly cruel blonde joke the moment Alice said "blonde".

"Alright," she opened her eyes. "Kosmowski, and that blonde chick over there. Come here, stand next to each other. Everybody else, two steps back. Chop chop."

They all did as she said, reluctantly, and the conductor was the most reluctant of them all.

"I do have to object to your methods, officer," he said when he'd finally taken his place next to the blonde girl.

"Yeah, what now."

"It is offensive. Towards the differently hairstyled, and the spatially challenged."

"And I object to blonde jokes," the girl said.

"Yeah yeah. Nobody told a blonde joke. But I can assure you, everybody thought of one. Except for you two. Now, if someone throws a man out of a window for bad writing, that's got to be one humorless cunt. But Kosmow here, he only throws words, not people. So, it comes down to you, kid. What's your name?"

"Johanna. And I object to being called a kid."

"Kid. Now, where are we? Denial, acceptance?"

"Well that's obviously nonsense. I don't have the physique, to throw a man out of a window! Or, tear a book in half! That's grotesque in the extreme."

"Yeah. Now, if you wanna be good at something...Johanna, is it? Yes. If you wanna be a murderess, learn the trade first. Start with dummies, or animals. Secluded places. In and out jobs. No clues, no witnesses. Got it?"

"This is completely unprofessional!" the conductor exploded.

"Don't interrupt me when I'm developing a criminal."

"This is unacceptable. I will report this."

"Let me educate you about life, shit brain. The world, it's a wonderfully diverse place. Like a fucking rainbow. And there's a walk of life for everyone. The robbers, they rob. Whores, they whore. Cheaters they cheat. Bakers bake bread, seamsters make seams, and policewomen, they police the fuck out of everybody. And train conductors, they don't conduct trains. They punch fucking tickets. So learn your place, and shut up. Johanna?"

"Madam, I swear. I did not throw the man out of the window. And," she folded her arms on her chest.

"You have no proof."

"Yea. I can see two of his hair on your elbow, five on your shoulder."

The young woman looked at her arms and then hung her head.

"Now, in your own words. Why did you do it."

"I mean..." Johanna flung her arms in the air, talking in a high-pitched voice that held a careful balance between whining and self-mockery; a thing quite irresistibly cute, in Southern Badlands. "The writing, it was so under par!"

"Under par. You're from the Badlands, right?"

"How did you guess?"

"Yeah, that was a tough one."

"Writing is overrated, you know? He deserved every bit of it." Something in the back of Johanna's head told her that maybe, she could win sympathy with the policewoman, with cute sounds and victimization, the thing she'd do as a socialite in the rooftop brasseries of Hightown.

"Writing. Overrated." The policewoman growled. "Any art form, kid, any you can imagine, is like a tiny piece of cake. You name it. A song, a painting, a fucking freak show. But when you write a story, you create a new universe. A whole fucking cake. That's why it's special. So, don't you ever say that shit again. It's worse than murder."

Alice had stood up, pulled a pair of handcuffs from a side pocket and walked up to the two. Now, she put a cuff around Johanna's wrist, and the young woman did not resist.

"See, Armwriter?" Alice exclaimed. "Two writers on one train, and she chooses poor Heinrich here. Don't underestimate yourself."

And then, something inside the conductor, perhaps a liquid, or brain matter, or something entirely otherworldly and invisible, reached boiling point. It was heated up, slowly but steadily, over the short period of time since he had met Alice, and the woman herself, she'd be unsure about the nature of that substance, if asked, but she sure as hell knew a lot about the heating process.

"I will not take this any longer," the conductor raised his voice. Straightened out, fists clenched. "You," he pointed his index finger at the woman, "you've been dancing on the edge, too long. I just can't, I can't look the other way. You are no police officer. Or a moral compass. Or anyone, who can educate anyone

else, about anything. And I will not bow down to your antics, and nobody should. You're in fact, just, disrespectful, vile, patronizing scum. And disrespect, that's not a character trait."

"No, it's a skill," Alice said in a calm voice, slightly amused.

"No!!!" the conductor was getting red in the face. "It is not, a skill! It is wrong! And people should stand up to you. And disrespect you, like you disrespect them!"

With a quick snap, and before anybody could notice, Alice clicked the remaining handcuff strand around the conductor's wrist and took a step back, to have a good look at the pair, both speechless now.

"Cute," she remarked, with a self-satisfied grin. "Now, Johanna. You will report yourself to Felicitad García, Hightown, District 2 police station. Unless you wanna saw off his arm and make a run for it. Take your pick. Oh, good morning, Mr Rottenschweiner."

And then, Alice walked up to the carriages.

"Armwriter?"

"Yes."

"Could you walk over here and throw me my bag?"

When she saw that look of bewilderment on his face, she sighed.

"Well, you know. The murder chick is from Badlands. Kosbitch, same. Poor Heinrich here, and that interesting book. I think I've seen enough of Badlands for one day."

VI.

"You told me you hated writers."

He had walked down the steps, with her bag, and approached her, amidst the general chaos, of passengers walking about, or getting back on the train, and of the conductor, trying to negotiate the responsibilities of his job with Johanna's acute wish to be on the other side of the planet.

"Well, I talk a lot of shit," Alice said. "You kinda figured that out, right?"

"I mean..." the writer fumbled for words. "I would not call it like that."

"Of course you wouldn't call it shit," Alice said with a smile. "You'd call it interesting."

"I shall bid you goodbye, then," the writer said, handing Alice her bag. "What are your plans? If I'm not too nosy."

"Yeah, I'll just run home. Clears your head, like." And then she paused, and sighed. "You know what, the Badlands, maybe they're not such a great place for a hungover morning. But, I mean. If there are more people like you in there, I might just come and visit one day."

"Are you mocking me?"

For maybe the first time, the writer saw her smile.

"See? This is where you get with a straightforward compliment. You know what, forget what I said. Who needs more people like you. One Armwriter is more than enough. Still reason enough to visit."

"It will be an honor, Alice."

And Alice Henderson, she shook the writer's hand, turned around and went back along the rail tracks. A slow, effortless jog first, then, longer strides, as she went into her tempo, like a marathon runner on the first mile, and later yet, a sprint. And in the far distance, Willi Armwriter could see Alice stopping, resting her arms on her knees, and he imagined the heavy breathing, and the curses she made.

The Shadow Operation

I.

One day in the early autumn, Willi Armwriter found Alice squatting on his front lawn. Like on many days before that, he'd come back from his afternoon writing session at the Central: two coffees, large cup, milk on the side, to be used on the flip of a die, one sugar, a small cup of almond schnaps, room temperature, bottle-fresh, served with a napkin over the rim. At home, he'd wash his face and play the trombone in his bedroom for twenty minutes. Schnaps breath, he believed, not only cleaned the instrument, but also gave the sound a broader quality. Meanwhile, through the ornamented sitting room and the hall, in a tiny kitchen, chicory black would be brewed, slowly, in a large ceramic pot. Then, he would take the pot to the garden, in any season, watch it gush out steam, and pour some into his cup, sit back, sip, hold the liquid between the tongue and the high palate, swallow. Sigh, with pleasure. None of that, from the almond schnaps onwards, would happen today. He just knew.

"Yeah Badlanders are funny," Alice said, packing up the thin mattress and duvet into a single bundle. "So, lemme tell you what I discovered in two hours. I can't sleep in the park, on a bench, in the road, on the sidewalk, on a traffic island, in a bar, at a public toilet. It's not allowed. Also, in a forest, in a wheat field, under someone's hovercar, on someone's hovercar, or in a bank. Not allowed. And those fuckers, they're faster than lightning. You barely manage to close your eyes, and they're on you. They're on your case, man."

"It's a scandal, Alice."

"Yeah! I mean, where do you guys sleep here?"

"In beds, usually."

"Yea, but if you don't have your own bed, because, I wouldn't drag my bed here, obviously?"

"You book a hotel."

"Hell no. Anyway, turns out, the only place they let me sleep is your lawn."

"How is that?"

"Because I remembered your name. And therein comes a major survival strategy in Southern Badlands. Find people with front gardens, remember their names."

"I'm glad you came, Alice."

"Yeah no, it's more work-related."

"A murder case?" the writer raised his eyebrows.

"Nah. They call it a shadow operation. No idea what it is, really. Got sent here by the police chief herself. There's got to be some rats at the station, wanna get rid of me for a few days."

"That figures," the writer said, allowing himself a little chuckle.

"Yeah don't believe all that you read. Especially Kamienski. It's all bollocks."

"Sure. The real deal is far more terrifying."

"Man, the real deal is a bundle of nerves and a hangover. Kinda like, the definition of a Saturday. Well anyway," she turned her wrist to the north and peered at her sun watch, "got one hour to be a tourist. Now what do you do, if you wanna be real nice to tourists?"

"We offer them cookies and chicory black."

"Yeah, then strip them and hang them by the ankles in a dungeon. No, you wanna be nice, you take me out for a drink."

"But Alice, at this time of the day..."

"So what? Kick the routine. You've already had schnaps, beer will go down easy. They say Central is a great place for tourists. Let's see if they talk shit. Lead the way."

There was really no way one could say no to Alice, the writer thought as he paced beside her, not really leading the way. In fact, he had to catch up, for whenever drink was involved, Alice Henderson was a fast walker.

And although he'd read everything there was written, about Alice Henderson, the range of her special powers was still mostly hidden from him, or so he felt. She'd smelt his schnaps breath, the one he'd saved for his trombone. And even though he never told her where he lived - what region in Southern Badlands, which town, and what street in that town, he was pretty sure she'd found him, just using her sense of smell: all the way to his front lawn. And, it was as effortless as breathing.

Seeing her again made him feel jubilant. And he hoped, or imagined, that the rest of his day would be wonderfully ruined, as was the case, they said, whenever Alice was around, and he somewhat happily

resigned himself to the idea, but, as it came to pass, reality was to subvert his expectations, quite beyond the imaginable.

II.

The Central spilt dim, wet light on the sidewalk. Inside, the bartender raised his eyebrows, noticing Armwriter at the table. He never went to a bar twice in one day. And then, he noticed the woman beside him.

"Ha - a tourist!" he exclaimed, coming up to their table. "Griaß di."

"Christie," Alice nodded her head. "My name's..."

"I wish your boat had got a hole in it, and sunk. At night, with everybody sleeping."

"I came by train," Alice said.

"I wish it had got derailed."

"Nice to meet you too. Name's Alice."

"Your name means nothing."

"She's Alice Henderson!" Armwriter exclaimed, in a pious whisper.

"She could be the president of the fucking universe. But in my bar, she's a nuisance."

"That was actually spot on," Alice said. "I'm a nuisance with a purpose. I want a beer, then another one, and another one, until I drop dead. Then you call an ambulance hover, they put me on a stretcher, rush me to the nearest hospital. It's raining, they skid in a rough turn, hit into a tree. Driver dead, nurse dead. I survive. Now let's get started."

"Big or small?"

"What do I look like? A bimbo with an attitude?"

"Big coming up."

"Well well," Alice said when the bartender left, "I find this place colorful already."

"You see, in the Badlands," Armwriter went on to explain, "there are two kinds of people in a bar. The regulars, we call them the *Stammgäste*, and then the tourists. Now the *Stammgäste*, they sit around that big table over there. They start coming in the morning, then maybe take a break, or a nap on the table, and they stay until closing time. They are, how should I say it, a special category. Noone spits or pisses in their beer, and they get leftovers from the kitchen."

"Man, that's one hell of a feudal mentality. How do I become a *Stammgäste*?"

"A *Stammgast*. Well, it takes time. You come here every day, and then after a long time, the bartender remembers your name. And then, one day, he allows you to sit at the big table."

"Sounds like an easy mission."

"You don't have that, in the Sun City?"

"Man, how would I know. I don't socialize, I just drink. So what, you're still waiting for your place at the big table?"

"See, there's a thing we may have in common," the writer said. "I don't want to be at the big table."

At that moment, one of the *Stammgäste* stood up, walked uneasily across the room and hit his head against the wall.

"Willibald!" Christie shouted across the bar.

"Was?"

"The toilets are that way!"

The young man brushed his hair with his fingers, then checked his spectacles. They'd withstood the impact.

"This way is my way," he said. "Frank Sinatra, 1968."

"They are a funny lot," Armwriter remarked.

"Yeah," Alice said. "Wildly entertaining."

Soon, the bartender came with their beers, and Alice sniffed at the foam.

"Wow, no piss, no spit. Sounds like happy hour."

"I only spit in a beer when I serve dumb guests," the bartender said, towering over Alice. "And I piss in it, when I serve annoying ones."

"Sure I can qualify for both. Your country sucks. It's a dictatorship."

"Of course it is."

"You're only allowed to sleep in beds."

"I know. It's a scandal."

"You can't burn your own schnaps, kids can fuck only after they marry, every Badlander has a dungeon for a cellar, which I'm sure is filled with dead tourists, and the Burgermeister is an ass."

"I think we have a common understanding of things. This country is a toilet."

"Full of rules and shit."

"Beer?"

"I just got one."

"You need another one, to mellow down the culture shock."

"Yeah you're probably right."

A little while later, Alice glanced towards the door and sighed profoundly.

"Alright, holiday's over."

III.

"You are saying, this is the local police force," Armwriter whispered to Alice.

"Makes you wonder, right?"

Even if he knew the officers, which he didn't, he wouldn't recognize them under the layers of make-up and eyeliner. They'd been chatting away, ever since they sat down at their table: an assortment of wig, curled-up hairdo, glittery costume, in shades of blue, brown and red. Which was nothing, really, compared to the large woman who'd sat next to Alice. She wore a magnificent golden robe, ornamented with leaves, various items of fruit and toy animals, and brandished a crown, with apples for rubies and mirabelles for diamonds. If the rumor was true, Armwriter thought, and Niki, Alice's godly sister, was ever in the police force, he'd imagine her just like that - an Earth goddess.

"Man, you're big!" Alice had said in awe, looking up to the woman the way you look up a mountain.

"A big body needs a big heart, kid." And Alice, she couldn't but smile. "Name's Tini."

"Alice."

"What brings you here?" the woman said, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Alice was summoned here by order of the Sun City police, and was to be briefed on their operation. Or, maybe, happily oblivious, by her own choice.

"Certainly not the name."

"Thymes upon Thymes? It's quite ingenious, actually."

"Yea right. Like you never know if the town's on a river, or the river's on the town."

"Well, if you stay long enough, you'll get to see both. The October floods."

"Ah. That's really ingenious, then."

And now, some time later, Willi Armwriter was still not quite sure what was going on.

"So, how is the operation going?" he whispered to Alice, hoping to find a solid point in that universe. To him, it was shifting away from understandable reality, by every heartbeat.

"Yeah fine, fine. Never knew anyone could talk about shoes for five minutes." And then, Alice took just a quantum of pity on him. "From what I know, they're doing an undercover drug operation in a theater. So, they had to learn to sing, and dance. And by the looks of it, today was the first make-up rehearsal."

At that moment, the one they called Victoria placed her fingers on the table like she was in urgent need of a nail job.

"So. You're the chick they sent us. From...somewhere north."

"Yes. See, I heard this was some kind of shadow operation, so like, what...where's the shadow?"

"You haven't read the manual. Have you. She hasn't read the manual." It was Thomas. And, as the writer observed, Thomas had that never-changing look on his face: like the apocalypse was just round the corner.

"Yeah I don't read much. I'm more into doing stuff."

"See it's not a shadow operation," Victoria said, rolling her eyes. "It's called sha-do-wing. Shadowing. Got it?"

"Uh-uh."

"That means, you're gonna watch us do our work, and learn." All the five officers nodded their heads, albeit at different speeds, so they looked like a vertical piston mechanism out of tune.

"Oh, so that's what it means," Alice yawned. The writer felt that she was profoundly bored, but she let it show only half way. Maybe, he thought, she'd already learnt the golden rule of communication in the

Badlands: never offend a Badlander directly. Do it in a covert manner; be passive aggressive, manipulative, playfully condescending but at the same time, make sure you look like you've just lost a fluffy toy.

"It will be fun!" Teri said. "You can draw donkey pictures on our battle plans!"

"Fun my ass," Theresa scoffed at him, casting a wishful look at the bar. "The only fun's the drink on the side. I'm like, literally starving."

"Yes," Victoria said, with a sweet baby doll smile, "see, she thinks drink is actually food."

"Duh," Theresa shot back. "It is food." She'd been watching the platter full of beers in Christie's hands, as it approached their table. "This is, literally, dinner."

"Alright," Alice said, "so, what I know is, some guys in town wanna break into a bank. And your job is to stop them."

"Stop," Victoria nodded her head eagerly. "And arrest them. Cuff. Cuff. Cuff them."

"Catch them rrrrrred-handed," Theresa said, gargling her beer.

"An then..." Teri said, raising his finger, waiting for the dramatic pause to catch everyone's attention, "the little sheep came up to the boy, and said..."

"Argh," the four officers growled in unison.

"Is he always like that?" Alice inquired.

"Yeah," Thomas said.

"Different ability programme?"

"Artist inclusion programme."

"Oh."

Alice was briefed on the general procedure and some of the details, but it felt like the bigger picture was still tucked in someone's bag, both metaphorically and literally.

"We've got plans of the site, okay?" Thomas lowered his voice to a whisper, looking around cautiously. "Entry points, exit routes, security protocol, surveillance timetable. But we can't do it here. Too many eyes and ears. We'd need to go to the station for that."

"Ah, you know," Alice said, downing her second schnaps. "I'm not into stations. Police, railway, what have you. But, what we need I think," she burped, "is a center for covert operations."

All the officers nodded their heads. They didn't know what it meant, but it seemed complicated. And whenever something new and complicated showed up, they felt like they definitely needed it.

"We could use Armwriter's house for that," Alice said.

"My what??"

"You have a dungeon, don't you."

"Y..yes, I do."

"See? Just like I thought. Every Badlander has a dungeon. And, there's a wine stash. There's always a wine stash."

Theresa sprayed beer across the table. She'd almost drowned in a gulp.

"I mean, really? What the hell are we waiting for?"

"Too late now. No rush. 10am tomorrow?"

And immediately, Alice gave her some sympathy schnaps.

When the police had finally left, Alice found Armwriter sulking, lost in a glass, with a deep frown in his forehead.

"With respect to who you are," he said after a long while, "I think you are using me."

"Yeah well. There's so much you get to learn in two hours. You Badlanders got one fatal weakness, and it's called hospitality. Schnaps?"

IV.

A while later, and much to Armwriter's surprise, another group of strange-looking characters sat down around their table, shaking hands with Alice.

"We got the message, and the seal," the one they called Apollo said, getting right down to business. "But I don't like what I'm seeing. Who sent you?"

"Ah well, you know," Alice said. "Howling wolves? Sons of the junkyard? Northend scum? How would I know. They change names faster than I change socks. It's a thing, up north. One more way to evade the police, and mess up their database."

"Really tho. They sent us a girl?"

"Excuse me??" Verenika shouted from across the table, and a moment later, she shot a wry look Valentina's way. "Seriously? How can you put up with that shit?"

"Me?" Valentina said. Her presence was unmistakable: a chaos of purple hair, and a red leather jacket, just like Apollo's. "I'm his mattress. And a couch. He cast a spell on me, now he owns me. What do I get to complain about."

"The girl they sent, she's good with knives," Alice said, hoping to release the tension. "Anyway, they said this was gonna be some kind of shadow operation. So, like, what's that?"

"She hasn't perused the manual," Paul said, with a sigh. "She clearly hasn't."

"Perused?" Apollo inquired.

"Swooshed," Verenika said.

"It is called shadowing, okay?" Paul jumped in. "You...."

"I know!" Alice shouted over him. "I watch as you work, and I learn."

"See?" Verenika said. "She's a fast learner. She...chocolate cookies!" Her eyes were now fixed on a display case at the bar.

"Yes," Apollo said. "You watch, you learn. Now, where were we." He turned to the rest of the gang. "You said we go through the back entrance, and I say, we break in through the side wall."

"How do you aim to compromise the wall?"

"How do I what?"

"Swoosh."

"Ah. Well that's easy. I just boom-boom-boom through it."

"Alright, if that's the case, we go through the hall then."

"Yes."

"Cut through the gate."

"Yes."

"How do we disassemble the locking mechanism?"

"How do we what?"

"Swoosh," Verenika said. "How do we swoosh the safe lock."

"Ah."

In the meantime, another gang member sat next to Alice, maybe too close for comfort, but Alice didn't know comfort.

"I'm Vincent. Gotta tell you girl, you're too hot for this chair."

"Alright lemme get this straight," Alice sighed, looking around. "Apollo's the leader, Valentina is the mattress. Paul's the linguist, Verenika is the brains. Who's this guy."

"We call him Babyface," Apollo said. "He can get a woman in bed within seconds. It's actually quite useful."

"Yeah right," Alice said, turning to Vincent, with a smile. "You're married. Now, get your fingers out of my ass crack, and behave."

Minutes passed, more details of the operation were discussed, but it seemed like the bigger picture was, both literally and metaphorically, tucked in someone's satchel.

"We'll need a place to talk over the plans of the bank, " Apollo said. "And some finer details."

"I got just the place for that," Alice said.

"No," Armwriter whispered, burying his face in his hands.

"Armwriter's house. He's got a big fucking dungeon. No wait. Too cold and damp. But, you got this cellar room with a wine press, right? Everybody's got that."

He just nodded his head, still buried in his hands.

"Alright, let's make it ten tomorrow? No wait. Ten thirty. Sound good? Yeah."

Later, they walked in silence towards Armwriter's house, him and Alice.

"I suppose you want cookies and a bed." It felt passive aggressive, from him, but Alice would take up on the offer anyway, if she wanted to. She'd always take up on offers that were meant as anything but offers: threats, frustrated growls, sad jokes.

"Nah, I prefer to sleep rough," she said, rolling out the bundle on his lawn and plunging head first into it. "Nighty night."

"Alice?"

"Yeah?" She opened one eye.

"How did you know I wouldn't...you know. What is it in you language. Spill the beans? Run my mouth? Rat on you?"

"Yeah, easy. You're a writer. You don't ruin stories, you make them. Or you watch. Night already."

V.

"See, I told you," Alice said, like she was passing a bit of secret lore. "Every Badlander has a fucking dungeon. Except for Hightowners. They just live on roofs and pretend to be posh."

"Donkey shit!" Teri cried.

"That's very offensive, actually," Victoria exclaimed, placing her nails on the table.

"Hightowners?" Alice asked the rest.

"Uh-uh," they said in unison.

"Oh well. True or not, that's what they say about you here in town."

"Cuff. Cuff," Victoria said.

"Does she have a speech problem or something?" Alice asked.

"Nah, she just loves the word," Theresa said. "Happened to me when I was a kid. Fell in love with a word, couldn't get rid of it. Took me years, man."

In the morning, Armwriter had taken a day off work. (He was indeed a radio phone operator, part-time: unlike writing, it generated some coin.) The temporary release form gave him three options: "family festivity", "care for elderly relative" and "sick". The writer was true with forms, as much as he was true with people. And so, his pen hovered over the paper for a long while, as he pondered which of the three options was closest to his current situation. In the end, he put a cross next to "sick".

For much of the morning, and part of the afternoon, he was busy serving cookies and chicory black, then making a lunch of bacon and eggs, using whatever that had plopped out of his chickens in the last two months, and half his pantry. And as Theresa's chair had effectively blocked his modest stash in the wall, he quickly gave up on salvaging any of his wine.

"What are those sounds?" Thomas asked, half a hour into the meeting, as the wine press room in a higher floor began to house the other party and Armwriter had come back to the dungeon with more cookies.

"Uhm..." The writer began stammering. In the midst of all the chaos, he hadn't thought of an answer to the one question that was sure to come. He cast a sideways look and saw Alice smiling.

"Yeah, just some kids playing board games. Cops and robbers, or something."

"Aww, that's cute," Victoria said.

"Yea. He says they come here every now and then. The place is more immersive, or I dunno what."

After a while, loud thuds were heard at the entrance to the cellar complex and down the stairs, and then violent rattling noises, on the way to the wine press room. Paul opened the door and waved his arms triumphantly.

"All welcome the great *Tischler* himself! Paul Stemberger, in person."

"Would you mind helping me with this?" the *Tischler* said, pushing a large wooden cart in front of him.

"Thank you, thank you very much. Would you mind closing the door behind me? Yes, thank you."

"What is it?" Valentina yawned.

"This is, a box. On wheels."

"To carry our loot," Paul added.

"And, if you care to notice....would you mind bringing the lamp over here, yes, thank you, would you mind looking at this microscopic ornament in the corner?"

"It's your signature!"

"Seriously?" Verenika said, rolling her eyes. "You're putting your signature on a box we gonna use in a bank robbery."

"I have complete trust in your operation."

The *Tischler* looked sadly over the room, noticed the wine press and also the one thing curiously missing in a room housing a wine press: wine.

"Well, I'll be on my way. I wish you the best of luck."

When Paul closed the door again, he froze, with a deep frown in his forehead. "What are those sounds? They're coming from down below."

"Yeah, that," Alice sighed, like every time she had to say anything twice. "Just some kids playing board games. Cops and robbers."

"Aww, I wanna play a board game!" Verenika made a pleading grimace. "Cookies!"

For much of the day, Alice would go back and forth between the two groups: up and down a flight of stairs, through one door, then another. As Armwriter observed, she would always offer a lame, careless excuse - she was making new friends, or, she was curious about board game design. He was intrigued to find out that all that time, nobody was even a little suspicious, but then he figured out why: for everyone, himself included, the trick Alice pulled was beyond the imaginable. And, what was worse - to everyone, this would be a stroke of genius. To Alice, it was probably just laziness. Why drag yourself to two places when you can stay at one?

"We've got new intel," Thomas said, suddenly remembering something. "And it's not looking good."

"Well tell us already," Tini said.

"Our informant tells us they're planning to break in tonight. At nine."

"Oh fuck no," Theresa said.

"Exactly. That's right in the middle of our *première*."

"Intermission. There's intermission."

"Yes. We've got twenty minutes."

"Heads up, brethren," Apollo said in the other room, suddenly remembering something important.

"Not a brethren," Verenika said, customarily.

"We've got intel about the police. They're running a covert operation in the theater, and they're performing tonight. I'd already organized everything. We strike at nine."

"Alright. We need some cover."

"Like what?"

"I dunno. Like we blend in with the festival, but we're not recognized."

"I think I have just the thing for that," Alice said, and led them up the stairs, down the hall and into the writer's bedroom.

"Man, that's like a traveling theater."

"Gives me the creeps."

"Where are we anyway?"

"Man."

"You know what's funny?" Alice said with a smile, browsing through the gigantic wardrobe. "Most people, they wear costumes to hide their real selves. But with him, it's the other way round."

Minutes later, the gang went down the stairs again. Only this time, they were a funeral procession from many centuries back: led by Death, then a fairy, a noble hitman in a tuxedo, a woodland whore and a young gamekeeper. And Armwriter, as he met them in the hall, he realized his capacity for surprise had long been spent.

When the police meeting was finished, the officers went up the steps, briefly passing a ventilation opening into a room where very similar plans were being hatched.

"They definitely looked like the police," the gentle hitman said when they'd all walked up to ground level and the big wooden door was shut.

"Yeah," Alice said, "they do cosplay. It's more immersive. What do I know. Look at yourselves." Alice, she didn't bother with a costume. As a foreigner and a tourist, she would blend in just fine.

VI.

"What you doing here? Missing Hightown?"

Both groups had left, Armwriter had retreated into his bedroom, playing long, sad notes on his trombone, and Alice, she just wandered round the house until she discovered a hatch that led to the attic and then, the roof. And there, she found Teri, the policeman from the artist inclusion programme.

"Ah..." he said, exhaling slowly. "Get high in Hightown, low in Lowtown."

"Yeah fuck me face up standing." She sat next to him.

"Faces asses."

For a long while, they just watched the afternoon sun, which sounds easy when written on paper, but it sure as hell is a strain on the eyes. For someone intimately involved with the situation, such as a telepath or a reader, it could feel like a staring contest, a different kind. And funnily enough, it was not, and Alice quietly refused to do all the stuff she could do to her eyes, which, back in the old world, would basically amount to wearing sunglasses.

"So, where's the little sheep now," Alice said as she closed her eyes to the sun.

"In the gutter. With the rest of the flock."

"Dead?"

"Almost."

"In a hospital?"

"At home. The caretaker nurse." Teri just stopped talking.

"Alright." As she stood up and turned away, she suddenly remembered something. "Hey. You think you're too sensitive for the world, so you do the dumbest thing that's always first on anyone's mind, you put up a show. Well guess what, everybody is."

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

"Everyone's got a coping mechanism. Because nobody really gives a fuck, about anybody. Too busy coping. And friendships, and families, and communities, they're just genetic leftovers from a tribal mentality. That crippling, stone age fear of being alone, and without fire. Nothing genuine about it, we're programmed."

"Alice. Alice, is it?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a family?"

"I cope with those questions by kicking people's teeth in. So don't ask me. Now what you're doing, that's actually cute. You make people laugh. I'd stick with that."

Roughly an hour later, a certain caretaker nurse issued a heated written complaint with the local council, involving a particularly arrogant young lady from Social Services, who had simply barged in, drunk half a bottle of schnaps from the cupboard, and then studied the little patient much longer than necessary, the nurse opined, especially, which was most strange, with her hands. And, the nurse was certain, women from Social Services must not drink when on duty, especially not in front of children, and most certainly not from the clients' private supplies. Also, touching children is most certainly a crime, and so was the woman's attitude, when the caretaker nurse voiced her complaints, for the woman turned to her and said, and the nurse had to quote here: "Bitch behave."

The human brain, Alice thought, is the only real argument against the existence of an omnipotent god. God the creator, sure. You pull a few levers, an amoeba plops out, and you watch evolution complicate itself. But no pureblood, or a crossbreed like Alice, not even God himself, could dissect and mend that ultimate chaos of memory, routine and rubbish that's the human brain. So, she did all she could, with schnaps as a catalyst. Erecting a few pillars, and support structures, wherever the brain was collapsing upon itself. Holding up the flood with a couple fallen trees and boulders. Dissolving the hemorrhage. A few years of life, at most. Some upper body movement. In the midst of all that touristy shit, Alice had suddenly wished it was more than that.

VII.

The streets were now covered in semi-darkness, and in pale reflections of gas lights, oil lamps, candles. Busy, with tourists who thought there was so much to do, on an evening like this. Busy with the autumn festival, rich in mead and *speck*, heralding a time when leaves change color and your breath freezes in the morning.

The gang - a funeral procession and Alice - walked along the main pedestrian zone. The *Tischler's* cart carried the woodland whore and the fairy, and for once, Death actually did some work.

"That was amazing, wasn't it?" Alice said. "Man, they gotta perform at the Needle. They just have to. They gonna rock the place to the ground. Man. That was something. I mean, like, you do the gang shit all your life, but for once, I was like, fuck the bank job, stay there and like, take a holiday or something."

The whore and fairy nodded their heads, sadly. Yes, Alice had dragged the gang into the theater and made them watch most of the first half, and some were sorry to have exchanged class entertainment for work. After a while, they turned into a side street and arrived at a large opening behind the buildings.

"Alright, here we are," Paul verbalized the obvious. "You mentioned a particular interjection you were gonna use."

"A what?" Apollo said.

Verenika sighed.

Valentina yawned.

"You say boom boom boom when we're in bed," she said. "And I know you call it rock hard and all, but it ain't gonna work here."

"It's coming."

"You say that too."

"Just a minute."

"And that."

Whatever the two were talking about, it was quickly dissolved in the sound of a fast-approaching steam engine. And then, a machine appeared in the clearing: a behemoth on wheels, two heavy steel rods in the front, and a young bearded man in the driver's seat.

It was a steam forklift. Even Alice was in awe: she didn't know the things were actually re-invented, and existed.

"This is Roland," Apollo exclaimed triumphantly as the man jumped down and they shook hands. "And this, ladies and gentlemen, this is the mighty *Stapler*!"

"Pay up," Roland whispered, lowering his eyes to the ground.

With a scoff, Apollo fished in his backpack, took out two bags filled with some solid, granulated matter, and handed them over to Roland.

"What's that?" Verenika inquired.

"Dog food," Apollo shrugged his shoulders. "The happy canine formula."

Roland knew what his job was. A wall. He'd use the *Stapler* to move cargo around the docks, and also, he did walls. He never cared what house the wall belonged to. For a *technik*, that was one mental process too many. It was just a wall. The main challenges lay in assessing the material, the wall strength, the best approach. He walked up to it and studied it with the tips of his fingers. Expensive white paint, not some lime shit. Underneath, plaster, polished ad nauseam by some lame fuckers paid by the hour. Damp, very damp to the touch. Yes - for all the outside glamor, the wall was just dried mud bricks, inside a wooden structure. He glanced about, noticing the plaster peeling off in places. And in his mind, a drawing board, the beam structure was recreated, and placed on the side of the house, like a framework invisible to the eye. He walked back to the behemoth, still puffing steam from a tall chimney.

"Stapler, stay strong," he whispered, kneeling down and kissing the side of the vehicle. And then he mounted it, like a duelling knight of old, raised the fork by half a yard, pressed down his foot, released the clutch. A moment later, the fork ran through the wall like knife through butter. Tilting the blades, he hit reverse on the gearbox, and half the side wall was plucked out of the building.

Armwriter, he was just around. Even before Alice arrived in the city, he was regarded, by everyone, as that person who is around, whenever anything happens. Crouching nearby or sitting in the corner, taking notes. To Badlanders, that was a perfectly ordinary phenomenon. And even Badladese philosophy, which enjoyed a massive boom in the past few years, recognized that every event needs an observer, otherwise it's like it never happened.

The police squad arrived at the scene just as Alice had sat down next to Armwriter, on a comfy sofa in the backroom, and less than ten yards away from them, Apollo had drilled through the safe lock and a formidable mountain of coin had spilled out of the safe and on the wooden floor of the bank.

"You're all under arrest!" Thomas cried, shrouded from head to toe in blue glitter. "Let me entertain you!" His mind was, quite clearly, still on the stage somewhere.

"Cuff!" Victoria shouted.

"Resistance is futile!" Teri added.

And Victoria jumped forward, a waltz, a twist, a head flip - looking for a worthy adversary. In a moment, she stood before the woodland whore, in a kumite stance.

"First, I kick your teeth in. And then I cuff you. Cuff."

Verenika observed her with some interest: a sparsely-clothed ring girl, golden glitter on her chest.

"You're some karate meister or what?" she said.

"Dancer. Cuff."

"Karate dancer," Verenika nodded her head. "Oh well. I'm a seamstress. And a lawyer. Dunno what I am, really. But I'm sure as hell gonna kick your ass. And by the way, I loved the show."

As Victoria lunged forward, others joined in, each finding his or her mark - a clash of funeral and glitter. And in the back, Tini opened her arms wide and started singing, in a deep, broad opera voice. She'd always do that, whenever violence was involved. And farther yet, at the rear of the room, Alice leaned backwards and put her hands behind her head.

"Gotta tell you," she leaned towards Armwriter, "that's one hell of a shadow operation."

"Indeed it is," the writer whispered.

"Oh well. Time to wrap up."

Meanwhile, Verenika collapsed in the corner after a sneaky side kick, and Vincent appeared behind Victoria's back.

"Hey baby. Wanna dance?" It took just a split second - the voice, the tone, a quick glance over her shoulder, holding her breath.

"Hey, tiger," she whispered.

And around that time, Alice walked across the battlefield, slowly, effortlessly, all the way up to the mountain of coin, and stuffed some in the pockets of her pants. And then, she turned to the commotion.

"Alright, people. Alright."

"Alice?"

"Alice,,,"!

"Alice."

"Alice???"

"¿Alice?"

"^%@#Alice"

"%Alice%"

"!Alice!"

"Alice.."

It took a while before everybody realized they all knew Alice. And as they shook their heads in disbelief, at different times and speeds, they looked like a horizontal piston mechanism out of tune.

"Yeah yeah," Alice said. "You know I came here as a foreigner. A tourist. And, for work. A *Gastarbeiter*, or what you call it. And yeah. I got overwhelmed. Wanted to try everything. Being in a gang, being in the police. Robbing a bank, stopping a robbery. Like, the complete experience."

Victoria threw up her arms in frustration. "You think this is all about you. It's all about you. Isn't it?"

"Well, like, it's the definition of a tourist, right?" Alice walked towards them, then through their circle, or more like, sparring pairs frozen in time, or enjoying a mid-round break. "And you see them every day. Blocking a whole sidewalk, because they're taking a fucking snap. So you get off your bike and wait, and you wish that one day, you could mow them down with a fucking tractor. And the tourists, they do that, because all of this, all of it, was built just for them. And it's standing here, just so they can pause for two seconds, and take a fucking snap. And I mean, you all did a great job. Really. And you know, you come here and everybody's wearing leather shorts and playing brass music, and they look like they can't count to ten, but then you get to know them, and they're great people. And, professionals. And I miss you already. Tini's big heart, and Theresa's love of drink, and Verenika's craving for chocolate. And all your funny accents, and the silly things you say just to make others feel better. It was a life-changing experience. Really."

There was a very long silence, and pretty much everybody watched Alice with their mouth open.

"That was, literally, the corniest thing I've heard in my entire life," Theresa said.

"Normally, I'd just break her neck," Apollo said. "But this is weird like...what's the most fitting comparison? It's like you're in a restaurant, and you get a sleeping kitten on a plate. You don't just eat it, or complain to the chef."

"It's performance art, man!" Vincent shouted, holding Victoria by her ass cheek.

"Ich find dich Scheise." Theresa growled at him.

"What happens now?" Teri asked. "Should we stay, should we go? If we go, there will be trouble. And if we stay..."

"How about," Alice said, nodding towards the front of the room again, "How about we take a handful each. For the effort." And she patted her pockets, heavy with coins. "Who's gonna miss a few handfuls."

"True," Tini said. "We all made some effort. And also, I think we all learnt something today."

"Yeah," Verenika moaned, getting up from the floor. "A *mawashi-geri*."

"Yes," Tini said. "And also, that we're all good at something. I think we should celebrate with a song. The audience will wait. I'm sure of it."

And as Tini began singing, her voice slowly drew them in, and by the second verse, both the robbers and the police were standing in a circle, their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders, except for Vincent, who was concerned with a different part of the anatomy, and they all sang together:

*Manchesmal, da spür i
So a zieh'n in der Brust und dann is Zeit
Aus heiter'm Himmel packt's mi
Und dann waß i, jetzt is wieder amal soweit
Da gibt's gar nix, da brauch i net überlegen
Heut muass i mir's wieder geben*

*Da führt ka Weg vorbei
Alles andere is vollkommen egal
Das is ma eh net neu
Plötzlich bin i dann total sentimental
Und dann waß i, was i brauch und was i will
I brauch mei Überdosis G'fühl*

Alice nodded to Armwriter, then towards the hole in the wall.

"You wanna leave now? That's actually a pretty song."

"Yeah I don't like pretty. Makes you all weepy and shit. Off we go."

VIII.

As they walked side by side, Armwriter was slowly waking up, back from madness and into understandable reality.

"Do you realize," he said after a long while.

"Yeah."

"Do you realize that you ransacked my house, my wardrobe. My dungeon, my wine stash, my whole life. To the last bit that could be used."

"Yeah," she said, now with a satisfied grin in her face. "Well maybe, just maybe. You could call it the revenge of the book character. You know? 'Cause the same thing happened to me. You enjoyed reading about me, right? Alice getting drunk, Alice getting shitfaced, Alice destroying this or that random cunt, Alice crying her heart out, at 6am, Alice getting cut to bits by Vasya, Alice getting well again. So now, you know what it feels like. Being a fucking character in a shit book."

Armwriter just nodded his head.

"And now you're gonna say, you owe me, Alice."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Nah, but you'd think that. Now, what would you want with me? I'm frigid, I'm neurotic, and I punch people for fun. And I may look like I'm on the wrong side of twenty, but in fact I'm waaay past middle-aged. And now you're gonna say, you want a hug, which, translated into Badlandese, means, brief physical contact that brings pleasure. Well fuck that. Up north in Sun City, it's the definition of a one night stand. And it don't bring pleasure, just longing and pain. Unless you're heartless and lobotomized. So, I know what I'm gonna give you. Yeah. You've just had an Überdosis G'fühl, well now, you get an overdose of Alice. And I say, I can become a Stammgäste in one night."

The wet light from the Central bathed her ankles.

"I bet you my shoes I can. Lead the way."

He didn't lead the way, really. For whenever drink was involved, Alice Henderson was a fast walker.

The Birdman

I.

As he was passing through the kitchen door and into the short hallway, Willi Armwriter thought this would be a wonderful morning. All mornings were wonderful, by definition. Well, except those winter ones, with rain and sleet and ice-covered streets, and the daybreak that was still in the waiting as he left the house. Combine all that, and it makes for a pretty shabby morning. Luckily, these happened only a few times a year in the Badlands. The rest, wonderful. And all the routines, wonderful, and now Alice, she added another layer of wonder to these mornings. He'd walk outside, in a few moments now, holding a breakfast platter in one hand: two bread rolls with butter, ham and goat cheese, and then slices of cucumber and tomato spread around in a neat crescent, and a large cup of chicory black, in his other hand. He would open the front door, nudging it with his shoulder and then helping himself with the right foot. The hinges would creak, just slightly, and he'd say *oil the hinges*, to himself, like he did every morning. The wooden door panel would stop just a few inches shy of the wall. He'd find Alice sleeping, place the breakfast on a stool next to her grass bed and go fetch a bucket. He'd fill the bucket with water from a rain tank, and as he approached Alice, she'd say, *Yeah, alright, alright*, and sit up in her bed, eyes still closed. And like every morning, she'd drink all the chicory first, eyes closed, and then eat much of the ham and cheese, leaving pieces of bread rolls behind, and never touching the vegetables. And only then she'd open her eyes, and surprise herself with a long, tender burp. Yes, it would be a wonderful morning, Armwriter thought. Except that it wasn't.

When he opened the door, he saw Alice on all fours, in the middle of the road. Forearm pressed against her body. Bleeding. Katana in her right. Two youngsters, a boy and a girl, circling her at a safe distance. One katana each. The breakfast platter rang against the porch.

"Alice!" The two paused, glancing in his direction.

"Whoopsie," the girl said.

"Oh well," the boy said. "Do you know him, Alice?"

"Of course...I don't know him, fuckwit. He's just...a fan. Leave him alone, alright?"

"Ohmygosh," the girl said, covering her mouth in mock surprise. "What a fanboy. He built you a bed!"

"Yeah whatever. I said leave him alone."

"Uhhmm....no," the boy said.

"Nope," the girl said, with an emphasis on the "p".

"Alice, what's happening?"

"Yeah well," Alice said as she managed to stand up, and Armwriter noticed much of her shirt was covered in blood. "Willi, purebloods. Purebloods, Willi. Now, you two. Had your fun, go back to Mommy. Alright?"

In response, the girl dashed forward and swung her sword. Or at least that's what Armwriter thought had happened. The human eye, it can only register so much. The ear, however - a clear sound won't escape its attention. The sound of two blades clashing.

Alice was equally fast. A side kick, and the girl flies backwards, hits the road with her bum. At the same time, Alice's katana stops another slash, behind her back. Quick swordplay, and the sounds, they're like a frenetic author on a typewriter. That's Willi's image, in his head, which needs to stay preoccupied. It threatens to explode.

"I said cut the crap. Alright?" Alice says, panting, as the boy retreats to a safe distance. "I'm awake now. Won't be that easy."

The girl stands up, growling. In his tunnel-like vision, Armwriter notices she's got a pair of very tender lips. And the next moment, she's gone, and his vision, shaky now, focuses on Alice in the center; a whirlwind of blade and blood, a typewriter in inhuman frenzy, and then it's over.

The girl, she collapses on the ground, with a red stain on her chest. The boy's katana drops, he runs backwards, falls. A deep cut in his side.

Alice collects the blades, throws them under her bed. Rests her arms on her knees. Breathe in, breathe out.

"Now mend yourselves, and fuck off." She sits on the bed, exhales through her teeth. Blood drips down the edge of her shirt. Dot dot dot.

"Alice." Armwriter manages to let out a whisper.

"What."

"The girl."

"What the fuck."

The girl watches the wound in her chest, transfixed. Those tender lips move, slowly. Like a goldfish washed out on linoleum.

"Yea she froze," Alice says, pressing her hands against her stomach. "Great survival strategy. Very popular, up north. Couple moments, she's gonna bleed out, and die."

The boy let out a desperate shriek, tried to get up but couldn't.

"Yeah whine all you want." She lay back on the grass, tucking the bundle under her head.

"Alice," Armwriter whispered.

"And now she's dead," she said, closing her eyes. The boy tries to crawl forward, blood shrouding his teeth. The pain stops him; now he's face down, sobbing into the dust. And Armwriter knows. He knows Alice could help. There's a short time window, right after you die. She could.

"Alice!"

"What."

"Do something. Please."

"No." She shoots him an angry look. At that moment, she seems galaxies away. "You, fuckwit," she turns to the boy. "How old. Hundred fifty? Two hundred?" He nods his head, face still buried in the dusty road.

"She?"

"Eigh...teen."

"What?" Alice flares her nostrils. "You're fucking kidding me."

"Alice."

"Was this like, your idea of a date? Hang out, kill Alice? Gonna make her wet? Talk, dumbass!"

"Y..yes."

"Well fuck you!"

"Alice, please."

"Armwriter."

"Please."

"What does your stupid god say about death."

"Alice, I beg you."

"What. Does he say. About death."

"We all turn to dust."

"No, the other thing. Self-death. Suicide."

"Freaking forbidden."

"She going to hell, Willi?" Alice said, standing up.

"Potentially."

"Yeah. Well I call this a suicide. Alright?" And as she says that, Alice walks up to the girl and plunges her hand in her chest. "And, too young for hell. What do you say. Fit your narrative?"

Armwriter didn't answer. And in a few moments, those lips he called tender, they drew a shallow breath.

II.

"Do you want a change of clothes?" Armwriter had sat on the grass bed next to her. "Alice. Talk to me."

When she turned her eyes to him, they seemed like the eyes of a hurt, beaten dog. He had to remind himself this was Alice.

"They're just killing me for fun."

"But why?"

"I said! Fun!"

"But..."

"Fun! You know? Like, wrecking a football stadium. Kicking dustbins around. I don't know. Beating the fuck out of a bus stop! I said fun! Get me already??" She'd screamed right into his face, at the top of her lungs. He didn't wince. "Yeah. Sorry."

They sat like that for a long while, Alice, with her face buried in her hands, Armwriter, looking straight ahead, wrinkles in his forehead, like he was trying to figure out a two-digit combination lock, and it was more of a challenge than he'd expected.

"But you sent them away," he said.

"They...they're kids. Alright? I don't wanna do kids. Don't wanna do anyone. The fuck."

What the purebloods had against Alice, he wouldn't know. Her sister, Niki, maybe. If they needed a reason, they'd have one. But Alice? And then, it dawned on him. Or maybe, she implanted that idea in the surface of his mind. The young, Armwriter thought, they always want to kill the old. At least metaphorically. Stage a culture war. Or laugh them off, drive them off - to outhouses, and garden sheds, and old people's homes. Cut or collect their pension. Wait for them to drown in their own shit. Modest funeral. Packed schedule at the cremation hall. Twenty minutes, in and out. Poof. Get old, repeat. And Alice, she was way behind schedule at the cremation hall. By anybody's standards. And for Armwriter, the two-digit lock was like a Gordian knot of combinations. Until it wasn't.

"I have an idea," he said. She raised her head, slowly, turned to him, and for a short, passing moment, it felt like she, Alice, was hanging on his lips, for a flicker of hope, or anything, really.

"Let's get down to the Central. Have a black."

The enthusiasm wore off quickly.

"That's your plan."

"Or, a drink. It doesn't matter."

She sighed. It really didn't matter.

"Okay."

III.

Alice watched the cup in front of her, in quiet, disbelieving anger. But the anger, it wasn't a flame, it wasn't a spark, just a speck of rain-soaked ash.

"Let's not do an Alice, for once. It's called tea. With lemon."

"Yeah I know tea."

"Christie, come over." Armwriter waved at the bartender. "Come, sit with us."

The tall man approached them, with measured, wobbly steps.

"The guests want breakfast. I don't want to serve them breakfast. So I sit, with the writer. And my lovely *Stammgasterinne*." Alice just raised her head and gave him a faint smile.

"Tell her about Thymes, Christie."

"What about it? It's a pile of dung. Filled with old people. And tourists. And the tourists come to my bar. I tell them to piss off, and they come again. With more tourists. I say Griaß Di, they don't say hello. I piss in their beer. They say the beer tastes like piss. I say of course it tastes like piss, I pissed in it. They laugh. And the next day, they come again."

"Not the tourists," Armwriter said. "Tell her about the town."

"We have floods every October. Years ago, this was a free town. And every fall, the flood would take your stuff, and give it to someone else. And you, you got someone else's stuff. Some years were happy, other years were not. That's life. We called it: the Equal. Distribution. Of wealth. Do you follow me."

"Yes," Alice whispered.

"Today, people are greedy. They prepare for the flood. They carry their stuff upstairs. Nobody touches anybody's stuff."

"Tell her about the owners," Armwriter said.

"The town is owned by five families. Madar. Berger. Künstler. Robbens. Klein."

"Willi, is this..." Alice's tired voice interrupted the bartender. "Like a...mafia hit job, something? Or like, a revolution? Alice brings back communism? I'm sorry..."

"No, no, not at all. Listen. Please. Christie, tell her about Madar."

Heinrich Madar was a ruthless businessman who ran five of the ten bars in the city. He'd grown his empire by leasing out money to people and then taking their property. When he decided to retire, his son, Markus Madar, took over.

"He's a walking vegetable," Christie says. "And my boss." The most under-educated man in town, with a ton of wealth to his name. Alice's imagination was interrupted by another story, and another.

Künstler would organize free dinners for local artists, most of whom were broke. As Alice remembered, the age of government subsidies ended with the end of the world, centuries ago. And Künstler, he was a substitute for that. Sort of. He'd buy the diners' artworks, for a loaf of bread or some pocket money, and then he'd use his contacts over in Hightown and sell them for unbelievable prices. Klein, he'd always boast

his collection of antique hovercars. And when his barn became too small, and so did the space around his house, he bought all the parking lots on the main square. And since then, noone else had been able to park their hovers, anywhere near the center of town. Robbins, he was a ladies' man. Every week, he'd bring a young socialite from Hightown, or an unfortunate village kid, parade them through town like an ornament or a piece of jewellery, and then every Sunday morning, he'd send them packing and go to church.

When Christie disappeared for a while, to fill up beer mugs at the big table, Armwriter leaned towards Alice.

"So. Have you noticed anything?"

She took a deep breath. To her, all the stories were derivative. And at the same time, somewhat real, by virtue of being about this place, here and now. As they always are. But Willi, he probably meant something even more derivative, and basic, and revealing.

"Yeah. He never said anything positive. But that's how he is, right?"

"Oh no. He has a lot of good things to say. About his family, his friends, the *Stammgäste*. The working people of this town."

Like always, Alice thought again. And for some reason, her fatigued mind was trying to pass through the derivative and the basic, into the revealing, as if there was something magical in all that silliness. And then, Christie came back to the table and Armwriter spoke to him, in a voice that was loud all of a sudden, so that a few heads at the big table turned in their direction.

"Tell her about Berger."

The bartender's brow deepened, and he fell heavily into the chair.

"He is a vile, vile man. That's all I have to say."

Meanwhile, one of the *Stammgäste*, Armwriter's namesake, staggered across the room to their table.

"Ya what. Berger? Aye, Berger. 'Ee's a Black Flag cunt."

Another, boyish figure joined him.

"He's filthy rich, man! We eat the rich!"

"He's never getting served in this bar," Christie said.

"Cun't getting poorer every day."

"He owns about twenty houses in Thymes," Armwriter explained. "And outside the tourist season, noone wants to live in them. The heating costs, the upkeep, the man's getting old, the kids have moved far away..."

"He's never getting served in this bar."

"Never," the namesake said.

"Not ever," the boy said.

"Even when he's as poor as a sewer rat," Christie added. "And begs for a bowl of soup."

Alice closed her eyes.

"He's not winning this," she whispered. "Any way he goes. Is he."

"He is not, indeed," Armwriter nodded.

"A mortal sin, in the Badlands," Alice said.

"You mean Black Flag, or being rich?" Armwriter asked, with a guarded amount of mocking interest.

"I don't know what to call it."

"Well then don't."

And then, everybody went silent, and Alice heard steps, and the shuffling of many feet, and the little circular bar table in the center of the room creaked, just a little, and someone said, *suppe, bitte*, or something of this sort, in a quiet, raspy voice, and someone else, Alice recognized Christie's voice, said something like *sofort*, and maybe *bitte*, but she wasn't sure. And then, she pictured an elbow to go with the creaking bar table, then a whole arm, a piece of a checkered shirt. And then, she opened her eyes and saw him.

"We call him the birdman," Armwriter whispered.

In the meantime, the old man in the checkered shirt was served a bowl of soup, and he slurped it, in a mercurial hurry, like it was a distraction, looking around, mumbling *passt schon, passt schon*, with soup-covered lips. And, until he wobbled out, Alice observed a while later, everybody in the bar minded their own business, which she found rather pleasant; and when they did not, once again, Alice was already in her own world.

"Berger," she whispered, closing her eyes again.

"Yes," Willi lowered his voice.

"And now you're gonna say..."

"What, Alice?"

"Now you're gonna say, let's finish our tea, and go and meet the birdman."

"Yes, indeed. Are you reading me?"

"No." She kept her eyes closed, and her smile now, it was an inward one, like the one he imagined when he read about Niki, her half sister.

"And you know what, Willi?"

"What."

"That was clever. Like, super clever. You know? Really."

"I'm honored, Alice."

IV.

The door to every one of Berger's houses was wide open in the warm months, and closed but unlocked in the cold ones, with ancient, weathered handles on the outside. No one ever broke in; people didn't really do that in the Badlands, and even if they did - it was Berger's house, for god's sake! There were only minor acts of vandalism. Like this one time, Willi told Alice, someone had painted a Black Flag symbol over one of his hotel signs, and Berger just rubbed his chin and said, "*Passt schon, passt schon....*but it's a little too small, isn't it?"

As they ascended several flights of old stone steps, opened a thin metal door and walked out on a rooftop patio, Alice stopped dead in her tracks.

"Is this real?" she whispered.

"Indeed it is."

"*Hallo, Willi!*" the birdman said, turning to them. And then he spotted Alice. "Aaah, you're the newcomer! *Griß Di!*" And he crossed the patio in quick, lively steps.

"Alice. Nice to meet you. Wouldn't people say, *newcomerinne?*"

"Yes they would, if they were weak in the mind quarters." He laughed, which, as Alice later observed, he did every time he made a joke.

"Are they..." she half-whispered to Willi.

"Yes. Very much alive."

"You can't tame them," she said. "Ever. Unless they got a broken wing or something."

"I think the lady mistook me for a therapist," the man said, glancing at Willi and then turning back to Alice. "You know what they like?"

"What?"

"I've got some special friends in town, very special people. They leave dead rats at my door. So every morning, I bring them up."

Alice nodded her head.

"Lots of rats. Now come already. No, wait. Look. I have to take you by the hand, like this. Yes. This way, they know you're a friend."

And Willi, he stayed at the door to the patio, and watched Alice, and the birdman, taking her by the hand, walking forward to a dead tree in the middle, heavily pregnant with a flock of crows, and Alice, extending her arm, very slowly, and patting a coal-black wing with the tips of her fingers. And then, something watery blurred Willi's vision, and he turned back, opened the door, bit by bit, and then tiptoed down the old stone staircase that smelt of moss and mouse droppings, and was gone down the street.

The Flood Republic

I.

In some moments, Willi Armwriter doubted if Alice Henderson had any real purpose in life. Ever since the thought occurred to him, he hadn't dared to think it whenever she was around, and she was around most of the time. People like Alice had the power to read immediate thoughts off of people's minds, or so the rumor went. And telling Alice directly, that certainly meant trouble. She would begin, Armwriter was sure, by quoting all the things she liked to do, starting, obviously, with punching people in the face, and ending on a bizarre note, something like, Armwriter thought, riding down a sand dune on her naked butt. Alice, however, she wouldn't stop there. In a long rant, she'd make the point that *his* life had no purpose - a point no doubt wonderfully illustrated, and essentially true. To resolve this conundrum, Willi Armwriter had decided that both him and Alice were purposeless beings, randomly clashing on two convergent timelines, and for a short while, they came to share the unbearable lightness of being, or, as Alice would put it, aimless shit with a drink on the side.

The thought would still come to nag him, nevertheless. As he was lying down to sleep, separated from Alice by three stone walls. In his waking moments, with the house quiet and Alice snoring outside, a sound that easily penetrated all the three walls. On his errands in town. At the toilet. It was curious, he thought, that all the regular, short-lived humans required some purpose from a creature that was a thousand years old. Maybe, she would tell him that purpose comes with a full-blown realization of one's mortality, but then again, Alice was as mortal as he was. She just wouldn't go down with age. Or maybe, she'd just call the whole idea bollocks. Whatever her answer may have been, the idea didn't leave him, all the way until the flood came. And after the flood had subsided, he never doubted again that Alice Henderson had a real, solid and sound purpose in life.

II.

One of those mornings, when Armwriter had thought about Alice, got up, brushed his teeth, scrubbed his body in a rain shower, unheated, penitent: he was surely being punished, more than ever in his life, then put on a change of clean clothes, boiled some chicory black in a large pot, drunk half of it in the garden and put it back on low heat, for Alice, gone shopping, come back, had a breakfast of fresh bread rolls and ham, leaving half for Alice, and practiced on his trombone for twenty minutes, Alice opened one eye, drew air in her nostrils, jumped up from her grass bed and snatched a bulletin from the hands of an elderly lady who was passing by.

The lady meant to say "Excuse me?!", with that steadily rising intonation that uses all of your vocal range. But before the idea could travel from her brain, all the way down to her vocal chords, the bulletin was back in her hands and Alice had stepped back, turned to the west, glanced at the clouds and then flared her nostrils, closing her eyes. Armwriter had seen all this, having walked out of the house with the half-full pot of chicory black and two bread rolls with ham.

"Hey. Morning," Alice said, her eyes still closed.

"Morning, Alice."

"Where do I find the *Tischler*?"

"Paul Stemberger? Uhhh...he lives in a village behind the river. I could phone him if you like."

"Back in the modern world," Alice sighed.

"Would you like some breakfast?"

"No time. I'll meet him at the Central in ten minutes."

"But he..."

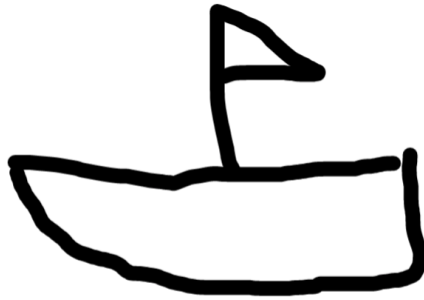
"I don't care."

And with that, she was gone down the street. Fifteen minutes later, Paul Stemberger sat down across from Alice, panting, red in the face. His donkey cart had made a rough skid in the road before the Central, and the four animals now watched them with quiet contempt. Alice didn't know how Willi managed that; perhaps, as a radio phone operator, he'd trained his voice to resound with a pre-apocalyptic urgency. Nevertheless, she smiled.

"I need you to build an ark," she said.

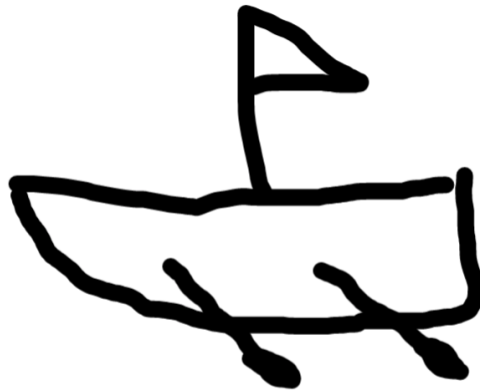
"An ark." The *Tischler's* eyes were fidgiting: his donkeys were a mischievous lot, and they were bound to toss him out of the cart on his way back. He just knew.

"Yes. An ark. Ten yards long, three yards high. Something like this," and she tossed a piece of smudged paper in his lap:



The *Tischler* rubbed his chin.

"Oh wait," Alice said. "It needs oars."



"Oars?"

"Yes, oars. See, you only see one side, but there are two oars on the other side as well. It's for the Four Oresmen of the Apocalypse."

"It's the four horsemen..."

"Oresmen. The Four Oresmen of the Apocalypse. You don't get to school me on old world history."

"I mean...what, where, who,..." The *Tishler* just stammered himself into silence. And then, his professional instincts kicked in, like he was a surgeon who can operate with precision while dead drunk.

"Who's paying for that?"

"The city council."

"The what?"

"I want you to build it here on the main square."

"Where?"

"Tonight."

And then the *Tischler* exploded. "This is impossible!"

"Which part?" Alice asked, in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Everything!" He'd seen outrageous deadlines, impossible concepts. Stuff created by architects who were taught to be everything but realistic. But this, this was far beyond unreasonable, in ways he could not begin to imagine.

"You've built the *Sommerspiele Bühne* in one day. You've reinforced and rebuilt your house, while it was burning. You've erected the Dragonfly bridge, as an army was crossing it. I know your shit. Don't fuck with me."

"That was...that was a long time ago."

"And, I got you *helpers*." Alice nodded to another table, and five men stood up, dragging their chairs towards them. "This is Paulie, Jugend, Jacob, Roland and Matthias."

The last one on the list glanced at Alice's drawing at the table.

"That's ridiculous," he said. Alice noticed his accent.

"You're not from here."

"Nah."

"You're a *Gastarbeiter*."

"Yup."

"So shut up, and gastarbeit."

"That's not even a word."

"It is now."

III.

Thymes over Thymes was spread out on a piece of flat land on the left bank of the river Thymes. For fifty years running, it had been voted one of the ten Heritage cities in Southern Badlands, mainly due to its exquisite, centuries-old architecture. Which only meant - Thymeans weren't dumb, or learnt from experience. They'd used oak for the framework, not pine, and macerated every beam in a mixture of oils, to protect it from mould and rot. Once the framework was set, the wall filler was just a matter of personal preference. Mud, or mud and straw, which was always bound to stay wet, flood after flood, and made your home smell like a kennel. Stones with cement, dried quickly, but were a pain to heat in winter. Hay or straw - needed to breathe, and caught mold real fast.

In short, Thymeans knew a thing or two about flooding. The Heritage medal was surely awarded for another thing as well, though noone in Hightown talked about it, out of envy, spite or both: their collapsible roof constructions. No other town in Southern Badlands was ravaged by floods to such an extent, and no other town had collapsible roof constructions.

The simplest ones were called *sessels* - basic chairs that opened as you pulled on the back, an intricate mechanism groaned, if uncoiled, and in the next moment, you could lean back, sitting on a steep roof. The more complex ones were called *tische* - basically picnic tables of all sorts and sizes. And, the most ingenious and respectable citizens in town even had collapsible wardrobes, cupboards and kitchen sets. The oldest of the townsfolk, a certain Mr Berger, even had a collapsible bath tub. Yes. Thymeans knew a thing or two about flooding.

And so, when Paul and his *helpers* began building the ark in the center of the main square that night, and were almost finished by the morning, with Alice running around with that intricate plan in her hand, shouting drunken orders and instructions, no Thymeans could possibly stay home and ignore that monstrosity.

Meanwhile, on the riverside, a centuries-old monument stood, unwavering. A stone construction, two thick wires and a metal plate for every major flood, placed at the height where the water level reached its peak, with a year engraved in the bottom. The worst flood came shy of three hundred years ago, four yards above ground. The second worst was last year.

IV.

Some Badlanders had learnt the peculiar habit of answering a question with another question. A small number of them - teachers by profession - would have done it most of their adult lives, bringing that habit over from the classroom into their homes, much to the displeasure of their partners and other inclusive relatives. A yet smaller number had never made a statement in their lives.

Most, however, used the strategy only when stressed or pressed for time; when an answer was required and the situation had become socially unacceptable. Armwriter, for instance, would use a mix of the following: "Yes? No? Maybe? Cookie?", and whenever Alice was around, she would lean towards him, so her face was but a few inches from his, and she would whisper, in a voice that was calm and not threatening at all: "Choose."

One of the current trends in the Badlands were rhetorical questions. And who else should be spearheading that trend than the Burgemeister himself - an ass by both profession and character, as Alice

had observed. The questions, they were not really a function of rhetoric. They were just sprayed around at random, ego in liquid form, so sure of themselves they did not need a question mark.

Such was the case when the Burgermeister had elbowed his way through the crowd and stood before Alice, and the ark.

"Who's paying for this," he exclaimed.

"You are," Alice said.

"This is ridiculous, who is this woman. Who is she. What is she doing in my town. What is this. Who's tearing it down. Who is, right now."

Suddenly, the whole main square went quiet. The man had spoken, and for some inexplicable reason, his tirade seemed like requiring an answer. Actually, the whole thing required an answer. And Alice, she delivered just that. There was a rhetorical voice she hardly ever used; maybe when reciting poetry in a bar at 4am, just to take the piss, when starting a revolt in a factory, two centuries ago, or when herding sheep, earlier still. She'd use it when her sister was in a coma, and Alice made her voice bite into the walls of the cavern, destroying its own echo, as she was reciting the Illiad, in a mockingly heroic voice, or the *Nibelungenlied*, or The Eve of Saint Agnes. And her sister, Niki, she'd cultivated the same kind of voice, but hers was tender, playful, like the might of a quiet sea washing against a shallow rock, but Alice, she was never like that. She could never be like that.

"In Sternau, it has rained for weeks," she said. "The clouds run in a circle, stay over one place, draw in more vapor every minute. Not enough for a hurricane, but good enough for a long fucking period of rain. Now, the plains up river, around Kremstal and beyond, they normally soak up much of the water coming in. But right now, they're drenched to the fucking bone. Not taking another droplet. It's all coming down here. You're in for a perfect flood. Your cellars, they're getting washed out. Your chickens, roosting on the high pillars, they got two options. Turn into ducks, or die. And we, we've built an ark. Under my expert supervision. And this man, the buttock face, he says tear it down. And I'll bet him. Right here, so all of you can see. I'll fuck him senseless, ten days in a row, and pay for this fucking ark, if my words don't ring true. And he's paying, if they do."

V.

And thus it came to pass, on the Eve of the Fludde, that Alice hath spoken unto the Thymians, and they did as she commandeth them. And the *Schweine* and the *Rinden* were taken to high pastures, and the roosting *Vogeln* were placed in the ark. So were the caskets and bottles of wine and schnaps, and racks of dry *Wurstchen* and *Schpeck*, from every family in the township, and Alice hath said unto them, these riches will be protected from the Fludde and the mudde. And the Thymians, they knew that was good. For every year, the water hath seepeth through the cork, and breathed into the meat, and thenceforth, all Thymian produce hath smelt of mudde, and market profits were thus low in winter.

And then, Alice loadeth a large wooden box on the top deck, and they came unto her and asketh her, what is in the box. And Alice saith unto them, 'tis the gold calf. And when William Armwriter hath asked her, is that really a gold calf in the box therein?, Alice saith unto him, art thou completely dumb?

And then, Alice chose four oresmen, to fare with her on board of the vessel, and also other brethren and bretherinnen she knew. And it came to pass on the morrow, that the windows of heaven opened, and the waters of the Thymes were upon Thymes, as Tini hath prophesised, and the ark was afloat.

VI.

The crew, they spent most of the previous night in the Central, and when dawn came, with the first droplets of rain, they retreated to the ark, and lay down to sleep on a bunch of blankets for a few hours, disturbed only by the *Vogeln* who'd just woken up, and their droppings. They were all brought back to life a bit later, by a strange rocking movement, and one by one, they went up on the top deck to puke, only to realize their vessel was floating on a vast expanse of water, and all that was visible of Thymes were roofs and some top floors, and on those roofs, the inhabitants were seated in their *sessels*, like every year.

Alice came out last. Slowly and carefully, she tied a red scarf around the top of her head, then took out her sword.

"Willi, get your band ready. Something upbeat. Oresmen, to your ores. Get ready. On my command."

"Would a few traditional songs suffice?" Willi asked.

She just gave him a stern look, and suddenly, he felt there was an entirely new vibe coming out of her. Like she flipped, and returned to her childhood, or whatever she'd call childhood, centuries and centuries back. A commander on a pirate vessel. The Spanish Armada behind her back. And her, ordering the crew to turn the ship around, and sail right into the heart of the royal fleet, at full speed. That's just what he imagined, in that split second. Whether it was true, he couldn't tell. And then, Alice screamed, at the top of her lungs.

"Navigator! Plot a course for Sun City! Oresmen! Front and plunge. Drummer, give us a good beat. Willi, keep the rhythm. Sails out! Now!"

A throbbing beat shivered through the beams, the planks on the top deck. That was the main rhythm of the ship. Willi's four-piece band joined in, like cogs in a machine. Four chords, a rising melody.

"Outerbridge, ready to call! Northwest drag. Set sail!"

The ark began moving, catching northwest wind on the edge of the sails, with the oresmen suddenly alive, despite their hangover and indigestion.

"Really, Alice?" Willi shouted between two chords.

"Fuck yeah!" she screamed back, raising her sword over her head. "Sun City, here we come!"

A dark wave of melancholy went over the city of Thymes, as soon as the inhabitants found out what was happening: Alice, a pirate in disguise, was making off with her loot. Their wine, their schnaps, their *Schpeck*. Objects were thrown. Curses were made. Parts of the anatomy were shown.

"Keep the course! If you don't bleed, you're not alive! Full speed!" And her sword rose to the heavens, and then pointed towards the one place where her heart was, home. A nutcracker hit her temple, and it started bleeding. And then, at least that's what Willi imagined, she flipped back. Hunched her shoulders, just a little. Closed her eyes.

"Alright, alright. Oresmen, standby. Kill the beat. Sails windside, stretch and standby." She rubbed her face with both hands. "Like, what? You Badlanders can't take a fucking joke?" The Thymeans, they were also on standby. Standing on top of their roofs, with the only ammunition they could muster: garden produce and kitchen utensils. And Alice, she took a deep breath, clenched her teeth and raised her katana in the air once again.

"I hereby declare this place to be the Flood Republic of Thymes over Thymes!" She never lost that pirate voice now, the one that carried over many a nautical mile. "A temporary republic, like everything that's victim to the whims of nature. And I declare myself the protector of the republic, and the distributor of your liquor, and wine, and poultry!"

Someone coughed on the lower deck. An uneasy voice, one that imagined just a speck of meaning in this sequence of events. And Alice, she nodded her head. She was back, to herself, just not too comfortable, not yet.

"Why are we the four oarsmen of the apocalypse?" Willibald asked.

Well, yeah, Alice thought, and took a deep breath, in her mind. What are the four horsemen of the modern apocalypse. Not the one six hundred years ago, which came unforeseen. No, not that one. The one old people sweat about in their death beds while the young laugh in their faces. And it's the same, century after century. The talk of a modern entropy. Crisis of morality, crisis of the family. Crisis of masculinity, addiction epidemic. And the ones at the oars, they fit the mould just perfectly. Oh well. What would she know.

"The four oresmen?" she said. "Well that's simple. Jugend, you keep building dreams in your head, and they say it's a great thing, to have dreams, but you haven't fulfilled a single one of them. You're not even trying. And with every promise you don't keep, and every dream you toss away, your balls shrink, just a little. Kosmow, you've come to feel that respect for others is so fucking important you've grown emotionally impotent. You can't feel a genuine fucking thing towards anyone. And you've come to believe that being nice and respectful is more important than being true. In fact, true doesn't exist anymore. Lisa, you can't bring yourself to be faithful to your man. You fuck around all the time. And you feel it's an okay thing to do, as long as you give it a name. Because your own shit always comes before anybody else's shit. My sis would smack you up, she would. And Willibald, all you got is drink, and it's replaced your life. And yeah, you'd think, who am I to say that, right? Well as it happens, I'm really fucking qualified to say that. And that's why you're the four fucking oresmen of the apocalypse. Happy with the fairytale? Now, shut up, and get your hands on the wood. We got deliveries to make. Ore away."

In the next hours, many a *Vogel* was slaughtered, coals were lit, and of course - the box Alice had brought up on the top deck was a golden calf of sorts: a metal grill she had arranged to be sent to Willi's address, from north end in Sun City, a few days back, for one reason or another, but now it was here, and Alice ruled over it the way she'd rule over a pirate ship; precise, merciless. And the ark, it stopped at every roof in Thymes, offering wine plenty, and schnaps, and grilled chicken, and *Schpeck*, and it made many a round, in the day, and the night, and the day after, until there was no drink or food left, and the waters subsided, and the ark's heel hit the cobblestones, and it tipped over.

Alice knew a captain never leaves a ship. And so, she found herself sitting on the side railing, when everyone else had gone, waltzing home in knee-deep water, and Willi had sat next to her, thinking of something nice to say, which was inhibited by two factors, first, him being totally shitfaced, and second, by the little there had to be said, really.

"You rocked," he said at last.

"This is not a great place for any of this," she started, yawning, "but maybe, like, I could lie in your lap, like this, and you could cuddle me, just a bit? Nothing serious, I'm jumpy, you know. Breaking necks and all that. Just, I don't know. Stroke me on the belly, or something. I mean, that's what you do. As a captain. When your ship lands on a rock. And there's no one else. You just lie down and cuddle. For a bit. Before all the serious shit. And after. They always leave it out of the books. You know? The cuddly bits. Before a battle, after rehab. The nonsensical, you know. The bits."

When Armwriter touched her belly, gently, with two fingers, she was already fast asleep.

The Hen House

I.

"Seriously. What is this."

"It's good to see you again, Alice."

"Yeah likewise. What is it."

"A compromise. They said you were in town."

"They did."

Armwriter rubbed his chin.

"They said you arm-wrestled the strongest man in Thymes. Started a fight, got thrown out. And it is only lunchtime."

"Yeah when do I ever start a fight. Seriously tho. What compromise? Really. It's like someone says 'flower bed' and you Badlanders take it literally? Like, you build shelters to provide sheltered existence? Man. I'm getting scared. Like for real, shitless. I mean, what if you have a mind-blowing experience in here? Or killer bagels for breakfast. Like, come on."

"It's just a grass bed, Alice." In her favorite spot. On his front lawn.

"Just a grass bed. No. It's a regular bed, with a piece of lawn in it."

"I water it every day."

"You what." Alice examined the construction from every angle. "No. You bring out a bedframe. With the rack. You dig out two square yards of lawn, you...and what is this."

"It protects you from the sun and the rain."

She'd already thrown her bundle on the grass and now she jumped into it, head first. The slats creaked, but held her weight, together with the two hundred pounds of lawn underneath her. Reinforce slats, Armwriter wrote in his mental diary, nevertheless.

"Man, this is surreal. Like a spring lawn or something. Get it? Spring lawn?"

"Yes, I get it. Alice, why...." However, she was already fast asleep.

II.

Alice was woken up half an hour later, in two distinctly unpleasant ways. Armwriter had stepped out on the front porch, and the smell of warm lunch hit her nostrils. The food was, quite obviously, meant for her. And then, at around the same time, someone had sat down on the side of her grass bed. Alice opened one eye, lifted her head.

"Helooooo. My name is Liisa." The woman was roughly her age, if not mentally then in the very least, physically. That is, if you trust Alice with her declared age, which was twenty-five on a good day, twenty-eight on a bad one. The woman had stretched her face into a grimace on saying Helooooo; a coin toss between cute and threatening, and then at the end of the sentence, she bit her lower lip, which made her look like a human rabbit.

"Are you with the rubber-faced people?" Alice said, closing her eye. Her head sank into the grass, and she stopped breathing.

"Is she alriiight?" Lisa inquired. She'd kept the rabbit face but added wrinkles in her forehead.

"I think she very much is," Armwriter replied, laying down the plate and fetching a bucket in the corner of the porch. "I would guess she is either playing dead, or she learnt the skill of narcolepsy."

"The skill of whaaat?"

He had filled the bucket from a barrel, and now he walked up to the grass bed.

"Narcolepsy. But me and Alice, we have a special arrangement, when it comes to sleeping at lunchtime." He stopped, the bucket raised to his shoulders, and thought for a bit. "Well, actually. We don't have an arrangement. Yet." And he splashed the water against Alice's face.

"Fuck me fuck me fuck me." She sat up abruptly, rubbing water from her eyes.

"Helooooooo. My name is Liisa."

"Fuck. Fuck. Your name's what? Broken record?"

"You must be Alice."

"Yeah. What what. Chicken!" Armwriter had placed the platter with lunch in her lap - chicken steak, potatoes, sliced-up cucumber, red salsa.

"And I have heeeheard, that youuuu are, the strongest peeeerson in Thymes. You're a woman."

"Yea so what. Do I get a medal?"

"You're a woman."

"Man, I...admeeer your...obser....veischaun...skills," Alice said, her mouth full of chicken and salsa.

"In the knooooown history, the strongest man in Thymes was a man."

"Ax...schio...matic!"

"But you're a woman."

"Look, broken record," Alice said, wiping her lips with her sleeve, "You wanna take a snap, bring me a beer first." However, the woman would not be disturbed by Alice's attitude. Her universe was composed solely of her words, her actions and the desired results.

"Alsooo, I heeeard, they kicked you out of a bar, because you had no moneys."

"Oh, that."

"Really, Alice?" Armwriter chipped in, genuinely surprised.

"Ever heard of gossip, Willi?" Alice croaked, with a bit of chicken still stuck in her throat.

"Well, yes..."

"It's aaaaall around tooown, she..."

"Gossip. One rule of gossip, always true. No wait, let's backtrack a little. Tell me, Willi. Which is more probable, in here. In Thymes. A girl starting a fight, or a drunkard who's broke."

"Well the latter, obviously."

"See? So, the main rule of gossip. You take a situation. The situation's true. You take the most improbable outcome. You multiply it by ten, you send it around. Got it?"

"I just...never thought of it that way. So what happened, actually?"

"Alright," Alice sighed. "What happened was, there was this mica factory worker, alright? Big guy. Pushy. Ten-word vocab. He said something. And I told him, his dick was like a wiener you left out in the sun. Which, technically speaking, was true. And when he tried to punch me, I said, come on, the thing you do, it has rules. Sit down. And then we did the thing, and then, there were like, ten glasses of schnaps on the table, bit of a blackout between number two and number ten, and then, I put my hand in my pocket, no money."

"Are you saying you have been robbed?"

"Nah. My best guess? I had no money when I went there. Kinda anti-climactic, right?"

"And that's whyyyyy, we want to offer you a job."

"A what? A we? A where?"

"The Hen..." Armwriter said, never finishing the sentence.

"Don't you dare!" Lisa shouted at him.

"Alright, alright," Alice said, politely laying aside the potatoes and chopped-up cucumber. "That's beyond bizarre. In my world, okay? Rubber face here, she's offering me a job at Don't you dare, because I'm the strongest man in Thymes. It's morning, for fuck's sake!"

"BKT," Lisa said, straightening out like she'd just received a Medal of Honor.

"Bwhat?"

"Badlands Kultur Thymes. The throbbing heart of the city. You need the moneys, remember."

"Yeah true. I remember. They wrote me last night. Would you believe that, Willi? Some fuckwit complained about me, so they thought, she's not working, she's on holiday. We're not sending her shit."

Armwriter went red in the face.

III.

Badlands Kultur Thymes had its center of operations in a building that was once a stonemasonry and a brothel. Downstairs, names were chiseled into tombstones to the sounds of creaking beds and muffled moans from above. And now, at the very same place, performance art was chiseled and molded into greatness. Maybe, Alice thought, Baldanders needed culture more than they needed death or reproduction. She was genuinely intrigued.

The ground floor housed a modest concert hall; the rest was taken up by a foyer, with a sad, unlit bar in the corner. Sad bars, Alice noted to herself, and she was sure the thought occurred to her periodically, like every decade or so, and then got forgotten, well sad bars, they don't have favorite places, or people to choose and occupy them. They only have occasional visitors. So occasional, in fact, that hardly ever do the seats get warmed up by their buttocks, soaked in their sweat; infused with their nervous farts: long before that, they're gone, towards something equally occasional.

The two floors above, they were just office space. And Alice, she noted to herself, again: culture needs more office than it needs itself.

"Kor-po-rai-shoon!" Lisa said. She was walking beside her, talking all this time, and Alice chose whatever she found interesting, or chose randomly, and blocked out the rest. Most of all, she was amazed at being amazed. And didn't know why, until she heard that word. Korporaishoon. Them and Alice, they were like oil and water; of course she knew what they meant, or thought she knew, but she'd never been in one, or imagined being in one.

And all those centuries, whenever circumstance forced her to work alongside people - just like in the Sun City District 5 police station - she was a squatter, or an unfortunate accident. Anything but an alien, though: the rest were aliens, populating the building, her squat, every morning, over and over again, and refusing to leave. And boy, did she try.

"...is Ingrid, our performance production managereuse...."

Boy, did she try.

"...Sofia, our central executive organizerin..."

Until she didn't.

"...Paula, our accounts *Rechnerinne*..."

Alice shook hands absent-mindedly, travelling back in time to the recent and not so recent events at the District 5 police station.

"...and Annik, our *liebe Freundinne*."

"Man, you got a dwarf on board," Alice said, still lost in thought, and Annik stormed out of the room.

"Whooops." Lisa said, with a slow, falling intonation.

"That wasn't very smart," Sofia remarked. "No, not very smart at all."

"I don't think she will talk to you again," Ingrid said.

Alice finally woke up, kicking her brain into action. "Yea I bet she will. So, yeah. Nice to, meet you, or whatever. What do I do?"

As Lisa took her hand and dragged her down the hall, Alice played back the last minute, which her mind registered but she didn't. Something was odd, or perhaps she hadn't yet got used to the Badlandese and their ways. All the women were very unpleasantly unique, not like up north. Annik, a maladjusted dwarf. But yeah, sure, she'd be off the charts anywhere. Ingrid, with two types of demeanour - taciturn, like she was holding back a grand mystery, and hysterically happy. Sofia, an emotionless robot with a slight smile in the corner of her mouth. Lisa, the rubber face. And Paula, with her nervous laughter and hunched shoulders, like she was hiding a pair of exceptionally small and saggy breasts. All of that was on the wrong side of weird; Alice was sure her face betrayed that sentiment. And yet, the women looked like they were incredibly happy to see her. Well, the four of them, anyway.

"Thiiis is your deeeesk, thiiis is your cooouch..." The latter looked particularly welcoming, but not at work. Back at the station, Alice would use the couch after a drinking night, but on workdays, she had her desk. It was a miserable place, but it was hers, and that's where she was supposed to be.

"Yeah, so what do I do?"

"Well...uhmmmm.." Lisa made the rabbit face again. "You just settle down, make suuure you feel at home."

"Yeah good. Desk, couch. I think I got it. What do I do?"

"You....you settle down, feel at home."

"Yeah but..." Alice realized this conversation might go on forever. And in Lisa's head, it had no other imaginable outcome.

IV.

A few days passed, and she still had no idea. And it felt like all the women at BKT, they'd also been settling in, for what must have been years, because they'd spend most of the day conjuring up dinner menus, writing invitations, discussing general nonsense or organizing this and that on their radio phones. Alice, she also got a radio phone, but she had noone to call.

The women would meet during their lunch break, and Alice felt obliged to do the same, then a chicory break, snack break, afternoon nap break, or a general purpose break. And they'd chat away, and Annik, she was the liveliest chatter of them all, just to emphasise a contrast between that and the few other moments

during the day when she passed Alice in the corridor, without a word, fuming with her own brand of passive aggressive, which made Alice slightly amused.

And during those lunch breaks and chicory and other breaks, she, Alice, learnt to fit in, just like any good sociopath would - she'd nod her head, and shut up, and smile politely. And as she smiled, and nodded her head, she would go into autopilot, like most times she was around people, and her mind got completely detached from her body, and wandered over some ancient, blood-soaked battlefield, and her arms, also detached, would swing in unison as her katana cut down enemies, left and right, and then Niki, her sis, would walk into her field of vision, shaking her head, citing Volkov, from centuries back - one hand, use one hand - and smile, and Alice would smile back. Or, she'd stroll through a meadow, in late July at first, with the thick scent of flowers and grasses blurring out every other scent in the world, and every memory of scent, and then in mid-September, when the still-green leaves of grass began rotting away at the bottom; Indian summer, they once called it, and there was a shower earlier in the morning, but now the sun came out, and Alice, soaked to the bone, had felt her sweat getting washed away, by degrees, and now she lay in the grass, flaring her nostrils, and everything around her was fresh compost. And then maybe, her mind would take a nap, just a short nap in the grass, and when she woke up, she'd still be in the dining hall, on the second floor of Badlands Kultur Thymes, and she'd still be smiling, and nodding her head.

On the third day, Lisa encouraged her to make her office cosy, and Alice decided she would do just that. On sheets of paper, she'd draw pairs of stick figures - which is as far as she got in the art of drawing things. Most of the time, the figures were either having sex, or licking each other's genitals, or cutting each other up with a sword. Sometimes, the drawings featured various combinations of the above, and Alice really enjoyed making those. When Lisa came in her office later that day, her eyes opened wide, for just a split second.

"Ooooh, you're an aaaaartist! Let me help youuuuu!"

And a few moments after that, she came back with a large snap of a blossoming flower, and placed it right above Alice's couch.

"Seeeeee?" she said, spreading her arms in a frivolous gesture, and giving Alice a broad smile.

When she was gone, Alice turned to the flower, and watched it, for long moments. And then, she snarled at it, like a hungry dog in a wire pen.

The things Alice did to fit in, most people would find them excessive, or even outright mad. In reality, some of them were just a function of boredom. After a fourth lunch made up of porridge and boiled vegetable mash, she suggested she'd set up a fireplace in the courtyard and grill steaks for everybody. And that's where she learnt none of the women ate meat, as a matter of principle. So, the next day, she locked herself in the kitchen, with a box of minced meat and a bag of fresh beans, and she spent an hour cutting up every pod, getting rid of the beans, filling it with meat infused with coriander and chilli, and fastening it along the whole length with a blade of river grass. She called them baked beans, the event was called Lunch Surprise, and everybody had to eat blindfolded. All the women except for Annik asked for seconds.

Some of the other stuff she did, well, she'd do it every time she arrived at a new place, and was staying for some time. She inspected the food storage, and estimated how many days they would survive in the event of a siege. She checked all the exists, and found ways to barricade them quickly. In her mind, she set up defence outposts around the building, and moved around innocent-looking piles of chairs and tables, for that purpose. She memorized the shape of every key, and matched it with the shape of every lock in the building. She crawled through every room, looking for weapons, fuel and materials to make Molotov cocktails. That's how she discovered the second level basement, and the man living there.

V.

Alexander looked relatively happy, given the circumstances. But Alice, she wouldn't be fooled. Feeling content in any situation, that was a Badlandese thing. A skill trained, she believed, from early childhood, or even late pregnancy, because babies here, she observed, they cried much less than in the north, and only for good reason, or not even that. And it was not a noble trait, like, maybe, being courageous when you face hardship, or light-hearted, or maintaining your sense of humor, because, well, there wasn't much hardship to begin with. That is, unless you were jailed in the second level basement at Badlands Kultur Thymes.

Alice had seen the man before. On bulletin cutouts and snapshots, hidden at the bottom of locked, abandoned drawers; in brochures discarded into waste containers long ago, now buried underneath heaps

of other stuff. The art director of BKT himself. Now stripped to his underpants, a three-yard-long chain leading from a side wall to a collar around his neck, a bowl of soup nearby, half eaten, half slurped onto the brick floor. And all around, the stale, damp stench of a creature endowed with a mind, which in turn made hygiene into a lifestyle choice.

"Oh my, look at you," Alice said, crouching on the floor.

"Good morning! Morning!"

"It's afternoon."

"My apologies. Afternoon, of course. Afternoon!"

In the following half hour, Alice was patient enough to learn of the man's fate, in coarse swathes so much resembling her stick figures. There was a summer performance that didn't go well. The bulletin critics hated it, and the audiences, they read the bulletins. The play ended on a fifth reprise, and this, this was the man's end as art director, and his due punishment.

Alice left the cellar confused. After a thousand years, one knows a bit about life, and its winding corridors. Alice did. But then again, she'd never been to the Badlands, not in this century anyway. There was a hidden part of the story she couldn't put her finger on, or it was beyond her imagination. And then, she did some surface mind reading as she sat in her office. And when it got dark outside, she ended up in the Central.

"Okay, here's what I think," she opened up to Willi after a fifth glass of schnaps.

"I'm listening."

"House full of bitches. Bitches are proud. The men, they do menial work, like stage sets, lighting and such, or they live in a basement. Bitches rule. I think that's it."

"That doesn't sound very complex."

"Yea. Well I tried to find something complex, okay? I really did."

"Are you sure you did your best?"

"Yeah. My worst. Tell me, why do people call it the hen house?"

"Well, actually..."

"What?"

"You kind of...summed it up."

"Yeah. So, five days in, I know every inch of that house, I've listened to every single thing that was said, well kinda, then read their fucking thoughts, and in the end, I discover what every single idiot in Thymes knew all along."

"It appears so."

"Man. What the hell did I get into."

"I think....well I'm not sure, but I think it's called politics."

"Fuck. Alright. How do I get out."

"I don't know."

"Alice?"

"Yeah?"

"I mean, even though you verbalized every Thymean's view of the house, I would still object to what you said."

"Sure you would. You don't say bitch."

"No, not just that." Armwriter's brow deepened, and now he looked genuinely concerned. "The implications."

"Something about women, right?"

"Yes."

"Well put it this way. And think what you may, alright? You got a woman running the show, that's cool. You got a woman running the show, because she's a woman, well that's mental."

She glanced at the writer, sideways, and then opened her mouth in surprise, for just a moment.

"And you, you've been testing me. Taking the piss. I'm trying to survive here, and he's taking the piss. Seriously."

Armwriter allowed himself a little chuckle, and Alice snatched a schnaps from his fingers, and downed it immediately.

"I'm drinking for two."

"That's your normal."

"There's no normal. Just challenges."

VI.

The next morning, things took a wild turn. But in spite of the initial shock, Alice managed to tap into that flow of events, and like every good writer, she did her best to tie all loose ends and carry out her own plan, as it became very clear that her stay at Badlands Kultur Thymes was coming to a close.

Still blissfully unaware, she arrived at work at nine-fifteen, only to discover a huge piece of fabric above the entrance to BKT, with an inscription that read as follows:

Hier arbeitet
ALICE
die stärkste
Personnerinne
in Thymes.

"Niki fucking Christ," she growled, which basically meant, she pretended to control the situation with her attitude while in fact, she had no clue what was happening.

All the women back in the offices, except for Annik, thought it was a great morning surprise gift, and piled upon Alice, with hugs, laughter and cookies. Shortly after, she inquired about the schedule for the day, and suddenly realized she had about two hours left, and so did her engagement with BKT.

First, she decided to confront Annik. She found her in the kitchen.

"Hello," Alice said, and Annik ignored her, fumbling about the chicory machine in the corner. Slowly, Alice walked towards the sink, took a cup from the shelf and filled it with water. And then, she made two steps and threw the contents all over Annik's head.

"I said hello."

In what seemed biologically impossible, Annik went red in the face in a split second. As she wanted to rush out of the room, Alice blocked the way. In vain, the tiny figure tried to find an opening between Alice's arms and her body, or the wall. Dead quiet, fuming, panting. She'd keep doing that forever: blunt, wordless anger in dwarven form.

Alice placed two fingers on top of her head, just to keep her at a safe distance and stop that useless effort. And Annik, she just gave up, and moving towards the sink, she started washing a pile of clean dishes, frantically. At which point, Alice did something quite inappropriate, not just in the Badlands, but in any country on the continent. She grabbed Annik by her breasts, threw her into the chicory machine, which disintegrated under the impact, and then filled another glass and splashed it against her face.

"Hello."

"Just...stop! Stop already! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Alice placed her hands on her hips.

"So you can talk. Now we're getting somewhere."

"Of course I can talk! I just don't want to talk to you!"

"Oh. That's why you wash the clean dishes."

"Yes! Because doing anything is better than talking to you! You're the worst person I've ever met."

"Wow. That actually hurt. You're good at this."

"Just leave me alone."

And Alice, she produced a smile. The kind of smile only Annik could imagine Alice would wear. Half devillish, half mental. The full asshole.

"No," Alice said.

Perhaps, someone grabbed her by the crotch. Or it was her bum. She'll never know. Anyway, in the next moment, she was sitting on Alice's shoulders, her thighs around her neck.

"Couple of firsts in your life," Alice said. "Totally nonconsensual, by the way."

Annik just shrieked. She thought so. Her voice got totally detached from her body.

"The first time you hit your head, against the top of the doorframe."

Bang, and Annik moaned.

"Watch your head, goddamnit. Alright. First time you looked at the top of Lisa's head. And, here we go. Sofia's head. Oh my. She's balding. Ingrid. Goddamnit, she's running away. Watch that, we're following the top of her head. Eww. Lice. Man. First time you touched the ceiling with your hands. Come on!"

And then, Alice noticed an open window across an office to her right. And she laughed.

"Yeah. The first time you jumped off a second-floor window!"

"No!!!!"

And down they went, with Alice diluting the impact with her knees.

"Alright. Here, an apple tree. Did you know, the best apples, they grew at the very top? And, she jumped again, balancing on a branch. "That one. Just in front of your face." And Annik, she grabbed the apple, like an automaton without a consciousness, and down they went, and Alice lay her on the grass.

"Get away from me," Annik whispered, transfixed. "You're a terrible person. You're nothing. Nobody."

"I know, Annie. I'm nothing. But you got an apple. That's something."

"Annik!"

"No. Annie. You're Annie. Annik, that's just a fancy nickname, to make you sound tiny and cute. Big eyes, tight dresses, an ass without a crack. You're not cute. Or tiny. And you're still a dwarf."

"Fuck you," Annie said, biting into the apple, instinctively.

"You won't," Alice said, turning around and walking towards the basement entrance.

"What...I'm sorry. What are you doing? I'm not allowed to let you do that."

"You're what? Man, what was that quote. Yeah. You're helping me help you help yourself. Now that's a brainfuck. Isn't it?"

"I...don't know. What is a brainfuck?"

Alice just sighed. She'd cut through Alexander's collar. It was leather, twin-layered, fastened with rivet bolts. And she only had ten minutes left. That was the plan.

"This is an axe," she said, laying the instrument on the floor in front of him. "And this....this is a sword. My sword. Be nice to it."

Alexander stared at the two objects, and then gave Alice a bewildered look.

"Yeah. So, an introduction to weapondry. Okay? This is the handle, here and here. This is the blade, here, and all along, here. Now, the sword, it is swift. Easy to land a blow. Cut someone, stab them. The axe, it's heavier, slower, but much more satisfying. Look at them carefully. Which one do you want?"

"What?"

"Which one. Do you. Want."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"Yeah. Just like I thought. Look, there's always an intimate connection. Between you and a blade. And it takes time. I shouldn't be part of it. It's like, I dunno. Watching someone on a wedding night. So I'll...let you choose on your own. Choose wisely."

"I don't understand."

"Yeah. You will."

VII.

A few minutes later, the crew arrived. They populated the BKT courtyard, like a platoon of killer ants. Make-up artists. Hair stylists. Snap machine operators. Script operators. Script holders. Stage setters. Stage decorators. Professional clappers. Professional whistlers. Time keepers. Lighting operators. Fire extinguishers. Chair bringers and chair holders. Scratchers. Massage artists. Snack managers. Stage doubles. Language flow maintenance operatives. Language correctness maintenance operatives. Note givers and note takers. Shorthand typists. A bulletin woman.

A while later, that woman sat on the stage in the BKT concert hall, at a safe yet intimate distance from the six ladies: Lisa, Ingrid, Annik, Sophia, Paula and, well, Alice.

"Good morning and welcome to yet another edition of *Behind the Scenes*, with Charlotte Tangiers. This time, from the lovely city of Thymes over Thymes, and the throbbing heart of it, Badlands Kultur Thymes. Lisa, what's so special about this place?"

"Wh....aaaare we starting noooow?"

"No, we're just rehearsing. What..." the woman looked behind her back. "Okay. Carlos? There you are. Could you tell all those people working behind the scenes, yes, those people, could you tell them to stop

whatever they're doing, and I dunno, take a shit or something? We're working, okay? Half an hour, maybe an hour. Until further notice. We need some quiet. Yes. Thank you. You're a treasure. Now, where were we."

"You asked this chick about the place, and why it's special," Alice said.

"Yes, thank you."

"Lemme tell you why it's special."

"Don't worry, Alice, we'll get to you, in due time."

"You just got to me. Now I'll tell you."

"I'm sorry..."

"They call it the hen house."

"Alice, I'm sorry, but..."

"You know why they call it the hen house?"

"Alice..."

"Because it's a house. Populated by hens. Without a rooster. Now. Let me expand on that. A rooster is this pathetic creature with a messianic complex. He shows the hens where to find food, like they wouldn't recognize a wheat grain when they saw one. Every morning, he tries to mount every hen in the flock. He's faster than a teenager on a first date, and it's both ridiculous and useless. But in his mind, he's an adventurer, a slave owner, and the ruler of a vast kingdom. The hens, on the other hand, they flock together, right after snack time, lunchtime and dinner time, and they make fun of him. In secret. And this, this provides an equilibrium. Not an equilibrium of power, which is a joke, really, but an equilibrium of mental impotence. A balance between the laughable and the insultingly stupid. Between blissful ignorance and an overblown ego. Between the under-educated and the pseudo-educated. Between the coarse and the stuck-up. Which is, really, the only equilibrium that has ever worked. Now. You take the rooster out, you take out the equilibrium. There's nothing to equalize, against anything."

"Alice, I have no idea what you're talking about," the woman said, visibly worried.

"A couple days in," Alice continued, "I was instructed on the rules of the hen house. By Lisa here. This is what I heard. You don't get to gossip about anybody in the house. Just about other people. Noone criticizes anybody in the house. If you do something wrong, it's not wrong. It's part of a learning process. You fuck up many times in a row, it's called determination. You don't do anything at all, that's not laziness. You're just considering your next moves. You don't make mistakes, you're just overworked."

"Alice, but..." Ingrid whispered.

"What."

"That's how we do it. Here in the Badlands." The bulletin woman nodded. Everybody did. Even the professional clappers, the whistlers and the chair holders.

"How do you build a house, with that work ethic," Alice asked. "Who built his house."

"People from the north," Sophie said.

"That figures," Alice said, glancing longingly at the stage door on the left. Any moment now. "And that's why you need a rooster."

"We don't. Need. A rooster." It was Annie, speaking in a low, growling whisper. And Alice, she just played for time.

"You do. Not to guide you. Nobody guides anyone. You're just rats on a shipwreck. But you need someone to laugh about. Someone real close. Someone you could project your hatred into. And your frustration, and your lack of potential, and your shitty Monday morning. The way you feel about your fat ass. The guy who tried to fuck you last night, but couldn't quite get it up and then fell asleep, farting under your blanket. All that. Someone you can bitch about. And draw pictures on the ladies' toilets, because that's sacred ground. And that someone's gonna tell you what to do, feeling like he's running the universe. And when he grabs your ass cheek every morning, he feels like Marlon fucking Brando. 'Cause he's a rooster, and a walking joke. And you need that. 'Cause if you don't have that, you grow lazy. 'Cause your bitching has no end. And it has no end, because it has no direction, no purpose, and it just runs in a circle, and bloats up, like when you eat four cans of beans on a Sunday."

And at that moment, at long last, Alexander burst through the door, stage left. Bloodied. Wielding a sword in one hand, and an axe in another. The blood, Alice noticed with some relief, was all his - he just cut himself, as he got friendly with the blades. Roaring like a lion before a duel, he ran center stage. Chairs fell over, the women froze, shrieked or tried to get out of his way. And Alexander, he paused, and then, grabbing both weapons with his left hand, outstretched the right.

"Hello, hello! Morning! Afternoon! Everyone!" Taking everyone's hand, a broad smile, "Morning! Morning!", the women on the stage first, then all the chair holders and script holders and scratchers and doubles, shaking hands with them, over and over, and Alice, she cast a longing look in that one direction, where beyond these walls, and the city streets and the brick roofs, there was the Central, with its dim, wet lights splashing against the sidewalk, and then slowly, she crept out of the snap machine view, and out of the main entrance, leaving all the chaos behind, and she was gone.

The Last Currency on Earth

"There is some kind of vibe here that makes me tremble," Armwriter said as him and Alice sat in the Central, after this or that story of the day; a safe haven, and a deus ex machina for any story there was.

The woman sat quietly, just peering into her drink. She'd done that for the last half hour; as if beer was to be observed, not consumed.

"It feels like," he continued, closing his eyes and trying to find a fitting metaphor in the darkness, "like the last day on a family trip. You know, all the luggage is packed, you're checked out, and you've got this last hour for yourself. So you stroll to your favorite bar downtown, say hello to the waiter, who is completely oblivious, doesn't recognize the magic of the moment, or, more likely, he doesn't care at all, but this is not the time to be cynical. You are broody, nostalgic, and you savor every moment."

"Man, that was a load of crap," Alice said, and Armwriter pulled a long face.

"But," she went on, "crap is often true. More often true than the good stuff. The story of every holiday. Like, nine out of ten tourists, they're just dumb fucks enjoying crap in the most retarded ways possible, calling it pure gold."

"Is it though?"

"What."

"Your last day."

She just kept peering into her beer.

"Yeah," she said after a long while. "See, it was so much fun, and...I can't live like that. I don't deserve this, okay? And it's not a moral standpoint, or a metaphysical one. It just doesn't feel right. You know? I'm supposed to work. Something everyday, and repetitive, and scary. And that's it."

"Do you miss your sister, Alice?" On other days, this question would have him killed. Not on this one.

"All the time," Alice whispered.

"You're a wonderful person. You know?"

"That's your problem. You were wired that way. So you...you always see the good in people. And you know sometimes, I would love to return to that primal state. But it won't happen. Unless I get lobotomized."

And at that moment, even Armwriter could notice some commotion outside, and then a voice spoke, loud and clear, and carried itself through the mica panels of the Central.

"Alice Henderson. Come out. We have sentenced you to die."

Alice took a deep breath. She never raised her head, or looked towards the door; her eyes, they were lost in that foam-capped, amber universe in front of her.

"If there's one thing I hate," she said slowly, "it's a penchant for drama. And western movies. And everything in between."

"Alice, you don't have your weapon," Armwriter said, visibly worried.

"Don't care," she replied, still peering into her beer. "Don't give a fuck. Fucking tired of it. Really fucking tired of it."

As she stood up, the writer stood up with her.

"What are you going to do?"

And only then did she turn to him, and her voice, it never changed, and it sounded like she was grinding marbles in her mouth.

"Die, Willi. Probably die. Because nothing, nothing makes sense anymore. And over there, on the other side of death? There's nothing. And what am I gonna die for? Nothing. At least it all fucking rhymes. Good stuff for a children's song. Write it for me. Okay?"

"Alice..."

When she turned to walk towards the door, he took a step with her, and she turned to him again.

"Yeah. You're too young for sacrifice. You know that? And, too old to be that dumb. Let me help you there."

With the palm of her hand, she pressed him back into the chair, and at the same time, he felt something cold encircling his wrist. And sooner than he could realize what was happening, his wrist was cuffed to the back of the chair.

"Stay put, don't move. Be a good boy. Goodbye, Willi."

They were ten, and Alice knew two of them. The kids she fought in front of Armwriter's house. Then some older ones she never met before. Like a family picnic. Swords drawn, hungry. A crowd began to gather round, at a safe distance.

"Yeah what," Alice said.

A stout, muscular woman in the center. Must be the pureblood chief. Like it matters.

"Any last words, Alice?"

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath through her nose. Badlandese autumn, late October. The sweet smell of rotten apples. Wet wood on porches. Greenish mold underneath the stairs. Breathing softly, half frozen. Fuck all that, Alice thought.

"Actually, yeah," she said out loud. "I do. How many purebloods does it take to kill one Alice? Nine? Ten? Now years ago, it would've been just one. With an arm cut off, and fucking blindfolded. That's all it would take. And all that breeding back then, you didn't breed better people, but at least, you bred meaner assholes. And today? You got kids whining because they lost a fight. Or got rubbed the wrong way. And you swarm people like a lynch mob. Come on, don't you get it? You lost your fucking backbone. Which is, really, the last currency on Earth, when everyone's sold out. And you know, it fits. 'Cause you just degenerate, like everything else, until in the end, the last living humans get chewed up by a pack of sewer rats.

Now me, I got shit. Just like you. Nothing you can touch and sell, no fucking legacy. No moral credit. No one to cry over my fucking grave. But I think I got a piece of spine left. So come get some."

"You're finished?" The chief raised her katana, and the tip, it suddenly stood motionless.

Just as Alice was delivering her last words, pacing about, shouting, spitting, two figures stood at the edge of the crowd and then moved closer. They were both wearing long, woodland raincoats, and if one inspected them up close and carefully, one would find out their bodies gave out a distinctive odour of Badlandese *Schpeck*.

"That is not looking good."

"No, it's not. Let's move closer."

"What do we do?"

"I liked what she said just now."

"What?"

"About backbone."

"It is the truth."

And then, the two arrived at a spot somewhere between the purebloods and Alice, where, for some reason, the onlookers drew closer to the action, as if the empty space was some kind of safe haven.

"Hey." A familiar figure, a voice, stepping out of the crowd on Alice's right. Shit memories.

"Laney." The worst kind of memories.

"Picked up your sword. Catch." And she drew her own, from a sheath across her back, and stood beside Alice.

"Laney Chisora," the chief said. "The only chief..."

"Yes. The only chief in history who resigned without a fight. Get to say this before bedtime? Make you wet?"

"You're betraying your kind."

"Yeah right."

"What you doing here?" Alice whispered, through her teeth.

"I was following you."

"Obsessive cunt."

"Pleasure."

"You don't owe me anything."

"That's not why I'm here."

Alice examined her sword, having taken it out of the sheath.

"What a way to go, Laney. At least we get to dance."

"Yes, we do."

And then, around the same time, for reasons noone could quite foresee or imagine, the barely legal kid, the one Alice had saved earlier, walked center stage, dragging her sword behind her, so it screeched across the cobblestones, and continued walking, towards stage left, and joined Alice's rank.

The boy, her date, he just stood there, speechless.

"Giullietta," the chief said.

"Yeah what," the girl shot back.

"What are you doing, kid," Alice whispered.

"You're betraying..." the chief started, again.

"Betraying what?" the girl shouted.

"Kid," Alice whispered, laying two fingers on her shoulder. "This is not a good idea. Really."

"Well thank you, mother. Noone asked your opinion."

Alice realized, in this passing moment, that whenever the girl wasn't dying, or dead, she was bratty as fuck. And stubborn, in a suicidal kinda way. She liked that. The boy, her date, had only just now managed to close his mouth. And then open it again.

"Giullietta..."

"What? The things you said in bed? Well sorry. This here, it don't rhyme with them. It never did. And you know what, dumbass? I'm old enough to know that."

And then, someone burst through the crowd, behind Alice's back.

"Stand back! Let me entertain you!" It was Thomas, with Victoria right behind him, and the rest of the police squad stumbling along, on high heels and covered in glitter. They'd heard what was going on, in the middle of their rehearsal, and arrived as soon as they could.

"By order of the Thymes city police, nobody hurts Alice!"

"Or we cuff! Cuff you!" Victoria shouted.

"Aaaand...by order of the Hen hooouse, nobodyyyy hurts Alice!" It was Lisa, tearing through the crowd elsewhere, panting after a long sprint. "Or the children."

"Seriously," Laney glanced at her. Well, not much she could do about it. She did look like a kid, from some angles. Most, actually.

"You're not getting served, anywhere in the Badlands, if you hurt Alice," Christie added.

"You will not hurt Alice," Armwriter said, having dragged himself out of the bar, with the heavy oak chair behind him.

And then, Paul Stemberger, the *tischler*, was heard from the crowd. "How many orders for caskets am I getting? I count nine. Would you be so kind and measure yourselves, before you die? Nobody hurts Alice."

More people started shouting, and Willi saw she closed her eyes, visibly moved.

And Alice, at last, she thought about the one Niki talked to as a kid, and she, Alice, never dared. It could have been worse, she thought. Alone, cut up beyond repair, in a dark alley somewhere, shrouded in the vile stench of rotting food remains. Feeling like everything that's soon to be compost. But this here, it felt good. Like a window to a mountain cottage, glowing with candlelight; it's a winter night and you're late, your feet wet and half frozen but they still hurt, and as you trudge through the snow, you know that somewhere in that candle-lit room, beside a crackling stove, someone's waiting for you.

"Nobody hurts Alice, because Alice can't be hurt," she whispered, and that whisper, it carried itself over all the shouting and commotion, so that even Armwriter heard it.

And meanwhile, one of the figures wearing a raincoat turned to the other.

"Maybe now's the time."

"Are you sure."

"Kamienski would've written it like that."

"Fuck Kamienski."

"I have."

As the other figure raised her hand in front of her mouth, to drown a snigger, the first one just shook her head. It still amazed her, how someone could laugh at the corniest joke on the planet. And then, she stepped out of the crowd, and walked into that safe space, those ten yards that separated the convict and the execution squad.

"Of course she can be hurt," she said, turning her head to Alice. "Like everyone."

For a very short moment, as Willi caught a short glimpse of the face beneath the hood, he suddenly knew, there and then, what an inward smile really looked like.

And Alice, she dropped to her knees, and her sword rang against the cobblestones. "Are you a ghost?" she whispered.

"No. I'm not." And that smile, again.

"What the fuck is happening?" the chief raised her voice, but it drowned in the rush of blood into Alice's head. Suddenly, her sword, it didn't matter, or this place here, or this afternoon, or anything else, really, and she jumped, wrapping her arms around that figure in a raincoat, and her tears, they didn't matter, either, or her repeating over and over, switching from her mind voice to her shaky, real one, *you're alive, you're alive*, and then, *I missed you, fuck I missed you so much*, and also, *I love you, I love you, sis*.

"What's happening?"

"I missed you too."

"Sis...you didn't..."

"I know. I know. We needed a break. Everybody did. After the war."

"Sis..."

"Who's that woman?"

"Alice..."

"Oh my god...sis. You're still angry with me?"

"What's going on?"

"I never was. Well...maybe for a bit."

"Sis, I'm so sorry..."

"If she doesn't leave immediately..."

"Don't... Look, there's time for everything, alright? I have a surprise for you." The woman looked into the crowd, nodding her head, and the other raincoat-clad figure stepped out, removing her hood and revealing a crown of black, spiky hair. Alice's knees, they gave way beneath her, once again.

"Vorange," she whispered.

"Alice."

They ran into each other's arms, sharing a long, passionate kiss. And all the Thymians, and all Badlanders, by extension, were taken aback; after all, in the Badlands, the most intimate way you would show affection in a public place was a handshake, or maybe a kiss on the cheek which wasn't really a kiss at all. And then, maybe a full half of them were amazed for a different reason, for they could never imagine such an affection could arise between two women.

And the one Alice called *sis*, she dropped her raincoat to the ground and turned to face the purebloods. Only now did Willi notice that she was a bit shorter than Alice, with blonde hair and a katana sheathed at her waist.

"Who are you?" the chief shot at her. "What pathetic spectacle is that?"

Willi realized that the woman, she never took out her sword. Instead, she walked straight into the group of purebloods, slowly, waving away their blades like leaves of river grass.

"What do you think you're doing?" The woman stood right in front of the chief now, with a nervous blade hovering but a few inches from her chest.

"Chill. Alright? Just sizing you up."

"Who are you?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm Niki. Alice's sister."

Upon hearing the name, they all made an instinctive step backwards. And another one.

"Well, half sister, actually. But we call each other sis. So I guess we don't care."

"You're dead," the chief said.

Just to be dead sure, Niki raised two fingers to her neck and checked the pulse on her jugular.

"Nope. I'm good."

"For now, you are." Amidst all the confusion, a realization slowly crept inside the chief's brain. But Niki, she never allowed her to finish that train of thought.

"Yeah, sure. Look, too much weight on the front leg, okay? If you wanna cut me, with a swing, put more weight to the back. Alright? Let's try."

"Are you totally mental?"

For the pureblood chief, this had been a straightforward mission, of some historical significance, best compared to a tiny splinter in your heel that grew in, so that on most days, you didn't know it was there,

and you were no longer sure if it was a splinter at all. You even forgot why it should be taken out in the first place, so it just felt like a scheduled job that was long overdue.

For centuries, Alice was in hiding, and then, she was protected by the Sun State authority and its police force. Until suddenly, she wasn't, as soon as she crossed the border to the Badlands. It looked like an easy hit job. And then, it grew more and more bizarre, slowly and by degrees, and if the chief had the experience, she'd know it's just like moving to the Badlands for some time, and gastarbeiting there: a culture shock that comes bit by bit, but it never really stops.

"Come on, focus," Niki woke her up from her thoughts. "I'm trying to teach you something here. You put weight on your front leg, like this," and she moved right next to her, positioning her arms and her legs. "Now, you feel more stable. Me and Alice, we call it the brawler stance, okay? It means, you're expecting a hit, and you wanna take it. Now as long as you can take it, that's fine. But at the same time, you're more vulnerable. You can't move away, not fast enough, and it puts you on defence. Now me, I'd just dance around you, and attack you, over and over, and it would feel like your back was against a wall. Get it?"

"Y...yes."

"Okay. Now, take some weight off the front leg. Just a bit. Okay. Now, it's beginning to feel like the back leg is a pivot. And see? Now you're free to move around."

The woman's ego, it never managed to kick in. Otherwise, she would have realized that she, a pureblood chief, on a mission to kill Alice, is being instructed by her sister on the rudiments of swordfighting. Perhaps, much of it was due to the fact that she was actually learning something new.

"But why...it never occurred to me."

"Well of course it didn't," Niki said. "How old are you, two fifty? Three hundred?"

The woman nodded her head.

"See? Medieval renaissance. So, as a kid, they taught you to practice with heavy swords. And armor. And if your teacher is a medieval nut, they can't imagine anything else. So you do fixed stance, slow advance, counterattack and all that. Lisa?"

"Yeeees?"

"The stage is free on Sunday, right?"

"Yeeees."

"Maybe we could do like, a sparring performance? For the people in town?"

"That would be wonderflllll!"

And Niki looked at the chief again, and placing her hand gently on her shoulder, she turned her attention to the one thing she came here to do. Alice and Vorange, they were still lost in each other, and in a world of their own.

"Now look at them. And tell me, straight answer. Would you wanna cut them up right now?"

The woman was quiet, for a long while.

"No," she whispered in the end, and Niki nodded her head.

"And that long pause, was that shame? There's no shame in that. It's beautiful, isn't it? The last currency on Earth."

Christie, he was moved to tears. Almost. This may just have been the most intriguing tourist spectacle he'd seen in his life. And his heart, it was overflowing with this very limited and temporary desire to do good. And, in his walk of life, there was only one way to do good to people. Get them drunk.

"Hey. You, over there. The nine tourists. And the two kids. Are they legal age?"

"Excuse me?" Laney and Giullietta said, almost in unison.

"Yes. I order you to come inside. Beer on the house. Quickly now. Beer is not a toy, and drinking is not a children's game. Bloody tourists. I hate you already. Come on, now. I haven't got all day."

Shortly after that, Niki joined Armwriter on the patio in front of the bar. He had sat down in his chair, overwhelmed by all the recent developments, and noticed her only as she stood beside him.

"Hello."

"Oh...he...hello. Are you..." Armwriter stammered. It wasn't every day that he was face to face with a god.

"Man, that was smart, wasn't it? Cuffing you to a chair."

"W...well..."

"Yeah. Super smart." She looked about her pockets, until she found a small key, and went on to unlock the handcuffs. "You're Willi, right?"

"How do you...know my name?"

"Well that's easy. You're not Bernhard, because you don't sound like a rusty door hinge. Or Johannes, because you don't smell of cabbage and manure. You know? That light smell, in the background? You don't have that. Or Heinrich, because your parents had a brain, or...man. Does she ever oil them? I mean, how can that even work? Where was I. Yes. Or Thomas, because you don't have that comedy thing, you don't need an audience. Or Otto, because your stomach isn't bigger than your heart. Or Paul, that name smells of very clean clothes. Like, starched clean. You know? Or Florian, because your toenails would have to smell of strawberry yoghurt. Or Jörgen, now that's interesting. You'd have to have that secret fantasy, of becoming a squirrel. So. That's how I know your name." She gave him that inward smile again. "Or not."

And then, she looked out on the square again, where her sister was, still lost in Vorange, and the spiky-haired pureblood, in turn, lost in Alice.

"Yeah," she said. "That's gonna take a long time. A really long time. How about we get a drink?"

And at around that moment, Willi Armwriter regained possession of a clear mind, and a sense of both the present and the past, together with the full range of his limited ability to make a joke.

"Eldeflower lemonade?" he asked.

And Niki laughed, and he identified it, most positively, as a child's laughter.

"No. Not today."