

Twinkle, Twinkle

The sky was covered with stars this far out in the desert, but Anna put her face up against the glass, peered between the bars and picked out the one daddy had said was hers. She hugged her Leeloo stuffed toy close, snuggling his purple fur, and scrunched her eyes shut, ready to wish her usual two wishes, the one she said out loud every night to the night sky and the one she wished only in her head. Although she was only seven and understood on some level that Mummy and Daddy were dead and couldn't come back, she still trembled before she wished, gathering her strength, dark shapes shifting behind her eyelids because they were closed that tightly.

She forced herself to count to ten, willing it to work this time, and said, 'I wish that mummy and daddy were alive again and we were all back home.'

She opened her eyes and blinked, and looked about the room. It was full of things from home, but this was a long way away from there and they didn't look right here. The rocket night light threw planets and shooting stars on the bare walls, the box filled with her toys from home was in the corner, her pink wooden bed was laden with stuffed animals (with a special space reserved by her pillow for Leeloo), her small wardrobe stood next to her desk and the bookshelf was by the locked metal door, but there was no sign of Mummy and no Daddy.

Anna wondered if the spoken wish was really two things and cheating, but it was no good having Mummy and Daddy back if they couldn't go home together, like it was before the time when the men came and Daddy had cried and Mummy had screamed when the men hurt her and took her away.

Now the only person Anna spoke to everyday was the woman with the scary eyes, the one who didn't realise Anna knew Mummy and Daddy were gone. She

would unlock the door every morning and sometimes at night, come into Anna's room and try to scare her into telling Daddy's secret, shout at her that her parents were going to die if she didn't tell.

Anna looked up at her star and it twinkled back at her, making her feel better so she made the other wish, the one that was only in her head, where the men with their machines wanted to go. So far she had kept them out and knew Mummy and Daddy would be proud of her for that. *I wish that I keep my promise to daddy and not tell the men and the scary woman his secret, no matter what they say or do.*

Before the men took Daddy away, he had told her they would say lots of bad things to make her scared and say the secret, but she must not listen to them. He had said they might stick needles and things in her and put her in machines, but she must not tell them the secret. Lots and lots of people would die and lots and lots and *lots* of people would be hurt if she told. Daddy had cried as he said this and said sorry lots of times and talked about things she didn't understand and couldn't remember now, but she remembered him saying how much he loved her and she remembered his voice and his face as he said it.

She pulled the curtains shut, hiding the horrible bars which blocked some of the sky and desert from her, clambered into bed, tucked Leeloo in next to her, picked a memory to dream about and tried not to think about being awakened by the scary woman in the morning.

Breakfast was always brought to the room by the scary woman and it was always her favourite: scrambled eggs on toast with a glass of cold apple juice. She could tell the juice was from the fridge by the way the water drops ran down the side of the glass. Despite knowing what was coming next, Anna could not take her eyes

off the tray, thinking how hot she was in this room, how dry her throat was and how her stomach growled with hunger.

The scary woman sat down in the space between the stuffed toys at the bottom of the bed and placed the tray across her legs. She smiled, and her teeth were very shiny in between her bright red lips. Her clothes – a kind of light blue playsuit, Anna thought – rustled as she shifted position. There was no picture or name badge, like Daddy used to have on his work clothes. And Mummy never used to wear boots like the scary woman's big leather ones.

“Anna, tell me the code. Tell me it now and we will stop hurting your mummy and daddy. They are begging you to tell. They are in great pain. Tell me and I will let you all go home. You can have your lovely eggs and tasty apple juice and then we'll bring your parents to you and you can all go back to your house and be happy and safe. Tell us and you will never see us again.”

The teeth shone in her big smile, but Anna was tired of this act and this lie. She knew her Mummy and Daddy had died some time ago – she knew because the walls in the white room, the secret room where she went to in her head sometimes, were blank where her parents' doors used to be. She could also see the scary woman's thoughts behind the words. And the fear. She was scared and thinking about something that was close now.

The woman narrowed her eyes – already like a cat's because they were pulled back by her tight ponytail – and Anna thought she'd been careless, looked too loudly as Daddy had warned her about, that the woman had heard her in her head, maybe heard her in the white room. But as Anna came out, she saw the woman's eyes were fixed just past her, on where Leeloo was under the covers.

‘You know I can’t break my promise to Daddy,’ Anna said quickly, to get the woman to look back at her.

She knew how quickly the woman would take her things away if she thought Anna needed them, starting with her photographs and her drawings. She couldn’t lose Leeloo and always hidden him when the woman came.

The woman produced a small phone from an inside pocket, one hand rocking the apple juice slightly so that it caught Anna’s gaze, her tongue big in her dry mouth.

“This is a sound recording,” the woman said, holding the phone out to Anna, “of your father, of your daddy,” and she thumbed the play symbol on the screen.

As the sound of screaming started, Anna recoiled and pulled the covers up to her neck. It was a man, begging her to tell them the code, to make them stop. More screaming, then the voice told her how much he loved her and it was okay to break her promise, this once. More screaming, then the recording stopped.

Anna bowed her head and sobbed into her hands, but in her palms her eyes were open and as she looked at the woman’s thoughts again, she knew it wasn’t really Daddy’s voice. It sounded something like him, except she knew it had been made up on a computer. She couldn’t let them know that – Daddy had told her again and again to pretend at all times – so she let more tears come, real ones, but not for what the woman thought.

With her face wet she looked up at the woman, who stopped smiling just a second too late. Anna sob-breathed like she’d practiced and remembered to break up the words when she said,

“I can’t – tell you. I promised to – keep – Daddy’s secret.”

The woman did the nostril breathing she always ended up doing and said,

“Listen to the *pain* he’s in, Anna! He *wants* you tell us, he said so. You *heard*

him yourself! Anna, why won't you help your daddy?"

Anna wiped her eyes with her pyjama sleeves.

"I always keep my promises."

And she lay back down and turned over to face the wall, making sure that Leeloo was hidden against her chest beneath the covers. She listened to the woman's breathing, which was loud today, then the rustle of her suit as she got up, the stamp of her big boots and the slam of the metal door as she left. Anna's stomach growled again, knowing that the woman would have taken the breakfast with her. They would feed her the usual porridge stuff later. The metal door was thick and Anna had one ear buried in her pillow, but she still heard the clang of the breakfast tray being thrown further down the corridor. She smiled into Leeloo's fur.

That night the star twinkled brighter, celebrating Anna's small victory over the scary woman with her cat eyes. She watched it for a long time, proud that it was hers. Daddy had told her how special it was and that it would stay fixed in the same place in the sky, watching over her, even while the other stars moved away. He had said that many people had a name for it, but he had given it to her so that it was now called Anna 1 and if anything ever happened to him and mummy then one day it would come down to Earth to protect her.

Even though she was very young then, she had giggled at the idea, even when Daddy's face had been very serious. Mummy had sat in the corner not saying anything, just nodding with a frown even bigger than Daddy's. Now as she looked up at the sky and saw her star through the bars, she knew it was true, because it spoke to her every night and sometimes during the day, although its voice was fainter then,

when she couldn't see it. It didn't use words she could speak, but when the voice came it went right into her head and she understood some of it.

Anna nodded as the star twinkled and spoke to her for a while before she scrunched her eyes and made her wishes and got into bed. She turned her nightlight off and turned over, pulling Leeloo out of the gap between the mattress and the wall. She fluffed up his squashed purple fur and cuddled him under the covers.

'I have to sleep for a while,' she whispered to Leeloo, 'but I need to wake up before the sun comes up and tip-toe into a person's head.' She held Leeloo tighter because she hadn't tip-toed past the walls of her room before and she was worried about it. She was older now than when her mummy first showed her how, but she still might make too much noise and the scary woman would then find out. She was very angry already and might hurt her, *maybe send her to the needle men again.*

Leeloo's warm fur and smell calmed Anna enough for her to choose a memory, so she dreamed about her last day at home, even though she knew the ending was horrible. It was the first time she had chosen this one and even as she dreamed, she realised she was seeing it differently, with older eyes, noticing things she had missed first time.

"Try again Anna, it's very important. Please try it for me," says Daddy. I lean back against him, sitting on his lap, sucking my thumb and pulling a face. How small I am! His voice is scared and he keeps looking over to the window where Mummy stands. The window looks out to fields and the small road that leads up to our house.

"You're such a good girl Anna. We know you are tired, but just give it one more go. One more. For Mummy and Daddy," Mummy says. She smiles at me but then she looks at daddy and in a different voice says, "They'll be here soon, Ben.

We're nearly out of time." She turns back to the window, both hands on the sill, leaning so that her nose almost touches the glass.

Daddy strokes my hair and reaches across to pick up Leeloo. His fur is much brighter and fluffier! 'Leeloo would love you to try one more time. He really wants to see what a clever girl you are.' Daddy makes Leeloo do the dance that always makes me laugh.

"Okay, daddy. Last time. Promise?" Daddy nods and makes Leeloo nod at the same time.

Mummy turns away from the window to look. She and Daddy go very quiet and I see that mummy is squeezing her bottom lip with her fingers.

I close my eyes and picture the room with the doors. It wobbles a bit, but then goes still. It is plain and white with four walls but only three doors (Daddy has told me I will add doors as I get bigger). There is no furniture or pictures, just a white wooden floor. I tip-toe to the door nearest me. It is locked and I think it has my name on it - I remember Daddy said that it was a special door and I shouldn't go through that until I was older. He said I would know when because I wouldn't have any other choice. The words Daddy uses and the door scare me, so I move away and go over to Mummy's door. It looks the same as the others but I know it is hers.

That's it, Anna. Open the door and go in. Don't forget to tip-toe. You must be quiet. Tippy-toe!

I can hear Daddy's voice even though he is not in this white room with me - he's still in the other room, with Mummy. It makes me feel less scared when he talks to me, but I remember the last time I was here and I couldn't make Mummy's door open and I cried. There is a silver handle on the door, so I tip-toe over to it and put

my hand on it. It turns and the door opens! I see inside but don't know what I see, there are too many things all moving and I am scared to go in.

That's brilliant, Anna! Now don't be frightened, it's only Mummy, remember? You'll be safe in there and you can come out whenever you want. Now stay on those little toes and in you go. Go on, Anna. Just take five steps forward.

I am still scared but Daddy says I can come right back out, so I creep into the room and...it is nice. The colours and the pictures are pretty, even if they do make me a bit dizzy.

That's it, her eyes have rolled, she's in. Do you feel her? Can you tell she's there?

I nearly tell Daddy that I don't know what he means, but then I think he is talking to Mummy.

No. Nothing. Ben, has she done it? I can't tell. Check her. Is she all right? She's not moving!

"I'm okay, mummy," I say as I watch the pictures on the other side of her door. I see myself as a baby in some of them. And Leeloo! In my pram with me! I nearly run to look closer, then remember that I must not run in the door rooms.

She's fine. You're fine, aren't you Anna? I'm so proud of you. Just one more thing then you can come back out. Tell me what you see in Mummy's room right now, the biggest picture in there. Take your time. Have a good look.

Ben, this doesn't feel right. She's so young. She's not ready for this!

Jean, she's listening, remember? Concentrate. Help her. She can do this. You can do this, Anna. You're so clever. Now look carefully.

One picture grows bigger than the rest and has the most colour. It is a blue car. Small and a bit like a box on wheels. Not like our car now. It is next to a river and it is raining but the two people inside are laughing and saying something about a 'cheap first date' and they are sharing sandwiches. They are grown up but not old like Mummy and Daddy although they look a lot like them. Is it them? Their faces look a bit the same but the hair is different.

I tell Daddy what I see and there is quiet then for a while, but I know Mummy is nodding and crying and it makes me want to cry as well.

Anna, you have done so well, but it is time for you to come back out now.

Daddy's voice sounds funny. Wobbly.

Tip-toe back to the door and close it behind you. Close it gently.

They're coming, Ben! A car's just come over the hill. We've only got a few minutes!

The picture in Mummy's mind breaks up and others jump out. Pictures of men in suits and uniforms and in black cars and a green truck with the same picture on the side that Daddy has on some of his shirts. Mummy's scared and I don't like it and it makes me scared, too.

Jean, we knew this was going to happen. We agreed.

But we're not ready! Anna 1's not ready. We should run again. Now! Get her in the car! Ben, please!

Anna. Daddy's voice still wobbles. You need to be fast now. Leave that room. Tip-toe, but quickly. Close the door behind you. Now go to my door. Quickly, Anna! That's it. Turn the handle. Don't be afraid, I'm with you. Anna, come into the room. Now, look at the pictures. There are going to be lots of them. Don't worry, you won't remember them all now, but they'll come back to you as

you get older. Look at the pictures and promise me you won't tell anyone else about them. No-one at all. Do you promise, Anna?

'Yes, Daddy,' I say in the other room, the one where I sit with Leelo. My voice is very quiet.

Don't speak out loud. Just think the words. Make the shapes like pictures in your head. Do you promise?

I promise, daddy.

Ben! They've reached the bottom road. I can't let them take her! Or us!

Good, Anna. I can hear your voice. Keep speaking in your head. Biggest pinkie swear you won't tell, Anna?

Biggest pinkie swear I will never tell ever amen!

Look at the pictures, and remember what I am about to tell you.

The dream ends soon after with big men smashing the door and taking us all away in different cars, and when all the screaming and crying has stopped I never see Mummy and Daddy again.

Anna woke with a gasp and took a few moments to realise where she was. The bars on the window reminded her and she was sad until she remembered why she had awakened even when it was still dark. She had to go out of her room tonight and she had not done it before. Mummy and daddy weren't there to help her, but she was a big girl now and her star was looking down on her. She thought back to the dream and knew now that she had picked that one on purpose. She remembered how to get to the doors now and, after giving Leeloo a cuddle, lay back down, closed her eyes and tip-toed out of her room.

Control room operative Jensen frowned and rubbed his head. There was an itch, but it felt like it was on the *inside* of his skull. He wouldn't be surprised if he got one of his migraines, not after the constant bloody racket in this room, all the double shifts, and worst of all, Queen Boudicca snapping at them all and crashing round like a bloody Valkyrie! Ordering them to get the *goddamn* satellite network back online didn't *goddamn* make it any easier and, anyway, why was she *goddamn* shouting at them? This whole foul up wasn't their fault, but as usual the bigwigs who were really to blame were nowhere to be seen. No doubt holed up in some bunker somewhere drinking champagne as the end of the world loomed.

The end of the world. A line from a million pulp novels and B movies, but it wasn't such a cliché now, not with all this going on and all staff at grade B status or above ordered to stay on-site at the facility. *A few days' training*, they said. Grade AA Queen Boudicca, with her damn cat eyes and drill sergeant voice, certainly wasn't acting like it was some exercise.

Despite the itch in his skull fading a little, his head still felt wrong – hollow and heavy at the same time. No migraine, though, not yet, despite all the shouting and running around. Every so often, just irregularly enough to make everyone jump every time, the siren would go off as the enemies' missile satellites course corrected, their movements slight but unmistakably hostile. That was the official line, anyway. Jensen had a hunch – nothing he'd say out loud – that all those other countries were merely preparing to defend themselves.

He thought back to all the 'exercises' over the last few months, all those attack drills and pre-emptive strike simulations. *Surely we aren't the bad guys in all this?* He looked at the dotted line of the Earth's atmosphere on his computer screen and the

flashing circles representing other countries' orbiting nuclear platforms and a queasiness rolled over in his guts. *So many*. And he was sure that in another room somewhere in the facility, another operative was staring at another screen dotted with nuclear submarines lurking under the surface of seas and oceans around the world.

What a mess, and *Anna I* was still offline, gone silent and dark up there for months. Rumour was that one of the lead designers had sabotaged it, but Boudicca came down like a nuke on anyone she heard anyone even mention it.

Jensen took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his neck. He was sweating and the noise in here – the clacking of keyboards and the loud voices all taking over each other – was making his head throb. The itch came back, and then he swore he heard a door click shut somewhere, near but distant like at home when the wind blew a door closed upstairs. The itch disappeared. He jerked as the siren went off for several piercing seconds, the sound jumping the shouting in the room up a few decibels.

The end of the world, he mused, pinching the bridge of his nose. *Would that really be such a terrible thing?*

Anna sat up in bed, shaky but smiling as she stroked Leeloo's fur. She hadn't heard of Queen Boudicca, but she knew it was a joke name for the scary woman that sounded funny. But not as funny as *Damn cat eyes*. She giggled, even though she knew one of the words was rude, and was pleased that it wasn't just her who didn't like the scary woman.

Even better than that, she had tip-toed through a stranger's door all by herself! Her smile became happy-sad when she thought how proud mummy and daddy would have been.

Then she got a funny felling in her tummy when she remembered the man, ‘Jensen’, knew about Anna 1. It was strange to think there was another room in the building – she wasn’t sure where; not too far away – where there were lots of people right now who were very busy and very scared. Perhaps they were some of the bad people who had tried to make Anna 1 dangerous? She didn’t understand a lot of what she’d heard from Jensen, although she thought that it sounded like Anna 1 wasn’t doing what the people wanted. That was good. But how could they make a star do what they wanted, anyway?

Anna had left the curtains open and saw it was still dark out there in the desert, so she got up to look at her star. Anna 1 was there, the brightest thing in the sky, in the same place as always and her smile was now just a happy one. In all the excitement of tip-toeing out of her room she had forgotten to make her wishes before she’d gone to bed, so she pressed her forehead to the cold glass, counted to ten and said out loud, ‘I wish that Mummy and Daddy were alive again and we could all go back home.’ When she opened her eyes she didn’t look round to see if they were there this time. The dream had made her realise that she was on her own and she would not see them again until she was with them, high up there, up above the world, maybe even higher than Anna 1. Still, it made her feel better to say her wishes because it reminded her how much she loved them. And that she had to keep the secret safe.

The desert outside her window was just rocks and sand, but the moon must have been out somewhere above the building because everything was silver and shadows. *It’s like actually being on the moon.* She thought about her favourite space book at home, the one with a photo of astronauts jumping high with the Earth in the sky behind them. Mummy had read it with her one night and said that families had been going to live on the moon once, until the people with the money spent it on bad

things instead and people like Daddy had to stop designing space rockets and make other things he didn't like to talk about.

Does daddy make bad things now? Didn't daddy make Anna 1? Does that mean Anna 1 is bad now? she had asked. Mummy had gone quiet for quite a while before she answered. She had said that it was complicated, that Anna 1 had started as something to make everyone safer, but other people had tried to change it into something that was dangerous and daddy had stopped them, for now. Then she closed the book and said these were things too scary for a little girl to think about.

I wish that I keep my promise to daddy and not tell the men and the scary woman his secret, no matter what they say or do, she thought now and closed the curtains. In a few hours Queen Boudicca (Anna smiled in the dark) would bring the breakfast she wouldn't get to eat and ask her questions she wouldn't answer.

Her blanket was warm and Leeloo snuggled against her chest, but before she went back to sleep, she decided to visit the white room again, just to check that it was okay for later because she knew she would have to go back soon. Anna closed her eyes, slowed her breathing down, and then the white room was all around her. It was much easier this time, much faster than when she was younger and she felt proud that she was getting better at it.

There were still four walls in the room, but this time only two walls had a door. The other two were just plain. Anna remembered the first time she came to this room after Mummy and Daddy had been taken away and how she had sat in the middle of the big white floor and cried when she saw their doors had gone and realised what that meant.

Now she frowned, because there were two doors when she had only expected one. The door facing her – the one she had come to check - was the scary woman's door which she would go through after the breakfast visit, but there was another door over to her right, and it looked different to how it should, how the doors had looked so far. As she walked towards it she saw that it was bigger than usual and had a small sign on it. She recognised the letters straight away before she got close and felt a funny feeling in her tummy but waited until she got right up to it before reading it properly. It said **ANNA 1**. *My Anna 1? How can there be a door into a star?*

Slowly, she leaned in close and put her ear against it. A quiet humming came from the other side. *Should I go through? What if I open it and there is just space and I fall in?* It was strange to think that she could tip-toe into the star that twinkled down at her from so high in the sky every night.

Anna stepped back and decided she would go through the scary woman's door later as she had planned, then tonight she would come back and – again, her stomach felt wobbly and funny – open the **ANNA 1** door.

When she opened her eyes, the darkness shocked her after the lightness of the white room. Twisting to look at the curtains, she saw a hint of brightness creeping round the window frame and didn't know if it was still the moon or the sun starting to come up. In case it was the sun, she closed her eyes, pulled Leeloo close and decided not to dream this time when she fell asleep.

She was still asleep when the scary woman came in, the noise of the metal door closing behind her loud in the small room. Anna blinked herself awake and as she sat up she saw that the woman had come without the breakfast tray. She continued to stand by the door, and Anna saw the dark patches under her eyes and the strands of

hair sticking out from her normally perfect ponytail. Her cat eyes looked red and sore. All this made her seem frightening again, like Anna couldn't guess what she would do.

"I think you know more than you let on," the scary woman said, peering at her with those slitted eyes. Anna blushed and shifted under the covers. *She knows I tiptoed through that man's door! I must have been too loud and she knows!*

"You cry when I say your parents are hurt and you pretend you don't know anything, but you have never really lost control. Not *really*. Not like a *normal* girl would if she was trapped here alone in a strange place with me coming in every morning to tell her something horrible. I think you know your parents are dead."

Anna didn't know what to say and the woman walked over to the bookshelf with her back to her, so she kept quiet. She could feel Leeloo's warm fur against her leg where she had pushed him deeper under the covers.

"In fact, you haven't responded to *any* of the techniques our psychologists have recommended and I think all the threats in the world aren't going to work. The psychologists think we have reached a deadlock."

Anna didn't need to understand some of the words to know she didn't like the scary woman's quiet voice and especially the sound of 'deadlock'. She didn't seem angry but Anna could sense it, like a thunderstorm that was on the horizon and moving closer.

The woman whipped round, her suit rustling loudly, and Anna jumped. The cat eyes stared at her and Anna looked down, hugging her knees. The image of the white room came into her head, the woman's door within reach. She pushed the picture away, scared that the woman would know what she was thinking. The woman's stare continued and she smoothed back her hair.

“Yet maybe there is one more thing I can try.”

She took a step forward so she was right next to the bed. Anna leaned away, still looking down.

“Yes, you have lost your family, your home and the life you used to love – and that would be enough to break most people, never mind a young child – but you haven’t quite lost *everything*. You still have things that give you strength.”

She sat down on the bed, her weight bending the mattress so that Anna almost tipped over into her. Anna shuffled away, pressing herself against the cold wall.

“I have watched you carefully these past few days, Anna. I see from your flush that you didn’t know. Well, it has been most educational. I have learned a lot.” Her breath tickled Anna’s ear.

“Some men are going to come in later and take away this nice bed, your books, your night light, everything. They will also seal up that window so you can’t look up into the sky like you do every night – searching for mummy and daddy, perhaps? Saying your prayers like a good girl?”

My star! Anna thought, her hands gripping the quilt, *I won’t be able to make my wishes!*

The woman stood up, her shadow darkening the bed.

“You’re shaking, Anna. I see that’s made an impact. At last. One more thing before I go.”

The woman grabbed the quilt, pulling it from Anna’s hands and threw it onto the floor, scattering the stuffed toys Anna never played with. She reached over and snatched Leelo. Anna shouted and lunged forward, but the woman slapped her hand away and thumped out of the door in her big boots.

“I’ll be back later. Perhaps you’ll have something to tell me then,” she said as the door slammed behind her.

Anna jumped up and banged on the metal.

“Bring him back! He’s *my* Leeloo!”

When she gave up, she slumped down and cried. She felt more scared than she had ever felt before, and didn’t even have her best friend Leeloo to stroke and talk to. She ran to the window and beat on the glass, but it hurt her hands and she knew even if the glass did break, she wouldn’t be able to squeeze through the bars on the other side. So she cried as she stared out at the desert sand, wishing on the star she couldn’t see in the blue sky that Mummy and Daddy were with her.

She stayed at the window, her eyes stinging, waiting for the men who were supposed to take her things away and block her view of her star. As she waited, she watched sand blowing around the rocks and wondered what the scary woman would do to Leeloo. Would she pull his arms and legs off? Would she pull his stuffing out? The thought made her lip tremble but she didn’t want to cry again, so she closed her eyes and made her wishes, this time all in her head so that the woman couldn’t hear if she was listening and couldn’t tell what she was doing if she was watching. She wanted to keep her promise to mummy and daddy, but desperately wanted Leeloo back. Daddy had said that lots of people would die if she told the secret, if she said the numbers that she had promised to remember.

The sand looked like it was dancing outside, moving around and sometimes twirling in the wind. The sun was bright and made it hard to look for too long and made the sand look shiny.

Then she remembered. The white room. The scary woman’s door. She could find out what had happened to Leeloo when she tip-toed through the cat eye’s door.

Like she'd already planned. Except she wanted to do it now. *What if the men come in to take my things as I'm tip-toeing? Would they know what I was doing?* But Anna didn't want to wait any longer. *They might not come in for ages yet. I need to find out what she's doing to Leeloo. If the men come in they'll think I'm asleep and I'll come back when they are trying to wake me up.*

Anna used her hands to wipe her nose and rubbed her wet cheeks dry. She felt a bit better now she had a plan, like she could get back at the scary woman a little, so she climbed back into bed and picked the covers off the floor and pulled them up to her chin. Her hand felt for Leeloo without her thinking about it, and she swallowed a sob back down.

Even though her jaw ached with trying not to cry and her hands were fists beneath the quilt, she was in the white room moments after closing her eyes. Ignoring the ANNA 1 door, she walked straight ahead, almost forgetting to tip-toe quietly, pushed open the scary woman's door and went right in.

She rubbed absent-mindedly at her head as the itch in what felt like the inside of her skull persisted. She felt a bit odd, like her head was heavier than usual but floaty at the same time.

“Commissioner Bradley, did you hear what I asked you?”

She snapped her focus back to the laptop screen, where Lord Melville was frowning at her. From the unpainted concrete walls in the background and the plain desk he was sitting at, she guessed he was in his Emergency Operations office. *Skulking in your bunker already, Melville? Typical. So you and the rest of the great and the good are expecting the fallout to well and truly hit the fan, eh?*

“Sorry, sir. To answer your question, yes, we have made progress with the girl. The psychological strategies recommended by your experts continued to have only a limited impact on this remarkably resilient child, I’m afraid, so I have adopted a new tack which has already...”

“Skip the waffle, Bradley. And don’t blame the head shrinkers. Has the girl told you what she knows?”

With the skull itch needling her and Melville’s beady eyes peering at her out of his florid face, she wished she could reach into the screen and grab his ridiculous bow tie. Instead she sat up straight and smoothed her ponytail to compose herself.

“No.” She watched Melville’s lips purse and the little eyes shrink almost to black coins.

“But like I said, I believe I made a breakthrough just before your call.”

She knew how it sounded, how *he* would think it sounded.

As he drew breath to cut in, she continued.

“I got through to her. Got a genuine reaction at last.”

She winced at what she was going to say next. She glanced at the girl’s doll next to her on the desk.

“I hurt her,” she finished and cringed at the twist of guilt in her gut.

She reminded herself of the breathtaking stakes and tried to ignore the fact that she had made a little girl cry by stealing her favourite toy. A girl who knew her parents were dead. She’d done some horrific things recently – she had the circles under her eyes to prove it – but this felt the most sickening. *Jesus, what have I become?*

“That’s all very good, Commissioner, but she still hasn’t said anything, and I don’t need to remind you...”

“We all know what is at stake here, Lord Melville,” she interrupted, heading off the inevitable ‘ticking clock’ lecture.

“I am confident – very confident - that the girl will crack tonight. We will soon have the access sequence. Everything else is ready and my team have been working round the clock to ensure we are prepared for launch.”

Lord Melville reached off screen and pulled a sheet of paper towards him. She recognised the National Defence Council seal at the top and frowned. Their nickname *The Vanish Inquisition* was only half a joke. She remembered it was they who sanctioned the use of torture ‘in the interest of national safety’ and even developed those horrific sentient bullets. If they were involved in this, then things were about to be taken out of her hands. *Dammit, Melville’s gone over my head. The usual rush for results and to hell with the consequences.*

Melville sat back, making a show of reading the paper, his needlepoint eyes stitching slowly side to side. She fought hard not to give him the reaction he wanted, focusing instead on the faint itch in her head. She found herself wanting to look across to the girl’s toy. It was out of shot for Melville, but was a purple smudge in her peripheral vision. Pretending to stretch, she reached out to knock it onto the floor, but when her fingers touched its soft fur, they stopped and stroked it. The itch in her skull grew, but the tension in her neck eased and her shoulders dropped and relaxed. Melville was mouthing at her on the screen, but her focus was on how comforting it was to stroke the toy and she had to fight the urge to cuddle it to her chest.

“...however, I am more inclined to believe their guarantees, as I’m sure you understand, Commissioner. Commissioner? Bradley, are you listening to me?”

She snapped out of her reverie and snatched her hand back. Melville was leaning towards the screen so that the thread veins in his cheeks were visible.

“Yes, Lord Melville. Please continue.”

He drew back, grumbling, and flapped the National Defence Council paper.

“They say their new techniques will get results. The girl will be subjected to a full interrogation and will – finally - tell us everything she knows.’

“Lord Melville, I am not an expert in this area, as I am sure you aren’t either, but we both know what that means.”

They can’t do that to a little girl! She felt a brief flush of shame at her hypocrisy, but reassured herself she would never have gone *that* far to get information.

“She’s only *seven*.”

“The Council acknowledge the ‘procedure’ will, cause some, ah,” he looked at the paper again, ‘some ‘psychological neutering’ afterwards, but what choice do we have? If we don’t get that key code, then the girl won’t live to her next birthday anyway. None of us will. And I am an expert in *that* area.”

“‘Psychological neutering’! If she doesn’t die, she’ll wish she had!”

Her blood is on my hands. I shouldn’t have stressed the girl’s importance in all this until I had answers. I should have monitored her parents more carefully. But suicide pills? Bloody Cold War stuff. Who would have thought to look for those? Who would have thought Ben and Jean would leave their work and their child behind? My God, what did it cost them?

“The investigation team have been scrambled and will arrive at the facility in one hour to collect the girl.”

Melville peered at her and she wondered if he could see the horror in her eyes.

“And you will give them your full cooperation, Commissioner. In the meantime, instruct your team to continue their preparations and assume the launch deadline will be met.”

“Just give me a bit more time with the girl. I promise I’ll...”

The feed was cut, her screen showing a blank viewing pane and the facility logo. She breathed through her nose for a minute before slamming the laptop lid down and sweeping the girl’s toy across the room. The skull itch had gone and she needed to get to the control room, but she couldn’t face the stress and commotion in there yet. Her guts clenched as she tried not to imagine the scene when they came for the girl. The worst thing was she knew that, as arrogant as he was, Melville was right. If they didn’t get that key code then it was the end, the absolute, no-coming-back end for just about everyone, even for those like Melville in their deep down bunkers. *But still, she’s just a girl...*

She whirled round as she heard a door click shut, but hers was still locked tight and the office was empty.

She’s just a girl. Anna was scared. Not scared like when mummy and daddy’s doors disappeared from the white room and she knew they were dead; not scared like when the woman came in the morning to tell her nasty lies; not scared like when she thought about not being to look out of her window at her star and make her wishes. *This* scared was somehow worse than all of those. Without Leeloo she didn’t have anyone and some men were coming to take her to another place where they would do bad things to her brain. Even the scary woman didn’t want her to go there. While she was through the scary woman’s door she had seen pictures – just flashes really - of wires and people screaming and crying when the posh man had talked about the

something 'Council'. Perhaps they might find out she could tip-toe. Daddy said no-one must ever find out or they would use her for bad things.

She screwed up her eyes to stop the tears, but she could still feel Leeloo's soft fur – even though it had been the woman's fingers, not hers – so the tears came anyway and felt hot on her cheeks. She couldn't think of a way to get Leeloo back and she didn't know how to get away from the men who were coming. Anna fought back a memory of the last time strangers had come to take her and mummy and daddy away, shaking her head to stop it coming clear.

She knew she didn't have much time because the man in the control room (*Jason? No, Jensen?*) and the posh man on the computer and the scary woman had all mentioned something happening soon. They all seemed in a rush and scared of what was coming, or of not making something happen - she wasn't sure.

By herself, with men coming, Leeloo locked away, and time running out, Anna knew there was only one thing she could do. She went over to the window and looked up. Even though she could only see bright blue up there, she knew that her star was looking down on her. She listened, but she couldn't hear its voice, not like when it spoke to her in its strange language at night. She closed her eyes and made her wishes, wondering if this was the last time. Because--she was going to tip-toe through the door of ANNA 1.

For the first time, there was only one door. The white room seemed larger, the walls further away, but the sign on the door seemed bigger than last time, so that ANNA 1 was clear from where she was standing in the middle. Anna's heart was beating hard, like the time she was one of the three kings in her school nativity. She remembered Mummy smiling at her in the front row of the audience as she gave a

gold-painted block of wood to Mary and Joseph and the doll they had in a manger. Daddy had been away at work, but kept sending her messages all morning telling her not to rush her lines and to speak in a clear voice so that the back row could hear.

She breathed slowly now, just like daddy told her to when he had helped her practise her lines. It helped a little and in her mind she pictured the secret numbers he had told her to remember, the ones he said she would need when she went through the ANNA 1 door.

She got up on her tip-toes, even though she wasn't at the door yet, keeping as quiet as she could as she moved forward, mentally saying the words and numbers to herself over and over. Although she knew them off by heart, she was scared she might suddenly forget now she *needed* to remember them.

The door was cold against her fingertips and ear as she leaned against it to listen. She jumped back as it spoke to her. '*Can you tell me the access code please, Anna?*' It was the same voice that she had heard all those nights looking up between the bars at the sky. The star's voice. *Her* star's voice, but she could understand the words now.

Anna swallowed, then spoke the long list of numbers in her best back-of-the-audience voice. She was relieved when they came easily, even though it must have taken over half a minute to say them all. She jumped again as the handle turned by itself and the door swung open to reveal a rectangle of dark in the white wall.

Anna, remembering to tip-toe, crept to the threshold and peered in, thinking '*I am looking into my star!*'. Her excitement soon faded when she realised it was just a small, dark room - not much bigger than her prison room - with what looked like a television screen at the far end. She also felt an ache inside and realised she had been

secretly hoping to see her mummy and daddy in there waiting for her. But no, the room was empty apart from the screen.

“Access code verified. Access granted. Please come in, Anna.”

Hearing the voice made her feel better, just like it had when she heard it in her prison room. It was clear and friendly. She took a few tip-toed steps into the room. It was dark, but she could see okay from the pale light coming from the television screen which glowed a sort of grey.

“There is no need to creep, Anna. You are welcome in here. In fact, I have been waiting for you. Your father said you would come. Please don’t be scared, and come over to the screen. But be quick, please. Time is short now.”

Anna’s heart fluttered at the mention of Daddy and she hurried over to the screen, hoping to see him there, looking back at her. But the screen was still grey and blank.

‘Now Anna, I am going to give you a message from your mother and father. It is short and I will only play it once so you must listen carefully. You understand, don’t you?’

Again, Anna had to swallow before she could answer. ‘I understand, star.’ This time her voice was just above a whisper and she could barely hear it herself with her heart thumping in her ears. Feeling shaky, she sat crossed-legged in front of the screen, folding her dress under her. The lace on one shoe was undone and trailing, but her hands were too shaky to tie it and she sucked her fingertips like she used to when she was little.

A picture came onto the screen. Mummy and Daddy smiling, their arms around each other and Anna burst into tears. She couldn’t help it. It felt like all of the crying she had held back since the men had come to take her family away - since the

scary woman had started saying those horrible things to her, since she had seen Mummy's and Daddy's doors disappear from the white room, since she had made her wishes alone every night - all came bursting out of her. She cried more than when she had lost Leeloo, and when a boy at school had pulled her hair, and when Daddy went away on work and all of them put together and the tears were hot on her cheeks and her nose was all drippy but she couldn't stop.

Anna was getting up to run to the screen when Daddy started speaking to her. She missed the first few words with sobbing, then slumped back down and chewed her fingertips.

"...am so sorry we had to leave you all alone. I bet you've been so brave. The bravest girl – the bravest *person* – in the whole world, haven't you? Even though you've been scared and we couldn't be there to look after you, I bet you've never told the secret, have you?"

"Never, daddy! I promised! That scary woman never got me to say. I made a wish every night that I wouldn't tell."

She stopped and realised that she was talking over Daddy. She felt sick then because she knew he wasn't talking to her right now, that his voice was a recording. The photograph on the screen wobbled as more tears came, but she kept wiping them and kept listening.

"...don't know how to tell you this, but you must try to understand. I will help you understand, okay Anna?"

She nodded even though she knew she didn't have to.

There was a pause and Anna thought she could hear daddy take a big breath in, slowly, like he taught her to do.

“Anna, the bad people who took us from our home will keep hurting you until you tell them the secret that you’ve been so brave and clever to keep to yourself all this time. I know you think you’ll never tell but they have...doctors, special doctors, who will take the secret out of your mind if they can’t get you to say it. I don’t want them to do that, not just because they will use the secret to hurt lots and lots of people – *millions* of people - all around the world, but because it will hurt you and you will not be...yourself anymore.”

Anna knew this was true because of what she had heard when she tip-toed through the scary woman’s door. Daddy was very sad now. His voice sounded sadder than she had ever heard before. She could see his face in her mind as he spoke, and it wasn’t like the smiling one on the screen.

“So there is one last thing I need you to do. Anna, I want you to tell your star the rest of our secret. I give you my permission. You are not breaking your promise to me because the star is our friend and it has been waiting for you to tell it. I promise you it’s okay.”

Anna thought about it and knew it was okay because Mummy and Daddy had said the star was her own light in the sky and it had watched over her all this time and talked to her when she was most scared.

“When the star asks you for the secret, say it out loud in your clearest voice. Okay?”

“Yes, daddy. In my best king voice.” Anna smiled.

“Three things before I go, Anna.”

“No!”

”Firstly, and most importantly, Mummy and I love you more than I have time to explain and we always will.”

There was a pause, and then when Daddy's voice carried on, it sounded wobbly.

“Secondly, I promise we will all be together again soon, so hold onto that thought. Finally – and this is important, so *please* do this for me – stay in this room with your star. Don't go back. Okay? Stay where you are. The star will look after you.”

Anna nodded, although she was a little puzzled. Mummy and Daddy had always told her not to stay in the white room or through one of the doors in case she got stuck. And if she stayed here how would she get Leeloo back? Then she remembered about the men that even the scary woman was afraid of coming to get her and she decided she would like to stay with her star after all.

She looked around the dark room but saw nothing apart from the screen. She didn't know where she would sleep, or where she would go to the toilet, or what there was to eat, but she thought the star would tell her later, after she had said the secret.

The photograph stayed, so she kissed Mummy and Daddy gently, closing her eyes as her lips touched the screen's warmth.

“I am ready, Anna.”

The voice didn't seem to come from any one part of the room, so Anna faced the screen, her eyes flicking to and fro between her parents' faces.

“Anna, there isn't much time. I am ready now.”

Although the star's voice sounded the same as before, Anna sensed a rush behind the words.

“Okay, star.”

She was a bit croaky, so she coughed to clear her throat.

“Please go ahead, Anna.”

In her mind, Anna once again sat on her daddy’s knee as he told her the secret numbers, his voice low and warm. And as he spoke in her mind, she said them along with him out loud to her star.

When it was finally done, Anna smiled, feeling light and giddy. The secret was out at last! She didn’t have to worry about forgetting the numbers anymore and she didn’t have to be careful what she thought when the scary woman was around. *Mummy, daddy, I did it!*

‘Launch codes confirmed,’ said the star.

Control room operative Jensen jumped as the siren screamed and his screen suddenly strobed with warning messages. Seconds passed before he reached for his keyboard with big, clumsy fingers. Swallowing back the burn of bile in his throat, he tried to concentrate as a din of overlapping voices erupted around him. There was the bang of a door, then the Commissioner’s barking cut through it all.

Seconds later, she was at his station, her hand gripping his shoulder and he could feel the heat of it through his uniform.

“Report. Can you confirm launch?”

“What?”

He was transfixed by her eyes so close to his, her face framed by the scramble and bedlam around them.

“Report!” she screamed at him. *“Can you confirm launch?”*

Flecks of spit on his face made him blink.

He followed her jabbing arm and turned to his screen and typed. The same scrolling lines came back at him, unbelievable despite their solidity.

“Confirm!”

Her fingers were pinching into his skin, but Jensen didn't register it - just stared at the screen, all the exercises and training fallen away. The siren had stopped and the room was quiet, everyone – standing, sitting, all stilled in mid conversation – looking at him with the same wide eyes, the only sound the Commissioner's fast breathing close by his ear.

Trying not to look at the tremble in his hands over the keyboard, Jensen said, “Launch confirmed.”

Some swearing around the room, some quick looks and muttering, then all was quiet again. Jensen thought that was somehow worse than screaming.

“But the launch command didn't come from here. How is that possible?”

The Commissioner loosened her grip on his shoulder and straightened.

“Target?”

The flatness of her voice was wrong in the thrumming-tense room and several people wondered at the vague expression on her face as she stared up at the ceiling.

“Ground zero is this facility. How-,”

Jensen was saying, but she tuned out his pointless question and the rest of the mindless noise that erupted. She should be giving the evacuation order – some personnel were already making towards the exit doors – but she knew that if they even made it to the bunker in time, they wouldn't survive a direct hit.

“Cancel launch. My authorisation. Override it now.”

She watched, already knowing the outcome. Operative Jensen flapped at the keyboard and stammered something at her, but she wasn't listening anymore. Ignoring the jostling and the panicked looks, she took one of the freshly vacated chairs, knocking a swinging headset out of the way, and closed her eyes. Even now,

with the end of the world about to come crashing down on them, her thoughts turned to Anna, locked alone in her room with bars on the windows. Her eyes screwed tighter when she thought of the hell she had put the girl through, the things she had said to her. *I tortured a little girl. And for what? So Melville and others like him could burn the rest of the world before it burned them? Does it matter who dies first when we're all going up in flames?*

Her eyes opened. *The least I can do is be with her at the end. I can do that.* She got up and shouldered through wide-eyed people, blind to them all staring at her, only thinking about how she would she wanted to get to the little girl's room and comfort her and tell her she was sorry in these final few minutes.

As she hurried down corridors now empty and lit red, she imagined the two of them, she and the little girl who wasn't scared anymore, kneeling in front of the barred window, looking up at the wonder of the sky.

She would hold the girl's hand and they would make a wish and watch together as one star got brighter and brighter as it fell to Earth.