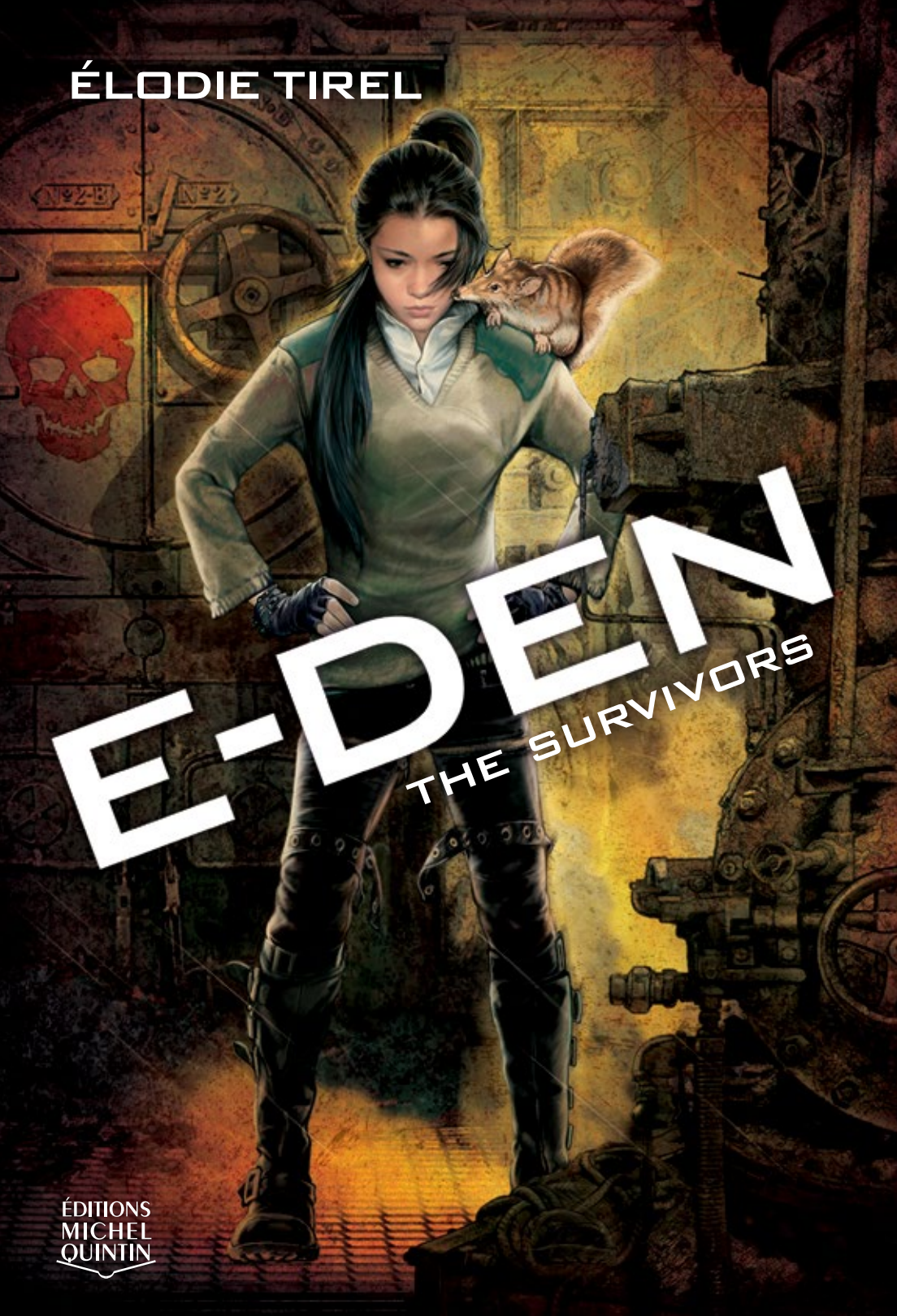


ÉLODIE TIREL



# E-DEN

THE SURVIVORS

ÉDITIONS  
MICHEL  
QUINTIN

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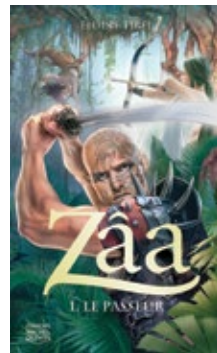
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ÉLODIE TIREL

# E-DEN

THE SURVIVORS

ÉDITIONS  
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QUINTIN

## PROLOGUE

*Journal of James O'Connor*

*January 12, 2257*

He chewed on his pen, hesitant. How does one begin a journal? Should he start by introducing himself, explaining who he was and where he lived? He nodded. It seemed like the first step to explaining everything.

*I'm James O'Connor, thirty-five years old, husband, and proud dad to a little girl. I live in Renaissance.*

*Renaissance is not a city actually, not really, it's more like ...*

He set down his pen and folded his hands as he considered what he was about to write next. How would Kate react if she ever read these lines? A wave of anger surged through him. It was his journal, after all, and he would write whatever he pleased! In any case, he would keep it where his wife would never find it.

*... it's more like hell! We're told that our colony, built inside long-abandoned mines, was designed by the elders to house thousands of people. The goal was to be able to live self-sufficiently until the Earth became inhabitable once again. It's common knowledge here that some sort of horrible cataclysm destroyed our planet's surface, but nobody knows exactly what happened. Rumours run rampant and take on a life of their own. Everyone has their own theory about what took place, the most common being a worldwide nuclear conflict; the air*

*saturated with radioactive particles became too dangerous for humans, who thus shut themselves away in these gigantic nuclear bunkers. The second most widespread theory was that our country fell victim to a bioterrorist attack; extremely virulent and contagious, the virus decimated entire populations, forcing the survivors to flee underground. If some say it was a flood of meteorites that rained down on Earth, levelling most major cities and stirring up giant tsunamis, still others claim that solar flares disturbed the earth's magnetic field causing a series of unprecedented catastrophes.*

*In any case, whatever was behind this exodus, we have been stuck here, deep inside the earth, for hundreds of years. Noone remembers exactly for how long, except perhaps the Elect. What is certain is that generations of men and women have each in their turn lived, loved, birthed, and died here in this underground shelter.*

*Were our ancestors many at the time of the exodus? I have no idea, but their leaders reserved the best district for themselves. The Cocoon is without a doubt the most beautiful, developed, and pleasant area of Renaissance. I was able to see the difference for myself when I left the Cave. The Cave is the district in which I was born. Kilometres on kilometres of rust-eaten pipes, overheating boilers spitting out clouds of toxic vapours, and dirty dilapidated homes, where entire families are crammed together, living in fear of local gangleaders.*

*When I left, we were over three thousand living in the Cave. Apparently, in the other district, called Granary because that is where all our food comes from, there are fewer people, but there's no way of knowing for sure. The Elect keep all data under lock*

*and key, and there is no interaction between the three districts of Renaissance.*

*Only the Elect know. They rule our lives with an iron fist. Since the exodus, they have overseen, controlled, subdued and repressed us mercilessly whenever they have seen fit. We are little more than a workforce to be exploited at will by the elite so that they can enjoy an idle existence in the Cocoon.*

*The Cocoon. It's a funny name for a district. It reminds me of a huge larva swaddled in its layers and growing fat off the efforts of others. Incidentally, the Elect regularly extract men from the Cave and the Granary to offer them as gifts to the women of the Cocoon. I heard that this is to avoid consanguinous unions that in the long-term would cause genital defects in future offspring. New blood is needed to renew the superior race of the elite. Thus, the larva continues to grow in complete security, deep within its protective Cocoon.*

*That is how I came to be here. Kate chose me. Mind you, she didn't fall head over heels in love with me or feel any sort of attraction to me at all. No. It was simply because, unlike the others, I wasn't some uneducated boor. I was the foreman of electric generator 12. I could therefore read, write, and count. That was why this brilliant scientist chose me, me and not someone else. To pass on good genes to her descendants.*

*James paused once more. After reading over what he had written, he neatly crossed out the last word: to her daughter.*

*My daughter. My treasure, my delight. She's what keeps me going. If I remain silent and obedient, if I tolerate Kate's whims and fancies without flinching or sighing, it's because of her. Only because of her. If I rebelled, Kate would send me back to where*

*I came from and deprive me of my only treasure. All of twelve years old, E-den is the light in my shadowy existence.*

His daughter's sweet, radiant face rose up before him. She was in class at this time of day. E-den was taking an applied mathematics module. Studious, serious, brilliant even, she commanded her professors' admiration and earned her mother's pride. Kate loved E-den's intelligence. James loved E-den.

He sighed before skipping ahead.

*I've decided to keep this journal because today I made a miraculous discovery. So much so that I wanted to shout out the news everywhere and to everyone. But I know almost noone; nobody who would care, in any case, and I have no friend to confide in. I have only E-den and if I reveal anything at all to her, it would endanger us both. Because what I have discovered is a terribly well-guarded secret.*

*First of all, I should explain that Kate wears a gold chain around her neck. A small key dangles from this necklace, which she never takes off. Last night, however, as she was going to bed, she realized that she no longer had it on her. She burst into the living room, livid, and rummaged through the entire apartment from top to bottom. I had never seen her so agitated before. In an absolute rage! Obviously, she yelled at me, accusing me of having stolen her chain, but she quickly came to her senses.*

*How would her doormat of a husband even think to come up with the idea of doing something like this? Impossible. She searched all night. This morning, her face was drawn and her features contorted in irritation, but she left for work all the same.*

*As for me, just like every other day, I cleared the table, did the dishes, made the beds, and cleaned the apartment. Then I woke up E-den and got everything ready so she would be in class on time. After she had left, I sorted the dirty laundry before taking it to the laundromat. As I put Kate's coverall back in its place, I stumbled across the famous chain, stuck in a fold of the collar. It had come apart in one spot. It's strange, but as I cradled the little gold key in the palm of my hand, a feeling of power came over me. I laughed aloud to myself. I buried the key in my pocket and went to throw the chain down the garbage chute.*

*Only then did I return to Kate's bedroom. I opened her closet and removed the boxes and the luxurious clothing hanging in there that stood between me and the door hidden in the back wall. I had discovered it last year completely by accident while I was tidying up. The finely wrought gold lock had aroused my curiosity. Today, I could finally satiate it.*

*The key clicked open the lock without the slightest resistance. A light automatically switched on and there, on the threshold, I stood frozen as much with fear as with happiness. The room was about the size of our living room and was filled with an incalculable number of books, meticulously arranged on huge shelves that covered all four walls. I had never seen so many books in all my life.*

*Holding my breath, I walked slowly around the room. My fingers caressed the columns of colourful spines as my eyes feasted on all the titles, each one more intriguing than the last. I saw atlases, novels, comic books, poetry collections, texts on history, science ... It was without a doubt a windfall discovery in a world where books are rare and carefully controlled.*

*Afraid that Kate would return unexpectedly and surprise me, I did not stay long, but I did leave with a large atlas filled with pictures. I'm still shaking! I ...*

*January 16, 2257*

*I had to leave off writing in a hurry last time because, as I feared, Kate came home earlier than expected. Ugh, that was a close call! Imagine if she had discovered my atlas and journal! I slipped them under my night table. There, at least, I can be certain that she will never find them. She never cleans.*

*She was in a bad mood because some experiment or other on rodents had gone wrong. As usual, I listened without a word of protest. Even if I disapprove of these genetic manipulations, I keep quiet. In any case, she doesn't ask for my opinion.*



*Three days have passed since my last entry. Three days in which I have had plenty of time to admire the photos in the atlas. I discovered this amazing world, full of mountains, deserts, tropical forests, oceans, lakes, prairies, savannahs, glaciers, beaches, volcanoes... So many unimaginable marvels that I had only ever known by name! These images of the surface fascinate me. I could spend hours on just one of them. My eyes feast on the colours, light, and unfamiliar sensations. I admire each landscape, down to the last detail, and I learn the name of each with an almost religious devotion. My favourite ones are those of the sky, this mythic sky that noone has ever seen. Now blue, now white, pink, purple or black, it amazes me with the thousands of*

*hues it dons. Especially at night when millions of stars sparkle like diamonds in a cloth of black velvet. There is something magical about it. What a shock for me who has only ever known rock, metal, and darkness! To think that it was in this world that our ancestors lived before the catastrophe. This world that they abandoned to hole us all up in the depths of the earth.*

*Renaissance may have saved us from a planetary disaster, but it has also condemned us to live imprisoned in the shadows of a world with no sky, no sun, and no warmth. True, we have survived, but at what cost?*

*January 25, 2257*

*Every time Kate leaves for the day, I head straight for the secret library to borrow a new book. My passion is all consuming and knows no limits. I read everything I can get my hands on, especially geography and zoology. It's as if the photos and the texts I immerse myself in were bringing the Earth I never knew back to life. At night, I dream that I am exploring these regions with foreign names and marvellous creatures. The most frustrating thing is that I must keep all this to myself. I would like to open up to Kate, but that is unthinkable. She would have me thrown in jail for treason, or worse. Every day I hear her speak of dissidents who threaten the balance and order in Renaissance and mention how efficient the police are at suppressing their rebellious inclinations. The Elect have no pity for those who step out of line. Kate would have none for me.*

*Obviously, there is E-den, but I refuse to plant these impossible dreams in her head. She is too young, too innocent. I have no right to make her suffer by dangling before her the idea of an*

*elsewhere that she will never know. So I say nothing. I suffer in silence and I mourn for this beautiful world we have lost.*

*P.S. Kate has a new gold chain around her neck. With a new key.*

*February 18, 2257*

*Today, a curious idea took root in my mind. While leafing through a text on natural sciences, I discovered that some species of animals can survive even the worst catastrophes. Not ice, nor radiation, nor extreme heat can kill them off. Some animals go into hibernation for long months, others can rest frozen for years before reawakening when conditions for life improve, others still evolve and take on new forms to survive. I wonder if, up there, on the surface, there are still animals or insects. Did they have some means of protecting themselves? Have they survived the catastrophe? Through hibernation or mutation?*

*And as for us, could we survive if we were to emerge now?*

*After E-den fell asleep, I asked Kate if she knew when we would finally be able to repopulate the surface. Her eyes almost popped out of their sockets. She flew into a rage and called me crazy and ungrateful. She said that our ancestors had offered us a safe, perfect world. Why should we want to head back to the surface? Why would we endanger our lives? Furious, she went to her room and slammed the door behind her.*

*February 19, 2257*

*This morning, over breakfast, she seemed to have calmed down. I did not bring up the subject again. Neither did she. After she and E-den had both left, I hurried through my housework*

*and then went straight to find a new book. I never take more than one at a time to avoid arousing suspicion. This one is a history text. Fascinating! I wonder why our children do not study this, instead of maths and physics.*

*This evening, after dinner, Kate knocked on my bedroom door. She normally never does this. I thought for a second that she had discovered everything and had come to arrest me. Without waiting for me to answer, she entered, and sat down on a chair before me as I stood in my pyjamas. I held my breath.*

*Her voice calm, she said that she had referred my question to the Elect. They had explained that the great return would not take place for another hundred years at best. Up above, the Earth was still engulfed in total chaos. The air was not yet breathable and human survival was not foreseeable. When I asked how the Elect could be so certain of this, she replied that they had sensors on the surface that analysed the air quality daily. However, the results left no room for hope: no human could survive on the surface for more than a few hours. But when I pressed for answers as to what had really happened, she retorted that it was no concern of mine. End of discussion. Kate left, leaving me alone and feeling more helpless than ever.*

*February 21, 2257*

*Among the forbidden books, I picked out a manual on Japanese origami. My grandfather used to make magnificent ones, but alas, a firedamp explosion took him from us before he could teach me his technique. My father, meanwhile, deemed it a useless and expensive hobby. "Stop wasting paper!" he would say every time I attempted to fold a few sheets. To be fair, his salary*

*at the mine was negligible; we weren't rolling in money, unlike Kate!*

*I brought the book back to my bedroom and started on the easiest model. Nostalgia-tinged memories of my nimble-fingered grandfather came flooding back. I loved him truly. More than my father, that's for sure.*

*Tonight, I successfully made a swan. I'm going to give it to E-den. If she likes it, I'll teach her some folds. Here, we have more paper than we know what to do with.*

*February 28, 2257*

*I think Kate suspects me of being up to something. Is it because of the origami I've been giving E-den? I told her that I inherited this talent from my grandfather, but I get the feeling she isn't fooled. She's been giving me strange looks of late. Some days she comes home unexpectedly, sneaking in silently, and checks up on what I'm doing. I will have to be more careful about the books, keep my journal better hidden, and above all, space out the intervals at which I record my discoveries.*

*March 25, 2257*

*The more I read, the more I discover, the more I dream of escaping. I dream of exploring the world, of seeing the stars, and of meeting other survivors. Because I refuse to believe that we are the only humans to have survived. I'm sure that there are other colonies, elsewhere, either on the surface or below. It seems more and more obvious to me that the Elect are lying to us. I never trusted them in any case. It's true too! How do you trust people you've never seen? The Elect rule, dictate, and punish. I*

*don't know who they are or how they got their name, because, as far as I know, no one has ever elected them.*

*I read recently in a political treatise that this kind of regime is called a dictatorship and that all dictators prop up their power with propaganda and lies. In the Cocoon, everyone knows that the Elect manipulate the inhabitants of the Cave and Granary, but I know that they also manipulate us. Everyday I'm more and more convinced that they are keeping us in the dark about the world outside. One question in particular gnaws at me: is the air on the surface really toxic? Hundreds of years after the catastrophe, it seems unlikely to me. So I wonder if the Elect have already tried to leave? And if so, what did they discover up there that made them decide to remain down here?*

*March 27, 2257*

*Kate was in a foul mood today. I finally learned from her that someone had sabotaged her experiments and released her genetically modified rodents. Personally, I find this quite funny.*

*My joy was shortlived however, because, almost as soon as she had returned from work, she picked up the garbage bin and went around the apartment throwing away all the origami I had made. E-den's entire collection is gone. I wanted to stop her, but she coldly rebuffed me. "If my daughter ever finds out that it was I who got rid of all this garbage, I will kick you out!" she spat at me before adding, "You'll tell her that it was you, that you were sick of it." I stood there speechless.*

*Kate has never loved me, it's true, but this is the first time that she's openly threatened me. I know she's not joking. Kate never jokes. I*



*April 2, 2257*

*When, after Kate had left this morning, I went to return the biology text I had borrowed, I had a dreadful fright and stood rooted to the spot. A new bolt had been installed on the door! Either she had installed it herself, or she had called a locksmith while I was out on some errand.*

*Kate is cruel, sadistic, mean and selfish, but she is also intelligent and highly intuitive. She must have guessed that I had found her secret library. Without proof, she never accused me openly, but by bolting the door she made sure she had permanently ended my secret trips.*

*Well, she can stop me from reading, but not from dreaming. The images I found in these books will remain forever engraved in my mind.*

*P.S. I will have to find a way to discreetly get rid of the biology text. Throwing it down the garbage-chute would be too risky. I'd better put it in a bin on the other end of the Cocoon. This pains me, but I don't really have the choice. It would be too dangerous to keep it here.*

*May 5, 2257*

*Last night, I dreamt that I had left Renaissance. A hooded man who said he was an Elect came for me in secret to lead me out of the colony. "You mustn't say anything to Kate, he said, or she will kill me." We walked through a narrow corridor at the end of which was a reinforced door. Behind, I saw green hills covered with tall fir trees. Down below, lay a placid azure lake. It was warm; the air was thick with the scent of resin and damp*

*earth. With what joy did my bare feet tread the carpet of pine needles! I was happy. For the first time in a long time.*

*Waking up was brutal. I could have stayed asleep forever. I know it was just a dream, but I'm also convinced that there is something up above us. Something beautiful, true, and different. I will do everything I can to find out what it is. If the air turns out to be toxic, too bad. At least I will have seen what the surface looked like. I'll die happy.*

*June 10, 2257*

*Today, I went to drop off clothes at the laundromat and, on my way out, I noticed the enormous air ducts that emerge from it to disappear into the rock. I wonder where they lead. To the surface? No doubt yes, since the scalding vapours have to be evacuated some place.*

*It's decided: tomorrow I go exploring, but only for a few hours to avoid arousing Kate's suspicions. Should she come home unexpectedly, I'll say that I was at the laundromat or out doing the groceries. With a little luck, I'll find a path that will allow me to discover the truth about the outside. And to escape.*

*March 13, 2258*

*Kate came home later than usual. It's not that I was worried. I feel nothing but indifference for this cold, contemptuous woman. But I found it strange, suspicious even.*

*It was past two o'clock in the morning and I was passing the time ironing when she finally came home, smiling. This is so unlike her that I was dumbstruck.*

*Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes shone as if she had been drinking. She stood before me, hands on hips, and proudly announced that she had just been promoted to Elect. The director of the military laboratory had been found dead the night before, mysteriously poisoned. The supreme Elect had deemed Kate worthy of this prestigious post.*

*Kate, an Elect! That was all I needed!*

*I debated remaining impassive, but fearing her wrath, I ended up congratulating her. Rather coldly, however. Kate took my lack of enthusiasm for insolence. She roughly grabbed my arm and fixed her icy gaze on me. Through her teeth, she warned me to beware, to stop trying to outsmart her. She added that I needn't think that, thanks to her new status, I would have an easy life. On the contrary! The slightest misstep and she would not hesitate to make a public example of me. I almost struck her with the iron right in the face. The blow would surely have killed her. But doubt stayed my arm. Did I really have the right to deprive E-den of her mother? I hesitated.*

*Kate's gaze shifted to the iron. She immediately picked up on my criminal impulse. Yet, she smiled. "My poor James, as if you were capable of that!" she spat at me. You are so cowardly, dull and thick! You disgust me!" She let go of my arm and turned to go. "Go to bed! We'll deal with this tomorrow morning and, believe me, I will make you regret even thinking of killing me!" She burst into laughter before returning to her room.*

*I have rarely felt as humiliated as I did then. I sincerely regretted not having killed her. Tomorrow, she will make me pay for it. But what is she really capable of doing? The worst?*

James paused for a moment. He was choked up with

shame, regret, anger and despair. He didn't want to die, not this close to his goal. Because, through repeated exploration, wandering up and down the air ducts and other pipes in Renaissance, he had finally found a promising route.

The truth suddenly dawned on him like a ray of light. It was now or never. Tomorrow morning would be too late.

James may have been too much of a coward to commit murder, but not to escape, not to attempt the impossible. He opened his journal to the first page to inscribe a short dedication.

*To my darling daughter,*

*E-den, if you one day discover this journal, know that I wrote it for you. So that you know the truth. In reading this, you will discover my story, my dreams, and hopes. I love you and, no matter where I am when you read this, I will always love you.*

His hand trembling, he took out a clean sheet of paper from the stack and began writing a letter to his daughter, a goodbye letter. After that, he took a second sheet of paper and skilfully folded it into a swan.

He got up and grabbed a bag into which he stuffed clothes and a photo of E-den. Then, without so much as a sound, he left his room and went to the kitchen for some supplies and bottles of water. Before leaving, he dropped his bag on the counter next to the aquarium in which Gloops swam in circles incessantly and then silently headed for E-den's bedroom. He gently pushed the door open.

His daughter was peacefully asleep, a million miles away from the cataclysm that was engulfing her father. It was truly heartbreaking to leave her, to abandon her in this world he

despised. Had E-den been older, he would have asked her to go with him, but at thirteen she was still too young to face danger. He had no right to make her take such risks, especially since the outcome was far from guaranteed. True, he had found a way out, but what would he find at the end of it? An inviting world or a devastated planet? Life or death? And if this path did not lead to the surface, what then? Would he return home? Certainly not. Kate would never take him back.

His eyes welling up with tears, he bent to caress his daughter's cheek. He then placed the letter and the paper swan on her bedside table, hid his journal on E-den's bookshelf and crept out silently. When he reached the door, he thought his heart would burst with sorrow. Through his tears, he took one last look at his daughter and turned to go. He felt as if he were dying.

Stopping at the kitchen counter, he picked up his bag and threw it over his shoulder. His hand was on the doorknob when a voice behind him made him freeze in terror.

— Going somewhere, James?

He couldn't breathe; his arms and legs trembled with dread. He turned around slowly.

Kate looked him scornfully up and down, a disdainful smirk on her lips, a pistol aimed at him.

— Put down that bag this instant!

James obeyed. All his life, he had done nothing but obey.

— What did you think? Kate barked. That you could escape me, now, like this? That I would let you leave? What were you thinking, you imbecile?

James' fists clenched.

— I'm the one in charge around here! she continued, her eyes filled with rage. You will kindly return to your room, because tonight I'm tired. But tomorrow you will pay for this, James! Oh how you will pay for this!

This time, however, things had gone too far.

Without thinking about the consequences of his actions, James grabbed the aquarium with both hands and flung it with all his strength at Kate. She had no time to either dodge the projectile or pull the trigger. It hit her violently. The glass orb shattered against her chest into a thousand sharp smithereens, releasing litres of water onto the carpet.

James fled out, slamming the door of the apartment behind him. Feeling sorry at having to sacrifice Gloops, he escaped into the white neon glow of the corridor.



# 1

Two years later, May 2260

The third siren that marked the time in the Cave faded out into a hiss of deflating tires. It was noon. Simeon held his breath. Hidden in a doorframe, he stuck out his head slowly to spy on the old man who was about to enter his house. He was not in the habit of picking on those weaker than him, but this was too good an opportunity to pass up. The old man had just stocked up on food. In his hands were two bags of groceries. Tired, the old man put one down and searched his pocket for his keys.

It was now or never. A week of fresh food was too good to give up.

Simeon leaped into action. Quick and agile, he snapped up one of the bags without even slowing down. The old man turned around, surprised, and began screaming after the thief.

“You can yell all you want! No one can hear you!” the boy thought, delighted at his success.

In the Cave, it was everyone for himself and only

the strong survived. True, stealing from a poor man was cowardly and Simeon was not proud of his actions, but he had no choice. Ever since he had been a small boy, he had roamed the narrow, filthy streets of this district looking for a morsel of food to eat or a nook to sleep in. He had always lived off stolen bits of food and spent most of his time on the run.

He turned the corner of the alley and abruptly stopped. Two brawny young guys were rushing at him, no doubt alerted by the cries of the old man. The boy felt his pulse begin to race. There was no other exit. Either he turned around, or he faced them head on and defended his loot. But there were two of them and they were both much bigger than him. He did not think for too long.

He turned on his heels and ran for his life, clutching the bag tightly against his chest so he wouldn't drop it. Of course, the old man had planted himself squarely in the middle of the road to block him off. Simeon would have to push him out of the way, perhaps even knock him over. The boy was feeling the first stirrings of regret when a vise suddenly clamped around his legs. He fell flat on his face. The bag fell out of his grasp and spilled its precious contents onto the dusty ground.

A sharp kick to his sides made him cry out in pain.

— That'll teach you, you dirty little snot! said the guy who had caught him.

With a steel grip, the other grabbed him by the hair to lift him onto his feet. He slammed him against the wall without ceremony.

— Did noone ever tell you it wasn't nice to pick on old people?

Simeon did not have the time to answer. A punch to the stomach left him breathless.

— Little scum like you should not exist!

A second blow hit him on the nose. The pain almost made him lose consciousness, while a stream of blood filled his mouth. He looked to the old man for support, but the man was too busy picking up his precious supplies.

— You know there are some areas here where you'd be eaten alive? Would you like us to take you there?

Terrified, Simeon vigourously shook his head to say no. A second slap split open his lip. His face covered with blood and tears, he dared not move. His fear was paralyzing.

Surprisingly, it was the old man who put an end to his misery.

— Come on boys, let him be. He's had enough.

Since the two, excited by the violence, seemed to want to enjoy themselves a little longer, the old man tried another tactic.

— Let me thank you by getting you a drink. Huh, what do you say to that?

He pushed the door to his house wide open to invite them in. A leering smile lit up the mug of the taller hooligan who let go of his prey. Simeon, motionless, collapsed at the base of the wall like a rag doll.

— Can't refuse an offer like that! said the first young man as he stooped to enter the small house.

— Yeah, cool! added the other.

But before following his accomplice, he kicked the boy sprawled on the ground one last time in the gut.

The door shut with a bang, leaving Simeon alone in the alley. He crossed his arms mechanically against his chest to protect himself, but even this small gesture made him whimper in pain. The pain radiating from his sides and his stomach was unbearable. His years were ringing, he could no longer feel his nose, and the taste of blood in his mouth made him nauseous. This was not the first beat down he had received, but it was certainly the most violent. “Don’t stay here, don’t stay here,” he repeated to himself, terrified at the thought that the two guys would return to finish what they had started.

Shaking like a leaf, he supported himself on an elbow to lift himself up. The pain was sharp and stabbing like a white-hot dagger. A stream of saliva spurted from his swollen lips. He bent over to vomit and began to sob uncontrollably, not so much because of the beating as because of the hunger that clutched at him. A gnawing, obsessive hunger. It had been three days that he had not eaten anything at all.

He was overcome by a feeling of extreme weariness. Only eleven years old, he was already tired, worn out, and disillusioned. Since he was very small, his life had been one long fight, a merciless struggle to survive. Abused by his adoptive family, he had run away three years ago. Since then, he had lived on the streets, or rather, he had survived on them. And today could very well have been the last of his miserable existence.

Was it really worth it? Was a life like his worth living?

Yet, driven by an indefatigable survival instinct, Simeon managed to get up. The grimace that contorted his lips testified to how much pain he was in, but he did not cry out. He suffered in silence, as he always did.

With the back of his sleeve, he wiped his eyes and nose. Blood smeared his shirt and blond locks. Resisting the pain, he walked away from the old man’s house, doubled over. He wanted to be as far away as possible when his torturers came back out.

He walked and walked and walked for what seemed like hours, so intense was the pain. When he finally reached the Nest—that was what he called his secret hideout—he could do nothing but collapse on his blanket and fall into a deep slumber.

When he awoke, his pain had abated slightly, but his head was spinning like the first time he had drunk alcohol. The experience had been so horrible that he had never tried it again. A hazy spiral was spinning incessantly in his skull causing him to feel completely disoriented. He closed his eyes to make it stop and fell asleep again. He heard none of the Cave’s sirens.

It was his thirst that finally woke him up. His tongue seemed stuck to his palate, so dry was his mouth. He sat up and grabbed the flask he had left in the corner. The dried crusts of blood cracked when he opened his mouth. His thoughts flashed back to the thrashing he had received the day before. “Those dirtbags!” he cursed through his clenched jaw. “If I see them again, I’ll ... no, I won’t do anything to them, nothing at all. They’re much stronger than me.”

Simeon was brave, daring at times, but he was not suicidal. He was well aware of his limits. Had he known that the two young men would come to the old man's aid, he would never have attempted to steal the bag. One or two things from it, maybe, but not the whole bag. In any case, it was too good to be true. A whole week's worth of food or more was unheard of, the kind of lucky break that doesn't come along more than once.

Thinking about all the food that had been unjustly wrenched from his grasp awakened the famished dragon that slept in his stomach. His belly growled like never before. "I have to eat today! I absolutely have to eat something ..."

He grimaced as he got up. His body was completely stiff and sore. His arms, legs and sides felt like they weighed a ton. But this would pass, like everything else. Simeon was a tough nut. If there were times when he felt depressed, he always knew how to bounce back stronger to face new challenges head on. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger!" his adoptive father used to say after having given him a beating.

Simeon touched his face to inspect its overall condition. Except for the traces of blood that he washed off with a little water, he was fine. His upper lip was swollen. His nose hurt when he pressed it, but it did not seem to be broken.

He tucked the rebellious locks of hair that fell onto his face back into the elastic band around his ponytail. His hair was long now; he had not cut it in three years. Sometimes he dreamed of a good pair of scissors, but that was a luxury he could not afford. Before leaving his hideout, he slipped his last twenty cents into his left pocket. If he could

not find anything to eat, he could always buy a bit of pasta so he would not die of hunger. He tapped his right pocket to make sure that the iron bolts he used as projectiles for his slingshot were still there. It was his only weapon, but it had got him out of many binds. He never went out without it.

After making sure there was no one around, Simeon left his hideout. The Nest was actually a small service room, perched in an immense metal utility tower that was itself situated in the middle of a gigantic vertical air duct, as tall as it was deep. The tower served as a support pylon for an iron walkway that was suspended over the void and connected the two opposite edges of the ventilation shafts. There were other identical ones both higher up and down below, but it was impossible to say how many. Each end of this walkway was closed off by securely barred circular doors.

It was on one of his many meandering expeditions that Simeon had found this place. He did not know what these giant vertical wells were used for, but he really could not care less. Despite the death's head symbol affixed to the door of the service room, he had opened it hoping to find something interesting. He had found much more than that: a real hideout! This large circular closet fitted with a small night-light was wide enough for him to stretch out and high enough that he could crouch in it. The very next day, he had moved in with his meagre possessions: a blanket, a flask, and a change of clothes rolled in a ball. This was the best hideout he had ever found, secure, quiet, and as comfortable as a cosy nest. For almost four months now, he had returned here every night.

After changing his shirt, Simeon left. He crossed the metal walkway and, on reaching one end of it, climbed over the railing to slide into the narrow mouth of the horizontal air flue below. It was a dangerous move, because the wells beneath his feet were at least a hundred metres deep, if not more. But Simeon was not afraid of heights; besides, he was remarkably agile and nimble.

Once inside the flue, he slithered forward on his stomach. There was a lingering stench of rust and other unidentifiable odours, but this did not bother him. In general, the Cave stank. Yet none of its inhabitants showed the slightest repulsion. Maybe it was because they all stank just as much, but no one really took notice. The stench was their daily reality.

At the first intersection, Simeon turned right, then left, following a path he knew by heart. The flue ended in a grill that he only had to push open to access a rarely used corridor, located near a waste recycling factory. He took the time to put the grill back in place behind him exactly as it was before, then made his way to the residential quarter. It was still there that he had the best chance of finding a little something to eat.

He preferred the garbage bins of pubs that served fast and cheap food, but these leftovers were rare and coveted commodities. Simeon, who did not belong to any gang, never got the best pieces. He had gotten used to being satisfied with the leftovers of leftovers, which is to say with not much.

When he reached *Chez Zorg*, the aroma of spices tickled his nostrils. It had been weeks since he had smelt anything so pleasant. Racked with hunger, he entered the divebar

without a second thought. The five tables were empty. It was apparently still too early to eat. The third siren marking midday had not yet rung out. The owner, the notorious Zorg, was wiping glasses with a grimy tea towel with the help of the stump that was his left arm. He glanced up distractedly at his client before stopping what he was doing. The frown that appeared on his mug did not bode well.

— What do you want? he spat out. You have no business here! Get out!

But emboldened by his hunger, Simeon moved towards the bar.

— Would you not have ...

The man brusquely put down his glass.

— I don't do charity! I don't have anything for you.

— I'm looking for a job, Simeon improvised.

I could wipe the glasses for you and do the dishes, in exchange for ...

— I don't need anyone! Especially not a little snot like you. Get out, I said!

Simeon felt his last hope fade away. Regretfully, he turned to look at the kitchen, towards the smell of food. He was dying to run and pinch a couple of things, but he knew that Zorg would catch him and treat him to the worst fifteen minutes of his life. The bar owner may well have had an atrophied arm, but his legs were perfectly functional. And Simeon had suffered enough the day before for this exact same reason.

His head hung low, he turned to leave. As he stuck his hands in his pockets, he felt the little coin between his fingers



and hesitated. If he spent it now, he would have nothing left to fall back on during another difficult time. He took a deep breath, taking in more of the spicy aromas. As he rolled the coin between his fingers, he thought this over. A serving of spiced stew was tempting.

— Do you need a kick in the behind or what? yelled the owner behind him.

It suddenly occurred to Simeon that this jerk did not deserve the last of his savings. He lifted his head, stuck out his chest and walked out proudly. But once he was in the street, his belly loudly growled out its distress. He attempted to ignore the noisy protests and turned his focus onto the gutter in the middle of the street; but the unimpressive tidbits that had been edible in the past would now no doubt leave him with severe food poisoning. And in the Cave, there was nothing worse than falling sick. The few doctors who did operate in the district were in league with the militia. If your case was serious or contagious, you had almost no chance of returning home. What happened to these invalids? There were many rumours circulating about them, but the only thing that was certain was that they were never seen again. The inhabitants of the Cave thus preferred to get by as best as they could, even risking death at times, rather than call one of these traitors. As a result, the militia had integrated doctors into their patrol squads. In the event of an arrest, even for a simple identity check, the doctor would examine you with or without your consent. For Simeon, this was yet another reason to avoid crossing paths with the militia.

The boy walked aimlessly through the streets, from time to time entering one of the intersecting circular corridors that were even larger than the drain or air pipes he crossed every day. He mechanically made his way towards the power plant. With its enormous generators, this was the main source of energy for the Cave and its various factories. He was making his way along a walkway, careful to avoid the clouds of scalding vapours that the pipes viciously spit forth, when he suddenly saw it. A beetroot, purple lustrous and barely eaten, that had fallen from some crate or pocket. Out of habit, he looked around to make sure that no one else was after his goods. The area was deserted.

“Today’s my lucky day!” he cried exultantly as he rushed to pounce on it.

But he had not counted on the creature that appeared out of nowhere, quick as a flash of lightning, to grab the vegetable.

“Hey, let go!” a furious Simeon cried. “That’s mine!”

As if surprised at being spoken, the little grey-haired creature turned to look at the boy. It studied him with big black eyes, as if it didn’t quite understand what was going on. The beetroot, enormous in its little paws, leaked a scarlet juice that dripped through the bars of the walkway.

— Drop it or I’ll squash you! Simeon repeated as he stomped his foot to scare it off.

Unexpectedly, the large rat-like creature obeyed. Its little paws let go of the beetroot, which sprinkled juice as it hit the grill of the walkway.

— Now, get away! Go on, off with you!

The rodent took a step back, but did not leave. Annoyed, Simeon grabbed a bolt from his pocket and threw it in its direction. He did not want to hurt it, just to scare it off. The projectile fell not far from the animal, which scampered off this time.

At that same instant, the word *mean* floated towards his ears. Surprised, he turned to see who had called him that. He saw noone. Simeon was all alone, but he could have sworn that he had heard a small voice laced with bitterness. Were hunger and fatigue playing tricks on him? He felt the stirrings of remorse; that poor creature was probably just as hungry as he. But he got over it quickly. It was just an animal, and a pest at that. Its life was worth nothing compared to that of a human.

Simeon picked up the beetroot and heartily bit into it. The joy he felt in this second was indescribable. The sweet taste combined with the buttery texture elated him. Neither the mould-ridden greenish part nor the earthy aftertaste could diminish his happiness. Dark purple droplets glistened on his chin. The dragon in his belly murmured with happiness.

— It came from there! a loud voice below him suddenly cried out.

Still standing, his fingers dripping with juice, Simeon froze. His eyes fixing the corridor three metres below him, he tensed up on seeing the black uniforms of five militiamen. They had only to look up to spot him. The boy held his breath, paralyzed with fear.



2260

After a planetary catastrophe has destroyed the Earth's surface, a handful of humans live in complete autonomy in Renaissance, a vast underground colony.

E-N

In the wealthy residential zone, E-den, an exceptionally gifted teenaged girl, dreams of becoming a doctor, much to her mother's displeasure. When she discovers her father's journal, the truth is revealed: the Elect are

lying to them.

Life may still be possible on the outside.

Despite the risks and uncertainties, E-den decides to run away from home in the hopes of leaving Renaissance and finding her father. Along the way, she meets Simeon, a young orphan who lives in the Cave, the most dangerous district in the colony, and a strange raquirrel with extraordinary abilities.

Together, they will attempt to reach the outside world, despite all the dangers along the way.

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