The Brain Cell

Marc van der Meer

Cover design: Marc van der Meer

Author photo: Martijn op het Broek

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Chapter 1

Bam! The steel door slammed shut. The sound, dull and hollow, propagated through the space, a definitive closure, not just to the outside world, but also to a certain kind of hope. The heavy lock, a massive mechanism of blued steel, was turned with what was undoubtedly a large, serrated key. First one click, then a second, resonating deeper, and finally the third, a thunderous clap that traveled through the concrete. The sounds were mechanical, final. The vibrations spread through his bones, not as a shock, but as a cold observation, a chord of steel and silence.

He was alone. Not in a cube, as one might say, but in a space defined by grayness. Bare, concrete walls enclosed him, their texture rough and unforgiving, as if even the stones resisted his presence. Against the wall stood a bunk, really just a plank, with a thin mattress that could hardly be called soft, on the mattress a ragged pillow, as a whole more a suggestion of comfort than an actual place of rest. It smelled musty, a mixture of old sweat, despair, and some filthy American disinfectant, a scent that was depressingly familiar, as if the cell itself were an organism that fed on misery.

This was the Polunsky Unit, Texas. The place where men sat waiting for their end. Each cell was an individual tomb, a concrete coffin in which the days slowly ticked away, the hours stretching into an unbearable infinity. At the other end of the cell was a stainless steel toilet, the metal gleaming under the harsh, merciless light, a reminder of the body's basic needs, even here, on the brink of existence. Above it was a small sink, the faucet dripping gently, a constant, monotonous sound that did not break the silence but rather emphasized it. He noticed that the toilet's flush water came directly from that dripping faucet, an efficient, if somewhat macabre, arrangement, a perverse example of utilitarianism.

He waited here. Waited for the injection. He knew the procedure in detail, its cold efficiency. The sedatives, midazolam for example, administered first to still the fear, although fear had become a luxury here. Then the paralytic, rocuronium bromide, which stopped the breathing, trapping the body in a living death. And finally, potassium chloride, to bring the heart to a standstill, the ultimate liberation. Three liquids, clear and colorless, that end life, a threefold symphony of death. He had seen it once before, from the other side of the glass, as a mandatory witness. It was... efficient. Impersonal. As if life itself were a defect to be corrected, a flaw in the machinery of existence. Even that memory brought him no excitement, no fear. Only a weary acceptance, a resignation bordering on indifference. For years, no, decades, he had been a prisoner. Although he knew the average

waiting time here was just over ten years, it mattered little to him. Time had become an abstraction, a concept that had lost its meaning in this concrete tube. He didn't keep track, so he had no idea how long or short he had actually been there.

In his head, deep behind his forehead, there was a space. Not a metaphor. A cockpit. No scared little dog sat there, no childlike soul. A technician sat there. A miniature version of himself. Not imaginary—an echo from a picture book he used to read to his son: “How Dogs Really Work” by Alan Snow. A mechanical dog, controlled from within by a smaller dog. With levers, strings, binoculars. His son had laughed at it. He hadn't. He had understood. That cockpit was always there. There, his pilot moved levers, tested buttons. Every action: cause. Every reaction: a note. Like Captain Keen, that old computer game. A bridge appears, a wall disappears, or it doesn't. The right sequence. No room for emotion. Only logic. Every movement a puzzle, a search for the right combination: lever up, push button, and then… maybe something. Or maybe not. The complexity of the mechanism, the inexorability of cause and effect, the absolute powerlessness when the sequence was wrong… it was a lonely occupation. The operator, lost in his task, lost in the labyrinth of his own creation.

And now? Now the dog was caught, the operator enraged. D'Hondt, as he cynically remarked because his name would translate into ‘The Dog’, in a cell. Fate had a sense of irony. And that irony was amplified by the inability of those strange Americans to pronounce his name correctly. "De-Hoand" it usually sounded, as if they confused him with his favorite rock band, DeWolff. Yet it was so simple: they could say "Don't"… but then it sounds as if he's not allowed to do something, just like so many things you're not allowed to do when you're a prisoner on Death Row.

Instead of a last meal, could he get a concert from those guys, preferably in the XL lineup with brass and backing vocals? Or better yet, have them perform here, like Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison? Strange, in all his indifference to death, his conviction, this cell, here in East Texas, that this was something he would actually be up for. Or maybe he could choose a piece of music to be played during the execution? "Rosita" by DeWolff, of course. And who knows, maybe a few new fans of the band would emerge if his execution is streamed and viewers hear that song (they'd get their money's worth, because the song lasts—in the live version—23 minutes…). But he didn’t give a damn about the physical cell, he thought at first. He was already imprisoned anyway. For years, no, decades, he had been a prisoner in his own head. His mind, a complex web of thoughts and considerations, held him captive in a constant state of inertia. He was a chess grandmaster with pieces of thought on the chessboard of life. One who endlessly weighed all possibilities, dissected every scenario,

until the chance to act was long gone. Another thought, another, and another. Paralyzed by the complexity of his own thoughts.

He often stood on the sidelines of his own life, more a spectator than a participant. Things happened around him, and he was there, nearby, but he did not intervene. He observed, analyzed, but did not act. Like that murder... had he committed it, or was he just there by chance? It happened, he didn't leave... and then things happened. Things he had no control over, things that happened to him.

He is highly intelligent, with an IQ of 131, just too low to be a member of MENSA, because at 130 you are 'highly gifted', but because that club uses a standard deviation of 2, you have to score 132 to be admitted. A detail that filled him with a mixture of irony and indifference. On the one hand, he recognized the absurdity of the whole concept—a club for people with a certain IQ? How elitist and reductionist could you be? On the other hand, a small voice gnawed in the back of his mind, a childish need for recognition, for belonging. And now he realized that that indifference might not be as deep as he thought. Because in essence, it wasn't that he didn't care about anything. It was more a realization, a deep-rooted conviction that his individual life, his minuscule existence, was a microscopically small part of immense humanity, a fleeting moment in the unimaginable history of the earth. From that perspective, everything indeed seemed insignificant, futile. It didn't matter.

At the same time, there was that gnawing desire, that unspoken need to ‘matter’. To make a mark, to make a difference. It was this paradox, this inner contradiction, that had once driven him to education, that had made him strive for a professorship. There, in the ivory tower of academia, it seemed possible to matter! To have an impact with your knowledge, your insights, your words, to make a difference. If not by publishing, then at least by influencing the young and unspoiled minds of his students. As Tom Lanoye once so aptly described in his brilliant trilogy 'The Divine Monster', there is also a danger in wanting to matter and then doing what is expected of you. Before you know it, you conform to the expectations of 'the others', you start doing exactly what is expected of you. It is a theme that also appears in Sartre's 'No Exit', where the characters are trapped in each other's gazes, condemned to a perpetual performance of their own identity. Hell is other people... Well, his hell might just be in his own head.

How many levels did Dante's hell have...? Nine...? Where, on which level, would he be now? And D'Hondt? He knew he yearned for recognition, for affirmation. His somewhat dandyish style of dress, his carefully chosen glasses, his distinctive goatee and curly mustache, the proud use of his title of professor, his preference for big cars... they were all

external manifestations of that inner need. He wanted to be seen, appreciated, admired. People are, after all, always just little children pathetically searching for their parents' approval.

Now, as a death row inmate, he realized with bitter irony that he might get that recognition after all. His execution—a Dutchman sentenced to death in the U.S.—would undoubtedly make the news, grace the headlines, dominate conversations. A macabre form of celebrity, a grotesque apotheosis of a life that had so often stood on the sidelines. In death, he would, at last, no longer be insignificant.

Chapter 2

How in God's name did he end up here? The question echoed in the silence of the cell, an echo louder than the footsteps of the guards in the hallway. D'Hondt thought back to the courtroom, a space where the truth, under the weight of procedures and interpretations, had turned into a caricature of itself. He remembered the fluorescent lighting, relentless and flat, that cast a cold, hospital-like atmosphere over the room and reduced the faces of the jury members to unreadable masks. Masks of indifference, of boredom, but also, here and there, of a kind of hungry sensationalism, as if they were gawking at a macabre spectacle. A spectacle in which he himself was the spectator, an outsider in his own story.

The judge, a man with a face drawn like parchment and a voice that creaked like a rusty wheel, had conducted the procedure with a routine efficiency, as if a man's fate were no more than a bureaucratic formality, a file to be dealt with on a cluttered desk. The so-called experts had spewed their jargon, an incomprehensible mixture of legal and scientific language, words presented as evidence, theories pronounced as irrefutable verdicts. D'Hondt had listened, but their argument had washed over him like rainwater on a smooth stone, impenetrable and irrelevant to the true complexity of the events.

His lawyer, this Jimmy (oh, the irony), a kind of Saul Goodman—the slick lawyer from the series “Breaking Bad”—with his smooth talk and opportunistic attitude, seemed more interested in making deals than in uncovering the truth. A smooth talker, with a hurried energy and a grin that never reached his eyes, had advised him to compromise, to seek a quick solution, as if a quick solution existed for the entanglements of human existence. "Let's get this over with as quickly as possible, D'Hondt," he had said, his hand on D'Hondt's back, a touch that felt cold and impersonal, like the hand of an undertaker. "A deal, that's what we need. A compromise." D'Hondt had felt the urge to stand up and proclaim his version of the truth, to expose the absurdity of the accusations, but the words had stuck in his throat like dust. Shouting had never been his way. His indignation manifested in a suffocating silence, an inner turmoil that found no outlet in the noisy chaos of the courtroom.

The public prosecutor, a woman with a fanatical glint in her eyes, had portrayed him as a monster, a conscienceless murderer, a dark entity capable of unimaginable cruelties. Her words were like heavy stones thrown at him, each accusation a wound that tore his soul further open. She presented so-called conclusive evidence, photos of the crime scene, witness statements that were contradictory and unreliable, but which she masterfully forged together with rhetoric into a seemingly watertight story. "Ladies and gentlemen of

the jury," she had said with a voice full of indignation, "the man standing before you has, through his shocking and deliberate contempt for human life, committed a heinous act. The evidence will irrefutably show that his actions on that fatal day went far beyond mere negligence; it was an act of extreme recklessness, so dangerous and so devoid of any consideration for others, that it is tantamount to an assault on life itself. The victim, a young woman in the prime of her life, and her unborn child, were brutally snatched from us, as a direct result of Mr. D'Hondt's decision to operate a deadly weapon—his vehicle—while heavily intoxicated. Mr. D'Hondt," she paused, her gaze fixed on the jurors, "did not just take a life; he destroyed a future, tore a family apart, with a heartless indifference that defies human dignity. His actions testify to a depravity that cries out for the severest conviction. And we haven't even talked about his attempt..."

As the prosecutor went on, his thoughts drifted. He thought about the absurdity of trial by jury. What did these 'peers' really know about the complexity of a human life, about the nuances of guilt and innocence? It was absurd that laymen, with their limited knowledge and prejudices, should judge the fate of another. This was something that should be left to experts, people who had dedicated their lives to understanding the human mind, to unraveling the truth. And how did one become an expert for a court, anyway? Were those types paid for their judgment, and by whom?

Could his mind even be understood? He himself had been a prisoner in his own head for decades and still hadn't figured out how that mind worked. Would an expert know? How could anyone else ever fully map the winding paths of his consciousness, the scars of his past, the fears and obsessions that had shaped him to the very core of his being? He'd actually like to be properly analyzed by a psychiatrist, but well... was that still going to happen now? And would he then, as always, expect miracles, just as he always expected to jump off the massage table like a young god, restored and well, after a sports massage?

In God’s name (well, not that God had anything to do with it, let alone that anything was done in his name here), now he hadn't been paying attention the whole time, and had probably been sitting there looking unaffected and expressionless. Where were we in the trial? Jimmy saw that things were looking bad for D'Hondt. The jurors, with their diverse appearances—one with a carefully trimmed mustache that curled at the corners of his mouth (a bit of mustache wax would have been nice), another with an impeccable baldness that gave his face a certain authority, a woman with her hair up and lips tightly drawn, and an obese specimen whose Texas-patriotic tie was too tight around his neck and who constantly tugged at his shirt—seemed less and less convinced of his innocence. Jimmy decided to request a recess. Not to plead the case, but to limit the damage.

While the bailiff recited his lines about the further course of events, Judge Thompson was already in his chambers at the back of the courthouse, enjoying a sneaky cigar. The room, small and poorly ventilated, was filled with a thick, blue haze that clung to the yellowed walls and the dusty books that flooded his desk. Smoking had been forbidden in the courthouse for years, but Thompson, a man of habits and privileges, had never paid much attention to the rules. With a deep, satisfied puff of his Montecristo, he thought about the case he had just left. What a strange fellow that Dutchman is, it's as if it's all passing him by... could it be a language barrier?

Across the hall, the public prosecutor, Ms. Davies, and her assistant sat in their assigned office, sipping weak coffee from a thermos. Davies, a woman with an impeccable career and a reputation for ruthlessness, was frustrated by the course of events. "That defense attorney," she said, her voice sharp as a knife, "is trying to get out of it again with his weak stories, wants to dismiss this as intoxication manslaughter, maybe even just manslaughter." She almost snorted it out. "As if this was a simple 'oops, my bad', a moment of inattention! That man knowingly gambled with the lives of others. His total, abject lack of responsibility... that's not simple manslaughter. That shows such depraved-heart recklessness that it resulted in the death of an innocent woman and her unborn child. That's murder, and we're going to make sure that Dutchman"—she said it as if it were a dirty word—"gets the maximum sentence." Her assistant, a young, ambitious lawyer, nodded in agreement, how could he not, but silently he wondered if there might be more to it than met the eye.

Meanwhile, the jury had retired to the jury room, a bare, functional space with wooden paneling up to a meter high, olive-green walls, a suspended ceiling, fluorescent lighting, and a long table with uncomfortable chairs. The atmosphere was tense, a mixture of unease and curiosity. One of the jurors, the obese patriot with the tie, made a remark about the defendant. "Did you see him? That weird professor with his goatee and curly mustache? And those glasses... he probably thinks he's smart," he said, his voice full of contempt. The woman with the tightly drawn lips snickered. "And that name! D’Hondt. Sounds like 'Donut'." And they made jokes about the apostrophe in his name. If D'Hondt had heard it, he would have had thoughts about it: “I'm an apostrophe. I'm just a symbol to remind you that there's more to see. I'm just a product of the system, a catastrophe. And yet a masterpiece, and yet I'm half-diseased. And when I am deceased, at least I go down to the grave and die happily”. There was laughter, a nervous, uncomfortable laughter that hid the tension in the room.

After the recess, Jimmy went to Judge Thompson's chambers. Ms. Davies and her assistant were also present. The room, small and poorly ventilated, was filled with a thick, blue haze that clung to the yellowed walls and the dusty books that flooded the desk. Jimmy looked around and remarked, "Nice, isn't it? Breaking all the rules. Smoking in the courthouse. I knew I liked you, Your Honor." Thompson looked at him sternly, but a small smile appeared on his face.

Jimmy laid out his proposal, or rather, the strategy he hoped to follow. "Mr. D'Hondt," he began with a solemn intonation that was meant to underscore the seriousness of the situation, "is undeniably involved in an immense tragedy, and we do not deny the gravity of the loss and the suffering caused in any way. However, his actions on that fatal day, however catastrophic the consequences, were the direct result of a severely diminished judgment and loss of control due to heavy intoxication. There is no indication whatsoever of malicious intent towards the victim. This was not an act of planned aggression or cold-blooded murder, but a catastrophic error in judgment, with irreversible consequences. We will therefore argue with conviction—and this is also the basis on which we hope to reach a settlement—that this is a case of manslaughter, and not the more serious, and in our view legally untenable, charge of murder."

Ms. Davies initially frowned, but after some urging from Jimmy, she reluctantly nodded. Judge Thompson listened attentively, his expression unreadable. After a short pause, during which he slowly drew on his cigar and exhaled the smoke towards Jimmy, who—after years of not smoking—eagerly inhaled, he nodded in agreement. "The court accepts the proposal for a settlement," he declared with a solemn voice. "The charge against Mr. D'Hondt will be amended from murder to manslaughter. The jury will be instructed to deliberate accordingly."

The relief in the courtroom was palpable, but short-lived. As the judge was about to address the jury, D'Hondt suddenly stood up. His chair scraped loudly across the stone floor. All eyes were on him. "Your Honor," he began in a voice that was unexpectedly clear and powerful, in flawless English, "I cannot accept this settlement. I am guilty of murder. I acted with premeditation, and I am prepared to face the consequences." A dead silence fell in the courtroom. Even the judge, who had seen so much in his long career, seemed stunned. The jurors looked at him with a mixture of surprise and dismay. Jimmy stared at him as if he had seen a ghost. His mouth fell open, his eyes bulged, and his face, normally so smooth and composed, contorted into a caricature of disbelief. The juror who had earlier spoken sneeringly of D'Hondt's name now looked at him with even greater contempt.

Ms. Davies smiled briefly, but quickly hid it. She was actually quite attractive, his practiced eye studied the curves in her pantsuit to get an image of her naked body... He did nothing with that skill, it was just an image; he just liked to see naked women.

D'Hondt looked the judge straight in the eyes. "I know what my punishment will be," he said. "And I am ready for it." Judge Thompson was the first to recover. "Mr. D'Hondt," he said in a voice that still contained a slight hesitation, "you have been charged with murder. The court has heard your plea. Do you have anything to add?" D'Hondt shrugged. "I am prepared to accept the consequences, Your Honor," he said. The judge turned to the jury. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you have heard the defendant's plea. Although the charge was amended to manslaughter, the defendant has confessed to being guilty of murder. It is now up to you to deliberate on a fitting sentence. I dismiss you for deliberation." The jury left the courtroom, its members looking at D'Hondt with a mixture of confusion and disapproval.

Jimmy stood up, his face still pale. He walked over to D'Hondt, who sat motionless in his chair. "What have you done?" he hissed, his voice barely audible. "We had a deal. You wouldn't get the death penalty." D'Hondt looked at him with a faint smile and shrugged, a slight movement that spoke of a deep indifference. "I prefer death to a hopeless life," he said in a soft but firm voice. Jimmy shook his head in disbelief. "You're crazy," he muttered. "Completely insane." As D'Hondt was led away, Davies gave Jimmy a sneering look, a mixture of triumph and contempt in her eyes. Jimmy felt the gazes of the others present on him, a mixture of pity and disapproval. His reputation as a lawyer for dubious cases, which he had painstakingly built, was now in ruins. The consequences of this failure were still unclear, but he knew his career would never be the same; how could he ever convince crooks and marginal figures that he was the dealmaker.

The bailiff came forward, his face impassive. "The defendant will be returned to his cell," he said. "Pending the jury's verdict." D'Hondt stood up and walked, flanked by two heavily armed bailiffs, out of the courtroom. Jimmy remained behind, stunned and frustrated, while D'Hondt's words echoed in his head.

The jury retired to the deliberation room, where the atmosphere was initially subdued. Mrs. Wayne, a demure, rail-thin woman with a somewhat yellowish complexion—was she even healthy?—of middle age, was unanimously chosen as forewoman. She had hardly said a word during the trial, but radiated an unexpected authority.

"Alright," she began in a soft but firm voice, "let's handle this in an organized manner. We all agree that Mr. D'Hondt is guilty of first-degree murder, as he himself has stated. Is there any further discussion about the facts?" There was a murmur of agreement. The jurors, who had initially been so talkative, now seemed in a hurry to get this unpleasant task behind

them. The man with the Texas-patriotic tie, who had spoken so contemptuously of D'Hondt during the recess, opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it again, under Mrs. Wayne's stern gaze. "Fine," she continued. "Then all that remains is the sentencing. The prosecutor has demanded the death penalty. Are there any mitigating circumstances we should consider?" An uncomfortable silence fell. No one seemed willing to speak up for the man to be sentenced. The jurors exchanged fleeting glances, avoided eye contact. "I don't think so," the woman with the tightly drawn lips finally said. "He admitted it himself. Manslaughter isn't good enough for him." "As if he's trying to pull one over on us," the man with the tie added, his voice full of indignation. "First he pretends to be innocent, and then he suddenly confesses to murder. What kind of game is that!? He probably thinks he's smarter than us." There were nods of agreement. The jurors seemed relieved that they could now vent their anger about the defense. It was as if they wanted to avenge the confusion and discomfort he had caused. "Let's leave it at that, then," Mrs. Wayne said, her voice unusually loud. "We all agree. Mr. D'Hondt is sentenced to death."

The deliberation had lasted less than half an hour, most of the time they needed to eat a donut (which prompted another sneer from the woman who had earlier made a joke about D'Hondt's name). When the jury returned to the courtroom, a tense silence prevailed. The judge asked the forewoman to announce the verdict. Mrs. Wayne stood up, her expression unreadable. "We, the jury," she said in a clear, steady voice, "find the defendant guilty of first-degree murder."

There was no reaction in the courtroom. No relief, no disapproval. Just a dull silence, as if everyone was holding their breath. The judge nodded. "The verdict of the court is in accordance with the judgment of the jury," he said in a solemn voice. "Mr. D'Hondt is sentenced to death by lethal injection. The execution will take place on a date to be determined at the Huntsville Unit."

D'Hondt stood up, his face completely impassive. He looked the judge straight in the eyes, without a trace of fear or regret. "I understand," he said in a soft voice. "Thank you." The bailiffs handcuffed him—the cool steel clicked around his wrists—and led him out of the courtroom. Jimmy watched him go, his face a mixture of disbelief and horror. He had failed. His client had thrown his life away, and his career was in ruins.

Outside the courtroom, a bus was waiting, with bars on the windows and heavily armed guards. Completely unnecessary for a man like him, but it's the procedure. D'Hondt was placed inside, his gaze fixed on the distance—what a beautiful landscape, by the way. The bus drove away, on its way to the Polunsky Unit—ha! that sounded like Polanski, had Charles Manson been here?—where he would spend his days awaiting his execution.

Chapter 3

The hours crawled by in the cell, each moment an identical repetition of the last. To break the suffocating monotony, D'Hondt fled into his thoughts, a mental escape from the concrete reality. Sleep came fitfully. The fluorescent tube, with its irritating flicker, cast a stroboscopic shadow play on the walls, while the dripping faucet produced a ceaseless, monotonous ticking that slowly but surely began to get on his nerves. It was as if the cell itself were a sadistic metronome, ticking down the time until his execution. The drops, clear and perfectly formed, fell with a tiny 'plink' into the stainless steel sink, each sound a brief echo in the otherwise deafening silence. Sometimes it seemed as if the drops fell in an irregular rhythm, now faster, now slower, as if time itself faltered in this concrete tube.

He used his old trick again: a diversion for the mind. Not a fantasy, but a thought experiment, a way to fall asleep. In his thoughts, he was no longer in the Polunsky Unit, but at the WinStar World Casino and Resort in Oklahoma. He had indeed played there once, during one of his travels. Not a high roller, just a bit of entertainment on the edge of the abyss. A few hands of blackjack, a round of roulette. The chips, smooth and cool in his hand, he distributed with a casual flair over the green felt table. The croupier, with his impeccable posture and monotonous voice, seemed like a robot, programmed to uphold the laws of chance. Innocent win, innocent loss. It was the jackpot he had seen that night, a digital amount that lit up in neon colors, that now served as the starting point for his calculations: 13.6 million dollars, about 12 million euros. A faint smile appeared on his face. What would he do with such an astronomical amount? "First, a car," he thought. His blue Porsche Cayenne, with its hybrid 3-liter V6 with 416 HP, was a beast of a machine, but there was always room for improvement. He would trade it in for a new Cayenne Coupé, clay-gray, even sleeker, even faster. The car dealer, a man with a smooth grin and a gold watch, would give at least 30,000 euros back for his old car, and he would pay the difference without batting an eye. He imagined driving away from the dealership, the soft leather of the seats under his hands, the smell of new plastic and precious wood in his nose, the powerful engine purring like a contented cat. His girl. Not an Audi, that was too ordinary. A Mini Cooper S, larger than the standard, with all the bells and whistles. The metallic paint glistened in the sun, the chrome details sparkled, and the interior was a perfect combination of retro charm and modern technology. Just because he could. Cost: a paltry 50,000 euros. He fantasized about her surprised face, the look in her eyes as she grasped the steering wheel and started the engine.

Then a boat. Not a sloop, that was for Sunday afternoons. He wanted a yacht. Something with a sun deck, a bar, and especially: a toilet, his girl can't pee in the wild. And separate sleeping compartments. One for themselves, and one for the children who came to visit. Practical, comfortable, not flashy...a hundred grand? The ship, white and elegant, glided smoothly through the water, the waves lapping against the hull, the wind in his hair. He quickly calculated in his head. 12 million minus what the new Porsche cost extra, 50,000 and another hefty sum for the yacht... there was still more left than he thought: 11,750,000, wow! The numbers danced before his eyes, a dizzying sum of possibilities.

A house. Or no, not a house, a home. A place with character, with a soul. A new old farmhouse in the Netherlands, with a larger garden and a study for him and one for her. The brick walls, covered with ivy, the wooden beams on the ceiling, the smell of old wood and freshly baked bread. Or a ranch in Texas, with room for a horse and an endless horizon? The vast plains, the blue sky, the sounds of nature. Let's say, 1.5 million euros. 10,250,000 left.

He frowned. Why in God's name did he think of himself first? What an egoist he was. The money had to roll, people had to benefit from it. How much could you give away tax-free in the Netherlands? He had to look that up. And to whom would he give? His sister, of course, she's next. Her light hair, her bright eyes, her quick laugh. His uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces... you're not allowed to give them much tax-free... a hundred grand in total! 10,150,000.

Is he forgetting his son now!? And his wife's children...!? Um... let's give gifts first... then buy houses that they can rent for friendly prices (up to the limit allowed by the tax authorities). Can he give them (expensive) gifts...? He'll just calculate with those houses then: 2 million for 4 houses in the Netherlands. 8,150,000 left...

His father and his sister. He had to arrange something special for them. The maximum tax-free gift for blood relatives was logical, but he could also take a stake in the family business. The dusty workshop, the smiling faces of the employees, the sound of the machines, the shop. Then they could finally pay themselves a decent salary, after all those years of hard work and sacrifice.

Even with this diversion, it didn't work. Sleep would not come. Dozens of thoughts flashed through his mind, as elusive as shadows. He couldn't catch a single one, hold on to it, think about it and thus banish it. It was a familiar feeling, an old torment. The thoughts raced, and he just couldn't grasp the threads. The solution for the peace in his head was there, right in front of him, but he couldn't reach it.

And then, as every evening, the light went out. Centrally controlled, somewhere in an anonymous room, the fluorescent tube went out at exactly 22:22:22. A digital signal, an inexorable action, and the cell was plunged into darkness. Whether there was a deeper meaning behind that time, a hidden code in numerology, or whether it was just the whimsical decision of a jokester of a guard, D'Hondt could only guess. His overactive brain, always looking for patterns and connections, found in this seemingly random timing another reason to overthink, to philosophize, to sink into a swamp of speculation. The seconds ticked away, an inaudible counting that continued, whether he paid attention to it or not. At first, it seemed pitch dark. An abrupt transition, a black velvet pulled over his eyes. He blinked a few times, but it made no difference. It was a tangible darkness, a weight that pressed down on him, enclosed him, isolated him. The sound of the dripping faucet, which had been so annoying at first, now turned into a beacon, a constant reminder of the physical world, of his imprisonment in this concrete grave. His breathing, deep and regular, filled the silence, proof of his still-present vitality.

Then, after a while, something happened. His eyes, accustomed to the bright light of the fluorescent tube, began to adjust. Slowly, very slowly, he distinguished a tiny glow. It did not come from outside the cell, there were no windows, no openings through which moonlight or starlight could penetrate. It seemed rather as if the darkness itself contained a source of light, a faint glow that seemed to come from the walls, from the floor, from the concrete itself. It was a creeping, diffuse light, as if the cell itself radiated a faint glow. It was an unreal glow, a twilight that did not belong in this world. It was somewhat reminiscent of the glow of a rotting piece of wood, or of the vague lights he had sometimes seen as a boy during ghost hunts in the forest. A light that seemed to live, to breathe, a light that did not obey the laws of physics. It was a color he could not immediately place, a kind of pink, but deeper, more intense, with an almost organic quality.

D'Hondt felt a shiver run down his spine. This was more than just darkness. This was another dimension, a twilight zone where the boundaries between reality and fantasy blurred. His reason, his scientific mind, tried to explain the phenomenon. Phosphorescence? A chemical reaction in the concrete? But deep down he knew that something else was going on. This was the beginning of something unknown, something beyond his comprehension.

Sleep was now completely gone. The restlessness in his head had given way to a tense alertness. He had to know where that light was coming from. Carefully, he stepped out of bed, his feet landing on the cold, hard concrete floor. Immediately, the cold seeped through the thin soles of his canvas shoes. Goddamn it! He had always had a burning hatred for the feeling of bare feet on a cold surface. It reminded him of his grandmother's warnings, his

mother's mother, who had made him believe as a boy that you got diarrhea from cold feet. An absurd thought, of course, but in his confused state it suddenly seemed relevant again, an extra reason for unease.

He walked to the wall, his eyes scanning the faint glow. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time, an elusive glow that defied any attempt at localization. He inspected the walls, felt with his hands along the rough concrete, looking for an opening, a crack, an irregularity. He examined the corners where the walls met, stood on the toilet to reach where the ceiling and walls met. He lost his balance. His foot slipped from the smooth stainless steel rim, and with a reflexive movement to hold on, he hit his elbow against the flush button. A deafening flush echoed through the dead silence of the cell, the water crashed into the bowl with a thunderous roar. D'Hondt swore softly but forcefully. When the silence had returned, the same elusive light was still everywhere.

Finally, he dropped to his knees. The cold immediately seeped through the thin fabric of his Death Row sweatpants. A tracksuit! His whole life he had resisted wearing them. He, the professor, the intellectual, the man of style and distinction, now spent his days in a shapeless, faded white tracksuit. The irony was not lost on him.

He bent his head as low as possible and peered under the bunk. He smelled the aroma of a cocktail of vomit, piss, shit, blood, sperm, and disinfectant that had apparently soaked into the floor so much that it had settled there. And there, in the wall, he discovered it. A tiny sliver of pink-glowing light, no wider than a fingernail, that seemed to pulsate, as if it were breathing. The light did not come from above, not from the side, but from within the wall. Sleep was long gone. The restlessness in his head had given way to a tense alertness. He had to know what the source of this light was. Where did it come from? What was it?

He stood up and fumbled in the dark for his glasses. His fingers found the familiar frame on the shelf on the wall next to his bed and he put them on. As always, when he wanted to look at small things up close, he had to lift his glasses with one hand while lying on the floor to see through the reading part. With his other arm, he reached for the light. He slid his fingernail over the wall, the rough concrete scraping against his sensitive skin. There he felt a small edge, a subtle deviation in the texture. His fingertip registered a different material than the cold concrete, something with small, regular bumps. He had to know what it was. Slowly, carefully, he followed the outline of the deviation. And then, gradually, it began to take shape. A miniature door. A medieval-looking wooden door with iron fittings, perhaps half the size of the palm of his hand. Just big enough for a mouse, maybe. The contours became increasingly visible, not by direct light, but by a kind of halo of light that surrounded the outline of the door. The pink light seemed to come from behind the door.

What was this, he wondered... a pass-through hatch dug between two cells by previous death row inmates... but how could his neighbor have light in his cell...?

That couldn't be it...! D'Hondt picked at the door. His nail found a tiny latch, barely more than a protrusion. With a soft click, the little door opened, and a wave of bright, pink-yellow light escaped. Blinded, he blinked a few times, and when his eyes were accustomed to the sudden brightness, he saw a hallway. The perspective was limited, his face was still pressed against the cold, concrete floor, but the hallway seemed winding, unpredictable, a secret hidden in the darkness.

What was he supposed to do with this...? Was this a dream? No, because he couldn't sleep. Was he going crazy? It wouldn't even be strange if he became 'delusional' from waiting for death for an indefinite period (hey, that's funny, life is actually waiting for death for an indefinite period anyway, he thought now). But this was no illusion, this was as real as it gets... he felt it, he saw it!

Not knowing what to do, he decided to stick his right index finger through the doorway... tense, not afraid of what was to come... His finger slipped effortlessly through the doorway, and strangely enough, his whole hand suddenly fit. His arm followed as if by itself, he slid further under the bed and saw his whole arm disappear into it, his shoulder, his head popped through, his neck, his other arm and hand followed... He was now crawling through the door and it was as if his body shrank as it passed through the portal... Before he knew it, he was on the light side of the door and the door was no longer small at all... It was quite large actually, a gate of old dark brown wood with heavy and black iron fittings, and a large sliding bolt on it as well. He closed the door, felt that he had to... slid the bolt and took a good look around...

A long, winding, pink hallway. The light came from torches on the wall, which cast a restless, yellow-orange glow, a color he associated with sunsets in distant lands, with the last glow of a dying day. And doors. Doors everywhere. A lot of gray doors in the pinkish, weak-looking walls. The walls themselves were strange, almost pulsating, as if they were breathing, as if they had a will of their own. It was a sight that reminded him of the inside of a mouth, or perhaps a more intimate body part, hidden and for men still always mysterious. An image that involuntarily made him think of jokes from the past, about Xaviera Hollander, the Happy Hooker, and a search for a Rolex and a camel... so bad and inappropriate, but in the 80s those jokes were in Playboy or Penthouse.

Chapter 4

Of course he went on his way. What else was he to do? Return to his cell? Wait for the inevitable injection? He had nothing to lose. With a vague sense of excitement and fear, he set foot in the pink hallway. His canvas shoes made no sound on the soft, almost springy floor. It seemed as if he were floating in some way. The walls pulsed gently, and the light from the torches danced in the corners of his eyes, giving the hallway a dreamlike, surreal quality. As if he were lost in one of those dream sequences, where reality slowly but surely crumbles and gives way to something else, something indefinable.

The first door he passed was of gray metal, just like the other doors further down the hallway. There was no handle, no lock, just a seamless, unbroken surface. D'Hondt hesitated for a moment, but then walked on. The second door was identical, and the third too. After a while, he began to wonder if he wasn't just walking in a circle. But the hallway was not circular, he was sure of that. He had paid close attention.

Suddenly he heard a sound. It came from behind one of the doors, a soft, plaintive sound that reminded him of a wounded bird. He stopped, his hand on one of the doors. The metal felt cold and smooth. He listened again. The sound was still there, but now softer, almost inaudible. It was as if the sound itself were an illusion, an echo of his own fear, like an ominous wind blowing through the empty streets.

Without thinking, he pushed against the door. To his surprise, it immediately gave way and slid silently aside. D'Hondt hesitated, but then he pushed the door further open and stepped into the room. The room was small and round, with a high, vaulted ceiling. The pink light also filled this space, creating an intimate, cocoon-like atmosphere. In the middle of the room stood a small, white table with a burning candle on it. The plaintive sound came from a bird sitting on the table. It was a small, yellow canary without water, without birdseed. Damn, Shiversqueek!

Years ago, he must have been about 6, when they had just moved, they had a canary. His sister had been allowed to choose the name… hence the poor creature's name. Shiversqueek had escaped once, but had come back into its—plain wooden—cage on its own for food. Later, the canary had died of neglect… he didn't know whose, but surely not his—he was only 6 years old—the cage was temporarily on top of a kitchen cabinet and then the animal was dead.

What kind of place was this? Was this place going to show him things where he was guilty of another's death...? There was nothing to do in this room. He couldn't feed or give the bird a drink, there was no cage... Apparently this room only wanted to show him the bird...? So he went back into the hallway, the door closed behind him! Where there had just been a door that radiated necessity, there was now just a gray door. He reluctantly—what else could he do—walked on for a bit... and then he heard music... and walked in the direction of the sound... What was it!? It sounded familiar, but he hadn't heard it in years... not even during the 80s week on Radio Veronica... He came to the door where the sound was coming from and recognized it. He happily opened the door, because "Leave it to Luck" by Topper Headon was playing loudly!

The sound cut through the pink silence, an unexpected tear in the fabric of this surreal place. A wave of memory washed over him, as clear and unexpected as a sudden downpour on a hot summer day. It was as if the music itself had opened the door, not to another room, but to another time and another consciousness. He was back in John's parents' mobile home, the air filled with the smell of fried sausages and a faint hint of Cacharel. Eight boys, packed into a space meant for four, the cardboard walls vibrating gently to the rhythm of the music from John's ghetto blaster. Outside, the promise of a week without supervision beckoned, a week of adventure and discovery. The ultimate goal: Rock Torhout, a pilgrimage site for music lovers, more or less reachable by bicycle from the campsite where they were staying.

They were nice boys, from respectable middle-class families. There was drinking, certainly, but the damage was limited to a few empty beer cans and a stray sock. Two of the boys, brothers, worked in their father's butcher shop. They had brought a kilo of chipolata sausages, sausages that initially remained untouched. Until D'Hondt, with an inexplicable urge for domesticity, decided to dive into the kitchen. He still vividly remembered the action as he saw his former self do it: opening the refrigerator, the cold air caressing his face, how he took the plastic package with the sausages from the refrigerator. The sound of the sizzling fat in the pan, the smell of the browning meat, the careful actions of frying, turning, serving. Potatoes, fried in the same pan, in the same fat. And tomatoes, yes, tomatoes, sliced, with a pinch of salt. It was a ritual, an almost meditative act, in which everyday reality briefly receded into the background. The smell of the food filled the small space, mingling with the sweet scent of aftershave and the musty smell of the caravan, creating an atmosphere of domesticity and togetherness. A vague melancholy overcame him.

Then the coffee, made every morning by D'Hondt, long before the others opened their eyes. The ritual of boiling water, the smell of freshly ground beans, pouring the water into the loose coffee filter, the slow dripping of the coffee into the pot. A task that earned him the

unwilling nickname 'mama', a label he accepted with a mixture of irony and affection. Caring, or just egoism disguised as altruism? The line was, as so often, paper-thin. He thought of the small details: the way the steam from the coffee rose and mingled with the morning light falling through the window, the sound of spoons against mugs, the sleepy conversations that slowly got going. The taste of the first sip, bitter and comforting at the same time.

The music, Topper Headon... The memory of that specific song, at that specific moment, was like an anchor, a tangible proof of a time that was past, but still alive in him. And then the vague memory of Torhout itself. Iggy Pop, raw and energetic, with his bare torso and wild movements. Peter Gabriel, still shrouded in his theatrical costumes and makeup, an otherworldly appearance on stage. Or was he mistaken about the year? he had been there more often. Elvis Costello, sharp and ironic, with his angular glasses and biting lyrics? Simple Minds, with their bombastic stadium sound? The Waterboys, with their Celtic folk rock and compelling stories? The music, the people, the atmosphere... it was a kaleidoscope of impressions, a whirlwind of sounds and images that had forever nested in his memory. A memory of a time when everything still seemed possible, when the future stretched out before them like an unwritten page.

The memories were vivid, intense, but at the same time also fragmentary, uncertain. Strange, he thought, how some details are so clearly burned into your memory, while other, seemingly more important aspects, fade to a vague shadow. As if time itself has a selective memory, choosing what it wants to keep and what it wants to let disappear. It was a realization that gave him a slight feeling of melancholy, a vague sadness for the irrevocability of the past. A realization also of the fleetingness of existence, the unpredictability of life.

They cycled 40 miles to Torhout at the break of dawn and 40 miles back the same night. Young bravado. They left the campsite early because they didn't want to miss anything, so they were on their bikes by 8 in the morning. Did they actually have anything with them, other than their wallets and their tickets... a jacket, rain gear... no idea! The return journey after the festival was something else... of course someone got a flat tire, of course they rang the bell of the bicycle repairman in a dead-quiet Flemish village in the middle of the night, of course the bicycle repairman sent them away from his bedroom window, cursing, and of course there was a fool who kept cycling with that flat tire... that rear wheel broke and so the eight of them had to continue on 7 bikes. The fun was no less for it (well, maybe when the fool had to call his mother from a phone booth the next day to ask if she would go and pick up his bike from a ditch somewhere in East Flanders... he didn't know exactly where)... The smell of sweat and beer, mixed with the faint smell of the Flemish countryside

air, the fatigue that was in their bones, the euphoria of the music that still echoed in their heads... it was a mix of intense experiences that connected them forever. They would be friends forever, no matter what happened... Well, a year later the whole thing fell apart. Like everything eventually falls apart.

Then, when he did such things, he wasn't yet imprisoned in his head, was he...? Then the operator and the dog were still one, right!? Did it happen after that....? Who knows, maybe there's another room that can show him that.

D'Hondt turned around, the music still echoing in his ears. He looked one last time at the spot where the door had just been open. The pink glow of the wall seemed to pulsate gently, as if there were a heartbeat underneath. The torches flickered, casting long, dancing shadows on the walls. With every step he took, the hallway seemed to get longer, the doors more numerous. A labyrinth of possibilities, of unknown destinations.

Suddenly, as if a veil were lifted from his consciousness, D'Hondt became aware of a scent. It was not one of the vague, hospital-like smells he had expected in this pink hallway, but something rich, complex, and unmistakably culinary. At first there was a faint sweetness, a promise of comfort and warmth, but it was soon overpowered by a deeper, more earthy scent. Meat? Yes, it was meat, but not the generic, bloody aroma of raw offal. This was more refined, stewed, cooked to perfection.

As he walked on, the scent became stronger, clearer. Now he could distinguish the individual components: the soft, almost buttery smell of braised celery and carrot, the sweet, deep undertone of white wine, and above it all the unmistakable scent of veal shank, slowly simmered until the meat was almost falling off the bone. It was the smell of ossobuco. His ossobuco.

The memory hit him with the force of an unexpected wave. It was as if the scent itself had opened a door, not to another room in this bizarre hallway, but to another time and another place. Il Punto. A small trattoria in Knokke. The ossobuco there was not a meal, it was an experience. The veal shank, braised for hours in a perfectly balanced sauce of white wine, tomatoes, celery, and carrot, melted on the tongue. The meat was so tender that it hardly required chewing, each bite an explosion of flavor. And then there was the gremolata, a small pile of chopped parsley, lemon zest, and garlic, which added a fresh, citrusy note to the rich, full flavor of the meat. The scent was so overwhelming, so lifelike, that D'Hondt briefly forgot where he was. He was no longer in a pink hallway, surrounded by flickering torches and inscrutable doors. He was in the warm, inviting ambiance of his parents' living room, the soft tinkle of cutlery and glasses in the background. It was a Sunday evening, the table was set. His parents were at the table, his sister, and... she. His new girlfriend. She

wore an oversized blue blazer with shoulder pads, the sleeves rolled up twice (it was the 80s), the kind of garment that was both elegant and a bit formal, and her hair was curled and had highlights, as if she had spent hours in front of the mirror. She didn't know this food yet.

His parents and sister had been to Knokke that afternoon and had, as a surprise, brought ossobuco from their favorite caterer. A luxury, a treat for a special occasion.

His father, the sweetest man he knew, but also a notorious tease, held a fork with a bite of ossobuco in front of his girlfriend's mouth. "Want a taste?" he asked with a grin. "No? Are you afraid of food, or something?" D'Hondt felt the tension in the room, the uncomfortable silence that followed his father's words. He recognized the situation all too well: the innocent teasing, the uncertain reaction of the new girlfriend, the unspoken expectation that he, as her boyfriend, would intervene.

And the young D'Hondt intervened. He stood up, walked to his father, took the fork with the ossobuco from his hand and ate the bite himself. "Delicious, as always, Dad," he said with a quip, dissolving the tension in the room with a laugh. "so I had an extra bite right away."

The memory was clear, vivid, as if it had happened yesterday. He felt the taste of the ossobuco on his tongue, the soft, juicy texture of the meat, the fresh touch of the gremolata. He saw his girlfriend's face, relieved and grateful, his father's face, surprised but satisfied, his sister's face, grinning and teasing. His mother, looking reproachfully at her husband who couldn't help himself again... she had told him—in the car, on the way back—not to tease the girl. Apparently his father had seen it as an encouragement. And he realized something important. In that memory, in that specific situation, he had acted. He had not hesitated, not doubted, not let himself be paralyzed by the complexity of his own thoughts. He had intervened, taken control of the situation, restored harmony in the room. He wasn't stuck in his head.

Slowly the images faded. The contours of the living room dissolved, the colors became duller, the sounds faded. It was as if a curtain of mist was drawn over the scene, causing the memory to slowly fade. D'Hondt felt a slight disorientation, a brief sense of loss, as if he were saying goodbye to a dear friend. But the feeling was short-lived. Soon the pink glow of the hallway returned, the flickering torches, the endless doors. He was here again, in this surreal place, looking for answers, looking for himself.

This time the transition seemed to be different from the last. There was no abrupt shift, no sudden change of environment. Instead, it was a gradual process, a natural decay from one reality to another. It was as if the memory of the living room, of his parents, his sister, was

slowly being absorbed into the structure of the hallway, as if the pink walls were feeding on his past, on his emotions.

And then, suddenly, there was another sound. Not a soft lament, not a cheerful pop song, not domestic scenes, but a cacophony of violence. It was a sound he knew, a sound deeply ingrained in his subconscious: the sound of war. The dull thud of explosions, the rattle of machine guns, the shrill screech of sirens, the distant, ominous roar of airplanes. It was a sound that was at once repulsive and fascinating, a sound that evoked fear and excitement, a sound that brought back memories of movies, of books, of stories of heroism and horror. Unlike last time, he was not lured by a particular scent. That was a good thing, because the smell of war—burnt flesh, gunpowder, cold sweat—would have been too overwhelming, too repulsive. No, it was purely the sound, the auditory chaos, that drove him on, that pulled him further down the hallway, to the next door.

He walked, faster now, his heart rate quickening. The pink walls seemed to pulsate to the rhythm of the war sounds, the torches were restless, casting dancing shadows that grew longer and more menacing. The hallway seemed to stretch, longer and more labyrinthine than ever before, with branches in all directions, as if the sounds themselves were changing the structure of the space.

Finally, he reached the door. But it was not the smooth, metal door of the last time. This door was different. When he reached out his hand, he felt no cold, smooth metal, but rough, worked wood. His fingers traced the surface and discovered the contours of two heavy, black swing doors, like those of an old theater. They were massive, menacing, with large, brass handles in the shape of grotesque faces, theater masks.

Hesitantly, with a mixture of fear and excitement, he pushed the doors open. They swung slowly and silently inwards, as if they hadn't been opened in decades. A dull darkness was revealed. Then, suddenly, a light flickered. Not the soft, pink light of the hallway, but the harsh light of a projector. On a large, white screen on the other side of the room, an image appeared. It was a movie, a war movie.

D'Hondt's attention was soon distracted. “The Dirty Dozen”. An appropriate title, as it turned out. He looked around the theater, and it was as if he had stepped through a time machine, back to an era of innocence and budding desire. The movie theater, with its plush seats and musty smell, had been transformed into a hotbed of adolescent activity. All around him, groups of twelve- to fourteen-year-olds were engrossed in their own little dramas. Hands secretly disappearing under seats, clumsy kisses in the semi-darkness, the unmistakable scent of excitement and shame hanging in the air.

His gaze lingered on a scene in the back left of the theater. There, in the back row, he saw himself and John, on either side of Janet. Janet, with her long dark hair and mischievous grin, generously divided her attention between the two boys. One was allowed to touch her budding breasts, over her clothes, while the other discovered the still unknown pleasures of her touch. D'Hondt felt a wave of forgotten emotions wash over him: the awkward excitement, the confusion, the fear of being caught, and the overwhelming urge to please.

He looked around in embarrassment, as if he were afraid someone would recognize him, see through him. Was this really happening? he wondered. Two boys and a girl, so openly, so uninhibitedly. But Janet's behavior left no doubt about her consent, her eager participation in this game of discovery. And they were all thirteen, still trapped in the twilight zone between childhood and adulthood, where the rules of the grown-ups didn't quite apply yet.

Now that he looked at the theater carefully, D'Hondt realized that this scene was no exception. Almost all the teenagers in the theater were more preoccupied with each other than with the movie. It was a symphony of secret touches, whispered words, and innocent experiments. The 80s, he thought with a mixture of nostalgia and amazement. A time of great change, of new freedoms and carefree hedonism.

In that period of his life, D'Hondt realized, the dog and the operator were still in perfect harmony. There wasn't too much thinking, not too much analyzing. There was action, driven by a boisterous energy and an insatiable curiosity. And there was a lot of action, he thought, as a wave of warmth washed over him. The memory of Janet's soft lips, her uninhibited touches, the smell of her sweet breath—that was, of course, just the Hubba Bubba she had parked somewhere between her teeth and cheek... it was all so vivid, so intense.

The images flickered, the voices sounded hollow and distant. He no longer heard the sound. The theater, with its faint smell of popcorn and adolescent hormones, began to slowly fade, the contours dissolving. Instead, he felt the pink glow of the hallway around him again, the flickering torches casting long, restless shadows. But there was something else. A change in the atmosphere. An uneasy feeling, a kind of vibration in the air that reminded him of a thunderstorm brewing in the distance. The sound of footsteps.

Not his own, soft footsteps on the springy floor, but the hard, rhythmic clatter of boots on stone. Several, and they were getting closer. D'Hondt froze. He turned and looked down the hallway. In the distance, he saw shadows, moving shapes that were rapidly approaching him. Guards? His heart rate quickened. A wave of adrenaline shot through his body, a reflex

as old as humanity itself. Flight. Immediately, the memory of the guard's warning came to him. 'Stay where you are.'

He hesitated. A fraction of a second, but it was enough. The shadows grew larger, the footsteps louder. He heard voices, harsh, incomprehensible commands. Then he braced himself and ran.

The pink hallway, which had at first been so dreamlike and inviting, turned into a maze, a labyrinth of winding paths and dead ends. D'Hondt ran, ran as fast as he could, his breath catching in his throat. The images flickered, the voices sounded hollow and distant. Behind him, the stomping of boots, the shouting of the guards. They were faster than him, he knew it. But he didn't give up. He had to get back to his cell, back to the safety, the relative safety, of his concrete cage.

He saw the old wooden door with iron fittings, the exit! If only he hadn't slid the bolt shut! Luckily it opened smoothly, less stiff than the iron suggested. Without thinking, he dived in, immediately growing to his normal proportions, lying half under his bunk on the filthy floor of his cell. His body trembled with exertion. He half-expected the guards to storm through the door as well, to come crawling out from under his bed, but apparently they couldn't get through the door.

The harsh, white fluorescent tube switched on, illuminating the gray walls, the musty smell of despair filling his nostrils. Everything was as it was. Except for him. Something had changed. There was an urgency now. A purpose. He didn't know what was in that hallway, what those doors hid. But he knew he had to go back. He had to find the answers he was looking for. Quickly he crawled out from under his bunk and lay down, as if he had just woken up. He heard the key in the lock of his cell door. The door swung open. A guard looked in, his face tense and unreadable. "Good morning, D'Hondt, room service," he said in a voice that clearly made fun of him. D'Hondt faked a yawn and stretched. "Lovely!" he said cynically, in a sleepy voice. "I'll enjoy it."

The guard put the tray down, nodded, and closed the door again. D'Hondt heard the key turn, the three clicks of the lock. He was alone again. With his thoughts.