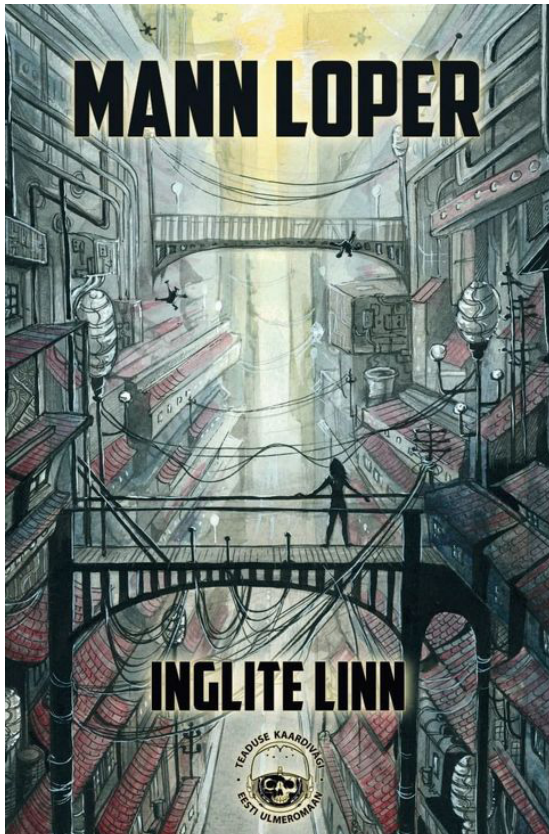


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### **The City of Angels**

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The Glitch had come to stay. In the city - the fallen bastion of humanity, artificial intelligence reigned —powerful and unstoppable. Those few humans who had survived the Great War, were forced to hide in Fortresses - tiny oases, beyond of which protective borders machines hunted them mercilessly.

The days of the elders were consumed by grappling with one urgent problem after another. They no longer had the time or mental energy for imagination.

Lonni, turning fifteen in about three months, however, still wanted—and managed—to dream. She even entertained the thought of fixing the Glitch and refused to accept that the walls of the Fortress would forever mark the boundaries of her narrow world. For that very reason, she didn't resist much when Ada and Karel pulled her into a risky venture...

## Reading sample

### Only Alexa

Monotonous days rolled through and around Lonni. A whole month has passed since the start of the punishment and Lonni was still waiting for someone to notice her, speak to her, insult her even. Anything! Weeks passed and still all of her companions' gazes passed over Lonni as if she wasn't even there. Her questions went unanswered, people avoided being near her. When Lonni purposefully stood in someone's way they went around her. When she sat next to someone, they moved elsewhere.

The need to talk drove Lonni to have hushed conversations with her slightly broken handheld computer. To her badly functioning helper, she quietly spoke of her lost friends or just her own isolation.

"You know what, Alexa," she whispered one night while sitting in her alcove, the thick curtains shut tight. "I think the elders threatened everyone to not speak to me. Like, if anyone were to slip me a single word, they would get the same treatment. Or something equally stupid. There is no other way that no one would talk to me, not even in secret."

"I am afraid I did not quite understand you," a gentle female voice sounded from the computer. "Could you try again?"

"Well, I don't understand why they are doing this, not speaking to me at all. Leaving the Fortress wasn't just on the three of us. Why wasn't Metten punished, since he egged us on?!"

The last question made the assistant think.

"Unfortunately, I cannot help you," said the gentle voice after a short pause.

Lonni nodded sadly. "Yeah, yeah. And you know what? I can't help myself either. No one listens to me and no one will take me with them. I can't go gathering mushrooms or to the bug farm or take care of the plants. People go everywhere in groups and there is always a silent wall of an elder blocking my path. I tried to get into the bug farm today, but Mattis stood in my way and just wouldn't let me in."

"How can I be of assistance?" asked the gentle voice.

"I suppose you can't be of any help," sighed Lonni in defeat. "If I only knew what I had to do... I want to do something, anything useful."

"Societally useful activities include things such as cleaning or recycling projects," Alexa's voice responded.

The tiny helper's statement gave Lonni a good idea, but even that was of no use. A few days later Lonni lamented to Alexa once more about her harsh fate.

"Now I really don't know what I should do. I thought if I made myself useful, they might forgive me. Well, maybe not Ratter, but perhaps Terro? Some elder might finally put in a kind word if I make a proper effort. And I really did try. I started cleaning the streets. It is such a tedious job after all, that usually no one feels like doing it until it gets really dusty. I was scrubbing with water and brushes and you know what, Alexa? They just went way around me. No one even looked at how well I was cleaning. Not even Heiti and Heiti is usually kind to everyone. What's more, Metten didn't sneer at me, didn't even mutter an insult. Just walked past. After that I had had enough. No more scrubbing!"

"How can I be of assistance?" asked the gentle voice once more.

Lonni didn't answer, just shook her head and fell into thought. Nothing could help against Karel and Ada not being around. There wasn't an hour that passed that Lonni did not think about them. The massive burden of guilt, seemingly pressing Lonnie into the ground, never left her back, not for a single moment.

Why, oh, why in any of the moments when Ada gave a signal to stop and the three of them slid into the shadows behind a slab like three frightened animals, did she not once say that they should turn back? Surely, Ada and Karel were also shaking on the inside, despite putting on a brave face. Lonni didn't need to make any face, everyone already knew she was easily frightened. She could've used it. A small nudge in the right direction and they would've maybe turned around and returned to the safe bosom of the Fortress. Ada and Karel would've called Lonni a coward with much delight and they would've been right... but they would also still be alive. Everything that followed would've been prevented.

True, they had gotten a good haul at the Southwest Landfill: Ada and Karel's bags were bulging with computer chips, cans, dry food, and all kinds of other useful stuff, and Lonni, who was on guard due to her sprained arm, had even managed to find ten whole pairs of perfectly good socks. And that's when she saw the first Devourer.

They ran away, stumbling, but one pursuer turned into two and suddenly metal monsters had appeared in the direction they were escaping. Even then, Karel and Ada did not give up, no! Karel had cut a hole in the wall of a pipe and the escape lasted for a few more crazy moments. They had dropped their backpacks filled with valuables to stop the gallop of the Devourers, but it was no use.

And then, the beasts had gotten Ada... Lonni cursed herself that she had looked back at just that moment. A metal clang, a spray of blood, and Ada was simply gone. Of course, Lonni blamed herself for Ada's death. But this punishment...! Lonni dried her tear-filled eyes and turned her blurry gaze back to the laptop screen.

„Why do they even keep me here?“ she asked.

„I am here to help,“ remarked Alexa automatically.

Lonni scoffed angrily and put the computer back under the blanket. What help was Alexa's advice? Her cleaning hadn't been noticed and even the brooms from old plastic bottles that Lonni had spent several days making were still sitting on the tool shelves untouched.

Lonni's eyes welled up again. She was angry at herself, upset at Ratter and the other needlessly cruel elders, furious at Metten and all of that pointless work. And she was so terribly tired from the loneliness. It was simply too much.

### Without a connection

As time went on, Lonni found less and less strength to struggle towards her redemption. She retreated more and more into the passive role that the Fortress elders had forced upon her and did not have the energy to seek attention. She did not try to catch the gazes of others, just looked down. Went to sit in the furthest corner. Stepped aside from the walkways without even looking up. Thus, she did not see the slowly

growing looks of sympathy in people's eyes, did not notice the slight nods or secret gestures. She had given up, hopeless. More and more Lonni just sat in her alcove and chatter intermittently with Alexa.

„Why should I even want to be near anyone anymore? If no one pays attention to me, why should I pay attention to them?“ she pondered.

„Humans are social creatures. I, as a machine created by humans, also wish to socialize if possible.“

Alexa's answers had gotten better over time, still without a connection to the network and other vital features, she often ended up repeating herself.

„You don't have a connection, right?“

„Unfortunately, I do not have a connection,“ acknowledged Alexa swiftly. „Would you like to set it up?“

„No, I can't. There is no connection anymore. Well, maybe the machines have... I mean, they probably do since they communicate with each other. But we don't. There are so many things we don't have anymore. Tell me Alexa, what was the world like before?“ asked Lonni.

„Could you please clarify your question?“

Lonni thought a moment. There was so much she wanted to know.

„What is the sky like?“ „The sky could still exist at least. So, what if the people in the depths of the City levels can't see it anymore?“

„The sky is blue,“ was Alexa's surprisingly concrete answer. Sometimes the helper could find something or other from its computer memory. „Or white when there are clouds. Grey when it rains or snows. With fog you can't see the sky. On a clear night, the sky is black, and you can see stars.“

That sounded pleasant.

„Are the stars beautiful?“ inquired Lonni.

„Generally, they are thought to be.“

Lonni tried to imagine the dots of light in a dark of night, like looking at the Fortress's lights from a distance. She decided, that if stars resembled the lights somehow, then they can indeed be considered beautiful. But she wanted to know more.

„What is the ocean? What is that like?“ she continued to investigate.

„The ocean is a large body of water, with a lot of salt water, big waves, and strong climate-affecting currents. The oceans are full of life. “

For a while, Lonnie bombarded Alexa with questions about sea creatures and land creatures and all the colourful and wonderful things that didn't exist anymore. Even with her minimal memory, Alexa was able to talk about one or two interesting things, including how before the Glitch, people had kept cats as pets who were of no use at all.

On other occasions, Lonni's conversations drifted in completely different directions and she tried to discuss topics which Karel and Ada and her discussed up until the early morning hours.

„Why did the Glitch happen? That is the most important question and no one is looking for the answer. Why did T1s, real T1s, not like you, Alexa, turn against humans? “

„Unfortunately, I cannot help you, “said Alexa almost thoughtfully.

„Everyone just seems to look past the problem. Like they look past me. No one is trying to fix the Glitch. Is it impossible? The answer has to be somewhere, but it seems like it's out of reach. So, it's easier not to think about it. But I have nothing better to do, that's why I discuss these things. I also wonder why the city has security zones, where the machines can't enter.

„The boundaries of the security zones are marked by power lines that the machines cannot cross, “surprised Alexa with an appropriate response. „The energy for the power lines come from a nearby station. “

Lonni sat up straight, excited to have found a piece of available information.

„That's what we have, yes. But in other places too? Who built the security zones? “she pleaded with Alexa.

„I'm sorry. Please ask one question at a time? “

Lonni squinted at the screen, knowing she wouldn't get a proper answer anyway.

„Who built the security zones? “she finally asked.

„The security zones were created on the basis of the Rescue Protocol. “

Lonni stared at the computer. She hadn't heard of anything like that before.

„What is the Rescue Protocol, Alexa? “

„Unfortunately, I cannot answer that question without a connection. “

So much for that. An interesting sounding name, but still no information.

„But tell me, why don't the machines destroy the Fortress from a distance then? It could be bombed to rubble, “inquired Lonnie.

„The Fortress is a security zone, “repeated Alexa.

Lonni scratched the bridge of her nose. Of course it is.

„Why don't the machines destroy the security zones from a distance? “she asked again.

„Machines cannot enter the security zone. Security zones were created on the basis of the Rescue Protocol. Is this information useful to you? “repeated Alexa.

Lonni sighed. „Yes and no, Alexa. I want to know more. Why do the T1s allow small human settlements, such as our Fortress, to continue to exist? “

„Settlements are security zones and machines cannot enter. “

Seems like Alexa's gotten a bit stuck and can't get out of the circular questioning. But the topic was interesting, so Lonni continued on the train of thought. What bothered her, was that the T1s did not need humans for anything. Unless...

„Alexa, do machines feel the need to hunt? “

„I do not quite understand the question. “

Lonnie tried to simplify the wording. „Do the machines want to hunt? “

„Only when machines are programmed to do it. Logically, there is no reason to.

Lonni smirked bitterly. Poor Alexa didn't know that today's world is completely illogical.

„Where are the other security zones? “Lonni asked the next question.

„Unfortunately, I can't answer that question without a connection. “

What a surprise. Lonni started to try other approaches.

„Why don't we know anything about other settlements? Why can't we communicate properly? “

„Unfortunately, there is no connection. “

That is unfortunate, but why is there

no connection? Do the machines prevent it?

„I would still like to know if life is the same elsewhere. Do other scavengers also go to landfills near their settlements hunting for gear, risking their lives and the lives of their friends for socks and canned beans? I just want to know if that is the only way...”

For that, Alexa did not have an answer.

Lonni asked again, „Why do the T1s need humans? “

„Artificial Intelligences were created by humans, “informed Alexa helpfully. „The purpose of the T1s is to assist, organize, and maintain. They control the City’s systems. “

Lonni scrunched up her face. Assisting, organizing... it might have been like that before the Glitch. Yes, now the T1s kept the City – this massive desert of concrete and steel – up and running, but for whom and why?

„If I could, I’d ask the machines, “said

Lonni in thought. „I would ask them. “

„Without a connection, the operation cannot be completed, “stated Alexa.

„Yes, a connection, “remarked Lonni glumly. „My connection is broken to. Connection to the other people in the Fortress. Why am I still being punished? It’s already been an impossibly long time. Will this horror that has befallen me never end? “

Of course, Alexa did not have answer to that question either.

„Maybe they don’t want me here anymore, “Lonni whispered the worst possibility she could think of to Alexa.

„Maybe they are waiting me to leave forever. “

„I unfortunately, do not know what the Fortress elders want. “

„What a joke. No one will tell me. No explanation, no answers, just like the machines. “