

# THE ELFSWOOD SAVING

Illustrated



'This will be your world, to care for.  
Do not forget, when you're grown up: we elves are there to help.  
Do not forget: this is our world, too!'

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen, *The Elfswood saving*

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# THE ELFSWOOD SAVING

(illustrated)

Book 1: Dána's tree

Book 2: The elf Dáa

Book 3: The wood is fighting back

Book 4: Angels and demons

Book 5: The elements intervene

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen





Book I Diana's tree

## Chapter 1

# Wandering in the forest

A loud creaking sounded in front of them. Startled, the four children huddled together. Did a large animal wander behind the fallen forest giant? A bear? In these wild mountains, one could still come across anything...

The creaking did not repeat itself. They did hear rustling, as if something were being dragged through the bushes. It was moving away from them, in the same direction they were going.

Bluish mists hung motionless between the tree crowns. The early sunlight cast oblique streaks through the foliage. There! A towering shadow moved along the glowing nebulae. What could be so big?

Frightened, the children turned around and sneaked off in another direction. They walked in Indian file along narrow game trails, taking care not to make any noise. In a clearing, they huddled close together and listened to see if the creaking had come after them. But it remained silent.

Only after a long time did they dare to go further. Hesitantly they stood up and looked around. They had lost all sense of direction! Where was the track that had brought them here? All the paths looked the same.

‘Are we lost now?’ asked Wendy in a pinched voice.

‘How can that be!’ Lucy was not as easily swayed as her twin sister. ‘Do we have a compass?’

They searched in their trouser pockets, coat pockets, backpacks.

‘Stupid, I forgot,’ Michael said regretfully. ‘My compass is in the bag with the camping gear, in the guesthouse.’ He looked up if he could see the sun, but the sky had closed up completely. There was only grey, diffuse light.

Little Diana pulled at his sleeve. ‘Come,’ she whispered, ‘I know which way to go.’

Without protest, they let themselves be guided by her along a game trail, which led past open spaces, where old hulking trees lay mouldering and bright white birches and metallic shining rowan trees grew sky-high. The young shoots were stretched out like gum strands in their struggle for light; their frail trunks were no thicker than an inch. The mist illuminated everything from the inside until all the stems and leaves shone as if they were oiled.

Diana hesitated as they crossed a promising game trail.

‘Look,’ whispered Lucy, crouching down to study something on the ground. ‘Traces of a very large deer, look, the prints are deep.’

‘Which way are they going?’ wanted Wendy to know. She didn’t feel like running into such an enormous animal.

‘Both sides.’ Lucy poked the ground with a stick. ‘I think last to the right, those prints look like they were made later.’



‘We have to go back to the river in any case,’ said Michael, worried. ‘Which side of the path goes down, do you think?’

‘To the right.’

‘Yes, I thought so too. Come on; let’s go to the right. That deer is more afraid of us than we are of him.’

‘You go first, then,’ Wendy fretted.

Michael took Diana by the hand and went up the wide game path. He was glad to be back in the lead and to be in charge of their expedition. For him, their walk in the forest was a voyage of discovery. He was keen to find new things, to go where no human had gone before. In fact, he hoped that they would stumble upon a miracle. Not the eerie creaking of invisible forest dwellers, but something beautiful. The desire was very strong, here, in this wonderful forest. It even felt like a promise: if he did his utmost and looked hard, he might... perhaps he could find it (her?). His heart was pounding in his throat at every turn...

After a while, the trail led over a rugged slope where mossy boulders lay scattered under a high cliff, like petrified trolls who had been surprised by the sun.

Water glistened and flowed in a thin layer on the stony path. It seemed as if they were walking through a village of dwarves, where all the inhabitants had fled into their houses and dens.

Diana laughed when Wendy remarked something like that. ‘It’s true,’ she said.

The twins looked at each other: should they make a wreath for the invisible people here, an elf house? Or was that too childish now that they were thirteen?

Because they did not know, they walked on, but they would have liked to peek under stones and in holes to see if Diana was right after all.

After a long time, there was more light in front of them.

‘We’re approaching a clearing again,’ Michael whispered. ‘Now be quiet, perhaps we will see...’ He did not dare to say what he hoped to see.

Hidden between the branches, they spied around.

Their patience was rewarded: rabbits hopped into view and continued nibbling and digging where they had been disturbed by the children's footsteps.

Then, again, creaking, hoof beats like a horse, but there was nothing to see. They held their breath.

An enormous stag emerged from an invisible game path. The girls squeezed each other and their brother with excitement. He appeared like a jack-in-the-box; they had hardly seen him move.

Michael's romantic longing for an elfin girl was instantly drowned out. This apparition was of a completely different order. This was clearly a powerful creature of nature.

Across the clearing, the old stag looked them straight in the eyes. They suddenly felt eyes on them from all sides. Some rabbits sat upright looking at them; but it were certainly not all animals looking at them...

The stag lowered its heavy head with its huge antlers, as if in salute.

Michael returned the salute politely bowing his head as well. The stag looked at them sternly, turned with smooth, broad movements and took a few steps. He looked back: were they following?

Only when he slipped between the branches, the children started to move. The rabbits hopped out of the way at ease, not wanting to be disturbed a second time by the bipeds.

The large animal led them along many winding trails to a wide-open spot near the stream. He stopped and turned his head towards them, as if to ask whether they had understood that this was the designated place.

They looked around in amazement, at each other, and then back again. Where had the stag gone so quickly? Not a branch had moved, not a step had sounded. Had they dreamed it? No, they had seen the prints of his hooves in the mud.

Hand in hand, they walked into the clearing. A solitary forest giant dominated the whole space. They looked at the gigantic beech tree with wide eyes. At its base, heavy roots snaked across the dry leaf-covered ground like giant fairy snakes. Piles of flowering grass and foxglove stood out between them. Higher up on the giant trunk, branches big as trees sprouted from the grey bark.

They stood around it and tried to encompass the trunk with the four of them. They only just succeeded.

'Gee, what a giant,' Wendy sighed. 'This is the biggest tree I've ever seen.'

The others nodded. Wendy had said out loud what they were all thinking at that moment.

Diana could not get enough of the tree. She stroked the gnarled roots, slipped her hands into crevices and hollows and finally laid her cheek against the trunk, humming softly.

'Okay, let's eat,' Lucy invited, setting out their food on a cloth. Diana let herself slide from a thick root into a hollow, where she presided like a princess on a throne.

They ate the sandwiches and enjoyed the creamy milk the landlady had given them.

It was quiet and peaceful; the countless birds and rustling breeze in the crests sang a song of wind and light and safety. Before long, they fell asleep.



## Chapter 2

# Unintelligible messages

Michael dreamed he was lying on his back. Above him was a black sky, speckled with millions of motionless stars.

He knew that right beside him were others; strangers, but he could not turn his head to either side. He could not move at all. He did not even have a body to move.

He felt a strong desire to see those beings next to him, but his gaze remained fixed on the motionless starry sky. He knew the beings were looking at him and asking questions, but he could not understand them. He almost thought he could sense what was being said, but the sounds moved too fast and passed by without leaving any meaning. The voices became more and more insistent, as if they were making an urgent appeal. He desperately tried to comprehend, but he could not even make out words from the random sounds. He thought they were calling his name, but it seemed as if a membrane blocked all meaning. A sense of loss made him so sad that he wanted to die in his dream.

The unfulfilled longing for the unknown beings continued to gnaw at him as he sat up dizzily. His head seemed to be filled with cotton wool, with a squeezing band around it. Rejected, he looked around.

He had failed. He had not grasped the messages. It reverberated in his head like an all-pervading echo: a unique opportunity had passed.

He got up; he wanted to wash his face in the river to clear his mind. But the water smelt strange: sweetly stale and metallic sharp at the same time, so he decided against it.

There were many dead trees along the water, which he only noticed after he smelled the water. The banks were bare, without any vegetation. Not even moss. He thought it strange, but it did not occur to him to look for a cause.

He turned round with a jolt; had anyone called him? The girls were still asleep.

There was an air of expectation around the gigantic beech tree.

Peering up, he lost his bearings in the wide crown, where layer after layer of branches and leaves formed a universe of their own. It suddenly seemed to him insanely nice to be able to live in it and walk across its thick horizontal branches. Why wasn't that for humans?

He sat down on the ground with his head between his hands, seized by a longing that he could not identify. Why were they sitting here? What was going on? How had they ended up here?

In his mind, he relived the past morning, looking for answers.

It had started with Diana feeling better this morning and it was dry for the first time in days. Finally, they could go to the forest. They had been looking forward at it for days, but it had been raining continuously.

They had left early with rucksacks full of food and drink and, just to be on the safe side, rain wear. Just before the bridge, they had taken a path along the small river. At rapids the fast-flowing water splashed and roared, but this only deepened the peace. In some places a rocky outcrop busted from the grass covered earth or a cluster of trees interrupted the smoothly grazed slopes.

From afar, the forest looked like the bubbling foam at the foot of a rapid. It, too, seemed to be constantly creeping upwards, while it remained eternally in the place where it was born.

They stopped for a moment at the edge of the forest, where the open ground changed into the fern-covered space under the trees. Oak trees overgrown with lichen stretched their broad branches out over the edge of the meadow. White-grey cows with long horns lay ruminating beneath them and watched the children without any interest.

Attracted by the expectant semi-darkness, they had taken the path that led into the forest. It was wide and free of vegetation. Yet they had the idea that no one ever came here, that the path existed only for them. There was no trace of human footsteps in the mud.

They had entered the forest and suddenly found themselves in another world.

Something had fallen away from them, it seemed as if their worries were left outside the forest. Wherever the sun could reach the ground, the soil was covered with shiny green plants with glowing white flowers and dancing sunspots, alternating with dark shadows between heavy trunks where the foliage was very dense. Majestic beeches rose sky-high. Between their lower branches, light and shadow played on the shiny leaves. They had wandered as if in a dream through the silent forest, which was nevertheless full of sounds: rustling of wind in distant crests and countless birds. Woodpeckers exchanged their staccato messages high from dead trunks; crows crowed far away. They climbed over fallen, decaying stumps, waded through ferns and carpets of blueberries; a little further they had crept through green-lit fields of lily of the valley, on their toes so as not to bruise the plants.

Michael thought back nostalgically to the time when their parents were still together. As far back as his memories went, they had spent their holidays camping in inaccessible nature reserves. They had walked on secret paths, had learned to sneak up on shy animals quietly like a cat. While playing, their parents had familiarised them with life – and how to survive – in an environment rarely visited by humans. Why had that stopped? What had happened between Mum and Dad?

With a frightened cry, the twins shot up at the same time. Startled, he knelt down by them. ‘What is it? Have you been stung?’

They grasped him with trembling hands and stared upwards, blankly. Gradually, the awareness in their eyes returned. He shuddered, for he had just experienced the same thing.

‘Did you dream like that too?’ he whispered. It did not seem appropriate to speak loudly. They both squeezed his arm and nodded, not yet able to speak. The three of them looked at Diana as if by arrangement, but she was sleeping with a happy smile. She seemed to be talking in her dream.

‘She’s just like a fairy,’ Wendy muttered.

‘I dreamt that I couldn’t move,’ Lucy mumbled.

‘You too? Me too!’ Michael and Wendy whispered simultaneously.

‘I was called upon, but I could not understand.’

The other two nodded. They had dreamt that too.

They kept watch on Diana until she would wake up on her own. The dream still lay heavy in their dazed minds; the urgency of the messages they hadn’t be able to grasp shimmered through their nerves.

‘I think it’s going to rain again,’ Wendy whispered after a while. ‘What shall we do?’

‘Let’s wait a bit. Maybe it will pass.’

‘I don’t trust it,’ Michael said. ‘We are going back.’

‘Back?’ Lucy scrambled to her feet to find the path by which they had reached the clearing. ‘Which way?’

‘Oh, look!’ Wendy pointed in the other direction. Lucy and Michael also stood up and saw why Wendy’s voice had sounded so surprised. There was a small path upstream the river. It had to be the same path they had originally followed into the forest. How they could have lost it they did not understand, but it made walking back to the village a lot easier.

Diana was having trouble waking up, so Michael had to carry her. They passed without difficulty the point where they had got lost on the way in. The path actually went on, but low-hanging branches of a couple of yew trees blocked it off. Lucy and Wendy bent them aside so Michael could pass with his sleeping burden. When he looked back, the passage had disappeared, as if it had never been there.

At the edge of the forest he set Diana down.

‘From here you will have to walk on your own, little mouse,’ he panted. ‘I’m too tired to carry you any further.’

Barely awake, she let her sisters drag her by the hand.

As they entered the village, they were caught by a heavy downpour. It stank horribly, as the heavy rain swept brownish-yellow smoke to the ground from the chimney of a factory that stood alongside the railway.

In the boarding house, they were taken care of by a worried landlady. There was nobody left, she told defeated. Because of the stench of the factory, the few other guests had left.

## Chapter 3

### Stranded and alone

Michael stripped off his raincoat, while the landlady peeled Diana out of her wet clothes and wrapped her in a blanket on the sofa. Lucy and Wendy went upstairs to change.

With a knot in his stomach, Michael sat down at the telephone and tried for the umpteenth time to reach their father at work. He had already seen on his mobile phone that his father had not yet responded to his text messages. This time, too, he was nowhere to be found, or so he deduced from the poorly intelligible comments at the other end of the line. His plea they should inform his father to call back as soon as possible was answered in unintelligible Slovakian. Despondently, he hung up.

The weather was more and more unpleasant. They had returned just in time. Michael shivered every time a gust of wind rattled the windows. The whole chalet creaked under the heavy gusts. It reminded him of the train accident that had happened three days ago and which had brought them here.

The images came up again unwillingly.



It was if the elements themselves rebelled. He remembered an old man in their

compartment, who was particularly worried about landslides, because so many slopes had been cleared for ski slopes or by excessive logging. It was already dark when in a sharp bend the train came to an abrupt halt with screeching brakes; passengers fell over each other, breaking branches scratched along the glass; a violent shock ran through the wagons.

In the sudden silence children started to cry, people screamed; here was shouting, doors slammed. The old man got out to look.

A long time later, he came back and sat down on the opposite bench to tell what he had found out.

‘A tree fell on the tracks,’ Dad translated for his sisters. ‘Right in front of the train; no one is hurt, but the train can’t continue. The engine is broken because a branch went through the cooling system. We have to stay here. The conductor went with some men to get help, but they have to walk back along the track. There is no mobile phone coverage here.’

That meant they were really in the middle of wilderness.

‘Well, that was just about it our destination for now,’ Dad had grumbled. ‘It seems we have to stay in these parts.’

Michael could still remember very well how he had shot upright at these words. Had they been stopped for some reason? It had felt like that, but why? By whom or what?

He was startled out of his thoughts when Diana suddenly moved wildly beside him, as if she were fighting. Alarmed, he shook her. ‘Wake up, Diana, wake up!’

Slowly she emerged from her nightmare.

‘Thirsty,’ she whispered. Michael poured a glass of water, which she emptied in one gulp.

‘Pee.’

‘Can’t you do it yourself?’ He was reluctant to have to fetch a potty.

‘Can’t walk.’

He briefly considered bringing in Lucy or Wendy.

‘I’ll take you.’ He carried Diana to the toilet and helped her.

She clung to him when he tried to put her back on the sofa.

‘What is the matter?’ he asked softly.

‘I don’t want to sleep anymore,’ she suddenly sobbed. ‘Then all the monsters will come to get me.’

‘Here, hold my hand, they won’t dare.’

He had held her like that on the stranded train, her little hand in his. Only then it had been a very cold little hand. By the light of their torch, the old man had indicated on their map where they were stranded.

‘Look, on the other side of this ridge is a pristine valley,’ he said with an undertone of reverence in his voice.

‘Branoč,’ Dad had muttered. ‘I know that place. I’ve been there once. There’s a very special forest in the valley. And there’s a railway leading to it from Jablun.’

Diana had looked at Dad intensely, but he had said nothing else.

In the first light a rescue train had finally arrived. Cold and hungry, they had stumbled past the devastation. Men with chainsaws had already begun to remove the fallen tree. Their train was badly damaged and would have to be towed away. Fortunately, a passenger train had also come along.

‘We’ll take the train to Branočs in Jablun and stay there for a night to recover,’ Dad had said. ‘I know a nice guesthouse, from before.’

In Jablun, they had got off the rescue train and had a full breakfast in the station restaurant. They got tickets to Branočs; it was only one stop and the little diesel departed almost as soon as they got on. He could still remember how excited he was when they got off the train. As if they had been on their way to this place all the time, to this valley and the vivid green of the forest they had seen from the train. As if they were coming home.

He shifted on the couch, the leg Diana was lying on began to sleep. She awoke to his movement, but continued to hold his hand.

‘Hey little mouse, are you there again?’ he greeted her, more cheerful than he felt. ‘Tell me what you want. A drink? Or do you need to go the bathroom again?’

‘Upstairs,’ she whispered.

With a sigh, he picked her up and carried her upstairs to the room he would have shared with Dad. Lucy and Wendy were probably in their own room.

He undressed Diana, laid her on the bed and stood at the window, a little lost. His gaze wandered along the track, past the signals that were green on both sides, over the shiny wet platform.

Where was Dad? Had he brought them here to... to get lost? What if it never stopped raining? Because of the rain, all things had gone wrong with Dad’s project. They had just left Jablun when that damn mobile phone rang. Arrived at the guesthouse, the first thing Dad had done was to make endless phone calls to his work. He had left on the next train. They hadn’t heard from him since. That was two days ago now. Could he have crashed?

‘Dad,’ he groaned. Fear that lurked in dark corners fell over him like a suffocating wet cloak. Their father had left them behind, in this remote valley between steep slopes and dark spruce forests, in a village where hardly anyone lived. Maybe he was dead or missing and nobody knew that he left his children here.

‘Dad, please come back,’ he whispered.

A little later, almost inaudibly: ‘Mum.’

A soft noise sounded behind him. It broke the grim haze that threatened to engulf him. Diana lay looking at him with wide eyes, glowing with fever.

‘Will you read to me?’ she whispered. ‘I don’t want to sleep any more. I keep having horrible dreams about monsters trying to get me.’

His fears faded into the background. With a gentle expression on his face, he sat down on the bed. He stroked her hot cheeks and picked up the fairy tale book they had brought from home.

'Where had we ended last time? Oh yes, the enchanted boy was walking around the place where the Elf Hill had opened, on midsummer night.'

The story inspired him to transform it into a real spectacle. Diana was captivated by the narrative, including cooing nymphs, hoarse gnomes and sweet-voiced elves in succession. It was as if he were the narrator and, at the same time, the enchanted boy who was searching ever more desperately for the fairy princess. One day the elves would come out again, one day he would see his dream princess again...

Filled with his own imagination, he looked down at the glowing child beside him. She had fallen asleep.

Without waking her, he got up and walked to the window. That longing in him, was it really for an elf?

Get a grip, he reminded himself.



## Chapter 4

# Unsafe

Outside was nothing to see but the wet village street and mud puddles between scattered houses.

A momentary crack appeared in the heavy cloud cover, through which a slanting shaft of white light fell on the sodden earth. The puddles and mud suddenly shone like melted lead.

Stronger than usual, he experienced a double feeling of repulsion and a kind of attraction. He had experienced this contradiction a few times before, especially when he turned his attention to the outside. Which... ah, it would be the unreliable light. Of course the opening in the clouds closed again and the light path disappeared.

On closer inspection, it was really a weird village: a dozen huge, ancient farms, a few houses that didn't seem to fit in at all and many of which were vacant; a white church and at last this guesthouse, which looked like a Swiss chalet.

There was an unattractive café with closed shutters on all windows, that dilapidated factory and a platform where the little diesel train that had brought them stopped eight times a day; four times one way and four times the other. According to him, no one had ever got off after them. It looked like a ghost town.

He shuddered, the momentarily forgotten fear was creeping up his spine. He pulled his jumper tighter around him. He wasn't going to get sick, was he? No, that should not happen! Who would take care of his sick sister and the twins?

He decided it was the cold, wrapped his arms around himself stiffly and sat down on the bench with his back against the warm tiled stove in the corner of the room.

Without being able to do anything about it, his thoughts flew back again.

The accident had made it painfully clear to him that there was only a very thin protection between wild nature and man with all his technical things like trains and such. One fallen tree could bring down such a very strong steel vehicle. No more safety, no more protection. So there you are, in the cold, in the rain, with bruises and nowhere to turn for help.

He stood and paced restlessly around the room. What were they doing here? Why must they go to this country so badly? He wished he could have stayed with their old group of friends for the holidays. But he had to look after his sisters and they didn't want to go back to Friesland. He longed for Sietske, but she would have a new boyfriend, he thought, feeling sorry for himself. She had never written back after they had moved.

Now the four of them were sitting here in a peasant village, Dad was gone and they had nothing to do.

He continued to stare out of the sprinkled window, oppressed. He wrote his name on the frosted glass and impatiently erased it again.

There, his heart jumped: in the distance, the twinkling yellow lights of the train had appeared between the trunks of the fir forest. Maybe, this time...

A little later the yellow-red diesel swerved around a steep cliff, crossed the river over a high bridge and disappeared behind the factory. Invisible to him, he heard the screeching of brakes and the thudding as it passed shunts, until it slid calmly from behind drab sheds to stop at the platform.

No one got out. Again.

He had not really expected Dad to come back, but he had hoped for it so much that it almost hurt. He felt lonely and lost, with an unfulfilled longing like a lump in his chest which grew bigger and bigger when he was alone with it.

He leaned his forehead against the cold glass until it started to hurt. Let it hurt, maybe thoughts would go away, maybe they would freeze and his mind would finally calm down.

Confused, he sat down next to Diana and stroked her golden hair.

Actually, he loved Diana the most, he realised. But that applied to the whole family. They loved the frail child without exception. Even Mum, he thought resentfully. He didn't get along with her, but he had to admit that she was always kind to little Diana. But he thought her stupid with her woolly talk about extraterrestrials and the quantum leap into the Aquarian era. Still, he worried about her. She had gone to Peru with that new friend, to meditate on a mountain and was bound to experience all sorts of woes again. Stolen papers, missed planes, infections, things falling on her feet, that woman always had something.

By the way, how would the two girls be?

Diana was fast asleep; on his socks he slipped out of the room, down the creaky stairs. In the lounge, Lucy and Wendy were watching television and snacking.

'Can I have some chips too?' he asked and sat down on the ground next to them.

'You've already finished your bag,' Lucy sniffed, looking at him coldly with her dark, bright eyes.

'Please,' he begged. He wanted them to get along better, but the twins had become inaccessible since they had turned thirteen. Wendy did not react at all. Was she ignoring him or just fascinated by the television? Bitch. It must be puberty, he thought. He had to chuckle about it. Was he already through puberty at sixteen? To be honest, he wasn't. He could also be unreasonably obtuse at times. But... he didn't have any pimples, never had any, he decided, his train of thought a little more optimistic than it had started.

'Shall we play a game?' he suggested in a fit of camaraderie.

Wendy tossed back her blonde hair and looked at him in a huff.

'I'm not taking part,' Lucy said, grabbing the bag of chips as Michael reached for it. If they wouldn't look so grumpy, they would be quite handsome gals, he

thought. Lucy was dark and bright, almost exotic; Wendy was blonde and a little tawdry. That twins could be so different; you'd almost think Lucy had a different father, but of course that wasn't possible.

Indecisive, he scrambled to his feet. After stumbling around for a bit, he announced lamely that he was going upstairs again. They didn't react; they just sat there staring at the old-fashioned black-and-white TV. What was the point? They didn't even understand the Slovak. He decided to leave them be.



## Chapter 5

# Together again

Upstairs, his mood brightened a little. Diana had woken up by the creaking door and wanted him to sit next to her in bed. With her duvet pulled tightly around her, she leaned against him and begged for a new story. From the gap between her sweaty neck and the duvet, a sultry smell wafted into his nose. He kissed her frail shoulders. She smelled familiar, but sickly. Yet he felt no repulsion.

He forgot it when he opened the book. With her hot body snuggled up to him, he continued the story of the boy and the elf princess.

The fairy-tale atmosphere gradually took hold of them. They hardly noticed the twins coming in and silently looking for a place on either side to listen in.

His voice weaved a sense of belonging in the semi-darkened room. A feeling anything was possible, that they only had to look up to see other worlds. Gnomes peered from the shadows; transparent fairies floated between the heavy beams of the roof, lured by Michael's soft voice. With staring eyes, the three girls joined in the adventure of the fairy-tale hero.

At some point Michael stopped, he didn't know how to continue the story. The very things he made up confused him; there was a lump in his throat, as if he himself were the enchanted boy.

'Does he find his princess?' asked Wendy hoarsely. She looked at him pleadingly. He shrugged his shoulders, not knowing how the story, his story, would go on. A desperate longing squeezed his throat.

'Do you believe in earthlings and elves?' It was not clear to whom she was asking, but Lucy had an answer: 'I do believe that there used to be creatures, elves, that looked like people. But I don't think they have been around for a long time.'

'What a pity,' sighed Wendy. 'What about goblins and fairies?'

'I don't know,' said Lucy hesitantly.

'At the Waldorf School they teach us that they just exist,' Michael muttered. 'You know: sylphs of the air, undines of the water, salamanders of the fire and gnomes of the earth. But I don't think they are males and females at all. I think they are energies, forces of nature.'

'Yes, I think so too,' added Lucy. 'Just like God is not an old man on a cloud, but some kind of energy.'

'The energy,' Michael emphasized. 'All of us, everything is actually God if you look at it properly. The whole universe is.'

'But also the Word,' said Wendy thoughtfully. 'What is energy? Just power from a wall socket? Isn't it about telling something?' She looked uncertain at her brother and sister.

'Like the radio?'

‘Yes, or television. If God is energy, he has also given words to it.’

‘Words? Then we are all words.’

Lucy giggled. ‘And what for; just give me some energy with the word FRIES.’

‘Mm yes, with falafel balls and garlic sauce and fresh sprouts.’

They dreamed away, thinking of good food, of God and nature beings, which they hoped would not only be forces; that they were also funny apparitions with whom they could talk.

Unwillingly, they returned to their daily consciousness when the stairs creaked. The landlady opened the door and lugged in a large tray of food. With her elbow, she skilfully turned on the antique light. In unintelligible Slovak and broken German, she made it clear to them that they could eat in their rooms and should not sit in the dark like that and that the doctor would come tomorrow to see Diana if everything was all right and if they had heard from their father.

Michael shook his head and mumbled a thank you.

The food was good. Their landlady had followed the twins’ instructions in sign language and a few German words and prepared a good vegetarian meal. The twins were very precise in their wishes. They did not eat anything with meat in it. Michael was not so principled.

In silence, they emptied their plates.

The yellow lamplight barely reached the corners of the room. Secure in their circle of light, they felt safe. The radiation of the tiled stove warmed them, the wooden roof protected them from the wind and rain. With the curtain closed, the deserted, wet outside world was shut out.

After the meal, they stayed in the room and played a game; Lucy won, as usual.

The twins reluctantly left for their own room when Michael put Diana in the big bed and crawled next to her.

He woke up to the creaking of the door. Sleepily, he saw Wendy and Lucy standing in the doorway in their nightgowns. They wanted to sleep next to Diana too and nestled themselves in the big bed on her other side.

It was a restless night; so close together they felt every movement of the others. Now and then, Diana woke up and wanted to drink or had to pee or had a bad dream. Michael wished that morning would come and the doctor would visit, although he had little faith in the man. A little lost, he sat pondering by the window for a while in the middle of the night when he could no longer sleep.

The rain had ceased for a moment. A bright white full moon shone through a hole in the glowing cloud towers. The houses were dark, like in a ghost town. Only a few orange sodium lamps were lit near the factory. It stank, of something scorching, something chemical.

He opened the window and sniffed the bitter air. The stench came from outside; certainly from that factory. It gave him a headache and he closed the window. With a sigh and an indefinable longing, he lay back in bed, folded hands

under his head and stared at the dark roof. He longed for Sietske. She had been his playmate ever since they came to live in the commune. She was a wild child, always playing outside, climbing trees or messing around on the water. They had a wonderful time together. He thought back fondly to their games just before they had moved out last summer. They had swum naked and...

Alarmed, he felt that he was being watched.

Over Diana's blonde head next to his, Lucy's dark eyes looked at him. He could distinguish little on her shadowed face, but understood that she was afraid. Hesitantly, he reached out and stroked her black curls.

'It will be all right,' he whispered. He suppressed the panic rising in his stomach. 'It's going to be all right.' Hear him! Where did he get this assurance?

'Tomorrow the doctor will come for Diana and we'll call Dad again. And if he doesn't come to us, we'll go for him.'

The responsibility as deputy head of the family was a heavy one.

'Miche, I want to go home,' begged Lucy with a shaky sigh.

Miche, she had not called him that for a long time! It warmed him and he suddenly loved his headstrong sisters very much. Since they got their periods and painted their nails black and wore gothic clothes, they had become like creatures from another planet. But now the four of them were in trouble, they were his trusted companions again.

'We can't go home, Luus. There's no one there.'

'I don't like it here.' With a sigh, she lay down again. A little later, her coy voice came: 'Did you tell us stories when we were little?'

'No, I'm only three years older than you. Mum used to read to us sometimes, and I used to listen too, but later I read other books.'

'Where did you learn to read like that? I mean, it's like a movie. You know, that storyteller, Jim Henson, with his dog by the fire. I...' she hesitated, 'I could just see the goblins and the elves when you were reading to us earlier.'

He smiled happily in the dark. That was how he knew her again.

'I don't know,' he finally replied. 'I just like reading to Diana. Those fairy tales are very exciting and not childish.'

'Sure, but you make up a lot of things. I was reading along for a bit and then there was a whole part that you made up.'

'Oh, that's easy. I don't know in advance. I think the story runs away with me.'

He chuckled. It felt so familiar to be in one bed with his sisters in an unintelligible foreign country that he talked more easily.

'You must have got that from Mum. She can also keep people occupied for a whole day on one of her courses. She can talk very well, when she feels like it.'

'Yes,' came Wendy's voice from behind her sister. 'You have a voice like that, we must be listening.'

'Gee, thanks.' He felt gratified by the compliment.

'Why do you always fight with Mum?'

Ai; that was a controversial issue. 'Oh well, she has these ideas. And I think she's irresponsible. She just doesn't pay attention. She's always busy with others and never with us.'

'Dad didn't either,' Wendy defended her mother. 'Why did they split up in the first place?' It was a sore point in the family. 'I mean the real reason?'

It brought up an old and hidden sadness. After swallowing a few times, Michael could speak again. 'I heard them arguing at the time,' he whispered hoarsely. 'You were eight then, Diana had just started to walk. I remember it well; she came to get me to go potty, as small as she was.'

'And? What did you hear?'

'Don't tell anyone. They don't know I've been listening. Mum was almost hysterical. I could hear that she was afraid of him and that he... that he was disgusting or something. It was very bad. She was screaming she couldn't take his energy anymore, that Dad was trapped in matter and only concerned with his work and money.'

'He was, wasn't he?' said Lucy indignantly. 'By the way, he still is. Much worse than then!' she concluded bitterly. It made her sad.

'Yes...'. He looked for something to defend his father with, but could not refute the fact that he showed very little attention to his children.

'When he's involved with us, I think he's quite nice,' Michael muttered finally. 'But he doesn't keep his promises and is always on the phone, even in the car!'

'Hey, no need to get angry! You used to be much more fun,' said Wendy. 'Since we've moved you've just been drooling and playing games on your computer.'

'Yes, that's true,' Michael confessed with a sigh. 'We used to have a good time.' 'When we were still living in the commune?'

'Yes, remember when we did that puppet show? We invited the whole neighbourhood and we made twenty quid the first day!'

'Oh, I remember! Too bad it caught fire the next day,' Wendy laughed. 'Because Miche had to do an explosion.'

'I had scraped off a whole pack of matches.'

'God, what a stinging flame; it scared me to death and my hair was almost on fire!'

They laughed their heads off; Michael himself was laughing too. Their audience had thought it wonderful, a puppet show in which things really went up in flames.

'Yes, that was cool,' he yawned relaxed. 'I'm going back to sleep now.'

Still chuckling, they all fell asleep, happy with the rapprochement.

## Chapter 6

### Crisis

His first thought when he woke up was for Diana.

Fortunately, she no longer was so hot and was sleeping peacefully. She smelled foul, of sickness. When she felt better, he would ask the twins to put her in bath.

The stairs creaked; there was a knock at the door. At his timid 'Enter!' the landlady came into the room with a fully loaded tray. Astonished, she saw the four children next to each other in the wide bed.



Michael looked at her shyly, but she smiled, put down the tray and pulled open the curtains. It was still raining cats and dogs, but he had already heard it rattling on the roof. From her verbosity he understood that she wanted to know how the patient was doing and that she would also bring breakfast for the two girls.

They enjoyed the sumptuous meal in the bed: fresh bread, home-made jam, boiled eggs, milk, tea and coffee, which only Michael drank.

Diana leaned to him and allowed to be fed pieces of bread dipped in sweet tea. That was all she wanted.

'I'm going to take a shower,' announced Michael, yawning as he finished. 'Can you put Diana in bath later?'

'I want to go with you,' she announced in a weak but determined voice.

He looked uncertainly. Wendy understood the problem and giggled: ‘Don’t you dare go naked with a girl?’ She burst out laughing when Lucy whispered something in her ear. ‘With Sietske you had no problems with it, Luus says. She saw you fidgeting with each other and how you were swimming naked!’

‘I’m going to take a shower, then I’ll run the bathtub,’ he interrupted, blushing ever deeper. ‘Otherwise it will take too long and she will get too cold. I’ll come and get Diana when the bath is filled.’

He quickly slipped from under the duvet. With a towel around his waist, he walked across the creaking landing to the old-fashioned bathroom. Standing in the bathtub, an antique cast iron one with lion’s paws, he took a quick shower. It was cold; rushing gusts of wind were blowing through the cracking window. Groaning, he turned on the bath tap. The old geyser only gave a little hot water: it took ages for the bath to fill up.

He stared out of the window thoughtlessly, the damp towel draped over his shoulders. There was not much to see, but behind the grey rain veils he knew the forest waiting. Wrapped in his towel, he walked back to their room.

The twins had fallen asleep again. Diana sat up straight and held out her arms. With a sigh, he gave in and carried her to the waiting bath.

She did not want to let go of him and, giving in again, he let her pee first while continuing to hold her. His towel fell off, so he stepped into the bathtub with child and all, where he took off her sweaty nightshirt and washed her tangled hair with foaming shampoo. He enjoyed grooming his sister.

Dreaming away with the child close to him, he thought about how he had hung out last summer. They had shared secrets about dangerous cold undercurrents and unexpected shallows in the lake where they could stand in the middle of infinity. Where they had kissed, up to their chins in the water, close together, until uncontrollable shivers of hypothermia had driven him out of the water. Sietske was a real water child; she was never cold. He did, he was more a sun addict.

Slowly and reluctantly, he became aware of the world again, the ancient bathroom, its polished copper pipes, unpainted wooden walls above grouted tiles, the quietly dreaming child in the cooling bathtub. It hurt to realise that the happy days with his playmate were over for good. Confused, he got out of the tub and started drying himself.

A hiccupping sound behind him made him turn around with a jolt. Diana was looking at him white as a sheet.

‘What is it, little mouse?’ he asked worriedly. He lifted her out of the bath and wrapped her in a towel. ‘Are you unwell?’

She nodded her head. Again? Michael thought.

Her body began to jolt. He held Diana over the toilet when she threw up her breakfast. She gagged a few more times and started to cry, shivering so much that she shook. Michael was too worried to feel any revulsion as he wiped her face with a flannel, flushed the toilet and cleaned the bathroom a little.

He could clearly feel that she had a fever again when he carried her back to their room.

'You two go and take a shower. Diana is ill again, she has vomited,' he said to the sleepy twins. Startled, they climbed out of the bed, staring wide-eyed at Diana.

'What has she got?' asked Lucy.

'I don't know,' he grumbled gruffly. 'She just got nauseous when she was in the bath.' He laid Diana down in the still warm bed.

'What do we do now?' asked Lucy as they sat around the table after yet another game. 'It's almost four o'clock.'

'It's still storming and raining like mad,' grumbled Wendy. 'We can't go out like this.'

'Shouldn't you call the doctor? He's supposed to come, right?'

'Yes, what for?' Michael shrugged his shoulders. 'He will say it's a summer flu, like last time.'

'Yes, but what if she is really ill, has an illness, I mean?'

'He will be here soon. I'm going to measure her temperature,' Michael said. He remembered that their first-aid kit contained a thermometer.

Shyly, he turned Diana on her back and put the thing under her armpit.

Their landlady came to bring tea and homemade cake.

Dejected, they sat around the table warming their hands on the hot cups. Michael got up and sat with Diana until the thermometer reached temperature.

'M... more than forty degrees!' For a moment he didn't know what to do, until he remembered what he had learned from their parents. He rummaged in their first-aid kit and pulled out a strip of paracetamol.

'Could you bring a glass of water?' he asked Wendy.

'This should help lowering the fever,' he murmured. Diana obediently drank the dissolved tablet. A little later it came out again. Sobbing and shivering, she hung in Michael's arms. Wendy mopped up the mess with a pinched nose.

'What now?' asked Lucy with a frightened expression in her eyes.

'I don't know,' Michael confessed. 'I only know that if you have a fever of forty degrees, you must send for the doctor.'

'Then do it!'

Startled by Lucy's outburst, he scrambled downstairs and asked the landlady to call the doctor. After several unsuccessful attempts, she hung up. She made it clear to Michael there was no connection and that she thought the wire to Jablun had broken. It often happened when a tree fell on it. The wind had been blowing quite hard the past few days. Michael asked her for the doctor's number and took out his mobile phone. It was idiotically expensive to call here with his prepaid, but necessity knows no law. When that didn't connect either, he had the hunch to look at the screen. No range, that's crazy,' he muttered. 'Not even an SOS. The transmitter must be down'.

‘We have to get her to a hospital,’ said Wendy, who had come down with Lucy to look what was happening. She had also noticed that her mobile phone had no signal. The landlady replied to their questions that there was no hospital in Jablun, they had to go in the other direction, to Zilina. The last train would be in an hour; they could take it.

Wrapped in plastic ponchos, they dove into the rain a little later. Michael carried the warmly wrapped Diana, who barely woke up. On the windy platform, they schooled behind a board for the heavy rain; there was no shelter.

The train was late.

When it had not arrived after half an hour, defeated, cold to the bone and wet in spite of their raincoats, they returned to the boarding house. The landlady said with concern that a tree had probably fallen on the rails. That happened sometimes, she remembered, when the weather was very bad.

Just like when we were on our way, it flashed through Michael. Then the storm had brought them here, and now it seemed to want to keep them here.

The landlady picked up the telephone and said she would try to find someone in the village willing to bring the sick child to Zilina. She could call within the village, she explained; it was through the factory switchboard.

After a few phone calls, she shook her head dejectedly. She had called the café, but the only car owner in the village was dead drunk. The few farming families who lived there only had a tractor.

‘Are there no cars at the factory?’ came Lucy with an idea. Michael translated and again the increasingly nervous woman started calling. There was no answer.

At the end of his wits, Michael asked if there was anyone else in the village who could drive the only car available. She shook her head gloomily.

‘Please call for an ambulance,’ Michael insisted. ‘It will be here earlier than the first train tomorrow morning. I really don’t dare to wait any longer.’

She shook her head again and repeated that the phone only connected within the village.

‘But we have to do something,’ he cried in frustration.

The landlady stroked the spikes of hair from Diana’s sweaty forehead. She was shocked at how hot the child was.

The twins started to cry. ‘She is going to die!’

## Chapter 7

### The van

‘Diana is not going to die, not while I still can do something,’ Michael growled. ‘Wait here; I’m going to get that drunk’s car. If I have to, I’ll drive myself.’ He pulled on his jacket with furious movements. ‘I won’t let my sister die because someone is drunk!’ he shouted shrilly and ran away.

What are you doing? he asked himself, startled. It wasn’t just raining; it was a full blast storm. He struggled against the wind. How did he come up with this crazy idea? Picking a car and driving himself? He couldn’t even drive. But it had to be done, he decided grimly. It was an emergency and in such a case anything is all right.

The car in question, an ancient Volkswagen van, stood next to the pub.

Nervously he looked around to see if he saw anyone. And whether anyone saw him. After all, he was stealing a car. He had to swallow hard to keep his stomach in check. Taking a deep breath, he mustered all his courage and fumbled at the door. It was not locked! He cast a quick look under the steering wheel. He had been afraid of this: the key was not in the ignition.

*Maybe behind the sun visor,* flashed through him.

He pulled down the frayed sun visor and nearly tipped over with relief when the key fell to the floor. He got in, tried the gear stick. How did it work again? The accelerator was on the right, the brake in the middle and the clutch on the left. When he pressed the clutch, he could move the gear lever. By the interior light, he could vaguely see the worn numbers on the knob. One, two, three, four and... he couldn’t put it into reverse, no matter how hard he pressed and fumbled.

*Press.*

Oh yes, he pushed the lever down ...crack... It went smoothly into reverse. He put the gear back into neutral. The van shook in the storm.

With the courage of despair, he started the engine. The rain pounded on the roof in the same rhythm as the starter. The engine would not catch on.

Choke! He had to do that with the lawn mower too when the engine was cold. He nervously fumbled around until he had found the right button and pulled it out completely. With a muffled roar, the engine started.

Okay, now into first gear and let the clutch come up. Bump. Engine stalled. His heart had almost stalled too.

Another start. Damn, this couldn’t be more difficult than a lawn mower!

At the second attempt, he got the car moving with a jerk. With a roaring engine, he steered the thing towards the road and hobbled direction the guesthouse. He dared not to turn on the lights. Windshield wipers! Groping around on the dashboard, he found the right button. Only one wiper worked properly, the other

one moved pitifully back and forth.

At the boarding house, he forgot to disengage in his nerves; with a last buck the car came to a standstill. He ran inside. Although panic was raging in his stomach, he was still proud of his achievement.

‘I have a car!’ he panted.

Three pale faces around a pile on the couch stared at him pointedly.

‘Can you drive?’ asked Lucy, as it dawned on her.

‘Ah, it’s like driving the lawn mower,’ he said in a careless tone. ‘Come on, we’ll put Diana in the back seat and then we’ll go to Zilina, to the hospital.’

‘Did you ask if you could borrow it?’ asked Wendy.

He didn’t answer.

‘Not,’ she concluded.

‘Just come on,’ he urged. ‘It’s an emergency. The sooner we are on our way the better. I can only drive very slowly.’

Despite their doubts about what they were doing, Lucy and Wendy were proud of their brother for daring to do it all. They looked at him in admiration.

He was so happy about this that he stroked their hair on impulse, which they allowed without protest.

They put the sleeping Diana, wrapped in a down duvet, on the back seat. Lucy sat down next to her to hold her. In the lounge he studied the map to memorise the route. Light! He flew up the stairs and took a torch out of his luggage. He almost knocked over the landlady, who came out of the kitchen with a bag full of sandwiches and a thermos of tea. Grateful for her good care, he accepted the heavy bag. Wendy was already on the front seat. He first handed her the provisions and then climbed behind the big steering wheel.

Trembling with nerves, he started. Startled, he turned the key back when the car made to jolt. Of course! It was still in gear. Relieved, he shifted into neutral, rattled the long gear stick to make sure it was really in neutral and started again.

The engine engaged immediately and raced loudly. Choke in! He pushed back the choke button just enough for the engine to keep running at a lower speed.

Waved at by the landlady, he managed to get away in one go, without too many shocks. He felt it was a victory. In a way, it felt grand, as if he had passed an exam that he thought was far too difficult for him. He had proved that he could be master of himself, so much so that he could actually help his sister.

He drove slowly towards the bridge. The rain hit the windscreen in hard gusts. Light!

‘Oh no,’ he groaned, ‘just one headlamp too!’

At the bridge, he switched to second gear without a squeak. At a leisurely pace, they disappeared into the rain.



## Chapter 8

### At ungodly hours

Michael kept the rickety van as much as possible in the middle of the narrow road, which snaked up the mountain in bend after bend. He did not dare look to the side, where he suspected chasms along the road. He was terrified that an oncoming car would suddenly appear with blinding lights, a large lorry for example, which he could not avoid. However, they had not yet come across a single car. Not a living soul, in fact, since the farewell of their landlady. The shiny strip of asphalt was deserted, as if no one ever moved across it. They were alone in the world. A world of rain, wind and ever-thickening darkness that seemed to grow between the firs and trickle down the steep rocks.

After a while, his arms and shoulders started aching from the heavy back and forth steering. He stopped the car on a flat section.

‘What is it?’ sounded Lucy’s worried voice from the back seat. ‘Can’t we go on?’

Wendy just looked at him with a white face.

‘I need a rest,’ he murmured, rubbing his neck. ‘Give me some tea please. How is she?’

Thinking of Diana helped him; he could focus his thoughts on something else than how hopeless he felt. The euphoria he had experienced when leaving was gone.

‘Oh, still the same. Hot,’ Lucy replied.

A little soothed by the warm tea in his belly and the trust his sisters had placed in him, he set the van in motion again. He had seen on the map that they only had to follow the road. In the next village, they had to take a side road uphill with endless hairpin bends. It gave him the creeps in advance.

It was getting darker and darker. The one headlight hardly illuminated anything but veils of rain and mist.

He kept driving slowly, despite his fear Diana’s condition was getting worse. Gradually, he gained more control over the car and when the road was descending, he dared to drive faster.

A sigh of relief escaped him when they came out of the forest to the lights of the village below. Wendy looked up at him in the faint light of the dashboard with an admiring glance. The first part was behind them.

Down in the valley, they crossed a narrow river over a stone bridge. There, he chose the only exit that existed: up.

He almost rammed a wall when he took the bend too wide. Startled, he slowed down and crept up the slope in first gear. Driving cost him so much effort that he became numb. It was also getting colder, but he did not dare stop on the sloping road to look for the heater.

They followed the hairpin bends uphill. It was hard work behind the worn-out steering wheel. He was sweating despite the cold. To make matters worse, he had to take a leak, but he dared not stop anywhere. The dense curtains of rain in the weak headlight made his eyes water with stares.

After what seemed an eternity, the slope became less steep. When they reached the highest point, Michael stopped.

‘A quick pee,’ he mumbled.

His heart almost skipped a beat when the hand brake didn’t work properly. He turned off the engine and left the car in first gear.

Quickly, he stepped to the side of the road and emptied himself with immense relief. His bladder was completely cramped; pain shot through his lower abdomen. He ignored it.

‘Please, hand me a piece of bread and some tea,’ he asked as he got in. Bending over the back of the chair he pointed his torch at Diana. Afraid of what he would feel, he touched her forehead and was startled by the heat the child radiated. They had to hurry!

He took a quick glance at the map. From where they were standing now it was a long way downhill, crossing a small river and up another mountain ridge. Behind this second one a main road led to the city with a hospital.

He started the engine, which immediately caught on. Fortunately, he had remembered to push the choke all the way back at their first stop. Otherwise, he probably wouldn’t have been able to get the engine started again. The things you learn when you cut a lot of grass, he thought. Petrol! What about the petrol? The gauge read half, but whether it was still in order, he did not know. Well, he would see. There was no petrol pump anywhere anyway.

He steered the van down the steep mountain ridge, braking on the engine in second gear. The hairpin bends required less and less effort as he got the hang of it. Down on a small bridge over a stream, he had to stop again. The strain had certainly hit his bladder. His arms ached and he had a throbbing headache.

He felt for a moment; Diana was still hot as a stove. ‘Better give her some tea, Luus.’

Diana, however, did not react to the cup Lucy held to her lips.

‘Drop it in her mouth.’

‘Yes, but how?’ almost cried Lucy. ‘I can’t do it with that cup, then everything splashes over.’

‘Wet a cloth with tea or something and squeeze it slowly over her mouth.’

‘I don’t have anything to get wet.’

‘Don’t you have a handkerchief or something?’

She looked at him helplessly.

‘Then take off your T-shirt.’

She obediently took off her jacket, jumper and T-shirt.

Annoyed with himself for staring at her bosom, he started the engine and tried

to figure out how to turn on the heating. There was only one knob that could do it. When he turned it, a hot, oil-smelling stream of air began to blow from two grilles at their feet and under the windshield. He was relieved. Wendy had been wiping the fogged windshield until now, but with the heating on it would stay clear. Without looking back to see how Lucy was coping with Diana, he set the car in motion for the next stretch.

The narrow road got rougher and rougher, until all that was left was a gravel surface and potholes full of water. Here and there, deep gullies had been carved out, through which they slammed with unexpected bangs.

Michael was getting weary of peering through the sprinkled windscreen, where the one working wiper could barely keep a patch clear. When he almost hit a wall on a bend, he stopped in the middle of the road, panting with fright. With his feet desperately pressing on the brake and clutch, he rested his head on the steering wheel to calm down.

‘Are you all right?’ asked Wendy, startled.

‘Sure,’ he managed to say, ‘or no; have to rest a little.’

Now he had to get going again on the steep slope, and even without a hand brake. He was completely frozen, his legs trembling and shaking uncontrollably.

‘What is it, Miche? Can’t we go on?’

The panic also stifled his voice; he could not answer.

‘Miche, what is it? Why don’t you go on?’

Wendy’s voice gave him the courage to overcome his rigidity.

‘I... I don’t know how to get going,’ he whispered hoarsely. ‘If I let go of the brake, we roll backwards, the hand-brake doesn’t work.’

A voice in his head said: *Let her press on the accelerator, you can operate the brake and clutch. Let it come up slowly until you can release the brake.*

Without thinking, he obeyed immediately. ‘Wendy, put your foot on the accelerator. No, a little less!’ The engine behind them raced and calmed down. ‘Keep it that way.’

Trembling with exertion, he let the clutch come up until he felt the power of the engine on the wheels. Slowly, he let go of the brake as well. With a jolt, they were moving again. Almost laughing with relief, he pushed Wendy’s foot aside and accelerated.

‘Thank you,’ he whispered, not just to Wendy. With pain in his muscles, he kept the car on the road, bend after bend, until, after what seemed like hours, they reached the top. Dead tired, he stopped the car and switched off the engine. A hand rubbed his neck as he leaned his head on the steering wheel.

‘I think you are very clever,’ Wendy whispered. ‘Shall I massage your neck?’

‘I’d love to.’ Almost snickering with relief, he surrendered to the pleasant sensation of being cared for by two kneading hands.

A few minutes later he was able to get some focus on his surroundings. He shone the torch on the back seat. Lucy was still squeezing her tea-soaked shirt

slowly over Diana's mouth.

'She does swallow when I rub her throat,' she said softly. 'I'll keep at it. If you don't swing too much, that is. I'm getting a bit nausea of it.'

'All right then. We're going down the mountain now. Down there should be the main road, we can drive faster there,' he said hopefully. 'We'll be half way.'

He started the engine and, braking on the loudly roaring motor, they descended the gravel road. It was raining harder and harder. In many places the road had turned into a mud slide.

## Chapter 9

# Avalanche

Suddenly, something shot across the road, right in front of the car.

‘Look out!’ shouted Wendy. In a reflex Michael jerked the steering wheel. The car swerved to the side and slid. Startled, he counter-steered and hit the brakes. Too hard: the wheels jammed. The van slid uncontrollably to the side and the left wheels banged into a ditch between the road and the slope. All three of them screamed in horror.

The van toppled over, fell sideways against the slope and came to a standstill with screams of tearing metal. The window on his side scattered with a bang.

In the sudden silence, Wendy began to cry; she was bruised meanly and had fallen halfway onto him. Powerless, he banged on the steering wheel.

*Get out of the car! Get out!* He was startled by the fierce message that echoed in his brain. *Out of the car! Quickly! Quickly!*

‘Can’t we go any further?’ came a cramped voice from the back seat. ‘Can you help me? Diana has fallen on me and I’m stuck.’

Agitated, he tried to pull Diana up behind him, but there was nowhere to brace himself. ‘I’m coming, Luus! Wendy, climb out!’ he shouted.

Wendy’s door wouldn’t stay open! He stood on the door at his side in the slatting car and helped push her door open so she could get out. ‘Hurry up! We have to get out of here!’

With difficulty he wriggled himself out. Slipping on the mud, he slid open the side door and worked his way halfway inside. He got hold of Diana’s feet. Panting and blowing, he pulled her up. Luckily the inside light was on.

Lucy pushed off against the side on her side and clawed her way up along the back seat. Through the broken window mud suddenly poured in. All at once her legs were yellow smeared. The half-open door pressed painfully against his hip.

A thump on the roof! Another bang, splashing. Stones were thundering down the mountain!

*Now! Get away! An avalanche!* echoed in his mind.

‘Quickly now! Get out of the car!’ he shouted. ‘An avalanche is coming down!’ With an enormous effort he dragged Diana’s limp body out of the car, while at the same time holding the door open, although he didn’t know how. ‘Wendy, take Diana,’ he shouted over his shoulder. ‘Here, take her! Lucy, quick, grab my hand.’ He was panting with excitement, expecting to be mortally struck at any moment. More stones fell. He was hit; luckily it was a small stone. ‘Wendy, take Diana up the hill, back to the bend! There you’ll be safe!’

He scratched his arm on the lock of the door as he dragged Lucy out from the back seat. ‘Run!’ he screamed.



It was not a second too soon. With a loud thunder, boulders and mud smashed on the van and buried it. The engine was smothered; the headlight miraculously stayed on. Struggling through the mud, they almost fell over the grizzled Wendy who had slipped with Diana in her arms. He took the wet package with the little patient from her.

‘Run!’ he panted. He had no breath left for shouting. ‘We have to get under the trees before the avalanche takes everything with it!’

They stumbled over the steep road, ankle deep in mud. The ground shook with sudden violence and splashing mud sprayed all over them. They screamed. Lucy went down and fell flat in the mud. On all fours she persevered in her agony. Staggeringly, Michael reached the slope in the bend. Here the terrain was steep, overgrown and no mud ran along it. He put the bundle with Diana behind a tree and scrambled back to help the twins. Against the glow of light that was still visible in front of the buried van, he saw Wendy stand out darkly.

‘Here, take my hand,’ his voice scratched. He dragged her up. ‘Take this tree. Diana is behind it.’

She loosened up when she felt the duvet.

Back to look for Lucy. ‘Lucy! Where are you?’

‘Here,’ he heard her squeaky voice somewhere in front of him. He just about tripped over her. She was lying flat in the mud. Frantic with fear, he lifted her in his arms. Nearby, boulders bounced on the road and disappeared into the dark abyss. He dribbled with her through the slippery mud amidst the rumbling of

the avalanche. At the slope in the bend, he fell forward over her. For a moment his mind went black. Nevertheless, he got up and with one hand pushed her up under her bottom. Apparently she found a hold, because the weight disappeared from his outstretched arm. That was the last thing he knew.

He came to by a pair of warm lips on his, which blew air into him. Wendy had thought of nothing better than to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to her unconscious brother. Indeed, it brought him to his senses quickly. He experienced her warm tears on his cold skin as life giving.

He hugged her. 'Thank you,' he whispered.

'A little further uphill is dry place,' she said with a shaky sigh. 'There's a rock protruding. I bumped my head against it. Diana is already under it and Lucy is holding her. It's steep though. Here, come on. Watch your head.'

It was a relief to be out of the cold rain. The shelter was small and his lower legs were still in the pouring rain, but otherwise he lay sheltered.

'Wen, did you see what crossed in front of the car?' Michael replayed in his mind's eye what he thought he had seen in the light of their headlamp.

'For a moment I thought it was a little child,' Wendy said hesitantly.

'It walked upright and waved at me, with two arms, that I should stop,' said Michael.

'Oh, I thought it was swinging from fright.'

'I really was afraid we were running it over,' Michael shuddered, 'but it disappeared before we hit it: flop! and the next moment we skidded.'

'Then it was a goblin or something,' said Wendy.

'A goblin? Yes, but that's as unlikely as a child in the mountains.'

They were not sure, but they had both seen it.

'How is Diana?' asked Michael aloud.

'B-better, she not so hot anymore,' Lucy chattered behind him in the darkness. 'The d-duvet is a little wet, but her clothes are only m-moist.'

'And you?'

'I am so cold Miche. I'm covered in m-mud and I've scratched my arms and l-legs. It hurts so s-so much.' He could hear from her voice that she was in considerable pain.

'Miche, I'm bleeding,' squeaked Wendy's voice.

'Where?'

'My head. I bumped my forehead and blood keeps running down my face.' She sounded very scared.

'Where are you?' He reached out and touched a wet coat. With difficulty, he slid up a little further.

'Sink down a bit, and I'll have a look. Well...' They couldn't see a hand in front of their eyes. He felt her slide down between his arms and clasped her when she was level. 'Hold me tight so I can use my hands. Yes, like that.'

Her body against his gave a feeling of security; at the same time, he protected

her. He felt her shivering from the cold and warmed her with his own warmth. Somehow his body steamed with heat.

‘Where does it hurt?’

‘My forehead. Oh, Miche, it’s running into my eyes!’

He searched feverishly for something clean to dab her wound, but everything was wet and muddy. At last he licked her forehead. Her blood tasted salty and like iron. He cautiously explored her forehead with his tongue. Wisps of hair stuck to it. He carefully brushed them aside. Underneath, his tongue found the frayed scratch. It contained sand and grit, which he licked out. She squeaked and jerked occasionally when it hurt.

The licking brought about a kind of detached calm in him. He knew at that moment how a mother-cat feels when she licks her young. Half in a trance he continued, did even her eyes, on which the blood was sticking. He held his sister in his arms and was able to help her, which, despite the miserable situation, made him happy and honoured. It had been like that before, when she was not yet an teenager. All the fighting was only because they felt unhappy and displaced. She was his sister and he loved her.

When she stopped responding, he suspected she had fallen asleep.

There he was, scratched, soaking wet, lying on a slope, half in the rain and in the pitch dark, with a warm body against his. Unexpectedly, he enjoyed it.

‘Luus, are you all right? Wendy’s wound is no longer bleeding and she is sleeping. I’m holding her.’

‘I’m okay,’ Lucy whispered. ‘I keep Diana close to me, she’s nice and warm. Then I won’t be so cold.’ He could hear that she was no longer shivering as she had just done. He shifted a little to avoid a sharp stone in his back and tried to lie down more easily without sliding down. His buttocks fitted into a dimple in the slope so that he could release the tension in his legs. He dragged Wendy half on top of him, so that she also lay firmly. Little by little he relaxed his trembling body. He slid his arms under Wendy’s jumper and dozed off.

## Chapter 10

# Licking wounds

Michael woke. It was silent in the forest. The roar of the wind and the rustle of the rain had ceased. Only large drops were dripping from the trees and occasional clattered as a final gust shook the branches. Everywhere he heard water gurgling and splashing. But the heavy sound of rain and wind was gone.

Very vaguely he could make out some of the surroundings. They were on a steep, rugged slope, with widely spaced trees. Here and there, rocks protruded from the forest floor. On the side, he could vaguely see the lighter surface of the road, with its hairpin bend almost directly under their feet.

Is it morning already? Not to his mind. Perhaps it was the moonlight that made it seem so light. Something in him urged him to go further.

‘Lucy?’ In his arms Wendy moved.

A little louder: ‘Lucy?’

‘Hm?’

‘How is Diana?’

After a short pause: ‘A bit better, I think. She’s somewhat brooding in the damp down bed.’

‘It’s not raining anymore. I want to go further. Can you walk?’

She sniffed. ‘Walking will be fine, but everything hurts.’ Her voice shook.

‘We are moving on again, Wendy.’ She did not respond. He shook her back and forth. ‘It’s not raining any more. Come on, let’s go. Down in the valley is the main road. I’m sure we can get help there or transport to the hospital.’

‘Hmmm,’ Wendy moaned, not wanting to wake up.

‘Come on, get off me. I urgently need to pee.’

Slowly, she turned to the side so that he could wriggle out from under her. A little later, he stood at the side of the road, feeling drowsy and sticky. The world consisted of light and dark shadows. In fact, he could not really see things, only shapes and planes.

Next to him, the dark figure of Wendy came sliding down the slope.

‘Miche, can you help me?’ sounded Lucy’s distressed voice over his head. ‘I’m stiff all over and everything hurts. I can’t hold Diana by myself.’

Michael climbed up until he could see shimmering the light spot of the downy bed. By touch, he found Diana’s feet.

‘Lower her. I stand firm and can take her from you.’

With small jerks, the package sank into his arms. He held her stiffly for a moment.

‘Are you all right, Miche?’ Lucy sounded worried.

‘I am beneath you, Miche. Pass her on. I’m on the road,’ Wendy said.

She tapped him on the foot to help him find his bearings. He braced himself against a tree and slid the limp body over his, between his legs, until he felt her being taken. 'I've got her,' said Wendy. 'Now help Lucy down.'

Groping up, he found her foot and pulled it. Carefully Lucy lowered herself, but she lost her grip. In a rain of needles and earth she slid over him.

'Aiaiai,' she sobbed. She had landed on top of him with her jumper and jacket pushed up, and he clasped his arms around her, startled.

'I've got you,' he murmured against her chest. 'I'm going to lower you further. The way is under, just as deep as you are tall with your arms up. Do you understand?'

Lucy swallowed her pain and nodded fearfully. He helped her down further. Bent double between his spread legs, he held her wrist as long as he could. Lucy went through a moment of fear when she felt nothing beneath her, until Wendy touched her. 'You're already there, just let go. Come over and stand next to me, then Miche can come down too. Miche? It's free below. Lower yourself down.'

Michael slid down the slope on his back and landed on his feet with a smack.

For a moment, he leaned half seated against the slope, his legs trembling with exertion.

Lucy sobbed.

'Where are you wounded, Luus?' he asked with a sigh.

'My knees and my... my chest. Oh, it's bleeding! Aiaiai, Miche, it hurts so much! My hands are open too,' she cried, shivering with cold, fear and pain.

He shuddered at what he would find, but pulled her towards him anyway. What could he do? He saw nothing, had nothing with him to treat her wounds, not even a handkerchief. The answer unfolded automatically: what he had done for Wendy might also help with Lucy.

'I can only lick your wounds clean; I just did that to Wen.'

'Yes, that is very nice and the pain goes away too,' she agreed from the darkness. Damn, he really couldn't see a thing. How on earth could he find where to lick, he wondered. It was almost too much for him. Here he was with three sisters, lost in the darkness somewhere in the wilderness, one sick and two wounded, their means of transport destroyed by an avalanche in which they had nearly died.

Shortly he wallowed in self-pity; then his sense of responsibility returned. He felt Lucy, sobbing softly, waiting patiently between his hands for him to ease her pain.

'Okay, where do I treat you first? I can't see where you're hurt, maybe you can direct me?' Her head moved against his hand; he understood that she nodded in agreement. He pushed her jumper up. 'Take my head and move it to where I need to lick.'

She shyly pressed his face against her belly. With his lips and tongue, he explored her sticky skin until he felt her jerk. It had to be there. The stickiness tast-

ed of blood. Just below the edge of her bra, he felt a deep scratch. She shivered in pain, but did not pull away as he very gently sucked the frayed edges together with his lips. He could almost see what he was feeling, as if the nerve endings in his lips and tongue were projecting an image on the inside of his eyelids.

Soil from her wound crunched between his teeth; he spat it out as much as he could. Apparently it helped, because Lucy sighed with relief. Through the soft skin he felt her ribs and behind them the steady beat of her heart. Absorbed in the intimate contact, he was free for a moment from the fear and worry of their situation. After a while, he did not know what else to do. With a slight reluctance, he stopped. A little despondently, he realised that he could not dress her wound, that it would open every time she moved. He wished he could take over her pain; she was so pathetic.

Then it was her knees' turn. He lowered himself onto his crouch until he could examine her knees with his sensitive hands. The shreds of her torn trousers had stuck to the scabs; her movements had made the abrasions bleed again. Through the holes, he sucked both knees clean. There was more sand and earth in them.

He got pleasure in it. He felt Lucy's relief when he was able to remove all the dirt from the wounds. Gosh, how she has suffered, he thought with glowing pity.

He turned his face upwards and carefully took a trembling hand in his. It felt dirty and crusty. When she moved for a moment when it hurt badly, he stopped and continued in another spot for a while. Again, he spit out all the sand and hard bits. He found it a bit scary, he really didn't know what kind of filth he was getting in his mouth. When he had finished, he stood up, supporting himself.

'Okay, let's get going,' he said. 'Should I carry Diana?'

'Yes please,' Wendy replied. Sighing with weariness, he took Diana from her.

'Can't we make a stretcher?' suggested Lucy.

'A stretcher? What do you mean?'

'Well, I thought...'

'Wen,' he interrupted her impatiently, 'grab my jumper and stay right behind me so we don't lose each other. Lucy, hold Wendy by her jacket.' He didn't think about the fact that she couldn't use her hands.

At a goose's pace, they shuffled down. He scanned the road ahead with his feet, afraid of stumbling with the unconscious Diana in his arms. It was just as well, because suddenly there was a deep gash in the road.

'Take care,' he sighed. Damn, that child was getting heavy.

'Just a little rest,' he murmured.

## Chapter 11

# Walking through the night

‘Just let’s make a stretcher,’ insisted Lucy. ‘We won’t get anywhere like this. Wendy, have you got your jacket on?’

‘Yes, why?’

‘Combined with my jacket all we need are two sticks. We put them through the sleeves, then you get a kind of stretcher.’

‘How do you know all this?’ asked Michael.

‘TV, man. Just watching TV. Is your torch still in the car?’ Lucy could think very practically.

‘Let’s go to the van and see if we can save anything. All the food, our clothes and my mobile phone are still in it.’

It was too dark that they could really see anything. The headlight that had been burning when they had got out of the car was out. Still, they had a vague idea of the surroundings.

The van was almost completely buried under a mountain of stones and mud. They could not get near it: the avalanche was blocking the road. Further on, the road seemed to have been completely swept away. They could hear streams of water gurgling down a deep hole. They could not pass through here. Back up? Michael wondered. No, there were only mountains.

‘We have to go down the slope through the forest. Further down, we will probably end up on the road again. It winds to and fro like a staircase,’ he suggested uncertainly.

‘But...’ Wendy clung to his jumper, ‘what if there’s a chasm? Then we’ll drop dead!’

‘We’ll find out just in time. We can hold on to the trees.’

At the edge of the road they peered down. None of them could see anything in the dark abyss.

‘I dare not,’ squealed Lucy. ‘I can’t hold on to anything with these hands.’

‘Just now we could see something, couldn’t we? Why is it dark again?’

He sat down on a roadside wall, too tired to stand much longer with Diana in his arms. The twins sat down on either side of him. They leaned against him; Lucy anxiously held out her aching hands so as not to bump them.

‘You are sweet,’ Wendy whispered.

‘You too,’ he muttered hoarsely, with his nose in Diana’s damp hair.

With a jolt, he realised that she was moving.

‘Are you awake, little mouse?’ he asked with a smile that he did not know where it came from.

Diana sighed and twisted a little.

Sitting close together was pleasant, despite the disastrous situation. It was almost windless. Now and then they could still hear drops falling when a high gust touched the treetops. They were relieved Diana showed signs of life again.

She sighed and fell asleep again. Her forehead was no longer hot, fortunately.

‘I think it’s best if we just go down the slope,’ Michael thought aloud. ‘I don’t know anything better. It takes too long to wait. Who knows, maybe no one will pass by here. Then we are waiting for nothing. And walking will warm us a bit.’ He shivered in his wet clothes.

‘It’s far too dangerous to walk down a mountain in the dark,’ grumbled Wendy, who clearly had not believed his earlier reassurance. ‘Let’s at least wait until we see something. I...’

‘I c-can s-see how we c-can walk,’ Lucy shivered. Her voice rang with excitement.

‘Where? I don’t see anything.’

‘The slope right in front of us seems passable. It seems to get less steep further on.’

No matter how Michael strained his eyes, it remained black.

‘If you think we can get down here safely,’ he hesitated. ‘But how are we to carry Diana?’

‘Look, there are sticks for a stretcher,’ he heard Wendy’s voice coming from the darkness. Due to his strained vision he completely lost his ability to see in the dark.

‘I can’t see a thing!’

‘Over there! said Wendy impatiently. Her head was throbbing feverishly from the wound on her forehead; her brother shouldn’t be whining so much.

‘Just now I could see a bit and now I can’t. Can you see all?’ he said, worried.

‘Not everything; more like light and dark shadows. What do you see?’

‘Nothing at all. It’s like I’m blind!’

Michael could not even distinguish between up and down, even though he was sitting firmly on a wall. But the slope made him lose his sense of balance. It made him dizzy. Groaning with misery, he clung to Diana on his lap. She woke up and protested weakly: ‘You’re hurting me! What is the matter?’

‘I could see everything before, but now I am blind!’

She turned around in his arms and looked at him. He could not see it, but felt it.

‘Oh, you’re stupid. You shouldn’t look so... look so hard,’ she declared gruffly. ‘Close your eyes and think of nothing. Just think that you see with your nose.’

‘My nose?’

‘Oh, not really. Just don’t look so stern.’

Michael squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

‘Don’t squeeze. Just close them, as if you were going to sleep.’ She raised her arms – it took her palpable effort – and put them around his neck. ‘Here, just rest a bit. It’ll be fine,’ she murmured, with something motherly in her voice.

He obediently closed his eyes.

For a moment he was out of this world, as if he had been asleep. Slowly he opened his eyes, lifted his head and distinguished the surroundings as a matter of course, outlined in dark and light areas. Diana had fallen asleep again.

Indeed, there was a pile of small stems right in front of their feet.

‘Will you pick two thin sticks?’

The twins had not noticed his confusion. Wendy slid down from the low wall and picked out two suitable ones. The stretcher was quickly put together.

Michael marvelled at the fact that they could see so much. The woods and sky were truly impenetrable black. There was no moon, yet they could distinguish dark and less dark shapes. As if they were looking through a darkened frosted glass. The twilight seemed to float between the trees like mist; at least it did not come from above.

They stepped into the forest, down the slope, with their hearts pounding. Wendy carried the stretcher at the back. Lucy, who could do nothing with her injured hands, scouted the route ahead. On the uneven terrain, they fortunately found enough footing to make the descent. It went so well that they decided to keep going straight on when they crossed the road. It was nicer between the trees. The mud slides had mostly followed the road, making it almost impassable.

As they grew tired, they tripped more and more on the slippery needles of the forest floor. At some point Wendy stumbled.

‘I can’t go on any more. Can we rest for a while?’

Reluctantly, Michael stopped. In a coordinated movement with Wendy he lowered the stretcher to the ground. She shuffled further down until she could sit beside him. Lucy returned and sought protection on his other side. They huddled close together, it was cold. High above them, the wind whipped through the treetops. Everywhere were soft crackling sounds of trunks swaying to and fro.

‘You know, Miche, I used to be afraid of the dark, but not at all now,’ Wendy whispered against his shoulder. ‘It’s peaceful in the woods. It’s as if the trees are protecting us.’

He nodded in reply and yawned. The peaceful atmosphere between the firs dissolved their fear and uncertainty. Lucy had laid her head on his other shoulder; he could hear her quiet breathing.

After a while, he got cramp from having to hold back his own weight and that of the twins. He whispered urgently for them to continue. Slowly they got up, at last he could stretch his aching legs.

‘I’d love to relieve you,’ said Lucy to Wendy. ‘But my hands hurt so much.’

The slope seemed to go down endlessly. However, it became flatter and flatter, so the descent became less tiring.

‘Are we still going in the good direction?’ asked Wendy as they stopped to rest. ‘We haven’t seen the road in a long time. We might get lost.’

‘We have to go down in any case, to the valley,’ said Michael. ‘As long as we are descending it is at least the right way.’

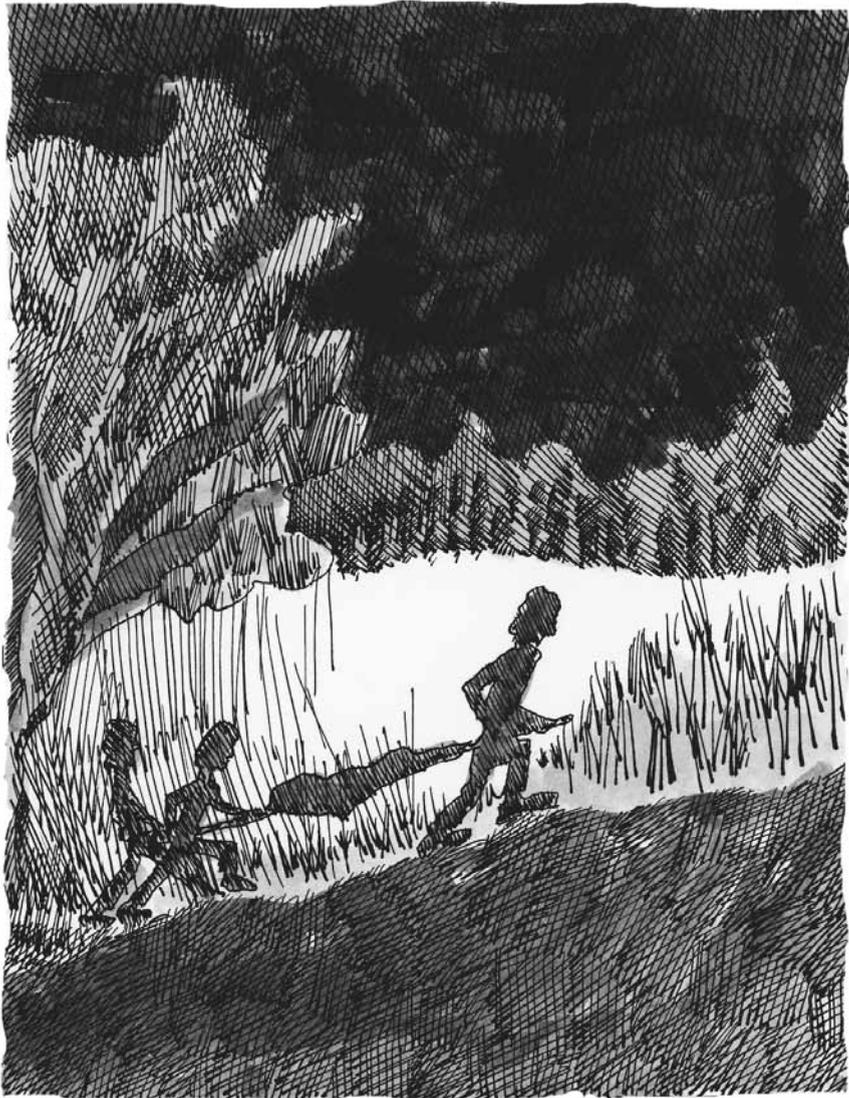
‘Oh well, we’ll find a path or a road,’ said Lucy, more cheerful than she felt. ‘They always go somewhere. Don’t they?’

With difficulty, they got up and trudged on.

As the slope turned into a more horizontal landscape, they unexpectedly found back the road. Relieved, they decided to follow it and not to cut corners anymore. They rested now and then, but made good progress. There was plenty of water along the way to quench their thirst. Only, hunger began to gnaw at them.

Half in a dream state, they trudged along the road, which descended almost imperceptibly to the middle of the broad valley.

It was very quiet. They heard no birds, no crickets, no human sounds; only the ceaselessly changing murmur of running water.



## Chapter 12

### Getting warm by the fire

‘Look!’ exclaimed Lucy. ‘It’s getting light! I can actually see things!’

Far away, on the other side of the valley, mountain peaks began to stand out against the almost black sky. As they walked, they looked back from time to time and saw the sky behind them turning ever brighter. The cloud cover was shining pink from below, but the sun itself was not yet visible.

Wendy stumbled, almost dropping the stretcher with Diana on it and burst into tears. ‘I can’t go any further, Michel!’

‘We’ll rest a while,’ he muttered. He wasn’t doing much better himself. How far would it be to the main road? He looked around to see if there was a house or farm nearby where they could ask for help. However, between the scattered forests, only empty fields were visible. They had no choice but to move on. But first they had to rest.

‘Wendy, can you walk a little longer? I want to take shelter in that bush over there, because the wind starts blowing again. We’ll catch cold.’

She agreed, taking up the stretcher and waddling after him. A cart track led to a spruce grove. With a sigh of relief, they lowered their load. Now it was getting light he could see how terrible they looked; covered in drying yellow mud, scratches everywhere. Lucy stood whimpering softly, blowing on her wounded hands. They looked scary, covered in blood crusts, red scratches and blue from the cold.

‘They hurt so much,’ she whimpered. ‘They are so cold.’

Michael wished he had thought of bringing matches. Most firewood would be soaking wet, but at least they could have tried and perhaps could have dried it.

‘I can’t make a fire without matches, Luus.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she whispered.

‘Oh, but I have matches in my pocket,’ sounded thinly from the stretcher. All rolled up in the duvet, Diana looked at them.

‘Where do you get matches from?’ he asked in amazement.

‘I am saving them. These are from the hotel where we were first.’

She wiggled around a bit and triumphantly held out a folder of tear-off matches. They were a little clammy, but they might still ignite.

Wendy immediately started collecting dry twigs and lichen from the firs and teared paper-thin strips bark from birch trees. Even as children, they had learned how to make a fire in a wet forest. For a moment it was uncertain whether the matches would ignite, but the fifth one did. That was enough for Michael to light the pile that Wendy had collected. Soon they were enjoying a small fire. They put stones around it and warmed their cold hands. Lucy felt so much better.

‘The pain is already going away,’ she whispered.

‘I’m going to dry my clothes,’ Michael shivered. From branches he constructed a rack on which he hung his jumper and T-shirt. On second thought, he also took off his wet, mud-stained jeans and hung them on the rack. He kept his pants on, although soaked; after all, there were girls around.

‘Will you make a rack for us too?’ asked Wendy.

With difficulty, she stripped off her muddy jumper and trousers.

‘Ouch,’ she groaned as her T-shirt rubbed her wounded forehead. The deep scratch began to bleed again. Michael licked her until the bleeding stopped.

‘Can you help me?’ asked Lucy. ‘I can’t grasp anything with those hands.’

They carefully helped Lucy out of her wet jumper. Michael was dismayed to see what an ugly gash she had under her breast. Luckily, the crust had remained intact. Then they carefully slid the unruly jeans over her injured knees.

‘Jeez, you’ve been hit hard,’ Michael couldn’t help noticing. He carefully started licking her knees where it had started bleeding again. Meanwhile, shivering in her underwear, Wendy searched for more wood. With finely-branched dead spruce twigs, she kept the fire going, although it smoked quite a lot because of the moisture. Despite their scanty clothing, they became warmer by keeping moving. The blazing fire began to spread an intense glow.

With a shy glance at Michael, Wendy took off her wet knickers and bra as well, hung them over the rack to dry and then walked in her nudity in and out the forest for a steady supply of firewood. Lucy wanted to dry her underwear too and finally Michael followed the twins’ example. He held his pants on a branch over the fire to dry it faster. Lucy sat shivering and puffing at the same time with her eyes closed, almost in the fire. Diana looked on sleepily from the stretcher.

When they had assembled enough fire wood, they sat close together, enjoying the heat radiation on their faces, protecting their cold backs with the damp duvet of Diana, who was hanging listlessly against Wendy.

Michael had slept for a while. Still drowsy, he stared on his back straight into the sky. The girls had crept up close to him; they were fast asleep. Lucy had put her hands on his belly like two dead birds.

He had been dreaming. Actually, he was still half dreaming; it was more a feeling that he did not want to give up. For it was a glowing feeling that he was no longer alone, that he was impregnated by another who loved him dearly, whom he loved dearly...

He shyly noticed that the warm girls’ bodies against him excited him. He secretly studied their new curves. Ever since they started to grow, they had scrupulously hidden their unfolding feminine bodies from him.

Wendy’s nipples were pink like roses, while Lucy had dark brown cones crowning her pointed breasts. Wendy’s hips and buttocks were also rounder than those of her sister. And amidst those smooth legs, his member stood jauntily erect.

From deep inside him a tightening took place; like a sneeze that wouldn't come. Jeez, what are you doing? he thought, slightly panicked. They are my sisters. This can't be!

But the flowing sensation was already too far to stop. He held frantically still when the release came. A deep, gasping sigh was all he dared to utter.

Anxious, he sat up straight and carefully untangled himself from the embrace.

At the edge of the grove, he urinated and cleaned himself. Shivering, he began to put on his clothes. The fabric was not yet completely dry, but it felt warm for at least a few minutes.

It had become a bright day; their clothes would dry further.

He scurried about, enjoying the silence of the landscape and the life that was coursing through his veins. He fetched wood and stoked up the fire. His spontaneous orgasm had left a deep sense of satisfaction.

We have found a nice sheltered spot here, he thought. How nice it would be if we could stay here for a while, but we have nothing to eat. All those precious sandwiches are buried under tons of stones and mud.

That gave him an idea. Strange really, an avalanche doesn't just come down like that, does it?

He walked back a little, to where he could see the slopes along which they had descended. He studied them closely with his sharp eyes.

The trail of the avalanche was frighteningly clear on the mountainside. A yellow track showed with a collar of uprooted trees. The trail fanned out as it descended. The landslide had wiped down several hairpin bends in the road. At the bottom of the slope, the avalanche had stopped in the forest, but a staggering number of trees had been knocked down in the process. In a broken tangle, they marked the boundary to which the landslide extended.

It hurt him to see the destruction. The pain turned to dismay when he discovered the cause higher up. The earth had shifted where the slopes had been completely cleared. Deep erosion channels marked the beginning of the landslide.

He was perplexed: every child learns in school one could not remove forests on steep slopes. Otherwise everything would be washed down at the first torrent, when the dying tree roots would no longer hold the ground. Or was he crazy? No, he had learned it in geography, he was sure of that. It was his favourite subject and he always remembered everything. But here he saw how much damage ignorance, or indifference, or pure greed could do. Yes, it was easier to fell whole parcels at once, because the trees then fell down by themselves. If you cut narrow strips along the contour lines and leave the rest standing, you have to work much harder.

First they could not continue by train because of a falling tree and now they were stranded in an avalanche with the van.

Confused, he walked back. He could not understand how people could be so stupid, so irresponsible. The whole road had collapsed; people could have died.

They themselves had almost perished. If they hadn't been warned just in time by that gnome or whatever it was that crossed the road in front of them; they would have driven straight into the abyss.

He walked back and woke his sisters. Together with Wendy, he dressed Lucy, making sure that her wounds touched as little of her clothes as possible.

'Can you walk by yourself, little mouse?' he asked Diana, who lay staring absently at the trees.

'I am so tired,' she whispered. 'I can't even lift my arms.'

He looked at her sharply. What was wrong with her? She didn't seem to have a fever, her forehead felt normal.

'No way, Miche,' she assured him with a resigned smile. She looked small, pale and minuscule, almost discoloured.

'Then we'll carry you, won't we?' he said in a quasi-cheerful manner.

A little later, they took the improvised stretcher further down the road, enjoying the bright morning, despite pain and fatigue. The sun was already beginning to give warmth.

## Chapter 13

### First Aid

Then, unexpectedly, there was a flat surface shining through the trees: the main road!

'Let's see if someone comes,' Michael announced. 'We'll wait on the other side, we need to go left, that way.'

'Look, there's a bus stop,' cried Lucy. She limped across the deserted tarmac in pure joy. She hadn't been able to carry the stretcher and still had some energy left for pleasure. Wendy laughed pallidly at her sister's antics: she could hardly stand on her legs any more. Stiffly, she lowered herself to the ground. Lucy came panting sit next to her and stroked Diana awkwardly with her wounded hands. Diana was awake and looking at the sky.

'I'm thirsty and I need to pee,' she said in a thin voice.

Wendy helped her, while Michael drew water from a small stream in his hands. Together they dismantled the stretcher.

'A car is coming! Shall we wave for it to stop, or shall we wait for the bus?'

'I have money with me, even if it is wet. We...'

'It is the bus!' shouted Lucy, waving that they wanted to board.

With squealing brakes, the old bus stopped in front of them. At first, the driver looked doubtfully at their muddied appearance, but when Michael got in with the sick Diana in his arms and urgently said 'To the hospital please!' he did not even want money. As soon as they were seated, he drove off at full speed.

He had to stop in a village. In Slovak he told the people to get in quickly and pointed to the sick child. The new passengers gathered around the four in concern and asked in broken German what had happened to them. A woman with a huge basket on her arm gave them sandwiches, another came with hot coffee from a thermos; it became cosy in the speeding bus.

The bus raced across deserted intersections honking and flashing its lights. The passengers were thrilled. He drove up to the entrance of a small hospital, blew the horn and opened the doors for them. With many thanks and waved off by the other passengers, they tumbled out of the bus.

Their noisy arrival had attracted the necessary attention. A nurse came out with a rolling stretcher. Relieved, Michael laid Diana on it. The nurse said something in Slovakian; when Michael shyly asked if she also spoke German, she repeated in fluent German that she had already alerted a doctor. She was the night nurse, she said, and responsible until seven o'clock. She added that it was a sanatorium with healing hot springs. The hospital was only small, actually only intended for the visitors of the healing baths.

While busy with all kind of things, she gave them tea from a large jug on a trol-

ley in the hall. There was no food yet, she said with an apology. The kitchen only opened at half past seven. Diana was doing well at the moment, she assured, she no longer had a fever. Between her rapid communications, she had taken Diana's temperature, felt her pulse, looked in her eyes with a lamp and done a reaction test for meningitis.

Unfortunately, she did not have any dry clothes. If the children would put on a bathrobe from the sanatorium, she would have their clothes washed and dried, the laundry starting at 8.30 am, so that they would all be dry by 11 am. Meanwhile, the doctor could examine Diana. 'Look, there he is, his name is Wenceslas,' she concluded with a wink at the girls.

The twins stared open-mouthed at the doctor. He was so handsome! And he had such beautiful eyes. They were instantly in love. He shook hands with them all as he introduced himself; when Lucy withdrew hers, he frowned briefly.

'I will look at your injuries in a moment,' he said in German. He waited after each sentence until Michael had translated it. 'But I will examine first this little girl. Is she your sister?' They nodded speechless.

'Hello, princess,' he greeted her. Diana smiled back a radiant smile. He asked her a few short questions while he felt her pulse: had she been nauseated, yes; headache, no; stomach ache, where, here? Here? And many other things, but to almost everything she said no, even before Michael had been able to translate the question completely.

'Do you know what is wrong with you?'

Diana shook her head. 'I'm just so tired.'

The doctor looked at Michael. 'Can you tell me anything about her?'

Michael began to recount the events of the past few days. As he spoke, the sentences came out more and more fluently. In the end, it seemed as if he was speaking his mother tongue instead of German.

'Diana is a very tender child,' he explained, 'right from her birth. She is often a bit sick. Not too bad, just a little fever, then she sleeps a lot and gets drops from my mother, something homeopathic, and she's better again.' He told of their walk in the forest, the bad weather, Diana's high fever, the storm that cut off the village from the rest of the world... 'Even at the factory there was no one with a car...'

'Factory?' the doctor interrupted him in surprise. 'In Branočs?'

'Yes. Do you know it?'

'No, only that it must be a remote hamlet.'

'That factory is along the railway,' Michael continued. 'The landlady told me that it used to be a steam sawmill, but she doesn't know what they're doing right now. It has a terrible stench now and then, as if they were burning all sorts of chemical things.'

The doctor suddenly cursed, in his own language. They were shocked; they had not expected that. He controlled himself. 'Don't mind; go on with your story. I want to ask you more about the factory later. It is important information, but

first we need to know what is wrong with your sister. What happened then?’

‘Oh, well, I borrowed a van from the local drunk and we drove down here...’

‘Borrowed? Can you drive? How old are you anyway? What happened to you? Did you have an accident?’

‘I am sixteen. I had never driven a car before, but there was no one else who could drive us,’ he replied shyly. ‘On the way, we lost the van in an avalanche. We waited until it was dry. We carried Diana down the mountain on a stretcher made of sticks and our coats. At the main road, we got on the bus. It dropped us off here,’ he concluded, summarising the exciting, frightening and painful adventure. Gosh, he had been so choked up.

‘It looks like you have had a rough time,’ the doctor said sympathetically. On impulse he stroked Michael’s tangled hair, a fatherly gesture that brought tears to Michael’s eyes. His father had never done that. ‘You are brave. But go on about her illness, I really need to know.’

‘She was glowing while on the way,’ Michael continued. He cleared his throat. ‘We had her wrapped in a down duvet on the back seat. Lucy... The one with the dark curls... kept dripping tea in her mouth the whole way, because she was unconscious. When we got off the road, we had to get out of the car because rocks were starting to fall. It was raining cats and dogs, we got soaked. Diana luckily did not, although her duvet was wet. We were able to take shelter under a rock. There she had cooled off a bit and...’

‘Yes, that’s what I mean,’ the doctor interrupted him again. He reassuringly put a hand on his arm. ‘The wet duvet probably saved her life. Listen, if Diana has another fever like that, you must make sure she can get rid of the heat without getting really cold. Fortunately, the wet down has dissipated enough heat so that she did not get overheated. That can kill too.’

Michael looked at him in dismay. They had not known that.

The twins had not been able to follow the conversation. When they saw Michael’s face become drawn, they looked at him questioningly.

‘What did he say?’ asked Lucy when he did not answer. Michael translated what the doctor had just said.

‘Gosh,’ said Wendy in amazement. They looked startled at the doctor.

‘Don’t worry. You know now for the next time,’ he reassured them. The girls understood what he said, but still Michael translated.

‘What is wrong with her?’

The doctor remained silent for a long time, looking intensely at Diana on the stretcher. She looked back listlessly.

‘I don’t know,’ he finally said. ‘It looks like influenza, but it’s not, she should have pain in her muscles. It’s not meningitis either, because then she would have been dead already.’

Michael was a bit shocked by this.

‘I’ll have a look at her irises and take some blood samples this afternoon, then

we may learn more,' the doctor broke the silence. 'There is nothing urgent going on with your sister at the moment. You could use some sleep, I think. I need to start my round as a matter of urgency myself. Speaking of which, what's the matter with you?' He pulled the twins under the lamp. 'Your name is Wendy, isn't it? I'll glue that cut on your forehead. Then it will heal without a scar. I'll glue that cut on your chest, Lucy, too. Just like that. The wounds are nice and clean.'

'I licked them clean,' Michael confessed, blushing. 'I didn't know what else to do, everything was covered in mud.'

'Bravo! That was the best you could do. Look, there's no dirt left and the edges aren't inflamed.' He examined Lucy. 'Her knees and hands don't look too good. Tell them to take off their clothes. You will get bathrobes until your clothes are washed.'

Shyly they undressed. Without any ceremony, the nurse collected their clothes and handed out the bathrobes she had picked up.

'Halt, you are all covered in mud. Nurse, can they take a shower somewhere? I'll wait here.'

The cheerful woman took them down a corridor, pointed to two old-fashioned white-tiled showers and handed out towels and shampoo. Wendy and Lucy disappeared with Diana into one and Michael took the other.

The warm water felt soothing on their chilled and bruised bodies. The shampoo washed off all the mud and frightening memories.

'Come on, I'll treat your wounds,' the doctor said as they entered the outpatient clinic again.

He touched Wendy's forehead. With great care, he glued the loose pieces of skin together with a kind of two-second adhesive from a very small tube. In one go, he did the cut under Lucy's breast. So quickly and the girls squeezed Michael's hand so hard that they did not feel a thing. White bandages with soothing ointment on the wounds melted away any pain that remained.

When a trolley with hot rolls, coffee, tea and all sorts of spreads was driven in, it even became a bit festive.

'Gosh, I was so hungry,' yawned Lucy. Wendy fed her small bites, for Lucy's hands were completely bandaged.

'Miche?'

He walked up to Diana and took her in his arms. She put her head against his and whispered: 'I don't want to go back to the boarding house. I'm sick there every time and I've had such bad dreams, like I'm choking, and there are monsters coming at me all the time.'

'We'll stay here for a few days, until we know what's wrong with you. If the weather stays nice, we can go camping in the forest. Would you like that?'

She sighed. 'Yes, that's good.' She yawned extensively. It was contagious. The late night on the mountain made itself felt. Michael suddenly could not stand on his legs any more.

‘Can we stay here or do we have to go to a hotel?’ he asked the nurse. ‘We really need to get some sleep.’

She nodded. ‘You can stay; there are plenty of rooms in the spa. But it’s not free, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, I have money and a credit card and we are insured,’ Michael rushed to reassure her, proud that he had all that.

They nodded after Michael translated the proposal for his sisters. Diana was almost asleep and only reacted by clinging even more tightly to Michael.

They said goodbye to the friendly doctor when a nurse came to fetch them. Diana wanted to be carried by Michael, but she had to lie on a rolling stretcher.

Their room was in a wing of the main building. It looked old-fashioned and somewhat dilapidated, although the woodwork had apparently been painted recently. They felt at home: it looked a bit like the villa they lived in. They were given a suite just for them with a large bed, an antique bathroom and a sitting room with a beautiful view on the cascading open-air pools, which were bordered by shaved hedges and flowering shrubs. The nurse rolled out two extra beds from a room in the corridor and left them alone with a friendly smile.

They walked around in amazement until they felt at ease. The twins sat down on the big bed.

‘I want to sleep here,’ said Wendy.

‘Me too,’ added Lucy. ‘Oops. We don’t have any pyjamas.’

‘Well, then you sleep nude,’ her sister chuckled. She herself was the first to defiantly take off her bathrobe. Shyly Michael turned away. Diana would not let go of him, so he let himself fall into one of the other beds like a bundle.

## Diagnosis: unknown

Michael woke up early in the afternoon, hot and stuffy from complicated dreams. With a swing, he threw off the far too thick duvet and sat up. His muscles were stiff with pain. Scratches and wounds flamed and itched everywhere.

He slid out of bed; with a sigh of relief he felt the fresh air cool his heated body down to a bearable temperature. In the bathroom, their clothes lay neatly folded in piles. They smelled a little strange, of detergent he did not know, but it was nice to be able to walk around in his own clothes again.

Diana slept peacefully and the twins were also still deep in dreamland.

When the door opened, he startled of the unexpected intrusion. A nurse came in to say that it was two o'clock and that they were expected at the outpatient clinic at three o'clock. He woke his sisters. While Wendy was still a little sleepy dressing herself and Lucy, Michael was taking care of Diana.

In the outpatients' clinic they had to wait for Doctor Wenceslas to arrive. He hurriedly greeted them and put Diana in a treatment chair to look into her eyes with a machine. She sat up obediently, but could barely keep her eyes open. He wrote things on a preprinted paper, sometimes shaking his head. Curious, they watched as he tested her with rows of small glass tubes containing coloured liquids. She had to hold them in her hand, during which he mumbled and pulled the fingers of her other hand, which she had to hold together. When that was done, he laid Diana on an examination table and began to probe her abdomen. Finally, he felt her pulse extensively.

'What did you just do?' asked Michael.

The doctor sat down opposite them, with a frown between his eyebrows. It took a long time before he started talking.

'First I looked at her irises with an iris-scope. Shapes, colours and flecks in the iris of an eye can tell a lot about health and illness.'

'Yes, and what did they say?' asked Michael when the doctor remained silent.

'I honestly can't explain it. On the one hand, she is a child who has never been ill. She is in perfect condition. But...' he sat up and looked at them seriously, 'I did see some acute poisoning. What she is suffering from now, that is. I've tested some known toxic compounds.'

'Toxins?'

'Yes. You noticed she had to hold a test tube every time? There are chemicals in it. With kinesiological tests I can find out which substances are bothering her. I do that by checking the tension of her muscles. I can feel random muscle responses from her fingers when I ask her if the substance is making her sick. If she is holding a substance that bothers her, she cannot keep her fingers together.'

‘My mother does it with us too, but with one arm.’

‘Yes, it’s the same method, only more tiring than using fingers.’

‘What did you...?’

‘I have received a positive reaction to a number of substances, which means that she may have become ill from them.’

Michael looked at him, horrified. Poison!

The twins, alarmed by the look on his face, asked what was wrong. He translated as best he could what the doctor had said. They looked down at Diana, who was lying motionless on the examination table. Poisoned!

‘But it is not so easy to draw conclusions,’ the doctor continued with a frown. ‘I’ve been able to test that several chemicals are undermining her health, but I can’t get a clear picture of whether they are actually causing her illness. The fever attacks are probably allergic reactions of her body to harmful substances, but to what extent they are really in her body I cannot determine! When I ask her directly, I get a negative reaction from your sister. In any case, I will have laboratory tests carried out on her blood and urine.’

‘What is he saying?’ asked Lucy.

‘We want to know too!’ said Wendy. Again he translated, this time with more confidence, what the doctor had found.

‘I can’t explain it,’ sighed the doctor. Slightly annoyed, he started pacing while muttering to himself. Again to them: ‘I’ve done all I can do at the moment. You can see for yourself that she has few problems now. She is weak at the moment, but not ill. In the village, however, she became deathly ill, if I may believe your description. We will have to wait for the results of the blood and urine tests first.’

They let the news sink in. ‘How... what now?’

‘I will have to investigate that further. Your sister will have to be hospitalised for observation.’

‘Oh,’ said Michael, alarmed. ‘Does she have to stay here then?’

The doctor hesitated for a moment and shook his head. ‘No, we are not set up here for research. It is a spa. For observations, we take patients to the regional hospital. They are better equipped to diagnose unclear cases.’

Michael looked at him, startled.

‘What is he saying?’ the twins insisted.

‘Diana has to go to another hospital for observation,’ he summarised the conversation. They looked questioningly at the doctor. Why?

‘I want to have her examined more closely,’ he replied. ‘A colleague of mine is an internist at the local hospital. He knows a lot more than I do about unexplained symptoms.’ He looked at his hands indecisively. ‘Um, this colleague,’ he finally continued: ‘claims to be clairvoyant. I hope you don’t mind?’

Michael looked at him in astonishment. Objection? That was an idiotic question. Maybe their doctor had a problem with it, he thought. ‘No, of course not,’ he murmured.

‘Good, that’s settled then,’ said the doctor with a sigh of relief. ‘He is very good at diagnosing obscure diseases. His conclusions are always correct strange as they may seem.’ He stood up and stretched.

Michael’s head was spinning. At least someone was to be called in who seemed to have more to say about Diana’s incomprehensible attacks of illness. It gave him hope, although in the background he still felt a suspicion that he could not put his finger on.

‘We will take blood samples of your sister for tests and give her a strengthening drip, as she is quite weak. When did she last eat?’

They looked at each other. It had indeed been a while, they realised.

‘Yesterday morning,’ Michael said. ‘A sandwich, but she threw that up a little later.’

‘And before that?’

He shook his head. ‘For a few days now she ate nothing at all. All she wanted was to drink.’

‘Well, that’s good, at least she isn’t dehydrated,’ he reassured them and smiled at the little figure on the examination table. ‘It’s almost four o’clock now. I’ll be finished at five. Then I have time to call my colleague for an appointment. The nurse will take blood and urine samples in a moment. After that, we will see. Shall we have dinner together, in the restaurant?’ he suggested. ‘If it suits you? The food is good. It’s vegetarian, though.’

Michael nodded. ‘We always eat vegetarian, so that’s okay. Is the restaurant here at the spa?’

‘Oh yes, of course. You haven’t been there yet.’ He explained how they could get there and said goodbye.

It was half past five when he came to get them.

‘My colleague at the local hospital is abroad for a few days, at a conference, so we’ll keep your sister here for now. There is no acute danger and I definitely want my colleague to do the examination.’

They looked at him with mixed feelings. It was nice that Diana stayed here, but it was also important that they found out what was making her so ill.

Together they brought Diana to a sick room, where she was put to bed wearing a clean nightgown from the hospital. The doctor took the children away before the nurse started the infusion, because pricking a thick needle into Diana’s emaciated hand would not be a pleasant sight.

## Chapter 15

### Diana's condition worsens

The restaurant was a semi-circular pavilion of cast iron and glass. They had just started their soup when the doctor was called away.

Depressed, they continued eating. None of them felt very comfortable among the other guests in the restaurant. The average age, according to Lucy, must have been well over a hundred. That was an exaggeration, but indeed only the waiters seemed younger.

'It's raining again,' Wendy remarked when she finished her dessert.

'Diana will get a fever again,' Lucy responded, unabashedly licking her dessert bowl clean.

'What did you say?' Michael was suddenly alarmed.

'Diana will probably get a fever again because it has started to rain,' Lucy repeated. 'That happened every time. When it rained.'

'Could it be?' He was shocked. 'It could well be, you know. Let's go and see.'

'O?' Anxious, Lucy jumped up. 'Come along, Wen.'

Together they ran after their brother, who was already on his way to the door with big steps. It was not far to the infirmary. Panting, they pushed open the door of the room where they had left their sister. The room was empty, even the bed was gone. Astonished, they looked if they weren't mistaken, but the number was right.

'They moved her,' Michael stammered, almost panicking. 'Come with me, we'll go and ask where she is.'

They ran into the corridor. Only in the hall did they find someone in an office. The woman looked up in dismay when they entered, but when she recognised them her expression softened and she greeted them kindly. To his question she replied in German that Diana's condition had suddenly worsened. She had been taken by ambulance to the regional hospital.

'Regional hospital? But why didn't anyone say anything to us?' asked Michael, angry and scared. 'Where is Doctor Wenceslas? Is he still here? We were having dinner with him. He was called away. For her? Is he with her?'

Bewildered the woman looked at him. 'Nobody said anything to you? The doctor was going to send a nurse to you.'

'No, we didn't see anyone! No, not now.' That was to Wendy who was tugging at his sleeve.

'I'm sorry, young people, something has gone wrong.'

'What then? How is she? Can we go see her?'

'There is no need to worry,' she said soothingly.

'Can we visit her?' repeated Michael.

The nurse looked at her watch and then at the wall clock. 'I don't know,' she hesitated. 'Visiting hours are over. They're a bit more formal in the regional hospital than we are; especially in Intensive Care. And if they're still busy with her...'

'Intensive Care? We want to see her right away,' Michael interrupted her sharply. 'Something was going very wrong. 'Can you call a taxi?'

'No, young man, you'd better ask the porter,' the woman replied sternly.

'Now you've insulted her,' whispered Lucy. 'Stupid.'

'Yes, sure, excuse me; thank you.' Michael stammered.

'Come with me,' he urged the twins. They ran after him as he briefly recounted what the head nurse had said. The doorman directed them to the entrance, where two old-fashioned taxis were waiting. They plunged into the front one. Michael tried to make it clear that they needed to go to the regional hospital.

The driver, an elderly woman, was not very forthcoming. He did his best to explain their hurry, until Lucy hissed: 'Show her your money. She doesn't trust it because we are too young.'

It turned out to be a golden tip. The woman nodded sullenly and drove off. They saw little of the town on the way; with staring eyes they imagined all sorts of woes. None of them said a word.

The regional hospital turned out to be an ugly concrete complex situated between a highway and an industrial area. They hurried to the reception desk.

The lady who spoke to them conferred with a man behind a desk, who looked at them for a moment and then shook his head.

'Please, wait over there, you will be called in a moment,' the lady said in almost unintelligible German. Uncomfortable with the enormous space, they sat down.

At some point Michael could not stand it any longer, he was going to make another attempt to find their sister.

'They don't even know our name,' he mumbled, disturbed.

He elaborately explained that they were Dutch tourists and that their sister had been brought here from the spa because she had suddenly become very ill. He asked them to write down their names and make sure they could see their sister.

Again, the woman behind the desk consulted with the officer. This time, he deigned to come to the desk in person. With a list in his hand, he said briskly that two hours ago a girl of about seven years of age was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit.

'But what about her?' stammered Michael. 'Where is the Intensive Care Unit? Can we go see her?'

The man replied that, as far as he knew, she was not allowed visitors. Almost crying, Michael begged whether they could at least see her, whether there was a doctor they could talk to.

'Tell him you won't pay,' Lucy hissed. She obviously knew better than her big brother how the world worked. Without thinking about it, Michael asked if they didn't need the number of their insurance company for the settlement, but first

he wanted to speak to the doctor in charge.

With a straight face, the man disappeared without a word. Through the glass door, they saw him making a phone call. A little later, he returned with a form. He asked him to fill it in. Michael nodded. 'Of course. Later. First the doctor and Diana.'

With an even sterner face, the man started calling again. His assistant came a little later to ask if they wanted to wait a little longer.

'So you see, brother,' whispered Lucy, who had been hanging on Michael's arm. 'Money always works. Threatening not to pay works immediately.'

'How did you get so smart?' he wanted to know, relieved that they had apparently managed to break a deadlock, thanks to Lucy's clear insight.

'TV man,' was her short answer, for the second time in 24 hours. 'Just watch TV and you'll learn how the world works,' was her pedantic reply. 'Or how to make a stretcher.' Michael had been a bit of a nuisance to them, always blaming them sitting in front of the television, but this was the second time she had payback.

'Anyway, I think you're very clever,' he sighed. 'It worked like magic.'

She glowed, pleased as she was with his praise.

They had to wait a while before anyone came. An elderly gentleman in a crumpled grey suit came out of the lift and looked around. Michael understood he was looking at them. He approached him hesitantly. When the man made eye contact, he straightened his back, held out his hand and spoke his name. The man did the same, shook Wendy's hand, was startled when Lucy showed her bandaged hands and introduced himself again – a name they could not remember.

'Ask him for his business card,' Lucy whispered to her brother, who obeyed without thinking.

To his surprise he was immediately handed over a business card. The man said that he had put Diana on cardiac monitoring because she had been brought in unconscious, had a very high fever and her heartbeat was irregular.

'Excuse me, could you say it again?' said Michael, a little overwhelmed. 'I didn't understand it all.'

The cardiologist repeated what he just said.

'She is not unconscious now. Thanks to the medication we gave her, her temperature has dropped and her heart rhythm is satisfactory,' he added in a reassuring tone. 'She has an IV and is doing reasonably well. You can see her if you like, but you are not allowed into the room.'

'What is going to happen next?' asked Michael.

'Wait and see boy, wait and see until she gets better. We have to, too, before we can examine her further. She is still too weak.'

'What are you going to do with her?'

'Not me, boy, my colleagues will do that. As a cardiologist I have only been called in to calm her heart down. I don't expect it to work erratically anymore, the medication will take care of that. She doesn't have a heart condition, if that

reassures you. She is as healthy as a fish. As far as that goes.'

'Can... can we go to her now?'

The man nodded, looked at his watch.

'She's in ICU, room 413. That's on the fourth floor.'

When they had no more questions, he shook Michael's hand, waved absently at the twins and walked towards the exit.

On the fourth floor, they followed the signs; through some double doors, they ended up in the Intensive Care ward.

Behind the windows lay pale figures attached to hoses and wires; some beds were empty.

'Here she is!' whispered Wendy at the window of room 413.

In a large bed lay a very small girl. They could only recognise her by the blonde hair on the pillow.

'Look, she is connected to all these wires. See that monitor? That's her heart-beat.' Lucy apparently knew all about it. 'She's also on oxygen. That's from the tube they taped under her nose.'

Further on, an alarm signal suddenly sounded. Startled, they looked into the corridor. Two white figures ran out of an office and into a room where a red light flashed above the door.

'What is that?' whispered Michael.

'Oh no,' moaned Lucy, her eyes frightened. 'Someone is dying. That alarm only sounds when someone's heart stops.'

They turned around simultaneously and peered at Diana's monitor. Everything was normal there.

'I am going inside,' Michael whispered.

'You not allowed to do that,' Wendy protested.

'Are you coming in, or would you rather wait in the corridor?'

In three seconds, they were inside.

Diana took a deep breath, sighed and opened her eyes. She was so happy to see them that tears rolled down her cheeks. Melting, Lucy and Wendy knelt at the headboard and stroked her, careful for all the tubes and wires.

'Oh, Miche, they tied me up,' she cried softly. 'I didn't want to and then they tied me up.'

Michael heaved the deck. She was tied to the bed with a harness made of straps and buckles! They stared at it wide-eyed until Wendy came to her senses and untied her. Diana immediately sat up and put her arms around her brother's neck. 'Miche, take me with you,' she begged. 'I don't want to be poked and prodded and tied to that device. It's sucking everything out of me and there's a monster sitting on it.'

Michael shivered for a moment. When Diana saw monsters, he always got images of greyish-grey lumps with arms and tentacles and suction cups that sucked life energy from you. He got conflicted. You didn't go against a doctor, did you?

Diana had been brought here because her heart was not working properly, hadn't she? But she kept giving unmistakable signals that things were not right here.



*I'm not a whining child, she seemed to be saying to him. I know what is good for me, and this is not good.*

His indecision caused an enormous tension. It swirled up and down his back, the tension grabbed him by the throat... he had to do something...

*Get away! Now!* was the message that seared out.

From overwhelmed teenager with too many responsibilities in a foreign country, he became an effective leader in a matter of seconds. It no longer mattered whether Diana had been rightly put on cardiac guard. Now she was asking for help so clearly, she would get it. Immediately.

## Kidnapping Diana

‘Wen, go and see if anyone is in the office. I’m going to disconnect her and they can see that over there. Luus, what should we do with the drip?’

Lucy hesitated, trying to remember how it was done on television. ‘We’ll just take the bag,’ she decided. ‘We just have to make sure we hold it higher than her arm, so it can keep dripping.’

‘There’s nobody in,’ Wendy panted. ‘I brought a wheelchair,’ she added, very self-consciously. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Here, hold this. Hold it higher than her arm.’ Michael reached for the bag of fluids and carefully pulled off the plaster that held the oxygen tube under Diana’s nose. He looked for and found the electrodes stuck to Diana’s skin and pulled them off as well. Immediately, the device began to beep loudly. Startled, he reflexively yanked the plug from the socket. That was his way of silencing a device.

‘Ssh...’ he hissed, ‘that was close.’

‘No one in sight.’ Lucy had gone to look in the corridor. ‘There is some sound from the office.’

*Run!*

Michael put Diana in the wheelchair and pushed it into the corridor. Wendy was smart enough to grab Diana’s clothes. They scurried to the lift as quietly as possible. Luckily, there was no one else in the hall. After a few nervous moments, the lift door rolled open. Two men in white ran out, rolling an empty stretcher. Astonished, they saw the couple disappear around the corner. Just in time, they shot through the closing doors and pressed the bottom button. Too late, Michael realised that they were about to shoot down to the cellar. With his finger on the button above, he hesitated.

‘Maybe we’d better go by the cellar. We’ll never get past the reception with her.’

Startled, the twins looked at him. ‘Everything could have gone wrong after all.’

In the basement, they looked suspiciously from the brightly lit lift into a drab concrete corridor with pipes running along the walls and ceiling. Here and there a fluorescent tube was lighted. There was no one to be seen, only a faint thud was heard.

‘Where should we go?’ whispered Wendy. They didn’t know, they couldn’t get their bearings anywhere.

‘Come, let’s at least get out of the lift, otherwise they’ll see that he’s stuck here and they might come looking.’

In the corridor they looked first one way, then the other. Michael sniffed the air.

‘I smell exhaust fumes. Maybe there’s a basement car park, then we can get out there.’ The thought had flashed into his mind like an illuminated advertisement.

‘I don’t smell anything.’

‘Neither do I, but Miche has a better nose than anyone else,’ Lucy responded laconically. ‘Let’s follow his nose instead of our own,’ she giggled nervously.

‘Miche, I want my clothes on,’ Diana said firmly from the wheelchair. ‘I hate this... this nasty thing.’ She picked at the plastic she was wearing in disgust. It was fastened to her back with snaps. They popped off of their own accord when she pulled harder. To everyone’s surprise she sat completely nude in the wheelchair.

‘Okay. Stand up and hold your drip,’ he commanded. They dressed her quickly.

‘Can you walk?’ She shook her head regretfully.

‘That way.’ Michael ran with the wheelchair at breakneck speed to the side from where he had smelt a fresh gust of exhaust fumes. He no longer had any doubts: there they could escape from this dreadful hospital.

The corridor led to a crossroads. Behind double swing doors cars gleamed.

They slipped through; nobody could be seen or heard. Puffing and groaning, they pushed the wheelchair up a ramp, crawled under a barrier and stood outside. When a car approached, they quickly shot down a path that seemed to lead between high bushes to a kind of park.

‘Can we take the wheelchair with us like that?’

‘No, actually,’ Michael agreed. ‘Can you walk a while, little mouse?’

‘Maybe if you hold me,’ sighed Diana.

It was easier than they expected: in one fluid movement, they lifted Diana onto her own legs, supported under her arms by the twins, Wendy also carrying the infusion bag. He pushed the wheelchair between the bushes.

‘There, they can’t catch us with that now. But how do we get back?’

‘We can take a taxi again, can’t we?’ Lucy was very practical about these things.

‘Doesn’t that look suspicious, with the IV bag and all?’

On a hunch, Wendy tucked the thing in the hood of Diana’s jacket and tucked the hose between some folds.

‘Solved,’ she observed with an air of: who can do better than me? ‘Now call a taxi.’ She looked at Lucy defiantly; at last she had outwitted her clever sister once.

At the taxi stand there was only an old Lada. With some money in his hand, being wiser since their previous experiences, he asked through the open window if the man would take them to the spa. Apparently he understood, because he silently pushed open a backdoor from inside.

The ride was no fun, because the exhaust was apparently leaking, it stank terribly.

The man asked a scandalous amount of money when he stopped at the entrance of the spa. Because he still remembered how much they had paid for the outward journey, Michael, shaking his head, gave an equal amount to the driver. He was satisfied; it might have been more than he had counted on.

They did not meet anyone in the corridors. They went into their room excitedly, where they sat down to rest.

‘What about Diana?’ yawned Wendy after a while. Now that they had returned safely from their rescue expedition, fatigue struck.

‘Sleep,’ yawned her sister. Despite all the differences, they were exactly alike in many things, sometimes to the second.

‘Yeah, let’s do that.’

Michael, too, yawned so hard that he almost unset his jaw.

‘That bag of hers, what do we do with it? Luus, you know everything about hospitals from the TV, you tell me.’

Wendy took out the pouch and adjusted the thing through which the tube ran, on Lucy’s instructions. ‘It will drip more slowly that way. Then it will last all night. Hang it up somewhere.’

‘Okay. Wen, you undress Lucy, and I’ll put Diana between you.’

When Diana was lying contentedly in the big bed, Michael hooked the eyelet of the bag on the hook of a picture above their bed. Wendy helped her sister undress, after which they yawned and crawled into bed. Michael got into his and switched off the light.

He woke up to the early sun on his face, slipped out of bed, showered and got dressed in the bathroom. He expected trouble and wanted to be prepared for it. He thought it best to go and see the doctor and tell him that they had brought Diana back. He also had some urgent questions.

He met Dr. Wenceslas in the polyclinic. Wary, they looked at each other.

‘You were suddenly called away when we were having dinner,’ Michael began. ‘Was that...?’

‘Yes, it was because of Diana’s condition.’

‘What was wrong with her?’ Michael looked at him accusingly, as if the hospital was the cause of Diana’s condition. ‘She wasn’t sick anymore, was she?’

‘Your sister suddenly developed a high fever, which was accompanied by irregularities in her heartbeat, which is why we had to take her to the regional hospital. I warned you, but it seems you didn’t get the message. They gave her medication and put her on cardiac monitoring. I spoke to the cardiologist at home last night. When the fever came down, her heart calmed down.’

Michael nodded. ‘We met the cardiologist. He said everything was fine. He just said he hadn’t seen you.’

‘Met him?’

‘Yes, we went there last night by taxi. The cardiologist said there was no one with Diana.’

‘No, it was too bad. I would have gone with her, but there was an emergency. An old lady had fallen and broken her hip. It wasn’t even my shift for God’s sake,’ he added grumbling. ‘I was the only practitioner present at the time. I’m sorry.’

Michael nodded shyly at this excuse.

‘Er, we got her back last night,’ he said when the silence began to drag.

‘What are you saying! Is she here again?’

Michael nodded. ‘She insisted on going back.’

The doctor looked at him in amazement. ‘But... who dismissed her? I haven’t heard anything about that.’

‘No one. There was nobody. We just took her with us.’

‘Did you kidnap her?’

‘Something like that,’ Michael agreed, blushing. For a moment it looked if the doctor was going to be angry, but he finally laughed.

‘You two are quite a pair. Is she all right?’

Michael nodded in relief. ‘The cardiologist said that she has no heart disease. She no longer had a fever. That’s why we dared ... I dared to take her with us.’

‘Well, it’s quite something,’ the doctor said, venting his surprise. ‘I’ll have a look at her later, but I have to do the first part of my round now. I’ll see you later at the outpatients’ clinic, say, at nine o’clock?’

‘Um, yes, of course. But... We would like to speak to you in private,’ Michael asked, relieved that the doctor was no longer angry.

‘That’s okay, I’ll have time for that. I have a coffee break at nine o’clock.’

‘Can we have breakfast together?’

‘Oh, why not. Where, in your room?’

‘Yes, please! At least there we are among ourselves.’

‘Okay, let’s meet at your place at nine o’clock. I can examine Diana over there as well. Then you don’t have to come all the way to the outpatients’ clinic. I’ll order breakfast; I’ll pass along the kitchen anyway.’

With a handshake the doctor said goodbye and walked off, muttering to himself.

## Chapter 17

# Shopping

At nine o'clock on the dot, a full breakfast was brought, followed a quarter of an hour later by Dr. Wenceslas. The four of them were already seated around the neatly laid table.

'Well, well!' he uttered in admiration. 'Mademoiselle has recovered, it seems!'

Diana emptied her glass of orange juice, licked her lips and answered with a smile: 'Miche and Luus and Wen came to fetch me last night. I had called them. With this.' She pointed to her head. 'I found it very unpleasant there.'

'But you were quite ill, my dear girl,' Doctor Wenceslas said defensively.

Diana's face tightened. 'Yes, I was,' she murmured. Her face brightened again. 'But Miche killed the monster that was sucking blood from my heart. Miche just pulled the plug and poof, it was gone.'

The doctor did not respond to this and began to examine Diana. He listened to her heart and breathing with his stethoscope and took her pulse for a long time.

'I don't understand it,' he said. 'I'm relieved that you're doing so well at the moment, but I can't explain these sudden attacks of fever.'

'Your colleague was supposed to come and see her,' Michael asked.

'Yes. I have already been in touch with him. He's coming straight over this afternoon, as soon as he arrives in Zilina. He wants to see Diana before he decides whether it is necessary to admit her to his ward. I'm expecting the results of her blood and urine tests soon. Come on, let's eat. I'm hungry.'

'Miche, can't we buy some clothes?' grumbled Wendy during the morning. 'I've only got one pair of underwear and I'm wearing it for the second day.'

'I do, and one T-shirt,' added Lucy. 'We're going to stink.'

'Oh dear,' said Wendy soberly.

'And my jeans are torn at the knees.'

'I do have plenty of money,' Michael muttered. He pulled out his wallet, which he wore on a string around his neck under his T-shirt, and started counting banknotes.

'Yes, shopping,' cheered Diana. 'I want new clothes too.'

'Shouldn't we buy a new mobile?' suggested Wendy. 'Mine is in the van under tons of mud.'

'Mine too,' Michael said hesitantly. 'But are they any use to us? When we really needed them, there was no coverage.'

'I still have mine,' said Lucy. 'I left it in the guesthouse. I didn't take it with me because there was no range anyway.'

'Let's not buy any new ones for the time being. Then we would get numbers that only work in Slovakia,' Michael decided. 'But we can buy clothes.'

'Hi, hi,' the twins cheered and slapped each other's hands. 'We go nice shopping and Miche pays!'

In the hall, they asked the doorman where they should go. His directions were so complicated, however, that Michael decided to take a taxi once they were outside. They were cheap, by Dutch standards, and Diana was still too weak in his opinion to be able to walk for long distances.

They were dropped off in the city centre at a large department store that had been recommended to them.

'You guys go ahead,' he said to Lucy and Wendy. 'When you've found everything come and see me in the cafeteria, we'll go to a cash register to pay. Can you get some underwear and stuff for Diana? I'll get some for myself.'

Diana wanted to pick out something for herself, so Michael quickly grabbed some pants, socks and shirts and took her to the children's department.

Diana chose a red dress and red trainers.

'Find something warm to wear for when it gets cold again,' he advised her.

After endlessly rejecting jumpers and sweatshirts, her choice fell on a colourful, woollen shawl in the women's department.

'Mm, I like that one,' she said cheerfully. She did not want to let go of the cloth and walked in front of Michael like a little witch.

He paid and in the cafeteria they took cake and tea, waiting for the twins.

The waiting began get boring. He bought an ice cream for Diana and went to have a look at the teenager section. His face twitched when he saw the two girls strolling with piles of jeans back and forth between the racks.

'Oh, are you there!' said Wendy heatedly. 'Cheap man! Look what I've picked out!'

'I thought you were only going to buy some underwear,' Michael responded gruffly. 'What's taking you so long? We've been waiting for hours.'

'Hours? Well no, we've only just started,' Wendy said in surprise. 'Here, don't you think this is cool?' She held up a pair of black jeans. 'A bit too long, but the saleswoman says they can shorten them to the right length.'

'Listen, you're not supposed to go shopping all the way. You'll have to carry everything on your back, remember. And hurry up, Diana's getting tired.'

'Oh, just a moment,' whined Lucy, who had just come out of a fitting room. 'Does it sit well in the back, Wen?' She twirled her behind seductively.

'Yes, tight man!' she said.

'I just can't get it closed,' grumbled Lucy, trying to hook the trousers up.

'Then take a size bigger...'

'No!' He tried to keep his voice down, but he couldn't hide the fact that he was getting angry. 'If you're not in the cafeteria in five minutes, then you've to find your own way, but I'm leaving! With Diana! And the money!'

'But we were still going to have tea...' 'And eat cake!'

'You should have thought of that before. I'm going home in five minutes. I

mean, to the spa.'

'Jeez, you're really pissed off!'

'Yes, you are being shitty, Miche. Why can't we buy new jeans?'

'Because it takes too long.'

'Then give us enough money and go back with Diana,' sneered Lucy. 'Here, we've picked this out for her.' She pushed a stack into Michael's arms. For a moment he was tempted to give in, give them some money and leave.

'I can't,' he finally said stiffly. 'I am responsible for you.'

Wendy stood with a sad face folding up some trousers lying around and putting them on a pile. 'So cheap!' she muttered sadly. 'Why are you hounding us like this?' Lucy reacted more fiercely: 'You don't have to pretend to be our boss, just because Dad gave you the money. You're only three years older. We can look after ourselves!'

At that moment, a servant came up to them and tapped Michael shyly on his shoulder. In broken English she said: 'Little girl with you? Crying?'

'You see!' He ran startled to the cafeteria.

A servant was squatting next to Diana, sweeping the floor. Another girl had just brought her a new bowl of ice cream.

'I dropped my ice cream,' said Diana, who was no longer crying. 'It was so delicious. But I got a new one.'

'Your trousers are stained too,' Michael grumbled, relieved that nothing more serious had happened. 'Put on your new dress, these trousers need to be washed.'

'Yes, may I?' said Diana happily. 'I can wear my new dress!' she shouted to Lucy and Wendy, who came in with grim faces.

'Diana is not tired at all!' was the first thing Lucy said in an indignant tone.

'You were just saying something to annoy us. I think that's completely false!' added Wendy angrily. 'You know we're just as worried about Di as you are.'

'Fuck you!' shouted Lucy.

Michael stood at a loss of words before the angry girls. The servants had not understood the language, but they did understand the arguing.

'No, I was crying because I had knocked over my ice-cream bowl,' Diana said cheerfully. She did not care about the quarrel. 'But I already have got a new one, and I can wear my new dress!'

'Come on, let's go to the fitting room and take your ice-cream.'

'Miche will wait for you here. Aren't you, Miche?'

With a few last contemptuous glances over their shoulders, the twins took Diana, leaving Michael confused and glowing with humiliation.

Half an hour later he paid for a modest amount of clothes for the twins. Diana was tired, of course, and the girls knew that they could not buy too many clothes since their backpacks were already full. But shopping was a joy, even if you bought almost nothing.

Michael felt a rare sense of embarrassment at his totally futile action of urg-

ing the girls to hurry. They ignored him and trudged ahead of him with Diana between them. He was suffering from a sense of guilt. He also did not know why he had been so inflexible. Last night they had united to liberate Diana... and now it seemed as if all connection had been severed. What had possessed him? Yes, he didn't like shopping. If he had to buy clothes, he would do it in ten minutes or so. But was that a justification to nag his sisters when they spent hours trying on clothes, just because he held the money?

There he touched a sensitive point. He could only have beaten them because he held the money. That was in fact an abuse of power.

When he confessed it to himself, his guilt turned to regret.

## Diana's riddle unfolds; a vast secret emerges

Early in the afternoon, Doctor Wenceslas and the internist came to their suite. As they were introduced, Michael noticed that the man was actually only paying attention to Diana.

'Tell your story,' Doctor Wenceslas invited him.

Michael repeated his account of their adventures. The internist, by turns pale and red, listened with half an ear, constantly looking at Diana. At one point he could not restrain himself any longer and declared in rollicking German: 'I see a tree with the child. A huge tree. As if... as if she were in it.'

Doctor Wenceslas looked at his colleague, not understanding. 'You see a tree? What do you mean, a tree?'

'Just what I say: I see a tree... through her aura, an image of a tree around her.'

'I really don't understand. You see a tree in her aura, you say?'

'I see it through her aura actually. You know, like two pictures overlaying each other.'

Doctor Wenceslas nodded that he was beginning to understand. 'You see not only the aura of the child, but also one of a tree, and these images are overlaying each other?'

The two men looked at each other with frowned brows.

'My dear child, are you thinking of a tree now?' the internist suddenly asked directly. Diana shook her head in denial. Michael was not surprised that she seemed to understand the man. He had noticed that before; not only with German, but with other languages as well.

'She has something of a dryad in her, I think,' the internist murmured hesitantly, with a slight awe in his voice. 'Although I don't understand how it can be.'

'A dryad?' His colleague sounded incredulously. 'You mean... aren't they tree nymphs?'

'Tree-deva's, yes,' agreed the internist, who was now apparently speaking more in the capacity of a clairvoyant than as an internist. 'Tree-deva's are nature beings of tree and forest. They really exist, although we can't see them. I can sense them now and then when I'm in an old forest, where dryads live in the base of ancient trees.'

'Did he say dryads? They're nature creatures, aren't they, Miche, like fairies and goblins and.... stuff?' Wendy's voice slowly died away when she saw the two men looking at Diana.

'Oh, you can't mean that!' The doctor made it clear it was a ridiculous idea.

'Dryads. How do you come up with that? Fairy-tale creatures. I am convinced this is a complex allergic reaction to an environmental poisoning.'

'You wouldn't talk so disparagingly about their existence if you saw what I see,' the internist snapped, indignantly.

'I can't do much with this,' the doctor remarked impatiently. 'I'm stuck with a sick child who is showing all sorts of signs of poisoning!' He almost screamed in frustration at the end. The twins sat there, startled. They understood something, but did not understand why the two doctors disagreed so much.

The internist looked up at Dr. Wenceslas, who was controlling himself with a red head.

'Well...,' the internist coughed as the silence began to grow long. 'I, er... understand that I haven't helped you very much with this. What I see is obviously not a diagnosis,' he confessed. 'Can you explain to me again what her symptoms are?'

The doctor rattled off a whole story in Slovakian.

Michael felt increasingly uneasy; he was about to protest or at least to do something to attract the attention of the two men discussing; when the internist fell silent and Dr. Wenceslas addressed him in German.

'We don't quite agree...' – to which the internist snorted – 'but we do agree, based on the tests I've done, that your sister suffers from some severe allergic reactions to foreign substances, presumably caused by air pollution, presumably from that factory you mentioned. The blood tests should be able to tell us more.'

'But how can that be?' asked Michael. He had not for a moment made a connection between the smelly factory and Diana's illness. 'I mean, what do they do in that factory? And...?' He had wanted to say that Diana had also sometimes been inexplicably ill in the Netherlands, but the doctor cut him off.

'My colleague is familiar with environmental poisoning and agrees with me that the substances to which your sister is reacting could indeed be residues of the incineration of certain chemical wastes. But the story of the tree... no, I'm afraid that doesn't get us anywhere.'

'But...'

The doctor interrupted him for the second time with a resolute gesture and a professional smile. 'Let's wait for the blood test,' he said soothingly. 'The results will be there very soon now. Your sister has no fever and is sleeping very peacefully.'

Michael looked at him in pain. Something was wrong. He tried to find a solution to the dilemma, but his head seemed to be filled with cotton wool.

'Oh, I KNOW!' shouted Lucy unexpectedly. Even Diana looked up. Lucy ran, red with excitement to her sister and hugged her tight.

'What do you know?' urged Michael.

Lucy looked triumphantly at the others with a blush under her dark curls. 'I sometimes hear a voice that wants to tell me something, but I could never understand it. But now I can!'

'What then?' cried Wendy in a state of confusion.

The two doctors looked on in amazement; the children spoke Dutch in their excitement.

‘Miche, do you remember when we were sleeping under that big beech tree by the river? Where that huge deer had taken us? Well, that’s Diana’s tree, of course!’

The three of them began to talk at cross purposes until Dr. Wenceslas clapped his hands. In the sudden silence, he asked what they were all saying.

Michael translated.

‘Her tree? You really believe that, don’t you?’ Frantically he scratched his hair. He shook his head and sat down.

‘Remember how it started, the day the weather turned nice and we could finally go to the woods because Diana was well again? I had felt for a long time that it was pulling at me, that it was calling me.’ She looked at the two doctors and tried to explain what had happened. ‘We had been walking through the forest for some time when the path suddenly disappeared. Without noticing it, we got lost. We started looking for the way and Diana showed us the way, until the game trail where I found prints of a very big deer.’

‘Yes!’ cried Wendy. ‘I was scared of it, it was that big!’

‘But it did lead us to the clearing by that tree,’ Michael said.

‘Exactly!’ said Lucy triumphantly. ‘I think it was...’ she hesitated whether to say what she thought.

‘A magic deer,’ cried Wendy with conviction, ‘a forest spirit disguised as a stag.’

‘I think so too! It took us to Diana’s tree with a purpose. We sat down to eat, but we didn’t know then that it was Diana’s tree. Then we all fell asleep. I remember what I dreamt. I couldn’t move and heard some kind of voices, but I couldn’t see anyone.’

‘Me too,’ Wendy declared excitedly.

Michael nodded that he had dreamt the same thing. They looked at each other, surprised they had forgotten.

‘What impression did you have of that tree?’ the internist asked unexpectedly.

‘That he is the king of the forest,’ Lucy said without thinking and without taking her eyes off Diana.

‘Queen,’ Wendy whispered, ‘Diana is a girl.’ It was apparently clear enough that their sister was the dryad of that enormous forest giant.

‘Was the tree sick?’ the internist repeated the question. ‘I mean, were there dead branches on it, misshapen leaves, or did you just get a feeling that something was wrong?’

Could that be the cause of her illness? Michael wondered. Through that giant beech tree? When he asked himself the question, a kind of door opened in his mind. A barrier of disbelief, which had blocked understanding and insight, dissolved like sugar in hot tea. Yes, of course, that was why they had been led to the forest, to that giant tree, to find out what was going on! And Diana was the key, always had been.

Michael reeled by the insight...

## Chapter 19

# Uncertainties

He was startled out of his thoughts. Somebody had asked something.

‘Um, no, I didn’t see anything unusual about that tree.’

‘Did you see any dead leaves or branches?’

The twins shook their heads in unison.

‘There were many dead trees along the river and nothing grew on the banks and the water smelt strange. I did not want to wash myself with it in any case.’ Michael checked his memories. He had not drawn any conclusions at the time, but now it seemed important information.

The doctor punched himself in his open hand. ‘I knew it! Michael, that factory, is it upstream of the forest?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you think they are discharging harmful substances?’ the internist asked.

‘I’m sure of it!’ The doctor was furious.

They all looked at him with shock, even the internist. Diana was the only one smiling at him with a heavenly expression. Michael thought he understood.

‘Do you think that tree is suffering from toxins in the water and that Diana is getting sick because of it?’ It did not occur to him to doubt that Diana had something to do with the forest giant.

‘Oh no,’ the doctor replied gruffly, ‘that’s absurd! Of course not.’ With a resolute gesture he dismissed the suggestion.

‘Diana is simply suffering from environmental pollution herself. Nothing tree. That...’ He became confused and struggled to find the right words. ‘They suffer even more from it of course. I mean, you said there were a lot of dead trees, well, that says it all.’

‘Do you hear that often?’ asked the internist, who had followed his own train of thought, repeating Michael’s earlier narrative.

He seemed to have less and less trouble understanding their Dutch. ‘I mean, a voice that seems to belong to someone else?’

The twins looked at each other. They hesitantly shook their heads.

‘And you, Michael?’

‘Oh, yes; I heard a voice in my head a few days ago. A few times in fact.’ He tried to concentrate. ‘That time with the van, when I... and later, when I didn’t know how to get going. That voice told me what to do.’ His face darkened. ‘We had just tipped over with the van in the ditch. There was an avalanche coming towards us and this voice was screaming in my head that we had to get the hell out of the van.’ He looked from one to the other. It went too fast for him, things weren’t explored, the conversation went from one subject to another. They were

talking about that factory...?

'I am convinced that the whole problem can be traced back to the chemical waste they discharge from that factory,' Dr. Wenceslas persisted.

'But then the whole forest might die! We have to stop that factory! It's ruining the water!'

'And the air! Do you remember how it stank sometimes? Especially at night, when the windows couldn't be opened because of the foul stench. It hurt my throat and eyes,' cried Lucy indignantly.

'What do they make in that factory?' asked Michael.

'I suspect they are secretly burning chemical waste,' Dr. Wenceslas remarked gloomily. 'I'll call some people from the Environmental Federation later. They may know more, or they may find out.'

'Shouldn't we call the municipality?'

'I will, but don't expect too much of it. The environmental legislation in our country is not yet as it should be. Let alone the enforcement of it.'

'We have to occupy the factory,' Lucy declared militantly. 'They have to stop that shit immediately. And when the manager comes, we'll take him prisoner and he'll have to clean everything up. They have to do that with us.'

There was silence after her outburst. The idea had been named; the word had been spoken...

'I will call the Environmental Federation when it's tea break, as I said,' Doctor Wenceslas remarked. 'And I'll go after the results of Diana's blood test, because they should have been here by now.'

'What will happen to Diana?' asked Michael. 'Does she have to be hospitalised for observation?'

The internist looked at Diana. 'To me she doesn't look sick.'

Doctor Wenceslas sat down with a weary gesture. 'No, not now. It's just that this is so unusual. I haven't had time to report to you in detail on her clinical picture yet, because of your er... intense first impression. But last night I had to put her on cardiac monitoring in your hospital because of cardiac arrhythmia.' This was followed by a technical explanation in Slovak that the children let pass by.

The internist listened attentively. His astonishment was occasionally noticeable in his raised eyebrows.

'But the end of the story is that the youngsters kidnapped her and took her back to their room,' their doctor finished with a mixture of indignation and admiration, again in German. The internist looked at Michael attentively. After a while, he asked: 'Did you hear a voice then, too?'

'Yes, I...'

His brow furrowed from the strained thinking. 'First Diana seemed to be telling me that it wasn't good for her over there. I didn't dare do anything, but suddenly I was given a sort of command, like Go! Now!'

'Was it a voice or more of a feeling?'

‘Yes, well... No, both actually. When I hear that voice, it tells me exactly what to do, it gives directions. But if I have doubts about whether I should do something, there is often a sudden feeling of certainty. It’s so persistent that I don’t think about it any more, I just do it.’

The internist looked at him, more like a clairvoyant than a doctor. ‘Yes, you also...’ he didn’t finish his sentence. ‘Wenceslas, I want to talk to you about the girl later when we have the results of her blood test.’

‘Yes, I would like to discuss her case with you,’ he answered. ‘Guys, shall we have dinner together in the restaurant again tonight? We’ll talk about what we can do next.’

The internist stood up. ‘Now I must hurry to my duties, otherwise...’. With a brief salute the stocky man disappeared, followed shortly afterwards by Doctor Wenceslas.

Fortunately, it became six o’clock sooner than they thought. They went to the restaurant full of expectations. To their disappointment, Dr Wenceslas was not available, they were told, and they ate their meal in silence.

Diana was lively and had eaten well; why should they stay any longer?

If nothing happened tomorrow, they would go back, Michael decided quietly. The weather was finally fair, and if it persisted they would be better off camping than loafing about in this spa.

## The tension is growing

The next morning passed in a kind of hangover and boredom, despite the beautiful weather. At lunch they discussed whether they should stay any longer.

‘Let’s wait and see today,’ suggested Lucy. ‘The results of her blood test are yet to come, maybe we’ll know more then.’

‘What can we do to stop that factory from discharging poison, Miche?’

‘I don’t know. What can a bunch of foreign kids do? Nothing, right? We don’t even speak the language.’

‘I like both doctors,’ said Diana, who had not been listening. ‘Especially when they argue.’

‘Silly, why then?’ asked Wendy.

‘You can see how they really are when they’re arguing, they don’t pay attention to what they are saying and they blurt out everything they would otherwise keep to themselves. Then they speak the truth. Adults hardly ever do that.’

‘Yes, that is true. But I found it a bit unpleasant the way they were going at each other,’ Michael confessed.

‘Do you believe the other doctor?’ Wendy wanted to know.

‘That Diana... may have a dryad in her?’ He looked at Diana, who looked back innocently. ‘Yes, I believe so,’ he admitted after some hesitation. ‘It sounds quite normal to me now, at least.’

‘But I believe Dr. Wenceslas too,’ Lucy proclaimed firmly, and took a far too large bite out of her sandwich.

‘How so?’

‘Nnnhmm,’ she mumbled. She tried to swallow, got the hiccups and burst out laughing. That was too much, coughing she sprayed the whole table with half-chewed pieces of white bread with strawberry jam. Wendy protested, getting the brunt of it.

‘Look what you’re doing, bitch, its all over me.’ She was closer to crying than to laughing.

Diana laughed. Although he did not like what happened, Michael had to smile, mainly at Diana’s bright, compelling laughter. They heard it so rarely.

‘Sorry, Wen, I’ll wash it out. But I couldn’t hold on any longer...’ Lucy laughed again, slapped a hand in front of her mouth and sat looking at her angry sister with a high red head.

‘Yes, and what do I wear in the meantime? I’ll put on your jumper and you can sit in your bra until my shirt is dry.’

‘Yes, that’s okay. Here...’ Lucy meekly pulled her sweatshirt over her head and handed it to her sister, who reached across the table her stained T-shirt.

Michael followed the exchange with his eyes on stalks.

‘Don’t look like that,’ Wendy sniffed. ‘Never seen tits? Well, take a good look at them...’ then she suddenly laughed so much that she almost ran her hair through the jam on her own bun. Glad that she was no longer angry, Lucy let herself go too, and soon the room echoed with their laughter. Michael looked for support from Diana, but she was chuckling. When they had finished laughing, the twins continued eating.

‘What were you saying, Luus?’ asked Wendy.

Lucy had to think for a moment.

‘Oh, I remember now,’ she exclaimed.

Calmer: ‘I wanted to say that Dr. Wenceslas is absolutely right about the poison factory. I mean, they’re both right, the new doctor and our doctor. They are talking about different things, that’s why it seems they don’t agree. That poison is making the tree sick, and it’s making Diana sick, because Diana and the tree are together...’ She couldn’t get it out and looked helplessly at Diana.

It was the romantic Wendy who managed to explain it.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Every time it rains, the toxic smoke from the factory is raining down on the leaves. Then Diana’s tree immediately gets sick and so does Diana. Not when the sun shines, then she gets better, because there’s no toxic rain.’

‘Yes of course,’ Michael whispered. ‘So that’s why... How clever, Wen.’

Lucy also looked at her with admiration. Wendy blushed. ‘Yes, Luus had said that every time it rains Diana gets sick. Only now did I understand why.’

‘As I see it,’ Michael said pondering, ‘we can assume that Diana and the tree are connected. I don’t yet understand how that is possible, but I think we can accept it as a fact.’

Lucy nodded vigorously; she had come to the same conclusion.

Wendy was already much further ahead with her conclusions: ‘Yeah, it’s logical, man!’ she almost exploded. ‘But what do we do about the factory, huh? That’s what it’s all about. It’s killing the forest and Diana!’

‘Hello, can I come in?’ sounded a familiar voice at the door.

‘Doctor Wenceslas!’ the children shouted in unison.

‘I knocked twice, you know,’ he apologised. ‘You were so busy talking that you didn’t hear me.’

‘Doctor, we have found out that...’

‘Diana gets sick when it rains and...’

‘Her tree is getting sick from the smoke, when it rains it comes down...’

‘Calm down, calm down,’ the doctor, who did not understand Dutch, exhorted, his hands raised in an imploring gesture. ‘I have good news for you and if you...’ Amid cheers, he was pulled to the table and pushed onto a chair.

In the middle of the noisy reception, Wendy suddenly discovered that she was not wearing any outerwear; with a suppressed squeal, she grabbed Lucy’s jumper from her chair and slipped it on.

Lucy did not realise it until her sister urgently pulled her. With a head like a buoy, they disappeared into the bedroom.

Meanwhile, Michael had been able to summarise what they had just discovered. The doctor seemed to hesitate for a moment when they talked about Diana and her tree, but nodded when they told about the smoke from the factory chimney, how it stank and seemed to suffocate everything when it rained.

‘I think you have hit the nail on the head,’ he praised. ‘By the way, I finally got the results of the blood test. Remember when I tested Diana for toxins? They did the same at the lab, but this time her blood was chemically analysed and they found nothing abnormal. Nothing at all! Chemically speaking, that is. Diana has perfectly clean and healthy blood.’

That was good news! The girls looked at each other with relief. Diana had not been poisoned! Michael felt downcast despite the good news. It solved nothing, because it meant that there was still no explanation for Diana’s illness.

‘What is the weather forecast?’ he asked gloomily.

Yes, they had forgotten about that.

‘This factory must stop!’ cried Wendy warily.

‘But how?’ Michael wanted to know. ‘Do you know something?’

The doctor was struck by Michael’s concern. He imploringly put his hand on Michael’s arm. ‘I’ve already done something, my boy,’ he said, a little hoarsely. ‘I called the Environmental Federation, as I said I would. They’ve agreed to come and meet you tonight. Here, at the spa. If anyone can do something about that poison factory, it’s them.’

He said goodbye by giving them all a hand. They remained dejected, full of what had been on the table for the last hour. When one started to yawn, the others started too.

‘I’ll wash your shirt later, Wen. I can’t take any more.’ Lucy could hardly keep her mouth shut. They were exhausted, from the emotions, from the sudden insights, from everything.

‘I’ll do it myself,’ she said. ‘Your hands are still bandaged. You go take a nap, sleepyhead.’

Lucy didn’t wait and unashamedly she got out of her clothes and crawled under the duvet. Diana wanted to sleep too. Michael undressed her; he was himself tired to the bone. When Wendy yawned and came out of the bathroom and followed Lucy’s example, Michael too admitted his tiredness. With tearful eyes from sleep, he wriggled out of his clothes and got into his bed.

## Chapter 21

# Help

Apparently nobody had thought of warning them in time. They were awakened by the entry of Dr. Wenceslas, accompanied by the internist, a woman and a girl.

The twins jumped up with the duvet pulled up to their chins. Michael looked at the entrants a bit dizzy. He could hardly get to his senses.

‘Forgive us for ambushing you, but it’s been six o’clock and you didn’t show up,’ Doctor Wenceslas apologised.

‘This is Dinja Havloch and her daughter Irina,’ the internist introduced the two women. He looked as if he thought the situation extremely amusing. ‘They are both clairvoyant. I’ve asked them to come with me to look at Diana. Who knows, they may see more than I do.’ He bowed slightly at this remark. ‘My name is Janos Melzedek, by the way, in case you didn’t get it right last time...’ – he winked mirthlessly – ‘but you can call me Janos.’

To the women next to him he explained: ‘Dinja, that little girl is Diana, with her I have seen the aura of a tree around her. The young man is her brother Michael, there is something special with him too, and the two young ladies are their sisters. Wendy is the blonde and the dark one is Lucy.’

Michael had hardly understood a word of the internist’s speech; he stared at Irina as if enchanted. He had never seen such a beautiful girl. She had chestnut hair that shone over her shoulders, huge brown eyes and a fine mouth in a heart-shaped face. She saw him looking and shyly lowered her eyes. She blushed, but he hardly noticed because his own blush ran down almost to his navel. He felt uncommonly embarrassed to be surprised unclothed and sleep-deprived in bed. It was a very bad first impression the girl had to get of him like that.

Diana, noticing his confusion, laughed her tinkling sound. He melted from the light sound. A sense of expectation vibrated through the room.

‘Hm hm,’ Doctor Wenceslas cleared his throat; he was touched by the atmosphere around Diana. ‘I believe the children are not wearing pyjamas. If we go to the restaurant...’

‘Can’t you have some meals brought here?’ suggested Janos. ‘I like it better to stay among us.’

‘I understand what you mean. Good idea. I’ll order some.’

The woman began to laugh. ‘We do surprise them a bit. Of course, with us in the room, they don’t dare get out of bed.’

Janos laughed. ‘Then they could stay in it, won’t they?’

‘Dear Janos, we embarrass them,’ the woman admonished him. ‘Come, we will wait for them in the other room.’

‘What are they all saying?’ whispered Wendy.

‘That...’ Michael coughed out a frog in his throat, ‘that we are going to eat here and that we can just stay in bed,’ he translated automatically. His attention was still caught by the appearance of the beautiful girl.

‘Yes, but I have to go to the bathroom.’

‘Then put on your bathrobe.’

‘Oh yes, where is it? Luus, pass me my coat.’

The two girls, tossing and turning, put on their dressing gowns without revealing themselves and fled from the bed to the bathroom.

Diana pulled his arm. With difficulty Michael shifted his gaze.

‘What is it? Do you want to get dressed too?’ His voice seemed to have become unusable. Diana nodded, which he took as an assent. He slid across the tangled bed to grab his dressing gown. ‘I’ll get dressed first and then I’ll come and get you.’ He did not wait for an answer and disappeared into the bathroom. He was greeted with screams from his sisters. He was too absorbed in himself to care much about their fuss and hurriedly stepped into the shower.

Clean and dressed, he felt a little more secure of himself. With a smile on his face he picked up Diana. He did not realise that he was carrying her around like a Barbie doll in dressing and undressing her. He thought it was quite normal and Diana let herself be mothered wonderfully.

Back in the bedroom, he saw that the girls had made the beds a little and the whole party had gathered at the dining table in the other room.

Invited by Dr. Wenceslas, Michael hesitantly began to tell Mrs. Havloch and her daughter about their adventure. It helped him to recover a little, even though he was sitting right in front of Irina.

He hardly took time to take a bite. He considered it of the utmost importance to report everything that had happened as accurately as possible, for every detail, however small, could have an important meaning. He wove a story out of the facts, the thoughts and fears he had had, the descriptions of the surroundings and the weather, in such a way that the listeners saw the adventures playing out before their eyes.

It remained silent for a while when he finally stopped talking. Stunned, Michael watched his listeners absorb the story with introverted expressions on their faces.

Irina looked at him with open admiration. He was embarrassed by her silent tribute and lowered his eyes.

Doctor Wenceslas cleared his throat, coughed and took over the report from the moment he was called the morning they arrived at the hospital. Doctor Janos then concluded by briefly recounting his observations and interpretations.

‘Michael, I am enormously impressed by your performance, and perhaps most of all by your storytelling. It was as if I was experiencing it myself. Boy, you are a born storyteller!’ was Mrs. Havloch’s first comment. She cast a quick glance at Janos. ‘I have a lot to ask, but one thing I think is very special. May I have a moment, Michael?’

Michael nodded in surprise. Of course she could ask anything she wanted.

'When you took shelter in the forest after that avalanche on the van, you said you could see everything as through thick frosted glass. At one point you had completely lost that vision. Diana got you out of your panic, so that you could see again. Is that right?'

Michael nodded again.

'If you closed your eyes, could you still see anything of your surroundings?'

He shook his head in surprise. 'No, I couldn't see anything.'

'Hm,' she murmured and frowned. 'You know, the way you describe it, it's like the kind of vision a person has when he has stepped out, that is, the spirit and the astral body separate from the physical body. But you were still in your body. Your sisters were too, weren't you?'

He translated it for Wendy and Lucy, who confirmed it. 'It seemed like the light was just floating between the trees, remember?' said Wendy.

'Yes,' agreed Lucy, 'like a mist. There was no moon.'

Miss Havloch nodded as Michael translated. 'Yes, that is how you experience that kind of sight. It is light living beings radiate, in this case trees. Only ordinary eyes cannot perceive that light.'

'But...' Michael looked at her, 'but we saw it, didn't we?'

'That's why I'm so surprised.'

Mrs. Havloch smiled. 'You seem to be more receptive than other people. Or maybe you were helped. By the way, did Diana have a fever, I mean at the time she helped you?'

'Not much more. The worst of the fever attack was over. She had just regained consciousness. She sounded very awake. I could see again immediately.' He hesitated as another thought struck him. 'She sounded so grown-up. I don't know how else to put it. Not childish at all. She's only seven, but seemed like a mother of sorts.' He smiled shyly.

'You see! It was the dryad who spoke to you. It could also make you see with your third eye!'

Mrs. Havloch looked at Janos amused. 'You don't doubt, do you?'

He shook his head fanatically. 'I know what I saw. The answers to your questions only confirm it.'

They looked at Diana as if by appointment. Sitting quietly between her sisters, she followed the conversation with tense attention. She watched the expressions on the faces more than she listened.

'What do you see in her?' Janos asked finally.

'A very, very wise intelligence that has been around for a very, very long time, a child, a sensual woman, humour, an intricate duplicity and a definite commitment, I might almost say, to a certain cause that concerns us all,' Mrs. Havloch replied without a hitch. Her voice had sounded as if it had been dictated to her.

'That's quite a list,' Janos complimented her. He bent down and with a smile he

stroked the smiling Diana on her head.

Michael knew that smile of hers: she always had it when people reacted to her in this way.

‘That duplicity is a mystery to me, by the way,’ Mrs. Havloch muttered. ‘Janos?’

‘Yes, dear Dinja?’

‘Diana is... a sort of... representative it seems; of an entire people. That’s how it seems to me.’

‘Go on...’

She looked intensely at Diana again, who looked back with a knowing smile. She shook her head regretfully. ‘I don’t know. There are more signals, but I can’t understand them. Very frustrating. Irina, do you see anything?’

Her daughter came to her senses in alarm. She had been watching Janos, who was studying Diana, without listening.

‘Um, no mother, I have no sensation,’ she replied.

‘Too bad. No Janos, I don’t know anything else to point out,’ Dinja concluded; with a raised voice: ‘Wenceslas, you reported that she reacts violently to poisons that she doesn’t really have in her body, am I correct?’

Doctor Wenceslas nodded.

He obviously thought the conversation was just drivel, but was too polite to say so.

‘It has to do with this duplicity in her, but how?’

## Chapter 22

### Question marks

‘What is actually going on with Diana?’ Michael asked, trying to break the silence. The conversation had been dragging on till now and he wanted to know something tangible. He was very worried about how to proceed.

Doctor Wenceslas was staring out the window with a dismissive face. He shook his head, but when Michael kept looking at him, he sat up straight to give his opinion. With a grim face: ‘I myself have not been able to diagnose any known illness. I think it is a strong allergic reaction to the substances that emit from that factory. My kinesiology tests confirm this.’

‘But... How should we proceed with Diana?’

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

‘In the short term I see no reason for medical intervention. She has completely recovered at the moment, although she has lost some weight.’

‘What should we do if she gets sick again?’ asked Michael, who was at a loss for words.

‘If she gets a high fever again, above forty degrees, you must give her some of the antipyretic I will give you.’

Michael looked at him with a look like: is that all?

With abrupt movements, Dr. Wenceslas got up and started pacing around the room. ‘I don’t like it, I don’t like it at all,’ he muttered. He glanced at the internist, who was just staring off into space and obviously didn’t have an answer either.

He came to a decision. He clenched his fist in his other open hand and declared in a fierce tone: ‘Furthermore I am of the opinion that this factory should be closed immediately, I repeat, immediately.’ He added fiercely: ‘If necessary, I’ll do it myself.’

‘Yes, do it! We’re in!’ cried Wendy. She had understood the doctor.

Michael was not so sure. ‘Can we go back to Branočs now, or do we still have to stay in the hospital?’

‘It depends on what you want. If you stay here, of course, you will have immediate help. But if you want to do something about it...’

‘We want to go back, to the forest and to Diana’s tree. This factory must stop,’ Wendy said firmly in Michael’s place.

There was an expectant silence after her words. Diana looked at Michael. What would he decide?

He nodded hesitantly.

‘Yes!’ burst out Janos. ‘I’ll go with you! If you don’t mind,’ he added. The others were startled, because he had not said much until now.

Diana looked at Janos in a way that brought a blush to his cheeks.

‘I would love to!’ Michael had finally come to some kind of decision. Having adult support brought a solution to Diana’s problem closer.

The responsibility weighed heavily. It made him shaky and every now and then panic fluttered through his stomach as his uncertainty overwhelmed him.

‘I’d love to come, but I’m on duty this weekend,’ Wenceslas said sadly. ‘My motives may be more environmental, perhaps even political, but I’d like to join the action if it can make Diana healthy. I’ll see if I can find a replacement.’

‘If it’s all right with you, I’ll come too,’ suggested Mrs. Havloch. ‘Irina, do you want to come too?’

Michael’s silent plea was heard: Irina nodded shyly.

Wenceslas said in a matter-of-fact tone: ‘I had contact with the Environmental Federation this afternoon. They would bring it up with the government, because they know the roads there much better. They asked if they could meet with you tonight. They want to go to the factory as soon as possible to see what they can do about it.’

‘What, what?’ the twins urged Michael.

‘They all want to come to Branočs,’ he summarised. ‘The Environmental Federation is coming too.’

Lucy giggled. ‘That will please the lady of our guesthouse; all her guests left because of the stench of that factory. Now she will have a lot of guests and the factory will be closed.’

The decision had been made.

Mrs. Havloch held out her hands and the others joined hands, even Wenceslas, who had decided to go along at all costs.

Irina sucked in her breath with a jolt of recognition as the circle closed. ‘Oh!’ she exclaimed. ‘I see the tree now!’

Michael was in awe of her; so beautiful was she in her pure emotion.

‘Irina is clairvoyant too,’ her mother declared with open pride. ‘It only works occasionally. She’s still in training with Janos.’

Wendy poked Michael in the side, insisting that he translated Irina’s exclamation, which she had fortunately uttered in German. Irina, meanwhile, was drinking in the image of the tree behind Diana. Janos, with a broad grin on his face, nodded that he was right after all; surely someone else could see it now? Diana looked with a cocky smile at the girl, who seemed to be in ecstasy.

‘And now what?’ came Wenceslas dryly.

Lucy and Wendy understood and replied in unison: ‘We are going to close that factory!’

## The situation becomes critical

‘The tree gets sick from poison that invades its roots,’ Irina said in the silence after the twins’ exclamation. She was still looking with wide-open eyes at something she seemed to see behind Diana.

‘A new attack?’ wondered Janos aloud. He looked intently at Diana, but apparently couldn’t make out what Irina saw, because he shrugged his shoulders.

‘I think I understand what’s going on,’ Wenceslas remarked thoughtfully. ‘Michael, you told me that nothing grows on the banks of the stream, remember?’

Michael looked at him in alarm and nodded unwillingly.

‘It means the water contains so many harmful substances that it kills all plant life. Those substances also spread into the groundwater, so it’s quite possible that those toxins have reached the roots of her tree...’ He looked at Diana in surprise. ‘Huh? Now I’m talking about Diana’s tree myself.’

‘Gee,’ Lucy expressed the disappointment that overtook them. ‘I just thought Diana would be healthy again, the weather is finally nice and there are no more poisons raining on the leaves of her tree.’ She looked to the big people for help with tears in her eyes. ‘And suddenly there’s something else.’

‘We have to protect Diana,’ Janos said firmly. ‘Otherwise she will get sick again. Dinja, that’s more your area. Can you do anything to weaken the bond with her tree? Diana is a human being; she doesn’t automatically have to suffer the same as her tree. They are, by golly, two different beings, two consciousness’s. We need time to think about what we can do. These repeated attacks on her health are exhausting her too much.’

Dinja’s face turned pale. She could not hide the fact that she was very worried. She started talking to Janos in Slovakian. His face became slightly ashen, as if he did not want to hear what she was saying.

Wenceslas joined in the conversation when he was asked something. He did not seem to like it either.

The children could see the most on Irina’s face. She shook her head and looked distraught. She could not hide her emotions as well as the three adults, who had learned to deal with doom in their years of practice.

Janos, seeing the anxiety of the children growing, gestured to the two others to shut up for a moment. Carefully summarising the discussion in German, he said: ‘Listen. Dinja says she sees a life thread between Diana and that tree I saw..’

‘A thread of life? What is that?’ interrupted Michael.

Janos looked at Dinja, but her attention was completely focused on Diana.

‘A kind of cord,’ he explained. ‘It looks like a luminous rope. It connects the mind and body when they are in different places. Diana, however, has a third,

strong consciousness at play. I suspect it is a dryad, a spirit being of trees and forest. The tree that I see and that Irina sees is the tree of that dryad, her focus in the material world. Through the dryad in her, Diana is connected to that tree with a life cord. Dinja says that she does not know how to loosen the bond between Diana, the dryad and her tree. How this strong bond can exist... well, she still has to think about that. She says that, in any case, it cannot be done now because there is an emergency. The connecting forces are too great. The dryad clings desperately to Diana to keep from dying. It means that Diana will continue to react strongly to the ups and downs of the tree. So strong that Dinja thinks Diana will die when the tree dies.'

The twins had listened tensely, but had not understood properly. When they saw Michael's startled reaction, they pulled on his sleeve. 'What does he say? Is Diana going to die?' They put their arms around Diana and looked at him angrily, as if he could do something about it.

Michael swallowed his fear and summarised it briefly; he could not translate it verbatim. Diana looked on impassively. She knows all along, he thought, only we didn't know it yet.

'I have few to add to it,' Wenceslas said. 'Apart from the tree story, which I still have reservations about; all I can do is medicate her to alleviate her allergic reactions, but that's about it,' he finished with something helpless in his voice.

Michael nodded that he understood. He turned to the two men with the almost desperate question: 'What can we do to shut down that disgusting factory? They are criminals, aren't they? The police can arrest them, can't they?'

The two men looked at each other with doubt in their eyes. Wenceslas finally replied: 'It may be a little disappointing for you, but don't expect too much. The police will certainly take action if we press charges and have evidence to support our complaint, but that may take weeks or months.'

'That's too long!' said Michael. 'I want to go there first thing tomorrow.' But he didn't know what to do either; he bit his lip to stop the rising tide of hopelessness. He couldn't, so he hid his face behind his hands. He took a deep breath until the emotion passed.

'Sorry,' he mumbled. 'I'm so worried for Diana.' The sole mentioning of her name agitated him even more; he rose, his chair toppled over, and pulled Diana from between her sisters. She put her arms around him and allowed herself to be cherished. He would have liked to cry all the way through to vent his pent-up emotion, but he was the one his three sisters expected to find a solution from: he had to be strong.

The three clairvoyants saw something quite different. They saw how Diana was supplementing Michael's temporary weakness, but they also saw that there was a force at play that came from within Michael himself, of a different signature than Michael's own energy field. Another riddle! They saw from the colours in his aura that he loved his sister dearly, which both strengthened and weakened him. Dinja

and Janos were aware that it was a love that could only be handled by older and wiser people. A young boy could be overwhelmed by it and lose himself in it. Dinja, well aware of the danger, took Diana from him. Janos also got up, took Michael by the arm, put the toppled chair upright and pushed him onto it.



‘Listen, Michael,’ Janos said in a persuasive tone, ‘we are going there first thing tomorrow. We can count on the help of the Environmental Federation. Don’t let your feelings carry you away. Don’t feel with your stomach but with your heart. Then you will be able to deal with it better.’

‘How... What do you mean?’ stammered Michael.

‘I would advise you to look at Diana with your heart and not to get into some kind of idolatry.’

‘Idolatry?’

‘Yes. How do I explain that. Um... Look, your love for Diana is very sincere, but just now you got caught up in sentimentality. Diana gave you strength, but you didn’t notice it. God, I find this difficult. But it is important that you learn it quickly. Do you understand the difference between sentimentality and a feeling that is in your heart?’

Michael looked at him in incomprehension. What was he talking about?

‘Look, if you’re sentimental, you feel sorry, for example. “Oh dear, how sad she is”, something like that. If you feel from your heart, you feel compassion. That is quite different. It means that you realise that the other person is suffering, that you know what it is doing to him or her, but that you respect his suffering. It’s his and not yours.’

Michael was digging deep within himself to find the meaning of what Janos tried to explain. It was important, he understood, but extremely difficult.

After a while he looked up and boldly looked into Janos' eyes. Strange eyes, he thought, so many colours. Confused, he collected the thoughts he had just had.

'I think I know what you mean,' he began slowly. 'I once experienced it with a cat I found with a girl from my school. That cat had been hit and terribly wounded. Its hind legs were broken, its jaw too, it couldn't eat or drink and one of its eyes was bulging out. I felt very sorry for him and together we took him to the vet.' He stared ahead. 'We all three agreed that it was better for the animal to be put to sleep,' he continued softly. 'We watched it die.' He swallowed. 'I felt compassion, but not pity, I remember. I didn't have to cry about it, and neither did the girl who was with me. But, of course, it wasn't my cat, it was a cat I didn't know.'

'That's exactly what I mean, Michael. I knew you had it in you!'

Janos was delighted with his response.

'I'm trying to teach it to Irina too, because if she's overwhelmed by what she sees every time, she won't be able to function.'

Michael looked at Irina. She did not lower her eyes this time. They nodded at each other, to confirm that they both found it difficult, but did their best. It created a bond that warmed their hearts.

How beautiful she is, he thought. I can read all her moods and thoughts on her face. How nice to be able to tell from those little changes. He smiled at her. Suddenly he realised that everyone was looking at them.

'What is the matter?' he asked shyly.

'Michael is in love,' the twins sang.

He did not know where to look. The double confusion, as with Irina's entry, knocked him completely out of his wits. Irina sought support from the grinning Janos. Wenceslas came in and saved them.

'I just called and soon someone from the Water Department will come along with the Environmental Federation who knows everything about environmental pollution, to discuss what we can do about it.'

They had not even noticed that he had been away.

'What time is it?' asked Dinja.

'It is almost nine o'clock. They would be there by ten.'

'Won't it be too late for you?' she asked with concern.

'We slept all afternoon,' Michael replied. 'There is not a minute to lose. If need be, we'll go all night.'

'That won't be necessary,' Janos said with a warm look in his eyes.

Michael looked at him questioningly. 'I think we can draw up a good plan in one or two hours at the most. Then you can get some sleep and be on your way at six tomorrow morning.'

'Yes, I could use some sleep,' yawned Wenceslas. 'I've been up since half past six. I'll see if we can get a drink.'

## Chapter 24

# Action!

A little later Wenceslas returned, carrying a tray with cups of coffee, bottles of soft drink and glasses, and in the company of three strangers: an elderly woman with the appearance of a school director and two young men.

They introduced themselves.

One of the young man, Stefan, said that he worked as an environmental expert at the Water Management Department; the other was called Demiros and was a chemistry teacher. The woman introduced herself as Olga Jellisek, President of the Slovak Environmental Federation.

Her surname was the only one the children understood.

With apologies to the children, the newcomers were quickly brought up to date in Slovakian. From time to time, they cast puzzled, sometimes even incredulous looks at Diana, who looked back with her angelic smile.

‘Michael, my compliments to you for your courage and perseverance in bringing your sick sister to hospital by yourself,’ Mrs. Jellisek began in fluent German. She had taken charge of the conversation as a matter of course. ‘We are naturally quite surprised by the story we have been told. We understand that there is an acute danger: that factory. It must be shut down immediately. Stefan, that’s your department.’

‘I checked it out today. After some nagging, the municipality of Jablun faxed me the documents. It turns out that the Branočs factory has a permit to process a large list of chemical waste compounds,’ Stefan explained. ‘Unfortunately, we know this company all too well, although they have changed their name. It’s still the same people behind it. We’ve tried to get it under control. I mean, our service. But they suddenly disappeared a few years ago. It’s nice that we have found the company again, although it’s not so nice that they are still causing so much environmental pollution.’

He looked grim.

‘The factory, a former steam sawmill, was bought by this company eight years ago. It is well paid by companies who need to get rid of their chemical waste. We know their history: they have left a trail of polluted factory sites, poisoned water, poisoned soil, poisoned air. The problem is that high authorities somehow cover them. And I mean by that the top of the government. Because every time after a scandal, they still get a new licence. It is only possible to shut down the factory legally if we can prove that they are not complying with the licence. We have to show that they are burning or discharging substances for which they do not have a licence. That can take weeks, perhaps months. Even then it can be covered up. There are very large interests at stake and a lot of money.’

That was bad news.

Dejectedly, Michael summed it up for his sisters.

‘What the hell, let’s do it ourselves!’

‘Exactly. That’s all we can do and all we will do,’ Mrs. Jellisek picked up Lucy’s battle cry with a smile. She had apparently been able to follow the Dutch.

‘But how?’ asked Michael, who was not very optimistic.

‘The only way is to occupy the factory.’

‘But won’t the police chase us away? We are just ordinary tourists and underage too,’ Michael objected.

‘You do, but we don’t,’ Mrs. Jellisek said with a triumphant smile.

It dizzied him. It suddenly seemed so simple, now that they had unexpectedly received all the help they needed. But would it be that simple? The other person in him did not know either. Whenever he was worried about Diana, he noticed that there was a kind of spiritual contact with another consciousness, which not only gave him instructions when he did not know what to do, it somehow sympathised intensely with him.

‘Listen,’ Mrs. Jellisek continued, ‘this is what we are going to do. You said that the telephone in the factory was not answered that night. Chances are that the factory is mostly unmanned at night. It would be easy to get in, lock it up and barricade it. That is what we want to do tonight with a small group.’

‘This night?’ Michael could not believe his ears.

The woman smiled. ‘Yes my boy, we are always ready for actions like this. A few phone calls and everything starts rolling. Only if we are very quick can we surprise the opponents. If we were to meet for days, things would leak out anyway and our action would fail. Well, once we are in, more people are called in to increase our numbers in and around the factory. The government doesn’t take action against hundreds of activists as quickly as against a few individuals. Stefan, meanwhile, will collect evidence and have samples analysed. With the results the government might be convinced to take action against the scum-suckers.’

‘Tomorrow I will call as many of my pupils as I can reach,’ added Demiros. ‘I’ve thought of organising a summer camp near the river, where my pupils can do a project on clean water. I am also chairman of the local Scouting organisation. They have the equipment and the experience to organise a whole camp in one day.’

‘Who knows someone who is working at the railways?’ asked Janos.

‘Why?’

‘That factory gets all its waste delivered by rail, doesn’t it? At least, if I understood Michael’s story correctly. If we can stop the freight traffic by rail, we will have gained something.’

Irina looked shyly at Janos. ‘There’s a boy at my college whose father works at the railways. But I don’t know in what line of work. Maybe it’s something?’

‘Call him first thing in the morning,’ Mrs. Jellisek advised. She looked at her

watch. 'It's after eleven. If you don't mind, I'll go and arrange for the factory to be occupied. Our members will be ready with cars by twelve. Michael, is the route to the village still passable? I heard you mention an avalanche?'

Michael shook his head with regret. 'When we descended through the forest, the road was impassable. Later, from the valley, I could see that a large part of it had been swept away and had fallen down in a landslide.'

'Hm,' she grumbled. 'Then we'll have to make a detour, over Jablun. That will take another hour.'

'Dear Irina, will you try to call that boy from your class or his father tonight?' Janos did not know when to stop and used his charms to persuade his shy pupil to do something she did not dare to do.

'It's almost half past eleven. They are already asleep,' she argued.

'I don't think so. Probably not,' Stefan intervened. 'There's a fantastic film on the television, which I suppose everyone will watch. It lasts until a quarter past twelve. I wanted to see it myself,' he added sadly.

'I know which film you mean. I'm recording it,' comforted Wenceslas. 'You are welcome to come and watch.'

'I'd love to!' Stefan was completely relieved. 'Call soon,' he said.

'I don't know his number,' she whispered.

'Irina!' her mother admonished. 'You can call a mutual friend. You do know the boy's name, don't you?'

Irina shakily reached into her bag for her mobile phone.

'Wait, I'll show you the line phone. I have a telephone card, it's a lot cheaper,' said Wenceslas and he took her out of the room.

'I'm going to make a phone call too, in the corridor. I must warn my companions that we may have to make a detour or think of something else,' Mrs. Jellisek muttered, and she scurried after the two of them while taking her mobile phone out of her bag.

'I'm going to call some acquaintances too,' Janos announced and walked out of the room after the others.

Stefan and Demiros conferred in Slovakian. They had come to a conclusion, because they stood up and said goodbye. 'I'm going to the laboratory to get sample bottles and stuff,' Stefan announced in German. 'I'm joining the occupation team. I'll see you again tomorrow in Branočs?'

'I don't know, I think so,' stammered Michael, realising that they had not yet made any plans.

Demiros said he was going home because he could only gather his troops the next day, as he jokingly called it. The two men left the room, talking excitedly.

Now there were five of them.

Irina was back first, with red cheeks from the excitement.

'His father works at the traffic control at the station,' she called at the door. 'I mean the father of that boy in my study group. He is on night duty. Janos has

gone to see him about the poison transports to Branočs.' Panting from running, she plopped down next to Michael. 'He wants to persuade him to stop freight trains bound for Branočs.'

They had jumped up at her words. The idea of blocking trains was exciting! They suddenly did not feel so powerless anymore. Michael became a little dizzy from translating for his sisters and processing all the events at the same time, but he persevered. Dinja saw his growing tension.

'Sweetheart,' she said to Irina, 'will you travel with them to Branočs tomorrow? They don't speak Slovak, maybe you can lend them a hand?'

'I'd love to!' exclaimed Irina spontaneously, looking excitedly at Diana. Michael got all warm and fuzzy. She would go with them! Dinja was pleased to see that her set-up had the desired effect.

'If you take the first train to Branočs and go directly to the boarding house, you might be able to book all the rooms. I think there will be a lot of new guests tomorrow.'

'We actually wanted to go camping in the forest, near Diana's tree,' Michael said timidly. 'Our camping gear is at the guesthouse.'

'I think that's a good idea,' beamed Dinja. 'You and Diana should stay as close to her tree as possible. Irina, would you like to go camping as well?'

'Yes!' she cried and hugged her mother.

'Thank you, mum. I've never been camping before!'

'Well, that's settled then. But do bring as much food as you can, because I don't think there will be enough in the village when all the activists descend on it. If necessary, take a later train. I have some appointments tomorrow morning that I can't change now. If you pick them up here tomorrow, you can take the bus to the station. First call to find out what time the trains leave.'

Irina had nodded vigorously at the deluge of instructions. More would have followed had Mrs. Jellisek not poked her head round the door.

'I am leaving for the factory now, the cars are already parked in front. We have to make a detour, but we think we will be there around four o'clock. It will still be dark then. Will I see you tomorrow? Bring us something to eat and drink,' and off she went.

A little later Wenceslas walked into the room.

'The action has started,' he laughed. 'I'll pick Janos up with my car and we'll go to the factory. I managed to persuade a colleague to replace me for a few days. Where are the others?'

Michael was getting sleepy, but he did not want to miss a second of the adventure. Wendy and Diana were snuggled up together; only Lucy was still awake. She asked Michael each time to translate what was being said. 'I'm beginning to understand,' she apologised. 'But I'm not sure. Tomorrow it will be better. Then you won't have to translate everything for me.' She understood that it was a heavy duty.

'Come on, girl,' said Dinja to her daughter. 'We're going home too. Wenceslas

will bring us home with his car.' And to the children: 'You go to sleep, Irina will pick you up tomorrow.'

Irina obediently stood up, together with Michael, who wanted to shake hands with her mother. They banged their heads together. They laughed uproariously, rubbing the sore spots.

'Well, you usually give a goodbye kiss more prudent,' Lucy laughed. Irina, who had not understood the Dutch, looked questioningly at Michael. He turned red, but translated anyway. Irina also started to laugh and spontaneously kissed him on both cheeks. He was so perplexed that he let it happen to him.

When he regained his senses, she was already halfway to the door. She looked over her shoulder teasingly.

Dinja hugged Diana and Wendy, gave Lucy a kiss and Michael a hand. 'Or do you want a kiss too?' she asked and did so. 'Go to sleep. Be confident, my boy. There's more help mobilised than you think.'

## Back to the forest

Just like the previous day, a visitor waked them. This time it was Irina, dragging a rucksack, who stumbled into the room backwards. Red-faced from exertion, she looked back in surprise at the four heads above the crumpled sheets.

She looked around uneasily. She glanced at her watch and asked hesitantly: 'We, er, we were going to leave for your village this morning, weren't we?'

Michael muttered something embarrassed about not having an alarm clock. He had a headache, as he always did when he had a bad dream.

'Or am I too early?' She said in an attempt to excuse them. 'It has just been seven o'clock. But I thought you might want to buy something.'

'Yes. Oh sure, perhaps we should,' Michael managed to say. 'Go and sit in the other room for a while,' he added somewhat more kindly. 'I'll be ready in a minute.'

A few minutes later he came back, with wet hair and fully dressed. He rushed his sisters to the bathroom and told them to hurry up, for it would be an important day. It helped, the tickle of adventure raised them instantly.

He sat down to put on his shoes.

'Have you had breakfast?' he asked Irina. Actually, he would have said something completely different, but he had no words for it.

'No,' she said, shaking her head.

'Shall we... Shall we find some breakfast then?' Uncertainly, he stood up.

Irina did the same; they found themselves unexpectedly facing each other, with less than five centimetres space between their faces. He looked at her wistfully, but Irina, who certainly looked a few years older than he did, averted her eyes. Relieved, he dashed off to get some breakfast.

'Have you heard anything?' he asked Irina when they were eating. 'I mean since last night. Has anything happened yet?'

'No.' She shook her head, causing her smooth hair to sway so gracefully that Michael almost forgot what he had asked. 'I left home at the same time as my mother. She is arranging things and shopping and is coming to the station at half past nine. The second train leaves at ten. The first one at six, we thought that was too early and the shops won't be open then.'

'How far is it to the station?'

'Oh, twenty minutes by bus, but we might as well walk it, about half an hour, I reckon. The bus takes quite a detour.'

'Yes, let's walk. We'll see some more of the city and...' he looked at Diana, '...I think she can walk a bit on her own. Otherwise, I'll carry her for a while.'

'Yes, it's already warm. It might be thirty degrees. Have you... have you often camped?'

'I don't know any other way,' Michael replied. 'In the most remote places, usually in a forest or at a farm, only sometimes on a campsite. We have real survival equipment.'

'How exciting,' Irina's cheeks were blushing with excitement.

The twins were watching them suspiciously all the time. They understood the German conversation by now, for Michael no longer had to translate.

'What time is it?' he roused himself from his reverie.

'Half past eight. We should go now,' replied Irina, the only one with a watch.

They had little luggage. Only their washed jackets and a plastic bag with some underwear and their torn trousers. After some hesitation, they left the room as it was. Michael paid for their stay at the counter with his credit card. Relieved, he stepped into the warm open air. The sunlight bounced off the world, setting everything in clear tones. They enjoyed the freedom. The stay at the spa had been quite oppressive.

Lucy and Wendy walked before Michael and Irina, who followed more slowly with Diana, who was chatting and chuckling. The two girls ran ahead of them the last distance to the station. Panting, they arrived at the station building, far too early of course.

'Don't we still have to buy something?' asked Wendy, who was fond of shopping. 'Do you have any money?'

'No, you?'

'Then we must wait for Miche,' she observed dryly. 'Could Irina be in love with him?'

'No, I don't think so,' said Wendy, who knew all about romance. 'She would look at him differently. She's a lot older too, about nineteen or twenty or so.'

'She is so beautiful. Could Janos be her father?'

'Why?'

'She looks at him so often ... if only he would pay attention to her.'

'I thought he was her teacher.'

'O! Could she be in love with him?'

'No, silly. He is much too old, isn't he?'

'Girls very often fall in love with their teachers.'

'Hey, there they are at last.'

'Miche, do we need to buy anything?'

'Yes, go ahead.'

Michael carried Diana on his back; the whole walk had proved too much for her.

'What do we need?'

'Just think of something. What things do we need when we go camping in the forest?'

'Food, of course. We have the rest.'

'Irina, do you have everything you need? Do you have a sleeping bag and so

on, and a mattress?’

She nodded enthusiastically.

‘Yes, an air mattress. My brother’s. My mother handed it to Doctor Wenceslas, together with my brother’s tent; they were too heavy as hand luggage for in the train.’

‘Miche, what shall we bring for food? Spaghetti and packets of soup and other dry things?’

‘Rice, flour, puree flakes, sauces, dried vegetables and mushrooms and stuff.’

The twins were well versed in keeping their luggage as light as possible. When you have to carry everything on your back, you leave it out of your mind to carry bottles of soft drinks.

‘Oh, there are plenty of mushrooms in the forest. I have already seen cep.’

‘Okay, come on then. We just passed a supermarket. Let’s go there.’

In the shop, they almost forgot the time. Loaded with bags of food, they ran back to the station. Yet they still had to wait.

It was only at five minutes to ten that they saw Irina’s mother crawling backwards out of a taxi, struggling with various bags. They were nervously looking out for her. Michael had already bought tickets.

‘I’m sorry I’m so late,’ gasped Dinja. She hugged Diana who sat quietly on a wall between her sisters. She was happy to see Dinja and revived a little. They ran into the station in a confused tangle. Their train was on a separate track back in the station. They found a compartment just for them. Amidst the luggage that had grown to enormous sizes, they looked expectantly at Dinja.

‘Good, the news,’ she puffed.

With a jolt, the train started moving and steered out of the station in a calm, shuffling pace.

‘Janos wasn’t able to achieve much last night, unfortunately. The father of your schoolmate, Irina, didn’t dare to stop the goods trains to Branočs. Pfff, how hot I am. Please, give me some mineral water out of that bag.’

‘That’s why it was so heavy,’ grumbled Lucy. Nevertheless, she willingly took a plastic bottle of water out of the bag and handed it to her with a smile. You couldn’t get mad at that woman.

Dinja drank greedily and then continued her story excitedly.

‘Janos and Wenceslas drove straight on to Branočs last night. I called a lot of people this morning, Diana, you’re becoming a celebrity!’

Diana did not react. She sank into a kind of lethargic state before their eyes.

Dinja knelt down in front of Diana and stroked her temples with her hands. They witnessed how she turned into a peaceful sleep.

‘How do you do it?’ asked Michael, who felt very uncomfortable, as if everything was going wrong.

‘Just,’ mumbled Dinja as she stood and rubbed her knees. ‘I give her energy. She’s short of it at the moment. I’ll teach you too, when we get to our destina-

tion. Not now. I...’ She looked confused and a little sad.

Oppressed by Diana’s new attack, they just watched the landscape slide by for a time, rocking back and forth in the train, which roared with a certain grace along the curving track. They were startled as they raced into a tunnel, but it was only dark for a moment. With a sound of iron on iron, they crossed a high bridge over a deep valley; it seemed as if they were flying to the other side, free from the earth. The twins sat side by side at the dirty window so as not to miss the rapidly changing vistas.

Another tunnel, another bridge.

They began to descend and the little diesel gained speed. Swaying through the steeply inclined curves, they descended to the bottom of the valley. When the loud roar of the engine subsided to a rattle, they suspected they were approaching a station, although they saw nothing but woods, empty meadows and fields of flowers. It was a pristine landscape without houses, roads or power pylons.

## Chapter 26

### First success

The train rattled over a switch; with squealing brakes it stopped along a deserted platform. It was just a stop in a small village. On the branch-off track stood a diesel locomotive with three tank wagons.

The driver waved at their invisible driver. They stopped right next to it.

Suddenly, Dinja flew upright, pushed open the window, with some difficulty and started shouting something in fast Slovak to the driver of the freight train. He listened and shook his head. Dinja started talking more vehemently, pointing at Diana. That changed things. The man shouted something to his colleague on their train and climbed out of his cabin.

‘Come on, kids, let’s get out on the platform,’ Dinja said tense. ‘I want to talk to that machinist. Our train is waiting for us. Michael, you carry Diana.’

Excitedly, they stepped onto the sunlit platform, although they did not understand what was going on. Both train drivers walked up to them. Dinja introduced herself, continuing in Slovakian. Michael’s attention was on Diana. She was hanging half asleep in his arms, but still had the awareness to clasp her arms around his neck. He sent love to her from his heart; she responded with a sigh. Although he was strong and Diana very light, he sat down on a bench anyway, he had the shivers in his legs. Lucy and Wendy sat down on either side, their arms around him.

Irina stood behind them, her hands on Michael’s shoulders. Gently she kneaded his tight muscles.

Dinja talked to the two railwaymen. The driver of the freight train knelt down in front of Diana and gently took her little hand in his big one. He softly said her name and much more. Dinja translated: ‘He says he has a little daughter about Diana’s age. Her name is Stefani.’

Diana smiled weakly at the man. Tears began to roll down his cheeks when he saw how weak and sick the child was. He asked Dinja something. She immediately translated her answer.

‘He asked me why she was not in hospital. I answered him that she had just been there. That we are on our way to find out why she got sick from that poison factory, because the doctors can’t do anything for her if they don’t know what makes her so sick.’

The man shook his head. They witnessed how his pity for Diana slowly turned into indignation. In rad Slovak he consulted his colleague, who looked doubtful at first, but when the man spoke to him in a loud voice, he nodded and they shook hands. They grinned at each other, which made them look very boyish. With a conspiratorial look, they walked towards the cargo train.

‘What is going on?’ asked Lucy. ‘I don’t understand. What are they going to do? Is the train busted?’

Dinja answered her with a smile: ‘I explained to the machinists that those tank wagons bound for Branočs contain probably contaminated oil – I saw that on the black signs – and what that does to Diana. Then the machinist of the cargo train said to ours that they are partly responsible for Diana’s illness, possibly even her death, if they continue to transport poison to Branočs. The driver of the freight train decided his locomotive suddenly has stopped working. I didn’t quite understand their jargon, but they pretend that they did everything they could to get the machine running, but it didn’t work. That is how they cover for each other. They are like a clan, the railwaymen. For the time being, I don’t expect any more freight trains to arrive in Branočs.’

‘Gosh.’ The unexpected help of total strangers, who were willing to go against all the rules to help his sister, moved Michael.

The men, grinning broadly, climbed off the locomotive and stepped onto the platform. They announced briefly that the locomotive was definitely kaputt and that their train was about to leave.

Curious passengers stared at them through the dusty windows as they walked back. They had barely made it to the compartment when they were pushed onto their seats by the abrupt pull-up. The cargo train machinist waved from his locomotive and raised his thumb.

Soon the train was running again through the wild landscape of rocky slopes, forests and streams, bridges and tunnels. Growling loudly, the diesel climbed up to the next pass. The only signs of human activity were cart tracks leading into the forest and the railway line snaking out in front of them. They climbed higher and higher into the chilly shadow of steep cliffs. Crawling along the rock face, they approached the black hole of a tunnel. It was a long one; at the other end they came out in full sunlight. Like a rebirth, Michael thought.

He sat between Irina and Dinja, who had Diana’s head in her lap and occasionally stroked her head and body with her hands.

‘I see a forest,’ Irina whispered. ‘Behind her, in a blue haze. It’s calling.’

She grabbed Michael’s hand. He noticed that she was very worried and needed his support. He gave it, but he did not know from where. It was easier for him now, because he was no longer alone. He looked at Dinja; she was the best they could come up with for Diana. He laid his head on Dinja’s shoulder in a rush of affection, because he felt that she too needed support, no matter how strong she was. He did not realise that he himself was longing for a mother.

The long descent went smoothly: the slopes were not that steep and the driver could run the engine idle; he did not have to slow down their speed.

Down in the valley, they stopped in a village where a few people got in and out. It was the last stop for Branočs.

## Arrival in Branočs

Excitedly, they looked out of the windows to see if they could already see something of 'their' village.

But it still took a long time: the little diesel had to go slowly along the curved line. They rounded a long bend, crossed a bridge and slipped unexpectedly past the drab sheds of the factory. The sight took their breath away. Diana gasped and babbled in her sleep.

'God, what an evil energy,' muttered Dinja. 'I didn't know a place could be so bad.'

The train slowed down and halted at the platform, where to their delight Janos and Wenceslas were waiting for them.

Dinja and the girls unloaded all their bags, suitcases and rucksacks from the train, while Michael stepped onto the platform with Diana in his arms. From the front carriage tumbled dozens of cheerfully singing scouts, laden with rucksacks, duffel bags and large bundles. When Demiros stepped off in the midst of the crowd and waved happily to Diana and Michael, the scouts realised that the reason for their journey to this village had been on the same train. A cheer went up.

The warm interest brought Diana out of her lethargy. She looked at the hustle and bustle around her and was clearly revived by it. With her transparent face, which shone with big eyes and a happy smile, she conquered everyone's heart.

Michael walked with Diana down the platform, surrounded by the boys and girls. Demiros came walking up beside him. 'If I had known you were on the same train, I would have come to you.' He stroked Diana's cheek. 'All for you, girl.'

'Didn't you see us talking to the machinist of the freight train?' asked Michael in surprise. 'Two stops back? And in Zilina? We were right at the back of the train.'

'No,' said Demiros in surprise, 'I didn't see anything. But I was on the phone the whole time, though. To get the equipment here on time.'

'The factory is occupied and is closed,' said Wenceslas, appearing on his other side. Michael turned in surprise towards the factory, but it looked the same as usual.

'The scouts will now first explore the area to find a good place for the camp. The heavy equipment will come later today, by lorry,' said Demiros. His name was called out and he shot off. Wenceslas felt Diana's forehead. He was startled.

'She needs to be kept warm, boy,' he hummed. 'She has the opposite of a fever now, she's getting hypothermia. Let's go straight to the boarding house. A hot water bottle will do wonders.'

The landlady had to dab her eyes with a handkerchief when she saw her young guests return. She immediately put a kettle on for a hot water bottle and installed the shivering child in a down cover on the sofa. Michael, trembling on his legs, sat down as well. He could not say anything. His throat was constricted by something ominous that hung in the air. It seemed as if the chill took possession of him too, despite the warm weather and bright sunshine outside. Restless, he wanted to get up again; they had to go straight to the forest!

His head was throbbing, there seemed to be an iron band around it that was sucking the energy out of him. His body was tense like a string, his heart was beating like mad, but he could not detect anything that looked like danger.

The anxious landlady pushed him back on the sofa with a mug of tea, which he gratefully sipped. The warmth spread pleasantly through his insides, calming his anxiously beating heart. Relieved, he saw a little later Irina and Dinja enter, laden with luggage.

They startled when they caught sight of Diana. Dinja dropped all her stuff and started making gestures, mumbling something. Irina turned pale. Michael looked at their strange reactions, not understanding.

‘W-what is it?’ he asked, anxious again.

‘Unwanted visitors,’ muttered Dinja. ‘I chased them away.’

‘Visitors?’

Dinja nodded, sat down next to Diana and took her head between her hands.

‘I’ll explain it to you later. There had, um... unpleasant astral entities slipped into the room. They’re gone now, so just relax. You’re safe.’ She nodded to Irina who obediently put her hands around Michael’s head. He closed his eyes and let the energy come in. Her palms warmed his chilled brain. Wrapped in the cocoon of the treatment, he dreamed in his own inner peace. He dreamt of clear running water and gnarled, friendly trees, playful lights whirled around him and teasingly stayed just out of reach. Gradually the feeling of trees enveloped him; it brought him to a deep, earthly rest. It awakened in him a longing for unification...

When he opened his eyes, he found himself alone on the sofa. Irina bent over him, looking far away. She smiled wistfully. He would have liked to stay longer in Irina’s warmth, but she raised. Michael did not fail to notice that something repulsive crept into her attitude. She had probably seen more, Michael surmised; after all, she was clairvoyant.

‘The others are already ahead, with all the stuff. Mother and the doctor have taken Diana.’

She pulled him up firmly. ‘Come on now, we have to go. They’ve taken all the food too.’ That helped, for he noticed that he was hungry. Outside, the weather was still beautiful. It was only half past eleven, he saw in amazement on the tower clock. It seemed as if he had already lived a whole day, so much had happened.

They ran along a wide track parallel to the river that dozens of feet had made before them.

Janos saw them coming and waited until they had caught up with him. Side by side they hurriedly ran after the others, while Janos reported.

‘Dinja told me about the freight train you ran into on the way; good work. The factory is shut tight anyway. The Environmental Federation have a good leader in Mrs. Jellisek. Gosh, what a performer she is. It went very smoothly last night. The lock on the gate was cut in two seconds. There is now a chain with a lock to which we have the key. Actually, there was nothing to it. Nasty mess, by the way. It’s an evil place.’

Irina and Michael shivered, despite the heat.

‘This morning a van came with two workers. We sent them away. Not the best people. They threatened us with a crowbar, but Jellisek grabbed it and threw the guy right over her hip into the mud.’ Janos laughed hoarsely. ‘You should have seen those two faces! Well, what else happened? There’s no one on the premises, because no one wants to stay there. Stefan has taken samples and gone back to the lab to have them analysed. Oh yes, Olga said that she has announced a press conference for this afternoon. I wonder who will attend. Those environmentalists have their PR well organised.’

‘Pee ar? What is that?’ asked Irina.

Michael, who was walking a little dazed beside Janos, cast a quick glance to the side. He just caught the look with which she was looking at Janos. She is in love with him, shot through him.

*Finally, you’ve got it*, sounded clear in his head. In fright he jumped to one side, forcing Janos to let him go.

‘Public relations is your connections with the press, your performance towards the public. Advertising and stuff,’ Janos explained, pressing Irina against his side.

‘Look, this is where the scouts have planned their summer camp,’ he pointed out. A few youngsters were exploring a meadow and gathering stones on a heap.

‘There is a little brook with good water and it is reasonably flat. And what is very important: the owner has provided it free of charge.’

They walked on and approached the forest. A group of boys and girls were waiting there.

‘You better go back and help the others with your camp,’ Janos suggested to the scouts. ‘You can clear stones and latrines must be dug. Demiros will be here soon.’

His insistence was enough to make the group return. The faces of the youngsters showed that they would rather have gone with them into the forest.

## Chapter 28

# Forest Magic

The forest was like a green magnet.

Diana experienced it as a large house, more a palace, decorated with candles and lanterns; soft music and tinkling laughter could be heard, wonderful scents wafted through the rooms, where she wanted to be so badly that it almost hurt. She was the guest of honour and in a few moments she would be welcomed into the company of her family and loved ones. A blissful feeling came over her that made her stomach flutter, her hair itch and her heart beat as if it wanted to skip ahead.

The forest embraced her with a quiet, green tranquillity, adorned with cheerful bird song. It was as if she came from a busy street, closed the door behind her and found herself in a peaceful garden. It was like coming home, so overwhelming that she fell into a trance. Wenceslas and Dinja did not notice, probably because they were impressed themselves.

A little later, Michael had a similar sensation when he followed the same path, arm in arm with Janos and Irina. It was as if he slipped into a dream while awake, so full of longing that he silently wept. This ambiguity remained all the time he was in the forest: the ordinary consciousness as he was used to and a second, dreamy consciousness in which there were no concrete things, only fluid feelings and clear knowledge.

Where the path ended, they found Dinja with the twins and Wenceslas with Diana on his shoulders. The girls had insisted on waiting for Michael, so that he could show them the way. The first time they had got lost somewhere here. The place where the path appeared to continue under the dense branches was like a magic gate, closed from one side only. A gate that you could only pass through if you were kind to the forest. The children thought of it as one of those simple places where the forest can lure unwary intruders to a wrong track.

It was easier than they thought.

Michael disappeared between low-hanging branches of yew trees, recognising the hidden passage because he had looked back when they had come out.

‘Come on!’ he called.

‘Where are you?’

‘Just here.’ His face appeared between the dark green needles, like the disembodied head of a djinn. Willingly he held aside the branches to show the path. Amazed, the others stepped through one by one. Wenceslas had to stand Diana up on her own two feet to pass under a crooked yew.

At Diana’s tree, Wenceslas laid Diana, wrapped in the down quilt, between the roots of the beech.

‘So, baby, you’re home again,’ he joked. But his gaze on the gigantic tree expressed a deep awe.

‘I’ll show the way to the guys bringing your stuff,’ Janos smiled. ‘They’ll never find us otherwise.’

A little later he returned, followed by a couple of scouts with the luggage. The youngsters looked around in amazement; they had never been in such a magical forest before. The boys around them excited Wendy and Lucy. They coyly draped themselves next to Diana and did not look up. They pretended they were alone, talked in a light tone with each other and Diana; in Dutch, of course.

Michael and Irina were looking at the little doll on the ground, who was looking back with a certain humour on her face. She was mainly looking at Janos. Michael knew for certain that the two had known each other for some time and that it was only now, under Diana’s tree, that they both realised this. How he could know that made him curious, but... there was something else that demanded his attention: Irina moved uncertainly, it seemed as if she felt abandoned. As if she got cold because the sun was gone. Of course: Janos’ attention was now entirely focused on Diana and no longer on her!

His feelings were all tangled up in it. For he was jealous of Janos; he wanted to be looked at like that by Irina. At the same time, he was angry with her and never wanted to see her again.

‘Come, I’ll go and see where we can put the tents,’ Michael said to no one in particular. He had enough; he wanted to be alone. No one reacted.

He looked back one last time at Irina. She was, however, completely absorbed by Janos’s actions. For Michael it was a kind of farewell. She stood there like a fairy from a fairy tale, so beautiful, so unattainable. With a sigh that seemed to come from his toes, he disappeared down a barely visible game trail.

From one moment to the next, he was cut off from the world of man. The forest was now his universe. The trail was so narrow that he had to place his feet one after the other. It led to a large clearing in the forest, covered with grass and tall wild plants.

Like an accomplished forester, he looked at what the surroundings had to offer in terms of shelter, wood to build a table and for a fire, useful plants, berries, mushrooms and the like.

‘Maybe there is a stream with clean water, then we can fetch water,’ he murmured, as if he were walking there with his sisters. He was completely at home, as if walking around in his own backyard. Busily taking stock, he scurried about, and about...

Rejected, he realised that he had been staring for some time at a dark opening in the bright green surrounding the clearing. Is someone waving a branch there? he asked himself, blinking his eyes to get a clear view. It’s not windy at all and yet that branch is moving.

He wanted to know more about it and crossed the clearing. Look, he thought,

I can feel the wind here. You see, it is just the wind. Without thinking, he stepped into the narrow opening as the branch moved aside. Between two huge, watchful spruces, he found himself on a foot-wide game trail. Behind him, the branch closed the opening as if it had never been there.

Curious, he crept along the winding track in the green twilight.

It was very quiet around him. He sniffed at twigs and branches to see if he could catch the scent of the animals that had made the path, but all he smelled was fresh forest, mushrooms and the haze that rose from the forest floor.

It became lighter ahead of him; he was probably approaching another clearing. Without making a sound, he crept up to the edge, his heart in his throat with excitement. His caution was rewarded: in the middle of the field a huge deer was grazing! The same stag?

He sniffed the air, surprised that he did not smell the animal. Male deer smell very strong, he knew. It was probably the same one as the first time. It had not had a scent either. It certainly hadn't been a real deer.

After a last firm pull on the grass, the deer looked at him calmly, bowed with its heavy antlers, turned around and stepped through a wide opening into dark shadows. For a moment its white hindquarters lighted up as a last salute.

He crept up on his toes and looked around intently.

One corner was densely covered with ferns; the rest was covered with patches of heather, grass and blueberries. All around were dark entrances to game trails. It looked like a meeting place.

He sat down in the middle of the sun. This would be his place, he decided. Grinning, he put his money where his mouth was and peed in four places.

So, he thought, my scent mark establishes my right to this secret clearing.

A deep sense of approval flowed through him. The other in him was satisfied.

## Clean water brings life

After a while, Michael decided to go back. Without looking for the right way, he ended up at the river, which he followed upstream towards the camp.

Nobody saw him walking in.

‘There is a flat spot further on where we can put the tents,’ he said, as if he had not been away.

Diana shook her head decisively. ‘I want to stay here,’ she declared succinctly.

‘If Mohammed doesn’t want to go to the mountain, the mountain has to go to Mohammed,’ Janos exclaimed jolly. ‘Or was it the other way round?’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Dinja in surprise.

‘It is too bumpy and sloping here to lie down well, but Diana wants to camp under her tree. What could be easier than to level the ground?’

Michael took up the suggestion: ‘Good idea, we drag in some earth and dead leaves and ferns and make a piece of level ground with a soft top layer. We have done this before. Do you have a couple of shovels?’

Janos said something in Slovak to some boys. They immediately ran off, jumping like mad and shouting loudly.

‘They’re getting their wheelbarrow and some shovels.’

Janos grinned as the others looked at him questioningly. ‘They must have arrived by now. They’re bursting with energy and, of course, they want to play the powerhouse to Wendy and Lucy; well, let them sweat. You’re going to have the best pitch in the area.’

Michael sat down in relief opposite Diana, still flanked by her sisters.

‘Diana, is it all right for us to camp here? I mean, doesn’t your tree or the dryad object to us raising the ground here?’ Michael wanted to be on the safe side.

She shook her head. ‘No, fresh soil is good. Can you bring fresh water too?’ She crawled into his arms with duvet and all. ‘Miche, it is very nice here, but it also hurts, here, in my feet and my legs. Can you please bring fresh water?’

Janos and Dinja had not quite grasped the Dutch, but they understood Diana’s complaint.

‘Of course,’ muttered Janos, with whom a light went up. ‘The poison is in the groundwater and gets into the roots of the tree! Diana feels that in her legs.’

‘So that’s what I saw,’ Irina whispered with big eyes. ‘That’s what the tree wanted to tell me.’

‘That must be because of all the rain,’ Lucy remarked. ‘That’s why everything got so wet and the river is so high.’

Janos walked to the river and stood there for a while looking at the water and the bare banks.

‘You are right, Lucy. The water even runs over the banks here and there. All the trees along the water are dead,’ he shouted indignantly. Apparently, he was now getting his first idea of the damage. ‘There is panic in the forest. The dryads are discoloured and churning.’

He came back with burning eyes. ‘This whole piece of forest is about to be destroyed. It’s almost level with the water, look. That encroaching poison is killing everything. It is a slaughter! Michael, come with me. We’ll find the nearest clean stream and dig a trench to it. We are going to do something about it! We’re going to flush the ground with clean water.’

Janos, bursting with energy, took Michael to the meadow where the scouting camp was being built. He followed Janos in an overwhelmed way. The events of the day followed each other in such quick succession that he was losing control. While walking, a slight resentment bubbled up. He was just becoming so happy and calm. From the moment they had arrived in the forest, he had been looking forward to a quiet afternoon, putting up the tents, making a washing place and latrine and exploring the surroundings, after which they would have a nice meal. The short scavenger hunt in the forest had been fantastic; it was wonderful to be in the dream world. The harsh reality into which he was being dragged back filled him with revulsion and fear. And to be honest, he couldn’t bear the fact that the most beautiful girl he had ever met was in love with Janos, who was old enough to be her father.

Janos stopped at the spot where a brook ran past the campsite and into the river via a culvert under the path.

‘This is good water,’ he pointed out to Michael. ‘Unfortunately it is not enough to dilute the poisonous water in the river sufficiently.’

‘Is the river not clean now? They don’t discharge poison anymore, do they?’

‘No, it’s definitely not clean,’ Janos replied. There was anger in his voice. Michael felt very stupid.

‘Closer to the factory the river bottom is covered with toxic sludge,’ Janos said as a further explanation for his anger. ‘From that sludge, harmful substances are still dissolving. More than enough to kill everything,’ he added.

Michael hardly reacted. While he remained staring into the murky water, Janos’ attention was already elsewhere. He took in the surroundings with a sharp look.

‘The best thing to do is to dig a trench parallel to the river. If we close this culvert, the water will have to go in that direction. If we push it up a bit, the meadow will only get wet here. That is not so bad.’ He seemed to have forgotten Michael. ‘Wenceslas, come over here!’

The doctor, who had walked behind them, was looking at the meadow where scouts were pitching tents.

‘Wenceslas, if we lead this stream through a gully parallel to the river into the forest, we will have water to flush the soil.’

‘Good idea,’ Wenceslas admitted. ‘But it’s five, six hundred metres to the forest.’

How do you propose to do that?

‘Just digging a ditch. If everyone who can find a shovel helps out, we’ll be done in no time. With fifty people, it’s only ten metres per person.’

Wenceslas punched his fist in the palm of his other hand in a gesture that was becoming familiar. ‘We will. I’ll go to the village, mobilise people and shovels.’

‘All right, I’ll round up these guys.’ Immediately Janos belt out a tune; everyone within earshot was summoned to gather around him. In speedy Slovak he explained the plan and why it was so urgent. Unfortunately, there were only three shovels. The three biggest boys immediately started digging on Janos’ instructions. Others took out the boulders that were exposed with their bare hands.

Michael looked at it as if it was none of his business. He had understood very little of it. What were they all worrying about?

At least twenty metres of the ditch had already been dug when a tractor approached with a cart loaded with camping equipment. The scouts ran to meet him. There were shovels and a wheelbarrow with it. When some boys from the village came back with borrowed tools, soon a boy or girl was digging fanatically every ten metres, each helped by a second who took boulders from the ground and laid them aside.



Janos had explained the reason to the farmer, to him it was all right: the path and the river were public property, and he suffered no harm from the digging. He was a good-natured man, happy that the factory was occupied and closed. He had watched with sadness as the river died and all the dead fish floated by. Nothing had lived in it for years, he said.

Janos and Wenceslas marked the easiest route with branches, around trees and rocks.

Beyond the last digger, it was at least another three hundred metres through the forest and considerably more difficult terrain.

The scouts worked hard, sweat dripping from their faces.

‘Michael, are you joining me to the village? We need pipes for the last stretch.’

He took him by the hand and pulled him along. In the village they first went to look at the factory. Perhaps there were some suitable pipes there, Janos suggested. Some activists were sitting in the sunshine in front of the fence, keeping watch. Mrs. Jellisek was in the guesthouse, they said.

Just at that moment, a train came clattering from behind the sheds and braked squeakily along the platform.

A horde of men and women with photo cameras and TV cameras poured out of the doors. The press had arrived!

## Chapter 30

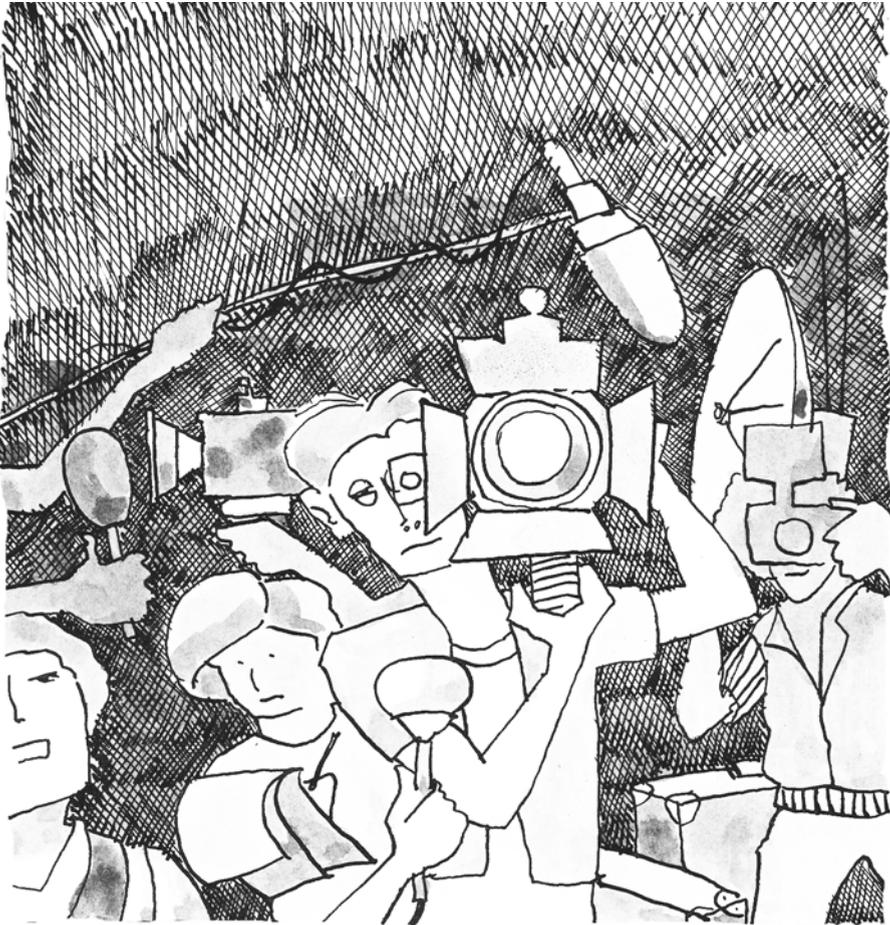
# The press

Michael stood like a pillar of salt.

‘Come along, young man!’ called Janos over his shoulder. ‘You are the important person right now! You have to do the talking. Diana we must keep in the background!’

Reluctantly, Michael started to move. It did not help him to walk slowly. Janos, surrounded by press people, with broad gestures pointing at the factory and at Michael, came his way. Cameras were aimed at him. He stood completely paralysed.

A voice burst out in his head: *Smile a bit, kid! They have come all this way for us, to see how the forest can be saved.*



He smiled mechanically, but by now he was fainting.

At that moment, right through his nausea, he felt a gigantic, impatient exasperation flaring up, as if a second personality was taking over in him. From his feet upwards, calm took possession of his rebellious stomach and wildly beating heart. The moment the microphones were held in front of his face, he was someone else.

Or maybe he was just himself. Janos winked at him, as if he knew what was going on.

Amidst a torrent of questions in Slovakian, a bright mind switched to German. Nevertheless, he did not understand a syllable of the questions and impulsively gestured for silence with his hands raised. To his surprise, the mob fell silent immediately. He could hear the diesel gaining speed, the church bell striking four times; far away he heard voices, a tractor, singing birds. The peace within him grew; the environment, the valley, the village; even the leaving train, all invited him to report what had happened.

With his gaze on Janos, his rock in the surf, he started to tell of the train accident that had brought them here, of their father being called away, of how Diana had become sicker and sicker. He described their harsh journey through the mountains, the storm and the avalanche. He mentioned all the kind people who had helped them. He was hardly aware of how the press people were hanging on his every word. He barely saw them; the images of his narration filled his mind's eye as if he were dreaming it.

He told how the factory stank terribly, especially at night, and pointed to the chimney. He gave a warm welcome to their guesthouse: the cameras zoomed in on the old chalet. He pointed to the parking lot next to the café where he had nicked the Volkswagen van and expressed how sorry he was for the owner that it had been destroyed.

He finally told of the forest, the poisoned river and the dying trees. How the poison crept unstoppably into the forest through the groundwater and killed tree after tree. How years ago, at the beginning of the spill, the fish and aquatic plants and dragonflies in the stream had died, then the plants and trees on the banks. And now the creeping death threatened the whole forest.

'My little sister is very ill,' he concluded, his eyes shining with emotion. 'I don't know how it works, but she is, as it were, linked in life and well-being to a very large tree, the guardian of the forest. The tree is getting sicker and sicker from the poison in the groundwater and my sister is suffering with it. If the tree dies, so will my little sister.'

He had wanted to end his story with this, but another sentence followed, to which he himself listened in amazement: 'She is half dryad, a wood nymph'.

It took a while for the journalists to realise what he had said. A look of disbelief slipped across the faces of some. A murmur replaced the silence that had prevailed during his story.

Startled by what had come out of his mouth and the reactions to it, he looked

pleadingly at Janos, who had watched it all with twinkling eyes.

‘Janos, can you explain how you saw Diana and her tree mixed up? And what is a dryad? They don’t believe me,’ he asked over the reporters’ heads.

‘Later, Michel!’ shouted Janos back. ‘Mrs. Jellisek is here to tell about the occupation and the actions underway to close the factory.’

The cameras immediately turned around.

All attention was now focused on the chairwoman of the Environmental Federation, who knew how to handle this very well. After all, she had summoned the press herself. Michael let his shoulders hang down; why didn’t Janos do what he asked? That was the point, wasn’t it?

‘You were good, kid,’ Janos complimented him when he had waded through the crowd towards him. ‘What a storyteller you are. I could see it all playing out in front of my mind’s eye. You have talent, Miche! And all in a language that is foreign to you!’ He was really impressed. ‘This story will kill tonight. Tomorrow there will be ten times as many press waiting for you,’ he grinned. ‘It’s summer and it’s cucumber time for the press.’

‘I’m afraid they are bringing too much commotion into the forest,’ said Michael gloomily. ‘How do we keep that in check?’ And before Janos could answer, ‘I had that voice in my head again. I became very upset from one moment to the next, while I...” he wanted to say something, but did not know the expression in German. ‘I was very scared,’ he finished.

‘I know, young man,’ Janos replied, putting his arm around him. ‘I couldn’t hear it, but I seemed to be able to catch its echo. It was a powerful mental message, so to speak.’

Janos was moved.

His moods change so quickly, Michael thought. He looks like a whole play on his own. In general, he felt comfortable with Janos, from the very first moment. Only sometimes he didn’t, when Janos was with Irina or suddenly changed the subject. Should he therefore close himself off to Janos? No, he decided. Janos was Janos. His effervescent energy, despite the rapid changes, was very attractive.

‘Listen, the church bell just struck four hours. How far have they got with the ditch? I want to go there.’

Janos was unstoppable.

While Michael was still recovering from his performance for the press, he was already busy organising again. ‘I’ll ask those people to choose a delegation, then they can film everything without the whole horde coming down on us.’

Janos went up to the huddled reporters, drew Mrs. Jellisek’s attention and explained why only a limited number of people could be invited into the forest at this time, given the condition of the sick child.

Looking around at the cameramen, he suggested that they choose one, who would then have to share his shots. One cameraman, one for the sound and one photographer, no more were allowed so as not to disturb the forest. It was soon

agreed which camera crew would go with him. A dark-bearded type with a large camera on his shoulder and his companion, a skinny guy with a recorder and a microphone on a rod, walked up to Michael and introduced themselves: Peter and Peter, from the national Slovak TV1. Michael had to smile, which they expected, because they were grinning widely.

There was some commotion when two groups of reporters wanted to appoint someone else to take pictures on their behalf. Janos shot at it.

‘Guys, what are you doing,’ Michael heard him orate in German.

‘The most famous photographer of the year is here and you are arguing.’

The reporters now quickly came to an agreement. A fashionable young woman joined the two Slovakian reporters. She was carrying an expensive digital photo camera and a large bag with recording equipment.

‘Yvette Neuchatel, Paris Match,’ she introduced herself, handing out business cards. She flashed a bright smile at Michael. Janos whispered to him that he was lucky: she was world-famous and that she happened to be in Slovakia just now and had come to see Mrs. Jellisek’s press release was a miracle.

Michael was immediately attracted to the three reporters. They were calm, professional and not pushy. They followed Janos and Michael to the bridge, looking around attentively, and took the promising path along the river. In the meantime, they took pictures of the water, the factory and the forest into which the river disappeared.

With a nod, an elderly man joined the group. Everyone seemed to know him: he was silently greeted with happy faces. Michael thought it a bit strange. Janos saw it and whispered to him that he was a famous TV presenter. They could not have wished for better PR.

Michael got dizzy; all those celebrities...

From afar they could see a row of digging youngsters, swinging like a living chain along the small river.

‘We don’t have any pipes yet,’ Michael remembered with a shock.

‘There are none, not in the whole village,’ Janos replied. ‘A stack has been ordered by telephone. If all goes well they will be brought by a truck from Jablun this evening.’

‘How did you manage that so quickly?’ asked Michael in surprise.

‘Easy,’ laughed Janos. ‘I have instructed one of the activists to take care of it with the utmost urgency.’

Yes, it could be that way, Michael mused. You did not have to do everything yourself. You could ask others to do something for you, to help. In this way, you could set a lot of things in motion on your own.

The cameraman followed the still dry ditch with his lens; the French photographer also took pictures. Near the forest, a dozen boys were building dykes. It was a bit lower here; otherwise the water would not get over the next bump and would prematurely run back to the river. Between the dykes ran a narrow, shal-

low channel. They had put agricultural plastic in it to keep the channel watertight. The last wheelbarrows of excavated soil were driven to the dykes. There was a nervous tension. The scouts had worked like horses for hours now.

As soon as they passed the first trees, the green calm descended on Michael like a benevolent blanket. It was as if a lot of noisy radios were being turned off at once. Here he was at home, here a different order prevailed.

Janos pointed out: 'Look, at this stretch we have to go a bit away from the river, because the banks are too rocky and uneven. We can get as far as this by trench, the rest of the distance must be covered by pipes,' he explained. He nudged Michael. 'Tell them about the rinsing.'

'Um, yes. We want to bring clean water to Diana's tree,' Michael began uneasily. Once he got going, the story carried him away. Deeply indignant, he told of the dying of the river, the poisonous rain, the toxic groundwater.

'The doctor with us explained that Diana is getting sick because her body is resisting the poison, when in fact there is nothing in her blood! It is in the juices of this tree. But because she is connected to the tree through the dryad in her, she is also getting sick.'

The reporters listened breathlessly.

'Her tree is slowly being poisoned. It will die if we don't do anything. We are afraid that my sister will die too.'

He did not notice the cameraman and the photographer making close-ups of his moved face. 'So scared,' he whispered to himself. He felt his heart shrink in his chest.

'We came up with the idea of diverting the brook that we just passed, in a way we can flush the ground with healthy water,' he explained, after swallowing his emotion. 'Diana asked me for clean water this afternoon.'

The memory of her dramatic plea was on his face.

He swallowed again to control his emotion.

'The water in the river will remain polluted for a long time, I am told, because the entire bottom is covered with highly toxic sludge. Only when that is gone will the water be clean again.' He paused for a moment to get his thoughts in order. 'That's why we're going to give the forest clean water and we hope to wash away the poison that way. We will start with Diana's tree. It is the guardian of the forest.'

He was silent for a moment, but his inward gaze told the bystanders that something was still to come.

He shook his head as if listening to a distant voice. 'No, I said it wrongly; the forest is not closed by a guard post. This is the entrance; the gate is just open for whoever can see it. Here is the key to the future of the forest,' he whispered. 'Diana's tree is the Keeper.'

## Chapter 31

# Elfs

At that moment, water came pouring through the ditch.

Janos came beaming, with the whole team of muddy and singing scouts in his wake. A cheer went up as the water began to find its way over the uneven terrain. Soon the water cleared and formed a small stream.

'The pipes are brought in a couple of hours, but I thought we better get started,' Janos said with a wide grin. A little disappointed, Michael looked in the other direction. The water ran in an arc back to the river. It was still two hundred metres to Diana's tree.

'Michael, will you guide them through the secret passage?'

*Watch out! Secret!*

'Oh sure.' He said, numbed as if he had run into a glass wall.

'Um, please don't film this. Or photograph it,' he insisted. 'We'd like to keep the entrance a secret for now.'

His request was granted; the cameras went down. Before the astonished eyes of the reporters, he bent the yew branches aside to let them pass one by one. He walked ahead at a trot. They followed him silently, the cameras running again. Under her tree he took Diana in his arms. 'This is my sister Diana.' There was so much love in his voice that it made the onlookers shy. 'It all started with her,' he continued in a soft tone. 'There's my sister Lucy. Wendy, her twin sister, sits by the tent with Irina, a clairvoyant girl from your country, and her mother, Dinja Havloch. And this is Diana's tree.' He pointed up at the tree they were sitting under, but his eyes were fixed on Diana's pale face. 'The water is almost here, little mouse,' he announced. 'Just a little longer.'

She let herself be warmed by her brother. 'I'm fine,' she tried to reassure him. 'I just feel so weak.'

When Michael looked up, the lens of the video camera was already pointing towards the mighty crown of the beech tree, where sunlight and shadows alternated. He looked straight into the photographer's lens as she took a picture.

'Sir?' The TV presenter addressed Janos. 'You are an internist at Zilina Regional Hospital and also a practising psychic?'

Janos nodded in confirmation.

'May I assume that you are involved in this in both, er, capacities?'

Again Janos nodded.

'You are known to see more than the physical exterior of your patients, to be able to see through them as if with x-ray eyes. Can you explain that to me?'

Janos laughed at the comparison. 'I will make an attempt. Mind you, I don't really see that kind of things with my eyes. The world we perceive with our eyes

is only a part of reality. Our eyes can only perceive photons, or light energy, in a very limited range, between infrared and ultraviolet. Those photons come from the sun, a fire or a lamp and are reflected by the objects around us. It is therefore a reflection from the outside. However, living organisms also emit photons themselves. Unfortunately, we cannot see them with our eyes, because eyes are not receptive to those frequencies. They can be measured with photon counters. The photons living beings emit tell us something about the inside. Every living organism has its own pattern of energies.'

The reporters listened breathlessly to the explanation.

'My clairvoyance is actually my sixth sense, here.' He pointed to his forehead above his nose.

'It's called the epiphysis, which I can perceive high-frequency electromagnetic vibrations. Those signals are very weak. An apparatus can measure them, but not make an image of them. I do; my brain eventually makes images of those energies in the form of colours. That is how I can see your auras.'

He grinned. 'You radiate those higher energies continuously. Psychics like me can see them.'

'I can understand that. But what does that have to do with dryads and what do you mean by saying that this girl would be home to a dryad?' the journalist asked.

'Dryads is the Greek name for tree deva's. They are intelligences that are connected to trees and forests. Just as naiads are connected with streams of water and gnomes with the earth.'

'Are they the souls of trees?'

'We call them fauns. A faun lives and dies with his tree. Tree deva's are of a higher order. They are conscious beings who look after tree species or an entire forest. They make sure that their trees are healthy and get the shapes that belong to them. Each plant species has its own deva. There are also flower spirits, but they are too rarefied even for me to perceive.'

'Thank you, you have been very clear. Can you also give such an answer to my next question, how a human and a dryad can become entangled?'

Slowly Janos shook his expressive head.

It showed that he was sorry not to have the answer, that he considered it an unsolved question and a miracle, and much more. 'No,' he said finally, 'we don't know that, not yet. We have only known since yesterday that Diana and this tree are so intimately connected that together they are falling ill from the poisoned groundwater.'

While the journalist was thinking, Janos took the opportunity to translate the Slovakian conversation in a whisper.

'Can we talk to dryads?' asked Lucy. Janos smiled and ruffled her hair.

'Yes, we do. They perceive mainly your aura and what it says. You know, the photons that you emit. It helps though to speak out loud. They don't hear the words with sound, but they do understand your message, because you express

it not only in words, but also in meanings.’ He laughed for a moment because he noticed that he was straying so easily from his subject. ‘If you show respect and love for trees and plants, if you recognise that they are alive, sometimes they even show themselves. But even if you don’t see them, you can exchange certain feelings.’

By naming the finer energies, they seemed to be evoked. Something dreamy came to the clearing, reminiscent of the tinkling of icicles. Everyone seemed to be listening to his or hers own mysterious music. For a moment, Michael thought he heard thin melodies... as if rustling voices, sounding like little bells, were being carried away by the wind...

The moment passed; in an instant he felt deprived of all energy.

At that moment, the French journalist’s mobile phone rang. She listened for a moment and handed it to Janos.

He shouted happily: ‘The pipes are already there! I’m going there now to help.’

The duo Peter and Peter left with Janos, chatting with the well-known presenter. The photographer stayed. After a while, she asked softly in German, with a beautiful French accent: ‘What do dryads look like?’

Dinja pointed at Irina. ‘My daughter can see them, just like Janos,’ she said. ‘I can’t.’

The woman looked at Irina questioningly.

‘Janos says he sometimes sees dryads as a blue mist at the foot of old trees,’ she began to explain softly. ‘I see them differently. Janos explained to me why. We don’t really see them, I mean not with our eyes, but through our eyes. Our brains make a picture of the energies we receive.’

‘How is your image?’

Shyly, Irina lowered her eyes. ‘I think I’ve seen them as fairies before,’ she confessed. ‘With rays of light behind them, shaped like wings. About this high.’ She pointed to half a metre between her hands. ‘But mostly I just see moving patches of light at the corners of my eyes.’

Michael’s vague thoughts wavered by the images Irina conjured up in his mind. Yes, he also saw movements in the corners of his eyes, very tiring, because when he looked, there was nothing. But still, he was distracted, excited sometimes...

‘Do you see them now?’

Michael looked at the photographer with a detached expression; a great longing showed on her face. She saw him looking at her and made a face as if he had caught her on something secretive. He smiled, for he recognised her desire: he himself had felt it very strongly. Their eyes met.

She whispered: ‘I saw a fairy in my grandmother’s garden once. I was still very young then.’ Tears appeared in her eyes. ‘That is why I came as soon as I heard about you. I would like to see them again so much.’

Irina tilted her head and a stare appeared in her eyes. ‘Shhh,’ she whispered, ‘maybe they’re coming.’

A deep silence fell over the small group under the tree. Far away they heard gusts of wind rustling through the canopy, closer by a boy called out something. The air seemed to grow thicker. Muted sounds came from great distances, like memories of voices of young people walking, centuries ago.

After what seemed like minutes, Irina slowly looked up, her eyes having to get used to seeing the things around her. She nodded.

‘How many and where?’

Irina hesitated whether to respond. However, she had an intuitive trust in the journalist and replied in a whisper: ‘I think I saw a few, but it changes so quickly. They come and go. I may have imagined it too.’

Michael was stunned; it was only now that he got what she was saying: Irina could see fairies! He had not expected this. In fact, he had not really believed that fairies were really existing beings that you could see with your eyes. The realisation unleashed an avalanche of feelings and memories. For a moment, he lost all interest in the conversation.

Irina and the photographer were completely absorbed in each other.

‘Where are they, the fairies who are here?’

Irina laughed for a moment. ‘I don’t know. But they respond to my thoughts, it seems. On my feelings, I should say. When I wanted to know what Janos was going to do, I thought that some of them were going after him. But I’m not sure, it could have been swirling dust or insects in the sunlight,’ she added.

‘And the other one?’ The woman didn’t want to know that Irina might have just imagined it.

Irina laughed again, with the innocence of a child. She looked at Michael with affection. She hesitated for a moment whether she should tell. But again she felt that she could be frank.

‘I only saw one very clearly. On Michael.’

He did not hear her, engrossed as he was in his wonderment about the meaning of what was going on here at this moment. The photographer, too, let it pass by, as if she did not want to hear that Michael really seemed to have an elf with him.

‘Can I see them too?’ Her question contained her whole heart, her whole desire.

‘Come and sit by me, then you might be able to tune in,’ Irina whispered.

She sat down next to Irina, who put a hand on her head. She dreamed away. For a moment, she thought she saw moonlit whirls, but as she looked directly at them, they disappeared.

‘They want to show themselves,’ Irina whispered. ‘Look not with your eyes but with your heart.’

Michael let himself drift away, full of longing.

However, he fell asleep. His consciousness found the multitude of impressions enough for now and folded inward.

The Française was seeing things that hurt her more than she could bear and broke off the contact. With a sheepish look, she sat up. 'Excusez,' she whispered. 'It didn't work. All I got were images of the past.'

Irina looked ahead with something of sadness. She herself could no longer see anything of the rarefied creatures either. How could she show others what she herself had not mastered? She felt inadequate.

She lowered herself to an easy lying position and dreamed away. The confused journalist stood guard in silence. In the clearing, the sunlight played games on the ground. Everything seemed to be waiting.

## Diana's tree rescued at last

Michael woke up well rested after his short nap. He sat up and looked around. Irina was leaning against Diana's tree, watching him with a wistful smile. For the moment, that was too hard for him. He avoided her gaze and looked further. Dinja and Diana were staring at the path. He heard why: singing youngsters were coming this way.

A little later, a long line of scouts came around the bend, singing at the top of their voices. Between them, they carried bundles of plastic sewage pipes and quickly assembled one pipe after the other. The water rushed in front of them. With loud squeals and screams, they let themselves be soaked when they connected a pipe to the previous one, leading the precious water into the forest.

With rhythmic singing, the last pipes were laid. From there, the water flowed freely downwards, on its way to the river. Streams and puddles full of floating leaves and litter from the surface arose everywhere. The quiet place was surprisingly filled with the murmur of water and young people huffing and puffing.

Michael carried Diana through them to a dry spot under her tree. In a comradely, almost reverent way, the scouts touched her in passing. The last horizontal rays of the sun shone through the foliage in a kind of goodbye and set things they touched in a reddish glow; everything else was hidden in purple shadows.

At the insistence of Janos, who seemed indefatigable, a couple of boys levelled a piece of dry ground and put up the two tents of Michael and his sisters. The twins immediately set up theirs with their luggage, lest Diana could be put to bed in the last light, with a view on her tree.

'Can we drink this water?' asked Lucy, holding a water bag in one hand and a saucepan in the other. 'I want to make some food. I'm starving. We picked a bag full of mushrooms, we can use them for our supper. By the firs there are whole bunches of cep.'

Janos tasted the water. 'Yes, we can drink it. It even tastes good. All the mud has been washed away by now.'

One of the scouts politely asked in German if they had everything they needed. He wanted to be back in their camp before it got really dark, because it was far from ready. They still had to make their own meal.

'Yes, good question. What are we going to do?' asked Janos to Dinja. 'Those two tents are too small for all of us.' He suddenly started laughing out loud. 'The guesthouse is probably jam-packed with journalists, so we can't go there either. We are homeless, dear friend.'

'Eh, you can use my tent,' Michael said. 'I can sleep outside in my waterproof sleeping bag; I have an extra tarpaulin with me to make a roof.'

'Oh dear, where is my tent? I had given it to Doctor Wenceslas to take it to here,' exclaimed Irina

'It should still be in his car. Where is he anyway?'

Nobody knew where the handsome doctor had gone.

'Then I'll have to walk all the way back to the village,' Irina sighed.

Dinja grinned at Michael: 'I will be grateful if I can sleep in your tent, Michael. Janos, do you have sleeping gear with you?'

'Eh, yes, but it's all in the boarding house.'

'Then you and Irina can walk back together. Michael's tent is big enough for two.' She giggled like a young girl. Michael watched Irina closely as she said this and saw her face become drawn. Jealous!

'Come on, my child, we'll go straight back to the village,' Janos urged his pupil. 'You can pitch your tent in the scouting camp or here, if you prefer.' She stood uncertainly beside him as he addressed the patiently waiting youngsters.

'Boys, girls, you have done a great job today. The clean water is already flushing the soil tonight, thanks to your efforts. Hopefully, we can replace the poisoned groundwater soon enough to prevent the tree being permanently damaged. Tomorrow we will see what else we can do. Eat and sleep and dream of sacred trees. All the best to you and on behalf of the forest, thank you!'

After this heartfelt speech, the scouts left for their camp, arm in arm and singing softly. Janos walked in the rear, his arm chummy wrapped around Irina.

Michael watched them with mixed feelings until they had disappeared around the bend. On the one hand, he was attracted to Irina and jealous that she was more interested in Janos; on the other hand, he noticed a kind of satisfied jealousy in himself. As if he were a girl who had just beaten a rival. It was so real that he racked his head as to who that girl might be. If he could feel her feelings so clearly, he had to know her very well...

The French journalist was still sitting at the same place.

'Do you have a place to stay tonight, madam?' asked Michael.

She smiled at him in the twilight. 'No, but do call me Yvette. May I call you Michèl then?'

Michèl, Miche, Mike, Michaël; he was used to his name being pronounced everywhere according to the pronunciation of that country.

'My three sisters are sleeping in the small tent.' He looked thoughtfully at his tent. 'Mine might big enough for three adults. Dinja, would you mind if someone else came to sleep in the tent?'

'Of course not,' she shouted back.

She and the twins were enthusiastically cooking on their camping stove. The mushrooms were ready to be fried at the end.

Yvette, stiff from sitting on the hard ground, strolled up to them and crouched down to watch.

'I think I will go and find my place,' Michael announced. 'It's still light.'

In a corner are a lot of ferns. I can make a great soft bed with them.

All his life, he had been used to deliberating within himself and he took it for granted that an answer almost always came to his mind. Now, too, he listened to the assent that came in response to his proposal.

He gathered his sleeping bag, a folded plastic sheet and a few other items that he thought might be needed, and disappeared along the game trail that he had followed before. On the open forest meadow he had found that afternoon, he slipped through the hidden passage.

This time, too, the closing spruce branch blew aside as he approached. He ran light-footed along the game trail to his secret spot; straight to the place he had chosen earlier to camp. They had all sprayed themselves with anti-tick spray, so he did not have to worry about that.

He made a hump out of ferns and rolled over it a few times to flatten it. He arranged his sleeping bag on the springy fern mattress, stretched the sailcloth with some ropes over it and his night's resting place was ready.

'Come on, I'm going to see if there is anything to eat,' he muttered to himself. Pleased with his sleeping-place, he ran through the darkening forest to the tents, where meanwhile the pan with food was steaming. They did not have enough plates, so they all just spooned from the pan. It tasted just as good, because they were starving.

They woke up Diana who ate a little, mostly mushrooms. The sparkle in her eyes this time came from within, not from the fever.

'Where is Dr. Wenceslas?' yawned Wendy. She missed her handsome idol. Her yawning was contagious. It had been a day to remember.

'Gosh,' Michael said. 'Only this morning we woke up in the spa; remember? We travelled by train through the mountains, the factory has been occupied and closed, I did a whole story for the TV and now we are sleeping at Diana's tree. The scouts have diverted a stream all the way here, the village is full of environmentalists, scouts and journalists...'

'Do you think Diana will get better now?' asked Wendy.

Michael hesitated with his answer.

'I don't know why not,' he finally mused aloud. 'The factory is closed and can no longer smoke or discharge poisons into the river, and what's left we flush out of the ground. Yes, I think we've had the worst of it.'

Wendy nodded as she yawned again.

'Yes, who would have thought it this morning,' she muttered and yawned for the third time.

'Well, you're not much use to me either, sleepyhead,' he laughed and got up. 'I'm going to sleep.'

'Yes, me too,' Wendy sighed and followed her sisters, who had already crawled into their tent.

He said goodbye and walked along his path into the forest. The twins looked

at him admiringly. Their brother alone in the dark forest...

But Michael was not alone. He felt a crowd of little beings moving with him. It appeared an escort, singing and strewing flowers...



## Book II The elf Dia

## Chapter 1

# Night watch around the forest

In the small tent camp under Diana's tree Wendy and Lucy were somewhat uneasy in their sleeping bags; it was their first night in the forest. Diana was snugly tucked in between them.

'O! Wendy sat up straight. 'Diana, shall I take your temperature?'

'No, I'm not cold anymore,' Diana mumbled sleepily.

'Just let's do it,' Wendy insisted. 'Maybe your hypothermia is over now, but you may get a fever again.'

'She only gets a fever when the smoke from the poison factory deposits on the leaves of her tree by the rain. Well, the factory is occupied now by the Environmental Federation; it doesn't smoke any more. And it doesn't rain either,' came Lucy's voice from her sleeping bag.

'Yes, but still I think it awkward that Diana falls ill every time there is something wrong with the tree,' Wendy insisted.

'That's because of the other one in me,' Diana said softly. 'The dryad Doctor Janos saw in me. It is her tree. If it gets sick, I will become sick too.'

'Can you feel her?' asked Wendy curiously.

'I don't even know if it's a girl,' Diana yawned. 'I don't know anything else but that the other is there. I only understood that other children do not have such a person in them when Dr Janos explained it.'

'Maybe you won't get a fever, but if you get too cold, we have to make a hot bottle, Doctor Wenceslas said,' insisted Wendy.

'I'm not cold!' said Diana, who had enough of it. 'The groundwater is flushed through, isn't it? Now no toxic groundwater can come to my tree!'

'Do you notice it so soon?' asked Lucy. 'They've only just diverted the brook this afternoon.'

'At least I'm not so cold anymore,' Diana sighed. 'But I am still very tired. My tree is far from being better.'

'All right, then; go to sleep.' Wendy hugged her sister.

Lucy was still thinking. 'Maybe it is between Diana and the dryad in her like it is between twins like you and me, Wen. I often think of you and I can feel it when you are not thinking of me.'

'Yes, I feel the same.' Wendy yawned until she could do no more. Satisfied they went to sleep.

Next to them, in Michael's tent, Dinja and Yvette were still talking softly. Yvette had put her recording device between them and asked Dinja to explain how as a clairvoyant she saw dryads.

Dinja was thinking about it.

She looked at Yvette in the yellow light of the storm lantern, which the twins had lent to them.



‘Do you know the biologist Rupert Sheldrake?’

Yvette shook her head. ‘I am reporting on politics,’ she said apologetically. ‘I am not so familiar with science and environmental problems, I’m afraid.’

‘Sheldrake, a British scientist, has a theory that organisms have a group consciousness that spans the whole earth. According to this theory, plants, animals and people have, in addition to their individual, a shared consciousness that they have in common with all others of their kind; or with their family or tribe. If at any time a sufficient number of individuals has learned something new that is beneficial to the survival of the species, that knowledge is in essence from one second to the next present in all individuals of the species’.

‘It sounds nice, but is it scientifically proven?’

‘Yes, this immediate knowing is scientifically proven; among other things with a particular species of monkey. When the hundredth monkey or so had learned to wash the sand from his food, all monkeys of that species knew from one moment to the next the trick; also monkeys on other islands where no one had ever seen them washing food.’

‘Weird.’

‘Well, Rupert Sheldrake calls it a morphogenetic field. He describes it as a field of vibrations, something like a symphony. Such a field is constantly maintained by the individuals who resonate with it and vice versa. By resonating with their morphogenetic field, the species maintains itself and keeps its form. Morphogenetic means form creating. That’s why all beech trees look the same’.

‘Beech trees?’

‘Well, to mention a different kind of organism than monkeys. What I mean to say is that every species of living organism retains its specific shape through its own field’.

‘Oh, I thought that’s because of their DNA, the genes in their chromosomes?’ asked Yvette, whose critical mind always questioned everything.

‘Yes,’ whispered Dinja, looking at her with a smile. ‘Now you show that you know more about it.’

‘Yes, no. I learned that at school.’

‘It’s true, but not quite. DNA provides the building blocks, but the morphogenetic field provides the shape of the whole, the blueprint, a designer would say. The way parts, proteins and so on, are connected to each other, is regulated by the DNA, but the construction of a whole organism, from a single cell or seed, is determined by the morphogenetic field,’ Dinja pointed out. ‘All those functions, all that living biochemistry is far too complex to get out of a soulless, accidental shifting of molecules.’

‘I will accept that, but what has all this to do with dryads?’

‘Look, such a morphogenetic field has a certain degree of self-awareness, is in fact consciousness.’

‘So what?’ Yvette still did not have the answer to her question.

‘Let me think for a moment. It may seem complicated, but it is actually dead easy. If only I know how to find the right words.’

Yvette switched off her recording device. ‘Have some more tea?’

Dinja nodded, stood up and went outside the tent to stretch her cramped body.

‘It’s rather small, though, a tent like this.’

‘You could have stayed at the guesthouse,’ Yvette said.

‘Sure, but that seemed much too busy. It is so peaceful here.’

In the village in the meantime, Olga Jellisek, the chairwoman of the Slovakian Environmental Federation, issued a big alarm. She had gathered all the activists

in the boarding house. They had converted Michael's old room, the largest of the boarding house, to a makeshift headquarters, which was now packed.

Olga knocked an empty cup on the table. The murmur slowly died away.

'Men,' she said, although there were also some women, 'it is a memorable day. The factory was occupied last night, without any resistance on the part of the owners. Today, we were able to rejoice in a generous interest from the press and it looks like we're having put a stop to the poisoning of the forest in the valley. Our goal has been achieved for the time being, but I predict that we have a lot to look forward to before this factory is finished and closed. We will have to keep watch during the coming night. And I mean full alert. I have on this map...' she pointed to a flip chart on which she had sketched the situation in the village, 'indicated where guard posts should be.'

She looked at those present. 'Prepare yourself for a violent action on part of the factory owners.'

'Violent? What exactly are you expecting?' was asked.

Olga looked around the circle. 'A goon-squad,' she said shortly.

They processed this in silence. Some looked worried to each other, others nodded that they had thought of that too.

'What do we do if they are armed?' one asked anxiously. 'I mean, do you think they will have firearms?'

'Just reckon on a couple of shotguns, a single pistol and more, especially clubs and chains,' Olga dryly summed up. The activists looked at each other in dismay. To firearms they were not prepared.

'What can we counter?' it was asked.

'Yes, if they start shooting, I'm gone,' one shouted.

'We use floodlights, megaphones and video cameras,' Olga replied. 'Think of the great example Greenpeace. Try to film them and do not be frightened. We have our own camera crew and a few press people with cameras go along with us. Try to blind the attackers, don't show yourself and make as much noise as possible with those megaphones and shout to them that they are being on camera.'

That sounded more like it. After some more questions and answers the activists started disputing about the places Olga had put on the flip chart and wrote their names on it. Most of them went outside immediately.

'Are you really expecting an armed gang tonight?' asked Stefan, the environmental expert from the Slovak Water Management Authority. He had returned on the last train from Zilina, where he had taken the samples of several loads of chemical waste in the occupied plant to the laboratory.

'You don't? Last night we could take the factory without a fight, but the two workers that we sent away this morning will surely have reported to their bosses.'

Stefan shrugged his shoulders in an uncertain gesture.

'Don't think they will surrender the factory without a fight,' emphasised Olga. 'This is no ordinary, tidy business of vigilant citizens. These are tough guys who

have poisoned a nature reserve without any scruples.'

'A lot of money is involved in getting rid of chemical waste,' another agreed with her. 'Such a lucrative business as this factory they will do not give up easily. It is remote and yet easily accessible by the railway line...'

'Yes, if those children hadn't alerted me to it, I would never have found out about this company,' Wenceslas replied.

'You are the doctor who found out that the little girl was suffering from poisoning?' someone asked. 'Didn't the children stay in this boarding house when the factory was still working?'

Wenceslas nodded: 'I still see them coming into my clinic, covered with mud and blood crusts.'

'They survived an avalanche on the way to Zilina; it may be considered a miracle,' Olga said.

'Still brave of that boy to pick up a van to take his sister to a hospital,' said another in admiration. A mobile phone on the table vibrated and began to spin.

'Those will be the sentries on the road to Jablun,' muttered Olga and read the text message.

'Are they well hidden there?' asked a man worriedly. He had just come in to pick up a spotlight.

'Yes, on a path in the forest,' Olga reassured him. 'Near the factory everything okay?'

The man nodded. 'Our camera is on the flat roof of the transformer house. I will go there again when I have something eaten. The reporters have strategic places from where they have a good view.'

In the camp under Diana's tree, Dinja had been thinking how to put her insights better into words.

'Take this forest,' she said eventually. 'Every tree has an individual consciousness. Those of a certain tree species are part of the morphogenetic field of that particular tree species. And the total forest has its own morphogenetic field, a forest consciousness that has developed in this place in the course of the existence of this forest. Such "collective consciousness's", particularly of tree species and old forests, may be perceived by sensitive people as energy forms. I think that such concentrations of energy are our dryads.'

It gave her great pleasure to convey fairy-tale wisdom, her own clairvoyance and the most advanced scientific theories into an understandable concept.

'I don't quite get it yet.' Yvette did not know when to stop. 'You're saying that you can see a morphogenetic field as a person? You really mean that a dryad is a person?'

'A being, yes, with consciousness, that has a form and performs a caring task.'

'Do you mean deva's?'

'Deva is a Sanskrit term for highly evolved nature spirits, also called goddesses,'

said Dinja. ‘We sometimes call them elementals, but there are enormous differences in levels of consciousness’.

‘So a dryad is...?’

‘You could call it a tree deva.’

‘And a wood deva?’

Dinja looked around. ‘That could also be named a dryad.’

‘What is the difference?’

‘A tree deva could be called the field of the tree species, like the deva of the peas or the deva of those monkeys. A forest deva is limited to the field of one particular forest, with all types of plants, trees and animals that are part of it’.

‘And fairies?’

‘I think that elementals with a highly developed self-awareness are able to take on forms that make them look like how people are imagining fairies,’ Dinja said thoughtfully. She was reminded of her romantic daughter Irina, who saw dryads in the shape of fairies.

‘The question then is,’ Yvette summed up thoughtfully, ‘whether elemental beings have a form of themselves or a form imitated from the material world’.

‘I understand that they are taking form according to the expectation we, mankind, have of them.’

‘That is illogical, isn’t it? Why do we expect winged boys or girls? The shape of fairies must originate from somewhere? Started somewhere sometime ago?’

‘That image might be our image of the angels, Yvette,’ Dinja said softly. ‘They have been created.’

‘Okay, angels and devas and everything, the universe, humans, animals, stars, energy, everything is created by God; that is what I was brought up with, I feel the same way. But I think our image of angels is created by artists.’

‘Then the apparitions of elementals in the form of fairies and goblins and the like are also based on the images those artists ever thought of them?’

Yvette nodded heavily at Dinja’s words.

‘But how do they get their images?’

‘I think the first artists, the first ones who have depicted angels, were guided by what narrators, bards, minstrels and the like were using imagery. Later, others took over from their teachers. It became even cultural heritage, passed on from mother to daughter, master to pupil. Something like that.’

‘Yet that does not sufficiently explain how such effigies ever came into being,’ Dinja thought. ‘I think there is something else at play here. You may know that many animals and insects can make themselves invisible by looking like something else...’.

‘Like a stick insect?’

‘Exactly! Suppose people could see elemental beings in the past. But if they did not want to be seen they could disguise themselves, for example earthlings as stumps or crooked branches or boulders, as we depict gnomes. Flower deva’s

would be disguised as flowers or butterflies, like flashes of light or dragonflies’.

‘Yes,’ said Yvette thoughtfully.

‘That would of course be the origin of our images. I have never thought about it like that. It sounds logical. If a narrator creates such images with his listeners, then visual artists would have been able to use them without any difficulty. Anyone would have recognized those images immediately.’

They sat quietly contemplating how they went from food washing monkeys to God and eventually art.

‘I think we should get some sleep,’ said Dinja.

A little uncomfortably, the two women made a bed in the narrow tent; took off an excess of clothes and tried to touch each other as little as possible under the unzipped sleeping bag.

## Chapter 2

### A fairy shows itself

Michael came into the world out of deep sleep. He lay looking up for a while, wondering what he might have heard.

The in places shining foliage stood out black against the moonlit sky.

He was warm and pushed the sleeping bag down. Smiling in the silent night he lay there foolishly being happy. It had been a miracle day. Everything had worked out so well: their journey, the closing of the factory, diverting the stream. Earlier this evening, Irina might have invoked elves...

While his body rested, he was acutely aware of the forest that stood around him, as familiar as the walls of his bedroom. It was noisy. Not that there were sounds; it was even silent completely. Not a leaf moved in the languid night air. But there was a coming and going of... yes, of what?

He imagined that the trees were still chattering restlessly with each other about the invasion of so many people. Closer to home he felt a kind of relieved satisfaction, a tree-like, green feeling of constancy, of growth, earth, water, air and light. He felt cherished and loved. His masculinity stood out tightly.

He recognised that cherishing from when he was little.

The memory deepened. He had played with children who didn't say anything, but whom he nevertheless could understand. Playmates who appeared out of the blue and just as suddenly disappeared. At that time, he thought that this was quite normal. The images came back clear and vivid. He remembered that his parents thought he was fantasising. They said that there were no other people for miles around, let alone children, who walked around naked just like he. But still they played all day with him in the warm shallows of a river. He was three at the time, maybe four...? Or had they been there before? Earlier?

It seemed as if his memory was going in two directions, towards vague experiences from before he could remember and at the same time to the time he was older and could write. He had once written his grandma about the children he played with all day.

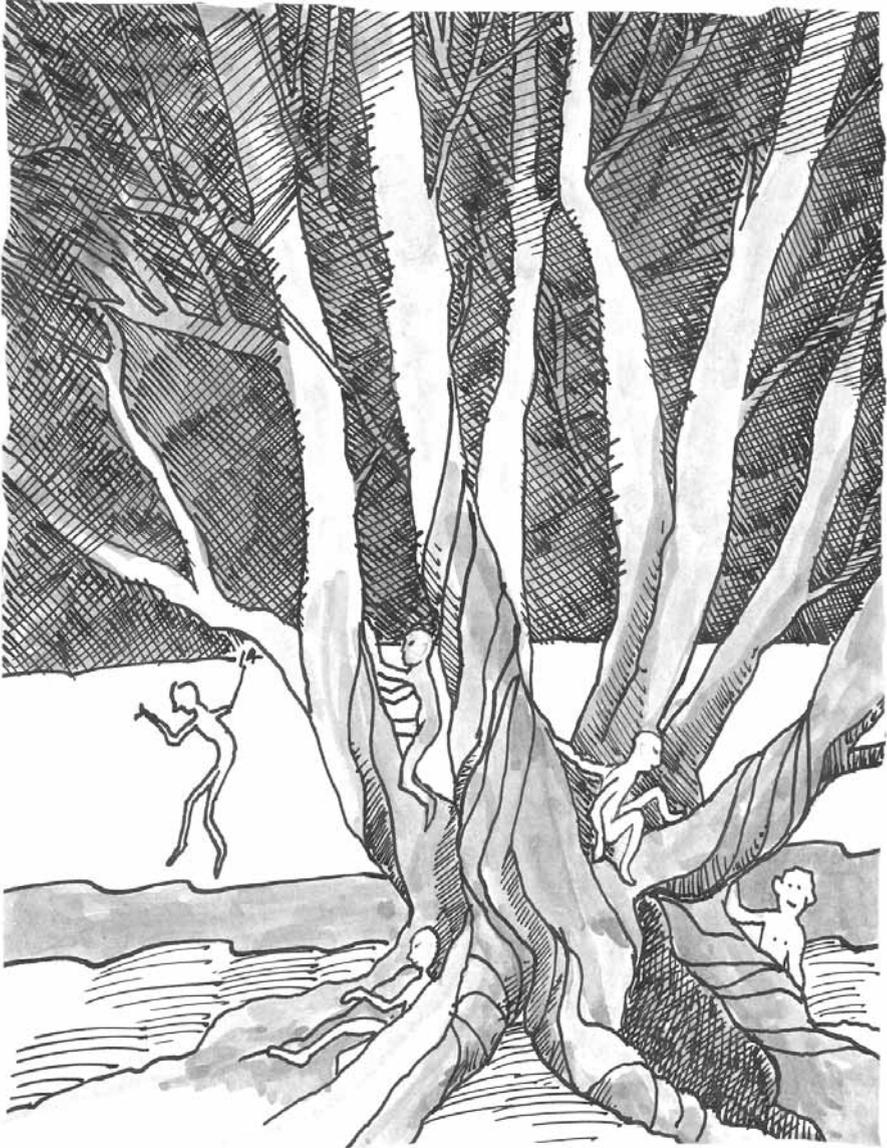
He saw them again. They had black eyes and were quick as water.

*They were naiads, said a voice in his head. Our relatives of the streams and rivers. We were there too, we were the green ones.*

With a jolt, he sat up. He knew it again! In the trees were green-haired children. They played together at the foot of a multi-trunked tree.

Michael sank deeper and deeper into his memories. Vivid like film footage, he relived his childhood, experienced again the unconditional surrender to the magical. He smelled again the scent of mushrooms, living wood and an indescribable freshness when he had discovered that he could get into the tree through a hole

between two solid roots. He saw it before his mind's eye as he had experienced it then. It seemed as if he crawled between two tree-thick wooden legs into the lap of a giantess. He had fallen asleep there.



*I have come to live with you, said the voice, just when you germinated under my tree in your mother, because we chose you to protect the forest. Each year you came back and you had grown a bit. When you were in the tree we have... sealed it.*

The last word was not quite right, but there was no adequate other for what was meant; he understood it like that.

It had been an obvious task. Of course, he would, he was a brave knight, wasn't he, protecting the forest? He had felt reborn when he had crawled out of the

tree, full of power, full of his mission.

Michael dreamed away on his fern bed, to the last of those series of wonderful summers. His two sisters, still toddlers, had followed him everywhere. Like him, they played with the silent children in the warm swells of the stream.

He had been so terribly sad when he had to leave. He had to go to school. He still saw himself standing on the bank. His parents were shouting that he should hurry up. A child had come up to him and hugged him.

In his trance, the tears ran from Michael's eyes from the revived sorrow.

They had never been back after that. His parents had gone apart that year for the first time; his whole world was turned upside down. He had sensed that to happen, the girl too that clung to him.

It all came back in a tidal wave. He had wanted to comfort her and press her tightly against his body so that he wouldn't have to go; she had wrapped him in illusions of arms and legs not to be separated from him. But she was not real.

He had not been able to hold her. She had dissolved into flashes of light coming from the rippling water against the roots of the tree.

The sense of her presence remained as he opened his tearful eyes again. Surprised, he saw that she was still there, close to him. He wasn't dreaming, was he?

In an impulse, he stroked, light as a feather, the little creature that was lying on her stomach on his. He could feel her! He followed the curve of her small behind, velvety and yielding, like a balloon. He did not dare touch her wings. She didn't have them at the time.

The face was not easy to see, it changed too quickly and was all black eye.

'Are you my imagination or is it really you, my little friend of yore?' he whispered, breathless with wonder.

The apparition trembled for a moment, dimmed and disappeared.

Michael blinked his eyes in amazement.

This time there was no bottomless sorrow, no despair to be separated forever from someone whom he loved so much that his heart was too big for his chest. But the echo of the heart-breaking farewell of that time shuddered through him and called out the years of hiding the longing for his childhood friend. His swelling heart begged her to come back.

'Are the children safe?' asked an employee of the Environmental Federation in the village. The two of them were alone at the headquarters. The activists and reporters had left to their posts around the factory.

'Yes,' said Olga. 'They are well hidden in the forest, secondly, the scouting camp is between their camp and the village. No, if they come it will be in a direct attack on the gate to throw us out of the factory for better or for worse.'

The woman shuddered. 'A thug squad... it frightens me.'

Olga tapped her on the shoulder in a masculine gesture of reassurance. 'Nothing can happen to you here, dear,' she said. 'They will not attack the boarding house.'

'No, I didn't think of that either. But suppose there are men of that squad that

go to the scouts' camp?'

'Then the scouts will retreat into the forest. I have mobilised all of them for tonight, they will keep a permanent watch. Their leaders are in constant contact with us through their mobile phones.'

'Oh yes. That's good,' the woman said with relief.

Olga looked at her watch. Almost three o'clock. If there would come a goon gang it would be soon. At five o'clock it will get light and farmers would start milking; then they would definitely not come anymore. Restless, she walked back and forth in front of the window. But the road stayed empty and silent in the moonlight.

Her mobile phone vibrated. She read the message and nodded a few times, relieved the wait was finally over. 'There they are at last. Two cars full, our lookout reports.'

'So many!' Her assistant was shocked. 'They are at least eight people, maybe ten!'

'Yes, more than I counted on. Wondering what kind of weapons they have,' Olga muttered, dialled a speed-dial number and listened.

'Okay, the message has reached the others. Now it's going to be close.' Nervously she pulled out a large army pistol from a holster on her hip, checked the weapon, put it back and zipped her windbreaker.

'Olga, will you be careful?' begged the other woman, who was completely adversary to firearms, although Olga had been a soldier and had ended her career as a general.

'I will not be the first to fire,' Olga said grimly, 'but if I have to...'

At the room door, she turned around. 'Close all doors and shutters behind me, Valerie, so that they cannot come in here.'

Olga snuck out of the darkened boarding house.

Her assistant closed with trembling hands the door and went in stocking feet, to not to wake up the landlady and the other guests, upstairs, checking whether all doors and hatches were closed properly.

Olga kept to the shadows and listened intently. There was not a sound to be heard. She knew where her men were hiding. In fact, the combatants from Jablun had only one route to get to the factory premises. That was where she had based her whole defence on...

## Chapter 3

### A fairy gets her name

From one moment to the next, the little elf was there again: stretched out on his chest she lay looking at him. Her eyes were pools of a deep black, very large in the pointed face; deep and yet with a glossy surface.

For a long time, Michael could only watch. Only then did he dare to believe his eyes and breathe again. She was really there. He did not have to be afraid that she was not there. The miracle dizzied in his consciousness.

‘Is it you?’ he whispered. ‘Are you the same as then?’ His voice was thick with emotion.

*Yes, of course, was the prissy answer. But why do you talk with your mouth to me? You never used to do that.*

*May I touch you?* he asked in his head. *Just a while ago I could feel you.*

*Go ahead, but be careful with my wings.*

He found her very beautiful. He could not remember the feel of her body in his arms at the time, but now it was there. Very light, but very real.

*How can you be so clear? And then again not?*

*I have learned to compact myself. Some of us can do that if we want. Then you can see us, even feel us if we are very skilled at it.*

He stroked the little body with fingers light as spiders’ legs. It looked like a real girl’s body, he thought in amazement. It was so tenuous that he suspected the outline rather than really felt it.

*Are you all girls?*

Something like giggles tickled in his mind.

*No. Some feel most closely related to human men. Others, like me, prefer to form themselves as human girls. The wood elves and garden elves love colours. They look like human children. I am the Deva of the Willow. We are also called dryads, deva’s of the trees, just as naiads are deva’s of water.*

*I love you,* he blurted out.

He could feel the confusion his declaration of love caused in the alien consciousness. The wings wiggled restlessly open and closed, just like a butterfly on a flower. Something like a resigned sigh sounded in his mind.

*That is something we do not know. It frightens us because it is so violent and at the same time we long for it. Between us it does not exist, we are all the same. We do not know boys or girls. We are all together, but everyone is yet alone.*

An age-old longing echoed in her explanation. And not only of the little creature on his belly, it came from all sides. There were more elementals that reached out to his consciousness... But... there was, right...?

*Isn’t Diana a deva and a girl, a human girl?* he asked timidly.

The voice in his head was silent. A sense of guilt resounded in it. He wanted to know what was going on with Diana. They were holding something back.

*You can tell me*, he said in his mind to all the elementals around him. He now guessed dozens of them. He wasn't surprised about it at the moment. He realised in a corner of his awareness that they had been there more than once, like flashes in the corners of the eyes.

The small figure sat upright. He felt a very light weight shifting, like a downy kitten. He could see now that it was not really a girl. Yet it had something sultry girlishness, something that even aroused his desire.

*Diana is...* said the voice at last, searching for words, *is... quadriplegic. There is Diana's soul and there is the Deva of the Forest, there is Diana's body and there is the tree of the Deva. They are... intertwined.*

Michael processed this. It matched his sensations when he was with his sister. She felt like a human being and a being related to a tree. But there was also something wrong... The thought faded away, however, and another question arose.

A very fundamental question.

A tense expectation tugged at his consciousness. He had to do something of the utmost importance. He searched his mind for clues. He must not make any mistakes now. He searched and searched, but the more urgently he looked the further back the answer went. A slight panic began to stir in his stomach, just like on the slope, near the crashed van, when he couldn't see anymore. He pulled himself together; what had he done then? Oh yes, Diana had told him not to look so strained. Just a bit off, peeking out of the corner of your eye, vaguely thinking of something differently, that's how it went...

*Do you have names?*

After a breathless silence, the answer came: *Not like you.*

It had not been the right question. Not entirely, at least. But he was in the right direction. Almost hit it. How to proceed?

*How do you know each other?*

He knew that this was not yet what was expected of him either. It was about a magic word, a magic formula that would put something in movement that had to happen. He must not make mistakes...

The little creature looked at him, apparently unaware that Michael was on edge. With a pedantic tone in her thought transmission she gave a lecture in elemental communication. At least, that is how he experienced it.

*We know each other's patterns*, it said. *Those patterns differ. There are forces of nature that cannot think as we do and cannot assume forms. Those are the Ancients. And there are many nature beings who have a lot of self-awareness. The first people could see them. Very few could sometimes talk to them. The deva's of the species are also highly developed, but again not as far as guardian spirits. In fact, there are many deva's who are created by man, of species bred by man, landscapes made by man, waters made by man, created or changed. But they are much too young, they have little self-awareness. We call them the*

*New Ones. I am the Deva of the Willow. People use willow wood and willow twigs and the bark and leaves for as long as they have been on the Earth. However, the willow is much, much older than the human beings of flesh and blood. Because I have existed for so long, I have gained self-consciousness and because the willow has been used by humans for so long, I can relate well to people,* she ended with an arrogant undertone. *I have been with you all your life. Look, this is my tree...*

The image of the many-stemmed tree by the river from his earliest youth appeared before his mind's eye. Her gesture of trust moved him in a way that he did not know. It was an emotion that was much broader than his person, as if she stretched from the youth of the Earth to an infinite future.

He tenderly caressed the little creature on its belly and looked at it with a self-transcending love.

The voice in his head was speechless.

The equivalent of a hoarse voice caused by emotion answered him after a long time. *What you are giving us now, we have never had. Never. Not from people, not of ourselves and not of our masters.*

Michael continued to wait silently for what was to come.

*Human love is so enormous, like a whirlwind,* sighed the voice. *Once you have experienced it and felt it in yourself, you are forever changed.*

The little creature became more clearly visible. Michael felt the weight increase.

*Do you like me?* the voice asked hesitantly.

'You are beautiful.' He whispered it with his mind and with his mouth.

*I'm not a real girl, you know,* confessed the voice on confidential tone.

*I know it, I can see it.*

*Oh yes, I see what you mean. If I were a real girl, would you want to unite with me, as people do?*

'Yes,' Michael whispered.

*Shall I become a real girl and make myself bigger?*

He pondered what he really thought about it. He had an idea. An idea so overwhelming that for a moment he could not speak; could not even breathe. The tension welled up in his breast like boiling milk. He knew very well that this was what she wanted, this was the answer. That he could just skip the question: this was what it was all about now, the magic key!

'I name you Dia,' he said aloud.

The forest fell silent. All movement stopped. Then...

*Dia...* whispered a caress along his consciousness.

'Dia...' the forest murmured.

'Dia...' echoed the mountains.

As if a drop fell into a mirror-smooth pool, so did ripples of presence extend from the point on his sternum where the drop seemed to lie like a warm shining diamond. His consciousness travelled along, interwoven with that familiar and yet strange being.

Despite her thorough planning and professional experience with military operations, Olga was worried. Would they... no, she reminded herself, there were simply no other ways. If only they had not found someone to guide them through the fields around the village...

Her mobile phone vibrated in her pocket. In the shelter of a parked car, she looked at the message. The guard post along the access road reported that the two cars from Jablun had halted right outside the village and the occupants were striding through the fields in the direction of of the forest.

Olga cursed incoherently. She had not expected that. Would those thugs have seen the importance of the children after all?

Of course!

Olga indulged herself. Television! Everything was extensively broadcasted on TV last evening! The interviews with Michael and herself, Diana's recordings in the forest...

She signalled back. It could be that the thugs had split.

<Yes 8>

What could that mean? She ran bent-over behind parked cars in the direction of the bridge.

'Olga?' whispered a voice from the darkness.

'Yes,' she growled back. 'We have made a mistake. They are moving in the direction of the forest.'

'The forest? What should they do there?'

A second voice: 'Isn't that where the scouts are?'

'Yes, but they can't stop an armed gang!'

Her mobile phone vibrated.

<8 bandits heading our way M>

She was swearing out loud now. The message came from the scouts.

## Chapter 4

# Explorations

Dia's body flowed over Michael like melting butter. Yet Michael was sure that he was conscious. He felt underneath them the rustling fern bed. The smooth flowing feel on his skin spread out and without any resistance his seed flowed out.

He lay quietly absorbing the decreased tension, staring into the faintly lit tree-tops. He understood the excitement around him that it had caused, but could not bring himself to give it attention.

He smiled. Had she got what she wanted from him after all. He chuckled; who could resist a girlfriend who flows over you like warm butter?

He supported himself on his elbows, to look at the miracle on his belly.

She was lying very still, her wings hanging left and right on the ground. She seemed to be sleeping. He felt her warmth in his lap; or was it his own essence?

Everything seemed to fit together. His whole life as a child and a boy came to meaning. It all had to do with the connection with this dryad from his earliest youth. He had definitively sealed the commitment by giving her a name and by giving her his seed. He, a human being, had acknowledged the elemental world by testifying his love. He felt very solemn and thought in ceremonial expressions. He reached out to the consciousness closest to his own. In the depths of that being, not bound by time or matter, he encountered a vastness that surged over him.

'You know,' he whispered, 'even people know the sadness of not having something. To be separated. You are so connected to everything. I feel it now, because I can talk to you and see you and feel you. I long for your eternal life, your eternal being. People's life is so short and so complicated.'

He cried. Through the mist of his tears, he saw the little creature sitting upright on his stomach, taller and heavier than just now. She was like a nude girl, with small breasts and a triangle of golden down above a tiny slit between her legs. She felt sturdy soft, light and warm like a plush cuddly toy. Only the huge deep black eyes were unchanged.

The momentary sadness evaporated in the glow of his admiration.

'Dia, you are so beautiful, how do you do it?' he whispered in awe.

She shivered, shook her head in repulsion. *What are you doing to me?* moaned her voice in his head. *I don't know anymore who I am!*

It sounded like confusion, a completely new sensation, for the voice had always been so sure and commanding.

*That is human love, Dia. You also experience the downside, the fear to lose yourself. The two belong together.*

Michael did not even ask himself where he got this wisdom. He was no longer surprised by anything.

*I do not want fear.*

Michael laughed inwardly at the childish resistance.

*Too late, little doxy. Now you know love, you cannot escape fear. But you can overcome your fear, you know. We have to do that too.*

He now marvelled at the wisdom he was displaying. Could it be because he was talking in his mind and not in language?

*How?* sounded unwillingly in his head.

*Good question. How do I do it? Well, if I was scared, really scared, there was always a voice in my head that helped me.*

*That was me.*

*I know that now, dear Dia. But from today on, I am also in your head. If you get scared, I will always be with you from now on.*

The cloud of flower-scented gratitude that resulted was a sensual experience. Surprised, he sniffed the delicious smell. He looked in awe at the dryad, which was now as tall as Diana and no longer transparent.

Michael clearly felt her weight.

He thought of something he did not understand.

*Dia, sometimes I got very clear instructions from you. How did you know those human things so exactly?*

*Easy: from you, of course. I only understand human things when I find them in your memory. I dig as long as needed until I have found all the connections. That is quite difficult because more items are coming in all the time and usually there is no structure at all.*

O? To his surprise, he did not mind that there was nothing of him she didn't know about. *If you are with me, where do you live?*

*In your aura, above your head.*

He had an inspiration: *Dia, what do you want to ask me?*

She was silent for a moment. Michael lay anxiously looking at the little fae on his breast. She spread her mother-of-pearl wings and folded them around him.

*I want to feel what you do to me when you unite with me,* it sounded shyly.

He looked at her, speechless.

*It is not possible, is it?* The dryad knew very well that it was not possible. *I don't have a real body. I cannot feel it?*

Michael was moved by the almost desperate disappointment to the dryad's unfulfilled desire. He caressed very gently her head and with a finger followed the curve of her back between the wings.

*If you live with me, can you feel what I feel?* he asked timidly.

*A little bit. More and more now that I am with you longer. I can feel your pleasure and what goes through you when you are scared or unhappy or when you are hungry and go out to eat. I can understand those things. Only...*

*Only... what? Go on.*

*When you unite with a girl in your mind and then so violently jerk your stem the juice pulls out, well, that's too much, then I get confused.*

*O... What did you feel when I just...?*

With a glowing head, Michael asked the question, though he was dead shy that the creature had been witnessing his most secret thing.

Again the hopeless longing came to him.

*What are you doing to me? I don't know who I am any more. You are tearing me apart.*

The dryad was totally upset, an experience as unfamiliar to her as was the love she craved or the fear she did not want.

*Actually, you want to become human, don't you?*

Shocked, the apparition retreated into invisibility. Michael knew that with this question he was getting to the heart of the desire of the dryad.

All the elementals around them had become invisible too. They were not really gone: bluish bright spots floated as released moon rays around him.

'Come back,' whispered Michael, his hands on his chest as if he were holding the dryad's tenuous body. But his hands remained empty.

Olga was standing on the bridge, looking towards the forest. What were those thugs doing at the scouting camp? For a moment she did not know what to do. If they were to go to the forest they would never be able to get there in time to protect the children... First of all, she needed more information.

<which way> she typed.

She did not have to inform anyone separately: all the messages that were exchanged among the group were automatically sent to all mobiles of the activists and the leaders of the scouts.

<to camp what should we do m>

<hide>

'There is still a chance that they will come our way,' she hissed.

<bandits see camp stand still>

The three waited anxiously at the bridge. The scouts should just keep themselves invisible... One of the men wanted to go at it. 'We must go there immediately. If they do something to those youngsters...'

Olga grabbed his arm. 'Stay here...' she hissed. 'What are you able to put against eight armed thugs, right?'

The man relaxed a little. 'I don't like it here standing idly by while these guys...'

'Quiet!' Another message: <b walk around camp, to village>.

Pfff. Olga let out a relieved breath. 'All right, they are coming this way anyway. They probably want to approach the factory from behind. You, warn the camera crew that they are moving.' The designated man sprinted away.

'Come on, we'll hide on the other side.'

Olga and the second man found a hiding place behind a lumber pile along the road.

## Chapter 5

### United in love

The image of the fairy came to life, slightly vibrating.

Michael felt how her solidity grew between his hands, felt increasing the weight on his chest. She looked a bit like Diana, but in a teenage edition. She had left out her wings.

On his disappointment about it, she reacted with happy surprise and materialised them after all. This time they were big, blue-black and shiny. She folded them open and covered him with them. The feathery touch of her wings was a caress. All his hair stood on end; his skin was all antenna for the new sensation. Her wings felt silky smooth with the firmness of kite paper, cool and warm at the same time, like silk.

*I am so glad that you are with me,* thought Michael and sighed with longing.

He stroked her. *Can you feel it when I touch you?*

*Yes, but not as you feel, on my outside.* She chuckled, which surprised her, because it was again an expression that until then had been unknown to her.

*I have no outside. I feel your feelings,* she said and was silent for a moment.

*I can feel how much you like touching me,* she whispered in his mind.

She gave him her life-giving, nurturing growing power, which until then was only intended for her trees.

The effect on Michael was an irrepressible impulse to unite in the act of love. All his thoughts had disappeared, he was a soul and a body that wanted to become one with the other, like two magnetic poles uniting to form one all-encompassing magnetic field.

Time slowed down.

The elf took the curving up human boy in her newly formed body. In a slow dance, they rocked each other.

Michael's consciousness multiplied; from the point where they intertwined; he was at the same time in his own body and around it. Together, they were his feeling skin and his glowing aura.

Around them, the swarms of dryads lit up in a violet radiation until they imagined themselves to float in a purple universe. His climax sprouted like an unfolding flower that put the surroundings in a bright light. The ecstatic explosion of light went up and vanished like dying fireworks in the crests of the trees, spreading an intense feeling of happiness.

Dia had sung, or had he only heard it in his head?

They had flown, or were that imagination?

Slowly he returned to his waking consciousness.

Dia sat upright on his lap looking at him motionlessly. She was now so dense

that he could feel her firm behind press in his groin. Her wings shuddered, caressed apologetically along his sweaty flanks.

He was aware with all his nerves where her feathery body touched his, in the Seventh heaven that they could have made love so intensely.

Her consciousness made its presence felt in his, timidly demanding his attention. The experience had been overwhelming. She asked like a little child to be cherished and cuddled. She cried and sang in his head. She experienced a new order of being that fulfilled her eternal desire for being whole.

He caressed her flanks and her back.

For the first time, he dared to explore the spot between her wings where they attached to her body. She had no extra muscles at all. His concern had been right: if she became too much of a human being, she would not be able to fly anymore because her wings were not driven by muscles. Her anatomy was not right.

A deep sigh ran through her body; he felt her breath on his face. He explored her further, trying to figure out whether she had a heartbeat. He could not find any; she wasn't breathing either. The sigh had been an expression of her mind and as such copied from him. It gave him strange enough hope that she had not yet become too human.

He contemplated her face attentively.

From her eyelids tears rolled down; real tears that he licked. He was without thinking, acted instinctively, like a mother animal with her apparent lifeless cub. He licked her and massaged her gently, noticing that her weight was decreasing and her firmness was becoming more tenuous. She moved her wings, flapping them like a restless butterfly. She was rearranging itself, he understood.

Slowly she faded away until he only had a kind of afterimage on his belly. Her wide-open eyes were the last he saw. It hurt him more than he wanted to confess, but he let go her. She needed distance to process what their act of love had brought about in her. So did he. He lay down on his side and fell asleep.

The moon sank behind the mountains and the village fell into shadow. The only illumination came from a few street lamps. Olga and the other activist had a good view of the bridge from behind the lumber pile where they hid.

'They should have been here already,' she whispered. Because of the rustling of the river, they did not have to be completely silent.

'Would they walk through the water, under the bridge?'

'I don't think it is possible; the river is very high. But then we would see them standing out against the water.'

After a few minutes, it became too much for Olga. 'I don't trust it, I'll have a look at the factory.'

'Don't, you'll have to cross the bridge. Then you are visible from a distance,' warned the other. 'Otherwise, call the scouts, where they are.'

There was no reply to her text message.

'Where are they?' she grumbled softly.

Minutes they sat listening intently, but aside from the murmuring river there was no sound.

At the same time, they reached for their mobile phones when they vibrated.

<Where are they C1>

The message came from the camera crew at the transformer house. Right after that another message: <quarrel 3 go back scared m>.

'That's from Maria, the scout leader,' Olga clarified.

'Definitely afraid of the dark,' the other mused.

Olga did not reply. It would be nice if the attack did not take place at all because the attackers lost courage. On the other hand, the occupation would lose a lot of publicity.

Vibrating: <see them coming C1>

A little later the two saw five dark figures on the road and disappear into the shadow of a shed.

'Would they cut a hole in the fence?' whispered Olga's mate.

Only moments later, some strong floodlights flashed on.

Five men stood frozen, trapped in the infernal light. They were wearing balaclava's and armed with crowbars. At a shouted order from their captain, they ran in the direction of the lamps.

Olga and her mate sprinted to the factory and crawled through the hole in the mesh. Men came running from all sides. Some journalists were filming the event. A group of excited scouts appeared in the light. Olga waved and two figures ran towards her.

Before she had been able to ask anything an amplified voice echoed across the deserted factory premises. Because of the echoes, they could not understand a word, but on the five masked men it had a daunting effect. They lowered their arms and looked around desperately for an opening through which they could escape. Two activists unlocked the gate and turned it invitingly open.

Under the eyes of various cameras, the five men ran through the gate. Two cars, which had been parked in a concealed position, switched on their headlights and escorted the men to where they had parked their own cars. There was only one left, where they got in in a hurry. With the lights off, they tore away.

'Okay,' Olga dryly observed, 'that's behind us. Our only weapons: a lot of light, noise and a couple of cameras.'

'I was quite scared that they would use violence,' Maria confessed, the leader of the scouts. 'When they suddenly emerged from the meadow and showed up at our camp.'

'What actually happened?'

'They got into a fight,' Maria said. 'They obviously didn't know that there were a camp.'

‘I think they were just afraid of the dark,’ her boyfriend said. ‘They could not make light, of course. I heard them coming from a distance, cursing every time they stumbled.’

‘Come on, it all ended happily. We are going to have a drink and then go to bed. A few of us are staying to keep watch, but I don’t expect them to come back,’ invited Olga the activists and journalists.

In the boarding house, the lights were turned on. At Olga’s request the sleepy landlady cooked hot chocolate and soup and toasted sandwiches for the relieved campaigners. It had been quite tense. If the thugs themselves had not been so afraid, if they had had firearms with them and had fired...

## Chapter 6

# Elemental life

Michael woke up with Dia sprawled on his chest and her arms around him. Her materialization had gone hand in hand with his return to the waking consciousness.

He had dreamed. He now knew what it was like to be a tree. He had stood in the earth, tasted of the deep water and minerals, he had turned his branches and leaves towards the light, sucking up water and soaking up sunlight. He had experienced the thrust and orgasmic explosion of the bloom, the satisfying formation of seeds. He had received the songs of the cosmos in his branches and brought them to Earth, from where he took up her song to radiate it out.

Dia lay motionless, her consciousness just as introverted as his own. He wondered what would happen next. Her love for him was human in nature and expression. Could a elemental being stand such a thing?

She had followed his thoughts and answered in his head: *I don't care. Once you are with a human being, you can't go back. I want to become a human being.*

*You know that you will become mortal then?*

Michael reminded her of the story of the little mermaid. It made him a little sad. Dia took over the story and his emotion.

*I know. But we know how it is to be born and die. Our trees germinate, grow and die. It always goes on in an endless cycle. We too come back as the same forever, we hardly change. We grow so slowly and many elementals do not at all. Most are gone, by the way.*

*Gone?*

*Before humans came, the earth was all ours. We have made her ready to receive you. But now there are almost no forests anymore and no clear rivers and peaceful gardens. There is little space left for us and our relatives. Only we, the devas of the species and some of our relatives from the water and the sea and the earth and the stones and plants are still there because we have not been destroyed by humans. The rest are no longer there.*

*Destroyed? Where have they gone?*

She did not understand the question. *Away*, she repeated.

Michael did not quite grasp it, but another question presented itself: *Why do only Diana and I have a dryad with us? And why is Diana connected to her tree and I'm not to your tree?*

*Many questions, human child.* The voice in his head had the familiar ironic sound.

*Who says you are not connected to my tree?* She laughed in his head, to her own surprise. *I am becoming too much like you*, she apologised. *But I will explain to you. My tree is safe and healthy. Our forest is well protected. The dryad of this forest has been in Diana from the germ, just as I have been with you. But she can't get out, she has become half of Diana.*

It sounds like it was not quite the intention. Michael had become very sensitive

for the fine nuances of the voice in his head, in which he sensed a kind of apology. It was for a moment silent.

*Yes, that's right. It had never been done like that before. With you I was present when your seed was laid. I was there along with your soul, but I only watched. With Diana, the dryad really helped to form the body. That was not wise perhaps, but the dryad is very young. We do not know how things will go from here, whether the dryad is now becoming human or that Diana will live as long as the tree, and the dryad is released when Diana dies. Normally it is like that. When our tree dies, we also go away and come back later.*

*Gone? What do you mean by that? You are the deva of all the willow trees on the world?*

*Yes, but we are only in a certain place when we have our own tree. If it dies... She searched for the right words in his brain. Without a tree of our own, we are scattered. Everywhere. And nowhere. She giggled just because of the language she had to use. Then we work too, but it is... nicer to live somewhere, in a tree that is the biggest and the most beautiful that we can grow.*

*So... all the elemental beings that are gone are scattered?*

She had to think for a moment, he realised she used his brain, but he did not notice anything.

*No, they are gone forever. Absorbed in the earth's field. There is only a kind of echo of them.*

*How do you think actually?*

*With your brain of course. You don't even use most of it. A head full of clay and what do you do with it? Almost nothing. I have all the space.*

*Are you using a piece of my brain?*

*You could say that. I have my own little office there, so to speak, with all things neatly put away, she giggled. Much tidier than yours, I sometimes have to search like the bejesus for things.*

*That's an expression I always use!* shot through him.

*I use your language, yes. Do you find that annoying?*

*No, silly, it's fun.*

*Yes, I like it too. Then I never have to worry that you won't understand or something. Everything comes from you. My body too, by the way. I always want to stay with you.*

*What about your tree?*

*I want to live with you by my tree, she stubbornly insisted.*

It suddenly seemed to him wonderful to be under her giant willow at the river.

*Do you want to?* she asked in a small voice. She was at that moment child, his child, she didn't look like an eternal living deva.

*How can I refuse you anything?* laughed Michael. *Diana does that too: asking something on such a way that I cannot refuse it. Did you learn that from her?*

She agreed without words.

*I see children playing in the water, just like you did then, she dreamed away. People's children. With naiads and other dryads.*

*Where do you see them?*

*Near my tree, later, later.*

‘Oh yes?’ laughed Michael out loud. ‘How many and how many girls and how many boys and what colour hair do they have?’

*I can't say that, Dia replied disappointedly. That is not to us. But I see many and they have all colours.*

He suspected nature beings were not allowed to predict the future for humans. He left it at that.

‘I have to pee,’ he said. ‘But I am so comfortable.’

Dia sat up straight.

*Will you give your water to Diana's tree? It contains nutrition and healing power. Especially now we have been united.*

A crowd of winged lights shooting back and forth whirled around him as he raised from his springy fern bed. Along his secret path he trotted to the forest meadow. He slipped between the concealing spruce branches and stood wide-legged with arms stretched upwards for a moment enjoying the softly colouring sky. He could feel the light growing, just as in his dream when he was a tree. The light flowed through him like weightless, cool water.

As if in a dream, Michael ran on with Dia hovering around him the whole way. The moment the first rays of sunshine crossed the mountain ridge in the east and set the tops of the tallest trees in a reddish glow, he crouched down close to Diana's tree and let his water sink into the ground.

With the fairy dancing in front of him like an oversized butterfly he hopped back along his path, dived on his fern bed, rolled over and was immediately overwhelmed by Dia who wrapped arms, legs and wings around him.

Far away, Michael heard his name being called.

Without warning Dia disappeared. For a moment he was startled, thinking she had gone.

*I'm still with you, she snapped at him. Go and see what is the matter, they need you.*

*Will you stay with me?*

*No, I have things to do. If you need me, I will be with you again.*

Very much against his will, he felt her consciousness detaching itself from him. It was as if a cloud was blocking the sun; he shivered for a moment from inner cold.

Her departure from his mind did although make him aware of his body again. He jumped up. Tireless energy bubbled through him. He ran at full speed, jumping and dancing over stumps and brambles, to the little camp under the beech tree.

## Chapter 7

### Forest walks

‘There’s tea,’ was Lucy’s short-tempered welcome to his bland appearance.

She was generally not very approachable this early in the morning.

‘Where are Wendy and Diana?’

He could have picked her up and do a little dance, but he held back.

‘Poop. Here, take it.’

It was nice to sit in the fresh morning with a hot mug of tea in both hands. Lucy was busy warming up the leftovers from the previous day’s meal. She saw him looking at her and bit out: ‘There is nothing else for breakfast than yesterday’s dinner. If you don’t like it, just go get some bread.’

‘I do like it,’ he said gingerly.

When she was speaking the wind blew her morning mood usually away soon.

‘I’ll wipe and rinse the plates.’

‘Yes, you do something too,’ she grumbled a little. Then, curious: ‘What was it like to sleep alone in the forest?’

With the wet plates in his hand, he walked back to the tent. ‘I found a secret place with lots of ferns. I have I also dreamt of a dryad that looks like Diana.’

‘Diana’s dryad?’

‘No, another, she only looks like Diana.’ That was all he wanted to say about it for now. ‘Who was calling me?’

‘Wendy, Diana wanted you to come.’

He sat down next to his sister and dried the plates.

‘Look, here they come. Washing hands!’ shouted Lucy to the couple, who obediently followed her command. ‘Nice poop?’

‘Well, man! A fat one!’ parried her twin sister.

Diana said nothing, crawled onto her big brother’s lap, took his tea and drank half of it in one gulp. ‘Don’t let your tea get cold,’ she panted, ‘otherwise I will drink it all.’

They ate their hot breakfast in silence. The peaceful forest made voice sounds unnecessary: by head gestures and telling glances, they made clear they preferred letting the two women in Michael’s tent sleep. Then they could explore the forest undisturbed. They stood up, leaving the dishes for the honest finder. One after the other, they went into the forest.

Although Michael led the way, it was Diana who guided them. Where he was in doubt as to which direction to choose, she pointed with a finger or a head movement. Often he did not even look, maybe she gave him telepathic instructions. In their young lives, they and their parents had visited many forests; they were brought up on forest walking.

They pointed at things that caught their eye: an unknown mushroom, the dead stump of an ancient forest giant with mushrooms growing on its decayed wood, herbs, a young tree, a crooked tree, a mossy boulder...

As they wandered, they had lost sight of the river, but that was no problem: they went up hill; if they needed to find the watercourse again, they only had to descend.

They came to a narrow brook, from which they drank eagerly. It murmured softly through a bed that was no wider than a foot length. The water flowed between tree roots and mossy walls from which cleanly washed boulders protruded here and there. They thought it would be fun to trace its source.

The whole journey through the forest they hardly spoke a word and made no sound either. They slipped through the dense undergrowth like shadows. Close together, they climbed the steeper slope.

Unexpectedly, they stood at the source of the stream.

At the foot of a giant boulder, which may have rolled down millions of years ago, water was welling up. The rock, rounded by countless summers and winters, looked like the skull of a giant buried in the mountain, a Cyclops, complete with a single eye cavity. The grey stone was covered with moss and hanging plants. The top was overgrown by a dense mat of flowering herbs; they could smell the thyme down where they stood.



The girls cleared dead branches around the spring and decorated the place with a wreath of flowers and leaves. An elfin house they called it. It was a tribute to the elemental beings of the place and the naiad of the spring. They drank again, bringing the cold, crystal-clear water with their hands to their mouths.

The walk in the woods had completely engrossed Michael.

So much he had not once thought of Dia. But then, of course, you can't think of anything else. Promptly he began to stumble, branches whipped into his face and he no longer picked up on Diana's signals.

'What is it, Miche?' The twins had also noticed.

'Oh, I'm thinking,' he replied hoarsely.

'Don't,' Lucy advised him. 'You're walking the wrong way. We have to go back.' They turned around; now he was trudging after his sisters.

That was better, soon he forgot about Dia and could walk again through the forest without a sound.

Led by the spirited Wendy and with Diana as a guide, they made a great arc, high up on the slopes of the valley. The forest here was less dense; the layer of soil was very thin and the trees needed a widely branched root system in order to cling to and draw sufficient nourishment from the meagre soil.

They descended and came across a second source, even smaller than the first.

Here, too, they cleaned up the place, made an elfin house and drank the ice-cold water. Around the spring had grown limestone deposits in beautiful strange shapes. A long time ago a tree had fallen over; they cleared the mouldy remains of it and with water from the spring they splashed clean the organically grown calcium deposits.

The tiny stream of water disappeared into a dense grove of brambles and they continued their journey at the same altitude.

At a steep cape, they were forced to descend a long way. Lower down the slope the forest became dense, green and vital. Here, they could once again make use of much-used game trails, made by large animals; deer or roe deer probably; they hardly had to stoop for low hanging branches.

As they made their way back to the camp, they found in an open spot under a circle of beech trees hands full of yellow calyx-shaped fungi, their favourite but rare mushroom. They cut out the biggest ones with their pocketknife. Delighted at the prospect of fried chanterelle's they entered the clearing where their tents were.

Dinja and Yvette were talking to Janos. Irina saw them first and waved enthusiastically. 'Did you go for a walk?'

'Yes, we have discovered two wells!' cried Diana.

'And these chanterelle's!'

Lucy and Wendy proudly showed their loot, which they held in a fold of their T-shirt. They didn't have anything else with them to carry the mushrooms in.

'We thought as much,' Irina's mother laughed. 'We could see you had already

had breakfast.’

‘Maybe you are hungry again?’ Janos took grinning a huge round loaf out of his bag. ‘Freshly supplied by the bakery in Jablun, by train.’

They were eager to do so; soon they were sitting in a circle, playing feast on bread with fried chanterelle’s.

Yvette ate little; she just sat and stared.

Her sadness disturbed Michael; he wanted to enjoy being together in the magical atmosphere of the forest. He was relieved when she announced that she was going to the village to send her recordings.

Janos and Dinja were talking softly to each other in Slovakian, that didn’t help him much either.

Actually, he wanted to be alone.

## Chapter 8

### Amongst the people

'Well my boy,' said Janos as he sat down next to Michael. 'We will have to go to the village... What happened to you?'

Michael startled out of his reverie. 'Nothing.'

'You're different, your aura is different.' Janos' attention shifted, to Michael's relief, to the things he was organizing. He had no desire whatsoever to share his experiences concerning Dia, not to anyone and certainly not to an adult.

'Listen, there was an attack on the factory last night...'

'What?' Michael looked at Janos in disbelief.

'A bunch of men tried to recover the factory last night.' Janos differentiated his blunt statement a bit. 'But they were sent back to their homes without being able to do anything.' He decided to leave the details. The boy looked so disconcerted.

'Olga had expected that they would and had everyone stand guard, with spotlights and cameras.

Just as Greenpeace always does: capturing everything on video what, for example, whalers do and how ships go dumping nuclear waste into the sea.'

'Gosh,' Michael stammered palely. 'We didn't notice anything.'

'That was the intention, young man,' said Janos, endeared by Michael's unsuspecting look. 'The scouts were all on guard to protect the forest and you.' And some others, Janos thought, but they were not visible to ordinary eyes.

'But, what should I do, Janos?' asked Michael, who had to get used to the fact that outside his private world, things happened he was involved in.

'The scouts want to hear from you, the village is beginning to fill up and the journalists are waiting for you to come.'

'What time is it?'

'Time to go; the press conference is at two o'clock.'

'But I have nothing to mention!'

'Can you bring Diana? She walks around as if nothing has been wrong. That's news enough, isn't it?'

'Yes, that will do,' Michael muttered, not sure whether it was such a good idea. 'Can't they come here?'

'I thought you wanted to keep it quiet in the forest?'

'Yes, that is true. But if they behave quietly and there are not too many...'

'Forget that 'quietly' and there are about thirty of them.'

'That many!' Thirty eager reporters, yes, that was far too many.

'Okay, I'll go with you. I'll ask Diana if she wants to come. And the twins.'

However, the girls refused to be seen in the village. They did want to go to the scouting camp, because they thought it would be exciting. All those boys...

Dinja and Irina also liked to go, so in the end a whole procession moved along the path to the scouting camp. The camp under the beech tree was left empty.

The scouts were impressed by the highly honoured visit in their encampment. Michael felt uncomfortably under all those admiring eyes, but the twins enjoyed them, showing off their high held bosoms behind their brother and Diana between them.

In the middle of the encampment, in front of a large group tent, was an open space furnished with a fire pit, surrounded by boulders and logs to sit on.

A few girls were busy with a large steaming cauldron hanging from a tripod over a cooking fire. Whether they wanted tea.

Yes, they liked.

Milk and sugar?

No, thank you, without anything... Yes please, milk and two lumps...

At Janos's insistence, Michael told some of what happened to them since the previous evening, though he kept silent about the miracle that had happened to him. The appearance of the fairy, her name, making love and telepathy talk were of such a different reality than this camp with busy scouts and serious adults, or the press conference in the village they were heading for...

Dia's existence belonged to the dreamy consciousness in the forest, between the trees and the elemental beings he could feel.

'... The water flushes through the ground so quickly that Diana could take a walk this morning in the woods with us,' he concluded. He turned around and smiled at Diana, glad that she was healthy again. She was glowing from all the attention and waved defiantly with her legs on her high place of honour.

'What are you going to do now?' one of the scouts asked.

'I don't know,' Michael confessed. He looked at Janos to see if he had an answer to this question and yes, Janos raised to stand in the middle of the circle.

'What is going to happen next,' he opened his speech; in courtesy of the Dutch guests, he spoke German. 'A good question. There are all kinds of things going on around the occupation of the factory. Last night, you have been on the look-out for a gang, sent by the factory owners, with the purpose to deceive them. It worked wonderfully well. I heard that you did see that they became afraid of something?'

'Yes!' shouted some of them. Their leader, Maria, stood up and pointed where they had seen approaching eight figures that night.

'At first, we were afraid that they would enter our camp,' she told. 'But they walked so awkwardly, it seemed as if they were blind and had sticky mud on their shoes...'

Her gaze happened to fall on Diana, who was laughing quietly. Janos followed Maria's gaze.

'Why are you laughing?' he asked curiously. He suspected that last night there had been more protectors of the forest on the move and not all of them were

visible. 'Do you know more about it?'

Diana shrugged her shoulders with a grin and did not want to say anything.

'At least some of them got scared and wanted to go back. They got a quarrel and at one point three of them ran back along the way they had come,' Maria concluded her story.

'So you see, Michael, how well you are guarded,' Janos took the floor. 'In the coming days, we expect a lot more visitors. There is a task for the scouts: this path is the only access to the forest.' He pointed around with wide arm gestures. 'Your camp is in just the right place to build a barricade against wandering tourists. Maybe you can make a fence or something.'

An older boy interrupted him: 'Are we permitted to do that? I mean, we have permission of the farmer to set up our camp, but whose path is it? If it is public, we are not allowed to fence it off.'

'Hm, no, maybe not.' Janos stood for a moment thinking about the issue. 'Ah, it is for the safety of the people after all, don't you think? And to protect the forest. I wouldn't take it too heavy; make that fence quietly and if someone tells you to remove it, you just do it.'

That seemed to be a sufficient strategy.

'Do we need to flush more soil?' asked another. 'I mean, there must be other trees that are sick from the poison that we can save by channelling clean water through the soil.'

'Michael, what do you think?'

'Oh, I don't know... We have to investigate that first. I know at the moment no other tree. Diana, do you...?'

She shook her head impatiently. Michael understood that she meant that numerous trees had succumbed or were about to succumb, too many to be saved with a jet of water from a single stream. He could no longer pass on that statement to the scouts, because Janos, meanwhile, had stood up with a knowing look on his watch. Michael looked confused; it was an important question, was it?

'Time to go to the press conference, my boy. Diana is joining you?'

Michael had only to look at the tired child to realise that although she could walk, the hustle and bustle outside the forest would be too much for her newly recovered energy. He shook his head. 'Diana should better return to our camp. Luus, Wen, are you taking her with you?'

The twins nodded that they had heard him, but to see their faces, they would rather stay in the scouting camp.

In the end, only Janos and he walked to the village.

## Chapter 9

### Michael's power

It was crowded in the village. Cars were driving at a walking pace through the traffic-clogged main street, people were lugging around cameras or stood outside the fence staring at the gloomy factory.

Michael and Janos were recognised and photographed when they entered the boarding house. The packed saloon was blue with cigarette smoke.

The oppressiveness grabbed Michael by the throat. Janos pushed him rushing up the stairs, talking loudly with noisy reporters. Upstairs, in the hectic headquarters, they were given tea.

The activity around him increased even more, with tension Michael was waiting for a climax. A young man opened the door and shouted something. Mrs. Jellisek roared something back. Then to Michael, in German, with a completely other, warm voice: 'Time to appear to the front of the troops. Show up, man. Can you handle it?'

He nodded. He even had thought about what he was going to say.

She pushed him forward with a hand on his shoulder. He was the figurehead, he realised, of the heavy warship that the woman was behind him. He chuckled, just at the top of the stairs, at his own word association. His inner pleasure was recorded in a barrage of flashes on dozens of sensitive chips. Surprised, he looked at the crowd at the bottom of the stairs. There seemed to be many more than when he had gone upstairs a quarter of an hour ago.

Olga Jellisek's piercing voice from behind him – the foghorn of the flagship, he thought and laughed to himself again – announced in three languages that the press conference would begin with a statement by Michael, the brother of the dryad girl and master storyteller.

He took the floor.

From his mouth flowed a compelling tale of their adventures, which silenced the people. They could understand his cheerfulness. After all, it went very well with Diana? The flushing had the desired effect on the diseased tree, now everything was back to normal, right?

No one realised that the happiness he radiated was because he was carrying Dia in him. The jolly vitality that resounded in his speech appealed to everyone. This was true not only for those present here, but also for the viewers and listeners who had tuned in to the broadcasts.

When he had finished, he was led upstairs with a gentle urge; Olga thought it better to answer the press' questions herself. The boy had actually been a little too positive. The seriousness of the situation was not to be snowed under by all too rosy representation of the current events.

Questions were promptly asked about the foiled attempt of a crack team to

chase the environmentalists out of the factory. Olga told how they had parried the attack. She recounted of the sentries, the text messages that were exchanged, the defence with floodlights, megaphones and cameras.

Her report was a sharp contrast to the wonderful events that took place deep in the forest. Olga was well versed in public relations and knew that such a contradiction in news coverage would be very productive. On the one hand, people saw the happy boy whose sister revived, while behind him she herself became visible, a solid lady who emphasised that all actions had been necessary, effective and correct and that the environmental movement was determined to continue in the same direction.

Meanwhile Michael was staring out of the window of his former room.

It was getting busier and busier in the main street.

People parked their cars just like that on the side of the road. There were a lot of German and Austrian number plates.

In the midst of this activity the factory lay silent and menacing behind the fence.

This is where he had been standing days ago waiting for the train to arrive and hoping Dad would get out.

How would he be? Perhaps he was dead, Michael thought gloomily. Nobody knew that they had been left here. Who knows the police already had called at his Dutch address and of course nobody was at home. He shook his head to chase away the worries; there was nothing wrong with their father. However, he felt not completely at ease.

Rummaging around in the messy room, the desire to the forest grew: to his secret clearing, to see Dia growing visible again between his hands. The need was so strong that he decided to face the crowd in the salon. Gathering all his courage, he went into the corridor. It was filled with the upward-smelling fumes of sweating people, beer and cigarette smoke. He swallowed his disgust and tried to go down. Olga, however, was still orating on the stairs; he could not get past her.

He looked around him frantically: he wanted to get out of here! At the end of the corridor he could see through the open bathroom door a window. It looked out on the kitchen garden and could be opened. Michael estimated the height. He would have to jump, it was at least three metres.

There was a rumble on the stairs. The press conference was probably ended. Talking excitedly, Janos, Olga and two of her employees entered the room. Michael saw his chance and descended the stairs quickly.

In the salon, some journalists tried to accost him. There was a traffic jam at the outside door, some newcomers pushed their way in, while a few hurried people wanted to go outside. In the midst of the crowd, Michael was almost crushed. A young woman recognised him and saved him, loudly crying: "The narrator! The narrator is here, the dryad girl's brother!"

It worked: suddenly there was room around him and he could breathe again.

Shyly, he lowered his eyes under all those admiring glances from the bystanders.

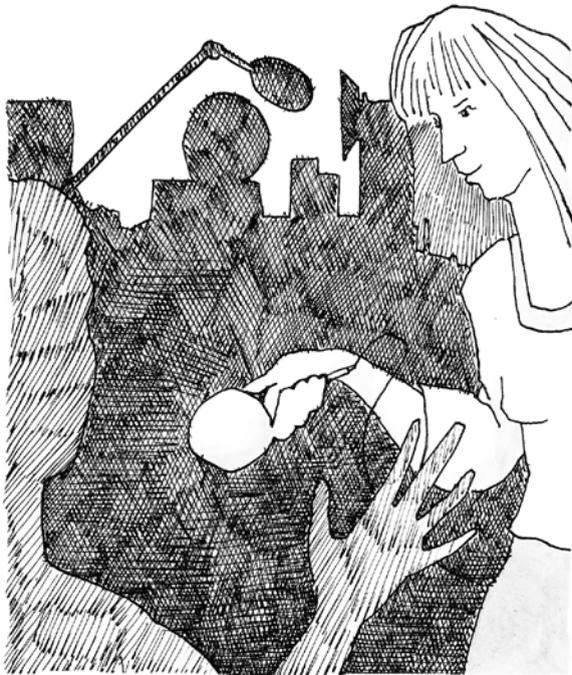
‘Can you tell us what happened?’ the young woman asked. ‘We just missed the press conference.’

He nodded in agreement. That worked like a detonator on an explosive: before he knew what was happening he was standing outside, in the midst of a circle of attentive people with their cameras and microphones on him.

He could not utter a word at first. There was too much distance, he could not tell what had happened. He asked the young woman who had first recognised him: ‘May I know your name?’

She looked at him delightedly. ‘My name is Anna Verovna, I work for a youth magazine in Moscow. It is called Open Times.’ She laughed and repeated it in Russian, which of course he did not understand.

She had spoken English to him, he realised. He had addressed her in German. Crazy, all those languages together.



‘How is your sister doing now?’ was her first question, which was underlined with loud humming by the others. The circle of people was still growing.

The question ignited the same fire in him as happened at the press conference on the stairs. In fluent terms, underlined with wide-ranging gestures, he told the same story and explained how the dryad and his sister could become so intertwined that a human child suffered with a sick tree.

‘Diana’s dryad is the Deva of the Forest,’ he explained the phenomenon. ‘A

tree-deva is normally omnipresent; wherever her kind of trees grow, she is present. The Deva of the Forest is... more concentrated, I would say. However, all devas need a fixed place, a focus. Tree- and forest deva's choose a particular tree as focus. Maybe they plant it themselves.' He laughed at the thought. 'In any case a tree deva becomes so attached to her tree that their ups and downs go hand in hand.'

He looked around the circle and his face became serious. The people followed him breathlessly, the cameras recording every nuance.

'When they started burning chemical waste in the old sawmill and dumping it into the stream, the forest was slowly poisoned.'

His face clouded over like a thunderstorm. 'Trees got sick, dozens of them. First along the banks. The Deva of the Forest lives in the Keeper of the Forest, a beech tree hundreds of years old. The Deva was at her wits' end.'

His gloomy face brightened.

'That year my parents camped there, not knowing the poisonous discharges. They could not see yet anything of it then. Under that beech tree, my youngest sister was conceived. The Deva of the Forest was there, but she came too close: she became fused to the fertilised egg.'

Where do I get it from? he asked himself. The story ran completely away with him. *Go on, go on*, a familiar voice in his mind exhorted.

He looked around at the faces that were staring mesmerised at him.

'Something didn't quite go right,' he continued, hoarse with emotion.

'The dryad could not get back out of my sister. As a result Diana became entwined with the the dryad of the beech. Do not ask me how, I cannot tell you. But if the tree of a dryad dies, it is... spread out across the world for a time. The dryad does function in the care of the forest or tree species, but is no longer an individual or in one place. The dryad is then more of a field, like a radio broadcast'.

He looked at the attentive faces around him. He realised that he was speaking right to their hearts at this moment.

'In case of a human being, you would call it dying.'

That is what we fight against: against the poisoning death of the tree, against death of the dryad and against the death of my sister. She is still balancing on the edge, although today she is doing better.'

His audience processed this in silence. The sounds of the village were heard sharply and clearly: murmurs, cars, music from radios, a scream, a whining child, the mooing of a cow...

In the doorway of the guesthouse reporters crowded with their microphones and cameras. The last part of his speech was new to the press people who were present at the press conference. Some shook their heads in disbelief, but did not dare to react openly. On most faces he could see compassion, admiration too.

'I have to go now,' he said softly.

The reporters made way. When he walked down the street, they followed him with their eyes and cameras.

## Chapter 10

# Dream or reality

A kind of enchantment remained around him during the entire walk to the forest. He greeted politely the people who recognised him; they sometimes raised their hands or wanted to speak to them, but he kept his pace.

At the scout camp they had listened to him live on a Slovakian radio broadcast. They ran to the lone figure on the path as soon as they had recognised him. Michael laughed delightedly at their excited remarks. He began to realise that with the impromptu speech in front of the door of the boarding house he had come out from under the very controlling wings of Olga Jellisek and Janos. That did him good.

At the invitation of the scouts, he joined for a cup of tea. However, after a while he became restless, wanting to go to his sisters. The scouts escorted him out and gave him handshakes, pats on the back and kisses. Still delighted with the warm interest, he arrived at the two tents under the beech.

Only Dinja was present, reading. The girls were taking a walk in the forest with Irina and Yvette, she said. A cup of tea he declined, wanting to get to his spot as quickly as possible to see and feel Dia again.

He could forget it. Halfway his secret forest clearing he bumped into the female company. They took him back to the camp with enthusiastic cries and questions. While food was being prepared, he reported in as much detail as possible of the press conference.

During the meal, he marvelled at the superficiality of interest.

No one had asked how he had felt in the village, how he had experienced the press conference. Yvette was, in an almost exasperating way, only concerned with her own need to see fairies. Her interest did not extend to him as a person. She only showed interest when fairies were mentioned. She had taken a few pictures of him and Diana and had recorded his story. Without asking him, he realised.

Irina's interest was almost exclusively for Janos, Dinja was also self-absorbed, the twins were as selfish as teenagers can be and Diana... She lay quietly in his arms, staring into the flames of the campfire.

Diana was a world on herself, but she was closest to him; he felt she had understood something of his soul. She had a dryad in her, a direct relative of his elf. Michael felt lonely among the six women.

When he noticed Diana was getting sleepy, he took her to the tent, undressed her and tucked the contentedly grunting child in. After a night kiss and a soft 'good night' he left for his field bed, where he lay in wait.

His heart pounded in his chest in anticipation. Full of impatience he waited for the arrival of his beloved, nervous if she would come...

*I am here again.*

He had apparently been dreaming and was startled when the voice in his head sounded. Dia appeared, prince-like fully stretched out on his belly.

He hid his face in her soft hair. 'Where were you? When you left, I just about collapsed,' he whispered.

*I haven't really been away,* grunted her voice in his head.

*I know that, Dia,* he replied, somewhat embarrassed. *But somehow I miss you terribly when I don't see or hear or feel you.*

Dia was delighted by his confession. She hugged him both astral and with her hands and wings. He felt her fine hair on his chest.

*Can't you show yourself once in a while, to my sisters for example?*

*I don't dare,* she confessed. *I've known you since you were born, but I only dared to show myself to you when I was sure you would recognise me. Because you know, when a person doesn't believe in us, it does a lot... pain.* It was not quite the right word. *We could fade away.*

*But people can see you now, can't they? They do believe their own eyes.*

*Yes? I do not know. It scares me.*

*You are firmer every time, aren't you? How do you do that? It takes a lot of energy, doesn't it?*

The wonder of her appearance continued to captivate him.

*It's your energy, you know,* Dia replied pointedly. *It is, by the way, not more than you use to walk.*

*I have the impression that I get energy from you.*

*You get that too, but that is a different power. From me you get growing power. There is plenty of it around here, by the way. I only give it by.*

'O.' He understood, but it seemed to him that the arithmetic was not complete.

*There is always and everywhere more energy than you can absorb,* Dia explained, who pulled the concepts from his memory. *If you can receive it you are never short of food. You may even not need to eat if you are very good at it.*

*Well, I was quite hungry just now in the camp.* His stomach started to rumble and made all kinds of digestive noises. When he had to fart Dia let out a giggle. At least, something like that. Although she spoke without a sound, her face showed more and more human expressions.

*I love you,* he told her quietly.

She hid her face behind her silky hair in a human gesture. Dia was shy!

*I am not shy,* she squealed. *I need to cry, just like you people and I don't like it at all!*

He caressed her. *Be patient, sweet creature. If you succeed in becoming human everything will be all right. And look, you are already taking over human things, you are even crying.*

*Hey, how can that be? Miche, I have cried water, real water! Oh Miche, am I a human being now?*

She sat upright, full of confusion, having forgotten her shyness, with a finger

touching the drops on his chest. *Real tears*, she murmured. *Where do I get them from?*

Slowly her appearance evaporated.

*See you later*, Michael heard, like a distant echo.

The sky was just getting light. An early blackbird let itself be heard. The rest of the forest was dead silent; there was no breath of wind. Half erected, Michael let the misty outlines of the trees sink in. Dia was making a round; she had put a message in his memory.

There she came floating along, less than a metre long. She was filled with scattering lights, a joke she copied from film footage in his memory. Breathless with admiration and a little shaky with joy he sat waiting for her to join him.

She greeted him by hovering like a hummingbird with quivering wings in front of and gave him a kiss on the mouth. There was no touch, but it felt like a warm drop of dew on his lips. Satisfied, she nestled herself on his chest. With an undiminished adoration he watched as she grew and became more solid. This time she had made her wings pearly, as an expression of how she felt. She grew until she was almost as tall as he was.

*Miche, I have been thinking*. She giggled. *With your brain, of course, because I don't have any myself*.

In response, he caressed her warm peach skin. He stayed away from her pretty bum, for he did not vouch for himself when he started to do so.

*You know, I don't really want to become a human being*.

He sighed with relief.

*I am your girl and at the same time your child as I am now. I am a piece of you, sprung from you, just like a human child from a mother*.

*That's right*, he replied dreamily. He checked with himself. Yes, she was a kind of child to him, for she was largely made of him, with his language, his thoughts, his physical energy and... seed.

## An elf experiences itself

He continued to listen to the voice in his mind.

*It is a bit more complicated, though. I mean that love of mankind, which makes you always want to be with someone. I already loved you when you were four, but then it was different. Thanks to you, I now have a sense of time and discovered things about myself. They were already there, but they were still in the bud, so to speak.*

He stroked her. It gave him an idea.

*Can you feel that, I mean, on the outside?*

*No, I have no outside. She laughed. No inside either, now that you mention it. I experience your feeling in your fingers, in your skin, what your senses tell you, as you experience your surroundings.*

*Try if you can make that feeling. Look at me how it works. It's very nice, I can recommend it to you.* He laughed with a hiccup of tense expectation.

She caressed him with her wings, her hands, her lips; she moved all over him, rubbed her belly on him, her legs and finally her lap.

*I understand what you mean, but it is your feeling.*

*You copied Diana's body, didn't you? See if you can get my feeling translate to what you have copied from her body.*

She withdrew from his mind.

For the first time, he saw her lying on top of him like a separate being, busy designing touch on its outside.

*I think I got it a bit, she came back. Please stroke me.*

That was a request to which he completely surrendered; this time he did not skip her velvety behind. She began to squirm and wiggle with pleasure. She made a real show of it: she even started to pant slightly; he could feel her warm breaths over his chest.

*How enormous, she exclaimed, breathless as if she had breath, if you feel it yourself. Oh, Miche, you have made me so happy!*

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with an accomplished love kiss, minutes long. Sophisticated as she was, after all, she was an eons old consciousness, shoved back and forth until she got his hardened member in the right place and let him come in.

Michael gave free rein to his desire, no longer afraid of the consequences and no longer worried that Dia would end up like the little mermaid. He bobbed and danced and kneaded her curves, her flanks, her head; her hands and legs wrapped around him; her flapping wings blew up leaves.

He was in and around her when she, for the first time in her existence, experienced a physical orgasm; at the same time as him.

It was so deep, all the dryads in the forest echoed the experience, they raced through the branches like a cloud of light splashes. If there had been a human being around, he would have been able to see everything, for the elemental beings had lost sight of all prudence

Dia was devastated. She had now experienced it herself, not anymore hitching a ride on the experience of the human with whom she was involved, but in her own body. Even though she herself had composed it of bits and pieces that she received and had borrowed from Michael and Diana.

Michael had lived for the first time how a girl experienced her orgasm. He had felt himself from the inside, but also how she had felt his body, moving against her and within her, how it feels when a boy comes inside you and explodes there.

For a long time they lay together and relived again and again how it had been.

The forest around them was lit up reddish by the morning sun; it was brimming with the joy of life. The birds were so busy that it became a cacophony.

Dia made it known that she wanted to go alone into the forest and let herself slowly dissolve. For a moment, he had the sensation of floating detached from the earth. The light feeling lasted for a long time.

His heart jumped up when Dia came back from the forest. She resembled less and less to Diana; she had made herself taller, her bosom and hips were more pronounced, her face began to look its own and became less childish.

She dropped down on his lap; something was bothering her, that much was clear to him. He had to rely on her behaviour and words in his mind, because he did not have access to her mind as she had to his. It was not yet possible, he understood, because she had had no mind that he could understand and comprehend. Its language was elementary, in terms of energies and information modulated on them in a way that he would not be able to decipher.

*I wonder when you will no longer be able to make yourself invisible*, he let her know; it was the first thing that came to his mind.

The equivalent of a shudder came in response. She admitted that she was terribly afraid of it. *Your fairy tale of the little mermaid is very true to life.*

*Isn't it better to stay like this, sweet creature? As you are now you have the best of both worlds. You can make yourself invisible, live in my mind, you can fly...*

Dia wobbled uncomfortably back and forth. It made him smile, he recognised her body language as his own. She had of course no other comparison, he realised. Her sigh in his mind went along with the movement of her chest.

*Are you breathing now?* he asked curiously, giving her the opportunity to reflect on the difficult issue of become human or remain non-human.

It was silent for a moment. She made the movement again.

*A little*, she replied, surprised at herself. *I do move air in and out. I have examined Diana's body as best as I can, replicated it, also from the inside. Then I also have a kind of lungs.*

*Have you made real lungs?*

*No, I do not need air. But I am hollow inside and I can make it bigger or smaller. She was silent for a moment. I am not stubborn like that mermaid; I'll just stay what I am now. If I want to be with you, unite, I just do, she continued defiantly. Oh, I don't know. I don't know what I am. I can't even remember what I was like before.*

*'No,' sighed Michael. I don't recognise myself any more either. I can hardly remember how I was a few days ago. Such a little boy, afraid of everything, and now I feel almost grown up. Crazy, isn't it?*

*No, it isn't! I know why, said Dia. I not only dig in your memory to know things, I also give you knowledge.*

*Would it be just that? Michael could not remember that he had certain knowledge of her.*

*No, of course not. You have been doing this for many lifetimes, it is all coming together at the same time.*

*How do you know all this?*

That question confused Dia.

*Just, she said after a while. I know that from your soul. It knows everything about all your lives. Again she was silent for a moment. You know, through your brain I can give words to what I know, only then do I know it consciously. My thinking consciousness I owe to you.*

Michael let this sink in for a moment. A new question arose: *Dia, your tree is in another forest, right? I remember that we were there, that I played in your tree and that you were there with me. How come you are so at home here? I mean, if I didn't know better I'd think that you actually live here.*

*Oh, I know that very well, she replied enthusiastically and sat up straight. That is because this is the place where people can meet us. Here is the place where the beginning of something completely new is made. This is a place where people and spirit beings will merge again.*

*Here?*

*This forest is a very important place, with a lot of earth power. There are streams of energy through the earth, you know. Sometimes they come together. This is such a place, where three streams come together. We follow them when we tour.*

*'Oh yes!' said Michael aloud; he knew something about that. Again in thought language: I think people call it ley lines.*

*Yes, and power places. In such places people can raise their consciousness, tuning in to the Earth and to us. They are also the places where certain spirit beings can acquire human consciousness.*

*Really? Then you are not the only one, are you?*

*No, she told him, a lot is happening to us.*

*Just like with me, he thought. Since you are with me, I have changed a lot. For good. I could no longer live without you. I think I can no longer return to the Netherlands and go to school and all those ordinary things.*

*You were going to live with my tree, right? When we're done here? I mean, when Diana's tree is healthy again, the dryad can take care of the forest herself.*

*Yes, but Diana is a human child and only seven. Surely she will have to be cared for.*

*Can't Dinja do that? She can live here with Janos, can't she?*

*I don't know if my parents will agree to that. We are their children after all. And what are Lucy and Wendy going to do? That I know neither.*

He remained silent with a frown between his eyebrows.

*They also have a job to do, Dia let slip. But they must grow a bit first.*

*Oh, what then?* he wanted to know immediately.

A kind of reprimand came into his consciousness: if Dia was not allowed to reveal the future, he should not ask for it either. Wordlessly, he apologised. His own future was unclear enough.

*I find it difficult,* he sighed after a while. *We will have to choose and what I would like to choose seems somehow to be impossible in the human world.*

*What do you want?* Dia asked tensely.

*Oh, wanting, wanting. It's more than wanting,* he said shyly and lowered his eyes. *I want to be with you.* It came to him a little weak. He gathered all his courage and exposed himself completely: *Forever, I mean. Like marriage and stuff. Just like that, promise each other that we will always be together.*

He looked with fear in his heart at her pixie face to see how she reacted to his words.

*I want to too,* she said panicking. *But I don't know if it's allowed.*

*Oh, in a year and a half, I will be of age and can decide for myself.*

She looked at him. With a jolt he realised that it was not for him, but for her, that it could be impossible to live together.

*But... what about that? You're... he searched for the right words, ... independent?* He did not know how to express it better, though it was not at all what he meant. *Nobody is in charge of you, right?* he added. That better covered what he wanted to ask.

She tried to make something clear to him that she had no words for. Gradually, something glimmered in his understanding. They looked into each other's eyes continuously to not lose the other in this almost inaccessible realm.

Dia, as an elemental being, was bound by natural laws, so it came to him. She had a fixed place in a hierarchy of higher and lower spirit beings. That she now has her own way pushed through to become a localised person was actually no less than a kind of revolution. Dia was in the process of developing a free will.

Relieved by his understanding, she nestled into his arms, seeking protection to resist the pressure from her origins to return to the state she was in before. She had left paradise, as it were. She had entered the realm where choices must be made without fail. No longer did every decision, no matter how small, have to be taken for granted to be the right one, Michael understood.

He stroked her: she was warm and soft as a ripe peach in the sun. And just as firm. It was time to return to the here and now, he thought.

*It goes fast, doesn't it? You'll soon be too heavy to fly.*

That astral shiver again. The realisation that they were at a tipping point stood sharp and cool between them.

A feeling of being trapped reached him.

Her shape evaporated on his belly.

Some sadness remained sticking to him. Sluggishly he got up to take the path to the world of the people.

## Chapter 12

### Dia and the sisters

Everyone was asleep in the camp. The clearing at the river was misty and mysterious. There were soft sounds everywhere: murmuring of the river, splashing from the flushing pipe and chattering, chirping and singing of hundreds of birds who were greeting the new day.

Michael went to wash himself and hummed a song.

He was jumped on from behind and arms were wrapped around his neck. Diana of course. Surprised, he clasped her legs and splashed hooping and hollering with her through the puddles around her tree.



Dragonfly-like apparitions made dives around them. They became completely smeared with the floating forest litter. They laughed as they looked at each other; they looked like gnomes.

Diana let herself slide off Michael's back. With her face lifted to her tree she told something to the sparks shooting cloud of winged creatures that he could not understand.

Transparent wings suddenly sprouted from between her shoulder blades. He understood that they were the dryad's, which sought space to develop itself in its own forest.

*Dia, come and see*, he thought in awe. *Diana is getting wings.*

Diana hopped merrily around her tree, followed by the scurrying lights. Her wings flapped, but she remained confined to the earth.

Dia had accepted his invitation. Michael felt how she materialised on his back, just as Diana had done, with her legs folded around his hips and her arms around his neck.

*You're getting steadier, little one*, he thought, insanely happy about her return.

*Little one! I can make myself bigger than you*, she replied, aggrieved. Immediately she swelled until her legs touched the ground and her head disappeared in low-hanging branches. It did not frighten him; on the contrary, it was a great sensual feeling to be between her legs with his head in her lap.

Diana followed Dia's manifestation with wide eyes. At one point she started to laugh. 'It doesn't look very uplifting, Miche,' she grinned. 'You look just like a naked Barbie man-doll between the legs of a giant child.'

Dia apparently picked up the thought association, her laughter sounding in his head. She shrank again until she was as tall as Diana and remained sitting happily on the back of her human idol.

*Can people other than Diana see you now?* asked Michael. *I mean, I can feel you very clearly, you have weight. I could put you on a scales. Are you so compacted now that you can just be seen?*

*I don't know*, confessed Dia. *I am looking to you for the answer. Diana can see me because the Dryad of the Forest lives in her. I think that little human children could see me now, because they believe in us. But older children? Adults? I do not know.*

*Would you like to show yourself to my sisters?* he asked tense. He wanted the twins to share in the life-sized fairy tale.

Dia hesitated for a moment and then admitted: *Ah yes, they have changed quite a bit lately, since the car trip with Diana to the hospital. What a trip! I know all about driving a car since that.*

Michael asked innocently: *More than I do?*

*N... no, I don't think so*, she replied wary. *Everything I know I have from you.*

*Well, you don't know much about it then, because I can't actually drive yet*, he chuckled. *What I know, I learned from mowing the lawn.*

*Oh, you are mean!*

*And you're a real chick when you talk like that.*

Yes? She hugged him. It was a real embrace, it made him warm and soft.

'You are becoming more and more real, Dia,' he whispered, in his head and with his voice.

*I do my best, she said jauntily. Well, will something come of it? Wake the two, then I will surprise them.*

In one fluid movement, Michael stood up. It was a fantastic sensation to be light as a feather and supple as a lizard to go and stand.

*Are you doing that for me?* he asked on the way to the tents.

*Yes, can you feel it? I can feel how it feels for you. Therefore I can let you feel what it's like for me to move,* she said happily while she ruffled his hair.

He showed his love for her without words.

She melted and sent back the feeling as she experienced it. The result was that he was standing with stinging eyes in front of his sisters' tent, not knowing what he should do now.

He scraped the emotion from his throat and unzipped the tent. The two girls were fast asleep.

*I will wake them,* Dia announced. With her wings spread, she floated towards their heads, at the same time making herself smaller so as not to touch the canvas. It was as if he saw her disappear into the distance at an accelerated rate.

Standing between their heads she touched them in a tender gesture with her wings. They woke up just as he did that night, in perfect peace and immediately in full consciousness. The first thing they saw was a real elf who stroked them with her wings.

Moved, he turned around to look for Diana. But she was nowhere to be seen. Far away, he sensed a kind of astral bustle. She was wandering through her forest with the twittering flock of fairies around her. They were making so much noise that he was able to catch it where he stood.

From the edge of the forest, he watched his sisters following Dia like sleepwalkers to Diana's tree and crouching between the roots.

Aha, he thought. They also give their water to the tree.

Dia flew towards him in a long curve, nestled herself on his back and started twisting curls in his hair.

*You must have copied that from Diana.*

*Yes, it is nice. I am now so firm that I can grasp matter.*

*That goes fast!*

*That's because of you,* she said in love as she wrapped herself all the way around his head, with her folded wings like a tent covering them.

Wendy and Lucy started to giggle; they might have heard, at least understood.

'Michael is in love,' they sang softly with their most charming voices.

'To a second Diana,' said Lucy.

'No, she looks like her, but she's completely different.'

‘Sure, I can see that, silly. She is taller than Diana and she has different eyes and wings and breasts.’

Their usual contest of words was forgotten when they came to look at the elf speaking those last words. Shy as little girls they walked up to her. Very gently, they caressed her.

‘You are as soft as my cuddly toy,’ Wendy whispered.

‘Have you always been called Dia?’ asked Lucy timidly.

The elf shook her shiny hair with a smile.

Halfway through the movement she was gone.

Dia’s unexpected disappearance shocked them.

Wendy looked guiltily at Michael, had she done something wrong?

But he was looking around. Probably there was just someone coming that Dia did not want to show herself to.

## Chapter 13

### Fatal photo

Yvette had just made the picture of her life. If that elf at least had been real! Burning with curiosity she studied in the tent's privacy the screen of her camera to which she played back the picture. Hissing, she sucked her breath. It was really there! Transparent, yes, but the little creature on the boy's back was as clear as day. She enlarged the image to check the recording pixel by pixel. The excitement in her stomach grew with every detail she examined. The fairy was real as life and she had caught it, just a millisecond before it had become invisible!

Photographing Fairies! Seeing that film, set in the early 1900s of photography, had filled her with a deep desire for the existence of the fairy world. This picture was the proof: it was not fantasy: fairies really existed.

She had seen and had taken a picture of one for the first time in history!

At that moment, Diana came strolling, softly singing, from the edge of the forest. Yvette was too late to set her camera to video mode so she could only take one picture of the nude child.

Diana first embraced her tree, cautiously, because the bark was hard and sharp, then ran towards her brother and sisters. She jumped up high to be caught by Michael.

Yvette managed to capture the moment exactly at the right moment. The fair child, blurred by her speed, floated in the misty clearing like an elf right into the spread arms of Michael, flanked by the two girls in their nightgowns.

Yvette felt at that moment, despite her eagerness, kind of voyeur because she had secretly taken photos of children playing, some even naked. On the other hand, it was her profession. She felt it as fate, as if she had to do it, it just was her job. She knew: with these three photos she would achieve her fame as a photo-journalist for good and the children would become world famous.

Consumed by a desire for even more earth-shattering pictures she peered out through the tent flaps, her camera at the ready. But the children were just standing around talking to each other; no fairy was left to see.

Containing herself, she made herself listen to what they were discussing. She swapped her camera for the digital recorder, set the highly sensitive microphones to a narrow recording width for maximum distance.

She switched her role of voyeur for that of eavesdropper.

'Where did you just come from?' That was Lucy.

Diana replied lightheartedly: 'Oh, just walking in the forest. It is such a beautiful forest, Miche. Later on, we'll go for a walk together and I'll show you everything. The fallen trees are overgrown with moss and mushrooms and there are critters crawling everywhere and I found a stream!'

‘You mean you fell in,’ he laughed.

‘Yes! I was walking on a dead tree and I fell through it. It was completely rotten. Well, I splashed into the stream, and all the rubbish from that tree fell on me. All my sisters were there. I mean my little sisters, not Wendy and Lucy, who were still asleep back then. Sleeping heads.’

‘We saw a fairy too!’ the twins shouted in unison.

‘It woke us and then we had to pee by your tree to heal him...’ and we were just talking to her when she disappeared...’ ‘she looks just like you only she has very large wings and is madly in love with Michel!’ ‘All the time she is on his back, digging in his hair, just like you.’ ‘Sure to search for fleas!’

They all burst out laughing.

‘She is called Dia,’ Michael said proudly. ‘I gave her her name last night.’

Diana squeezed his waist. ‘I know, I was there,’ she said.

‘How can that be? I... um, we didn’t notice anything?’

She giggled. ‘I have seen it all. In my dream; when I dream I can be anywhere I want. I have also felt everything, just as my little sisters. The whole forest enjoyed it.’

‘Oh,’ said Michael embarrassed. ‘In your dream?’

‘Yes, when I dream I am with my little sisters. Only today I can be there when I am awake. For the first time.’ She hugged him firmly. ‘You were so beautiful,’ she whispered, her beaming face lifted towards him. ‘All light and then a whole ball of colours exploded, like fireworks.’

‘Oh, what do you know,’ Michael grumbled shyly.

Diana laughed gurgling. ‘Oh Miche, boys are so stupid. I know all about sex.’

‘Wendy, were you like this when you were seven?’ he asked uneasily. ‘Did you understand what she said?’

‘Yes,’ laughed Wendy. ‘When little girls talk about sex, well, it makes boys blush. Eh, Luus?’ They grinned mischievously and stuck out their tongues.

‘Well, that must be because we have become telepathic,’ he concluded, referring to the shared experience of the intimacies between him and Dia.

It was something to consider but not really important either. He longed at this moment intensely for Dia; that overshadowed all other feelings.

He got up to go to his sleeping place. The girls followed him; that was not the intention, but he could hardly send them back. On the forest meadow, he could go no further. The entrance to his Secret Wood Square had to remain hidden, even to his sisters. To get anything to do, he went to make a bed of ferns. The girls helped him without him having to ask. They sat next to each other on the springy deck.

He soon became terribly restless; he wanted to be alone with Dia. Even Diana was too much now. He stared blankly ahead, his arms rigidly around his knees. In this cramped position there was of course no way Dia would appear. He felt displaced, with a painful kind of homesickness.

‘Would you rather be alone?’ asked Wendy, who noticed. She saw she was right, and poked her sisters. ‘Come on, let’s go back.’

They meekly followed her. When Wendy spoke in that tone, it was better to do immediately what she said. As soon as the girls were gone Michael got up in relief and ran to his sleeping place. He laid down in the position with which he Dia tried to persuade to materialise between his hands.

But they remained empty.

Longing for his beloved, he dreamed away.

It was the best he could do under the circumstances. He was in a pristine piece of nature where the elemental realm was optimally accessible.

Soon he found himself in a dream world, which is reality for other beings.

Dia had fled.

It was told to him by dozens of voices in his head. The elemental world was in turmoil. It had happened before that nature spirits connected with a human being, but every time and again, it turned everything upside down.

They were not sending emotions out to him; they did not know them. They scrambled with advice, memories, comments and murmurs that the human did not understand at all. In his trance he remained who he was, a boy of sixteen who had just tasted love. He did understand that these were the same unintelligible voices that he had so often heard in indistinct dreams. Even recently, under Diana’s tree. After a while, he began to understand pieces of it, but much wiser it did not make him.

*Where is Dia?* he interrupted all voices in desperation. His body lay cramped, moving and eager to get going. *I must go to her! She is alone and I have to help her!*

It immediately became silent around him.

The elementals showed him without reservation where Dia was: by a stream where she was hiding in a willow tree.

Without getting in touch with Dia, he learned why she was so disturbed. It was as if, in the midst of the squabbling a number of serious voices took the lead to explain how the Deva of the Willow had fared.

*She has taken a material form in order to be equal and loved by Michael,* was passed on to him.

So far, this was nothing new for Michael. He had just shared this realisation with Dia.

*What happened?* he wanted to know.

*The Deva of the Willow did not anticipate the consequences: it has placed her in the world that is visible to human eyes, where she is unintentionally observed. Too late, she realised that of her existence a material print is made. She understands nothing of the technique, but she knows what its meaning is. You people call it a photograph.*

*A photo?!*

*Yes, the woman who has been staying with you since yesterday has the light image of the Deva of the Willow recorded in electrical codes. She therefore has become manifest in the*

*matter, beyond her tree, beyond you and what is especially important: beyond her control.*

*But how? I do not understand.*

*She felt she was put alone in the world because of that photo. Not a human being, but not a pure spirit being either. That terrified her. For to a material form belongs also the fear of being separated. That is for the residents of our elemental realm completely unknown, because our very existence expresses being interconnected.*

*What can I do?*

This question remained unanswered.

Angry and frightened, he let it be known that he was going to find her and that no one was going to try to stop him.

The elementals of the forest and the field willingly allowed Michael to use their energy fields to reach Dia.

It happened in a timeless flash.

For both of them it was a shock of recognition.

She was not yet ready to return to him. His dream consciousness understood that, but his feeling body was submerged in sadness.

Reluctantly, he returned from the depths of the forest consciousness back into his body. Confused, he lay listening to the busy forest, full of sounds of birds, rustling branches and the singing of the tall treetops in the wind.

The forest gradually came back into Michael's consciousness.

His fierce desire for Dia had temporarily outstripped it, but now he could be open to impressions from outside again.

## Chapter 14

# Invasion

Reluctantly, he sauntered back to his sisters' camp.

Irina, Dinja and the twins were busy around the gas burner with tea and bread.

'Where is Yvette?' he asked stiffly, angry with the French journalist, who had chased his elf on the run.

'To the village,' Irina replied cheerfully.

'Gosh, I thought you had gone too,' he blurted out gruffly. Her good mood upset him considerably. Because Yvette was not present, he had nowhere to vent his anger.

'Oh,' Irina blushed. 'I camp in the scout camp, but I am in the village a lot.'

With Janos, Michael thought bitterly. Or at least she follows him all the time.

Despite his resentment, he enjoyed his breakfast.

Their cosy get-together was interrupted by a girl who came running from the scouting camp. Panting, she reported in hesitant German: 'I was picking flowers with a friend by the brook. There are a lot of... scaring people coming this way.'

'I'll go,' growled Michael, piqued that their peace was being disturbed.

The atmosphere got charged, as if for a severe thunderstorm. Somehow Michael's anger was the cause of it.

'I'll go with you,' Irina declared determinedly. 'This is something we have to do the two of us.'

'As you wish,' he muttered crossly. Fortunately, Irina didn't hear him. 'You two stay in the camp,' he ordered Wendy and Lucy when they also wanted to get up. 'Hide in the tent with Diana. Dinja, would you look after them a bit?'

Dinja nodded; Michael sensed that she was looking at him sadly; he turned his gaze away. The twins looked at him timidly, but Michael looked as if the answer to his question did not interest him anymore. They obediently started to clean up the breakfast stuff.

Michael, with Irina following in his footsteps, ran along game trails in the direction in which the scout had pointed.

His frustration became gradually less because of the fast running. They were able to bridge the whole distance to the edge of the forest without stopping; it seemed as if the forest itself had shown them the way and given them wings with inexhaustible stamina.

From the edge of the forest, they caught sight of a scattered group of people that came their way across a sloping meadow.

'It's already starting,' he panted. 'There will be more, for sure, after last night's television broadcast.'

'I have come up with a plan on the way,' said Irina. She stepped out. 'Come

on.' She grabbed his hand and pulled him from the shelter of the trees. Michael looked at her determined profile. Irina was now a completely different girl than when she was around Janos.

'Come,' she said hurriedly, 'we will lead them through the woods to an open space that looks like the camp. There we will show a glimpse of Diana. Miche, will you ask her later if she wants to help?'

She unfolded her plan as they walked hand in hand towards the group, where the first photo- and video cameras were already being levied.



'Good morning,' they said in unison. 'We are here to guide you to Diana, the dry-ad girl.' To his amazement, the people followed them like a flock of docile sheep. Irina and Michael were heading for the forest edge, just north of where they had come out. Meanwhile, they took turns answering the barrage of questions.

At the edge of the forest, Irina stopped and raised her arms to silence the mob.

'Folks, if you would kindly restrain your impatience for a moment? Michael, the brother of Diana, will tell you the fairy tale of the wood-elves before we go into the forest.'

A frenzy of excitement erupted. In the confusion, some hunks walked ahead, averse to fairy tales and only horny for little elfin girls.

'You're going the wrong way,' Irina called after them.

'There is a dangerous swamp, completely filled with toxic water from the factory!' she made up on the spot. It helped; unwillingly the men came back.

Michael gestured for the people to sit down. Immediately candy and bags of chips, bottles and cans were brought out.

An exciting story rolled from his mouth. Thanks to his interaction with nature beings, his words were loaded with a multitude of hidden meanings. He proved to be a master of the art of deceiving, concealing and looking like something else, a skill that elemental beings had developed in their eon long dealings with humans. Every listener heard what he or she wanted to hear the most.

They were instantly under his spell. Beneath his aversion, Michael had a kind of compassion for these people, who hardly had anything for themselves, who only could only react to their feelings of lust and ill-feeling, advertising incentives and television images. Their thirst for sensation served to fill the emptiness of their existence, an emptiness that can never be filled as long as they could not be themselves, imprisoned as they were in consumer addiction.

His compassion gave extra depth to the story he was telling. It was broadly the same as the one he had recited earlier, only he left out many things that these people would not interest. He held their attention with quick turns in the story when their eyes began to wander restlessly. Due to the eternal zapping in front of the TV, their concentration was exhausted after a few dozen seconds.

Michael sensed they became restless to get on the way again: bags were being packed; so he added an ending to his story. First, he made them clean up all traces of the picnic, because rubbish was scattered carelessly.

They obeyed without restraint, still under the spell of the atmosphere that he had managed to weave.

The group walked into the forest in a much less chaotic manner. There had been formed pairs; apparently they were looking for a buddy to share the soft feeling that had been evoked by the narration.

Michael left the group unnoticed. At top speed he sprinted along secret paths to the camp, where he panting and blowing explained Irina's plan. Diana was immediately willing to participate; she even knew a suitable place nearby. The twins would go with her and hide to keep watch; Dinja stayed to guard the camp.

Michael ran back and walked next to Irina as if he never had left.

The walk through the silent forest with its countless singing birds had affected the visitors; they even started to speak more softly.

Michael and Irina led the way, pointing at thick trees which they immediately gave a name, or mushrooms where a gnome could just have jumped off. Moving light spots on leaves and trunks could be fairies; dark trees with twisted branches could grab hold of you. It went on like that until they unexpectedly arrived at the river.

Michael warned: 'Be careful.' A few people had sat down to take off their shoes to take a bath. 'The water is still poisonous. Look, all the trees along the boards are dead!

A little lost, the people stood staring into the water, as if it should be flowing

green and smoking through the forest, like poison in cartoons always looks.

Irina whispered that the people should be very quiet and hold their cameras ready and not get too close, otherwise all chance of seeing fairies today was gone.

It worked. These people reacted just like children when you approached them alike. The whole group silently tiptoed behind the two.

When they saw through dense foliage a small shape lying under a huge tree, they were moved to tears. The women, that is. The men stood filming or turned their gaze if they did not have a camera.

‘Is there no one with her?’ whispered a few women, who were upset that the child was lying there all-alone. ‘Who cares for her?’ ‘Isn’t she cold like this?’ and other such practical questions mothers ask.

‘Please don’t smoke and please don’t drink alcohol. The elves are allergic to tobacco smoke and the smell of alcohol. If you want a chance to see fairies, it is best to smell of flowers. Oh, and do not use a torch or flash. Then they remain invisible for days.’

‘Now be quiet, we’re going to call them.’

The group became silent.

To Michael’s mental request to the dryads of the forest for a few fairies to fly by, came no response.

Michael persisted, he explained in simple feelings and images that they would win these people hearts forever when they had once seen fairies.

‘Shh,’ whispered Irina, impressed herself. She pointed: ‘Over there! There are two! They are watching us!’

Immediately all cameras were focused: two dragonfly-like apparitions were flying around Diana. The little lights allowed to be filmed briefly and then disappeared. Even the most boorish loafers in the company were perplexed. It had not been dragonflies they had seen. Dragonflies are not half a yard long. They all had clearly seen that it could not be a trick.

It took little effort to get the introverted group back through the forest, after which they headed in the direction of the village.

‘That was a close call,’ Michael panted. ‘But it went great. Good plan, Irina! We can do that more often.’

Cheered up, they returned to the camp.

Halfway, Michael indicated he wanted to be alone for a while. Deep in thought, Michael wandered through the forest, which he considered more and more as his home. Eventually, his feet carried him back to the camp by themselves.

Only his sisters were there.

‘Where have Irina and Dinja gone?’

‘Oh, Dinja has been away for a while, to the village,’ Lucy replied. ‘Irina has gone to see her.’

They went playing a game, but he was not focused on it.

He sat down against a tree in the sun and closed his eyes to dream of Dia.

## Chapter 15

# Kickback

Michael dreamed. A simple dream, of light and air, earth and water that flowed and clumped together. Everything was green and gold and brown and sky blue. He walked through a dense forest with sunlit golden openings. In a dark green cave, he encountered a frightened elf. She had called him; at least it seemed so, although he had heard nothing but birds and wind in high crests.

She was desperate, waves of panic were emanating from her.

*What is the matter? Why did you leave?*

Was he still dreaming?

Her distress unexpectedly seized upon his own, deeply ingrained fear of being abandoned by the one whom he loved most. Defenceless, he was overwhelmed by a demon of fear. As desperate as she was, he shook her to and fro.

‘You must not leave!’ he shouted. ‘Never, do you hear me, never!’

*I can't leave at all!* She struggled furiously to escape from his grasp. She became slippery like an eel, slipped out of his hands and disappeared like a bursting soap bubble.

Rejected, he stood in the silence of the green cave. She had done it again. She had left, without him. She had simply left him behind.

With a distressed cry, he shot up. The dream was so real!

Desperate grief stabbed like a spear through his chest, made him gasping for breath, he couldn't get any air into his lungs.

‘What is the matter, Miche?’ his sisters shouted in dismay. ‘Did you have a bad dream?’ He shook his head to indicate he could not talk.

Wendy tried in vain to comfort Diana.

‘Dia left and she is so scared,’ she sobbed. ‘Miche had just found her and then they had a fight and now she is gone!’

With a jolt, Michael stood up and looked around in a daze. ‘I must find her!’

It was as if the clearing guiltily held itself aloof; the river murmured a little to itself, Diana's beech stood busy drinking in the sunlight, birds twittered in the high treetops. Everything said: she is not here, we don't know either.

‘I need to find Dia! She's lost, she...’ He was almost suffocating from emotion.

Lucy and Wendy looked at him with big eyes. The elf was lost? What had happened? Diana was still crying. The child had understood better than anyone, after all she was herself half a dryad.

Michael wanted to run away into the forest; startled, the twins clung to his legs in unison so that he almost fell.

‘Don't go!’ they begged. ‘Don't leave us here!’

The double appeal to his protection tore him apart. Feral his eyes shot around.

Where...?

The heart-rending sobs of his little sister called him back.

The elf Dia was gone, without a trace. Diana lay at his feet and needed him here, now more than ever.

Slowly the tension subsided from his body, just as slowly did the hope to find his fairy again to comfort her. As if to find comfort for himself, he took Diana in his arms. As he used to do with her, he mechanically kissed the tears out of the corners of her eyes. This time, too, the miracle cure worked.

Still snickering, the child curled up against him. A deep silence descended upon the sad little group at the foot of the forest giant.

Not knowing what else to do, he carefully laid Diana on the ground. Sadly, he lay down beside her; his hands digging frenetically in the layer of litter. The earth graciously received his tears, but did not answer his pleas.

‘Miche, Janos is coming,’ whispered Lucy.

Unwillingly, he lifted his eyes to the man who was walking the path to them. He sat up straight; maybe he could... ‘Janos...’ he wanted to complain to him.

‘Not now, Michael.’ Janos looked as if he had no good news. He sat on the ground next to them. ‘I have a message for you. For all of you actually.’ He was more serious than they had ever seen him. They listened anxiously.

‘We have been doing a tremendous job of venturing over the past few days,’ Janos began. ‘The occupation and the closure of the factory, the ditch which we dug to flush the soil, the publicity... It has all been achieved through the efforts of many people. We have been able to act with lightning speed; everything has been really good. The worst need has been alleviated, the threat of the poisoned water has been averted for the time being, Diana’s tree has been saved.’

‘But it won’t stay that way,’ Lucy added gloomily.

Michael had hardly heard what Janos said. Full of unrest he stood from where he had sat down, scanning around him in a hurry.

‘No, things won’t stay the same anyway, but I foresee more countermeasures by the owners of the factory. I think that we have to take into account that the police will come to throw out. Or worse.’

‘Do you... do you see that in the future?’

He nodded.

‘That’s not so nice. But there’s more, isn’t there?’ Lucy got chance to show how developed her intellect was, now that her brother was completely seized by his dryad, or rather, her disappearance. Janos nodded again, surprised that the young girl responded so adequately, while the boy to whom he was actually speaking was not at home. Strangely enough, neither of them noticed that one spoke German and the other Dutch.

‘Yes, but I can’t talk about that now.’ He shook his head, as if to shake off visions he did not want to see. ‘You know, predictive images are sometimes very difficult to interpret. As a psychic, you see the outcome of the current relation-

ships. That outcome actually already exists, at least on the ethereal plane. As a collective form of thought?

He sighed, it was not easy to remain optimistic.

'However, man has a free will. With it, he can alter an already "formed future", so to speak, by changing something within, in others or to change the circumstances. That happens often enough,' he finished, more hopeful than he felt. He stood up and stretched. 'Miche, I think it is necessary that we go to the village to discuss what to do next. I am afraid we will get into trouble for having moved the stream, because this turns out to be a protected national park. Without a permit you are even not allowed to pick a flower here. Michael?'

'Yes... eh, what did you say?' He was sweating with agitation. He had not listened. The twins looked at each other; a dilemma: should they tell the man about Dia? Better not, they saw in each other's eyes. Miche had to do that himself.

'I said we are needed in the village, Michael,' repeated Janos impatiently. However clairvoyant he might be otherwise, at this moment he had certainly no view of how upside down the boy was by the disappearance of his elf, who was almost as close to him as his own soul.

'Come on, the forest will be here later too,' he admonished, made insensitive by all the intrigues and the battle that was going on a little further. 'You must come with me now. Your presence is required at the discussions.'

Reluctantly, Michael came to stand beside him. 'What should I do?' he began recalcitrant. 'My...' He could not get it said he had lost his beloved.

'You? You must tell of what is happening here. You have to show yourself. You are Diana's representative, her brother, her protector. And of the forest too.' He suppressed a rising annoyance. 'Don't give up now, young man.'

The appeal to his sense of responsibility weighed so heavily that Michael had no choice but to give in. Very much against his will he turned his attention to the message that Janos had come to bring. What had he said? In a cry for help, he looked at Lucy, who had listened best, he thought.

'Janos said that we should prepare for counter-moves from the owners of the factory,' she helped him. 'What we are doing here is not permitted. They could catch us for that.'

'Sure, but how is it possible that these perverts have a licence to burn chemical waste?'

'Cronyism, I guess,' Janos replied. 'They will not call it waste, but raw material or fuel, and work with false papers.'

'Yes, but a permit to discharge such filth on a river that flows straight into a national park, that's mad.'

'Bureaucracy is not always logical, Miche, seldom just, and susceptible to bribery.'

'Okay, but then what can we do?'

'Stop your yammering. Put on your best clothes and go with me. I think it's

better that the girls stay with Diana for the time being. Dinja and Irina are already in the village. I have told the scouts no one should pass beyond their camp,' Janos confided. 'We have to keep the forest protected. Hey kid, don't look so glum. We have won the first battle, now it is about to stay one step ahead of our opponents every time. Do not forget that we are about to have a whole army of pressmen on our hand.'

Michael sought out clean clothes from his luggage, washed himself by the gurgling pipe and got dressed. Still damp in his sticky clothes, he staggered behind Janos along the muddy path, past the neatly tidied-up scouts' camp, on the way to the village.

## Chapter 16

### At risk

There were rows of cars and camper vans parked around the café.

Everyone wanted to get to the village where miracles happened.

The boarding house had been turned into an action centre, packed with activists and press people. The entry of Janos, with Michael in his wake, seemed to set off an explosion. Everyone thronged around the pair, cackling and shouting. Michael didn't understand a syllable, smiled palely in lenses when his name was called and was promptly blinded by flashes. He was rescued by Mrs. Jellisek who, roaring like a sergeant, dismounted the pair.

'In half an hour there will be a press conference!' she shouted while dragging them upstairs.

Their old room had in the meantime been completely transformed into a headquarters, with a mishmash of chairs and tables, stacked with papers, faxes and computers. In the middle of the dining table, to Michael's surprise, Yvette was sitting, her folded legs tucked under, reading a newspaper. However, he got no opportunity to speak to her. Circling around them Mrs. Jellisek provided them with a cup of tea.

'You have become famous, men,' she laughed. 'You are called the saviours of the primeval forest.'

'By whom?' asked Michael, who could not follow it quite.

'The television broadcasted everything,' she rattled on, 'because there was just cancelled a football match due to flooding of the football pitch. Well, the phone is ringing off the hook.'

Janos asked tense: 'What is the latest news from the opponents? I've had some prospects that weren't promising much good. Do not underestimate them, I pray you, they have friends on high posts.'

She looked at him mischievously. 'Me too,' was all she said.

'What are our next steps?'

'A few points are important. Stefan needs three more days to analyse the samples of the chemicals in the factory and of the silt from the river, maybe four. That is how long we have to hold out here. Second: there was a police car this morning to check. They did not speak to anyone and left again. Three: We expect today or tomorrow a police order to evacuate the factory. We are going to appeal against it. We've done this this before. Four: as long as the press is here in these numbers, we do not expect violence on the part of the opponents. But when the press is gone, you can bet your bottom dollar that they will come again with an armed gang, this time with firearms and bigger than the first time. Those people stand for nothing.'

Michael was startled by her last words. 'Firearms! Gangsters?!'

'It is important to keep the press here for as long as possible by providing new facts,' she continued. She looked at Michael, who she had seen startle when she mentioned the possibility of violence.

'You play an important role in this, my boy,' she interrupted. 'Five: there will pass no more freight trains for a while, especially after the television broadcast last night. The railways refuse to be held responsible for the supply of chemical waste that could end up in the environment.' She looked triumphant.

'Six: The television pictures have been transmitted through Eurovision and are tonight in at least six countries on the tube. Seven: We have the first offers for cooperation from sister organisations in Europe. Eight: ...'

'Ho, wait a minute, I'm missing something,' Janos interrupted her. 'How are the connections with the government? In particular, the ministries of Home Affairs, Economic Affairs and Spatial Planning are important, but so is the municipality of Jablun. The forest is a national park, it falls directly under... which ministry actually? We do not have a permit to camp there, let alone to divert a stream. We have to find a way; otherwise they'll chase us out and put the stream back. Then everything was for nothing.'

Michael knew that it all was important, but he could not keep his attention. He left Janos and Mrs. Jellisek at their discourse and stared gloomily out of the window. It was raining again. He longed for his sisters and above all for Dia.

He startled when Yvette pulled his sleeve. He tried to look away, but she didn't notice. Triumphantly she shoved him a few papers in his hand.

A lump shot into his throat at the sight of the printed photographs. They had apparently been taken that morning, while he thought that Yvette was still asleep. Dia's photo proved otherwise.

Tears burned behind his eyes. Where was she? Why was she so shocked by that photo? He did not want others to see him cry and hid his grief.

'Nice photos, Yvette,' he said barely intelligible and wanted to hand them back.

Yvette smiled. 'Keep them. They will be published in Paris Match next week and in Life. After that, they are sold a few more times. Millions of people will be able to read your story and the pictures will be the proof that fairies really exist!'

Michael almost choked in his contradictory feelings. Their pictures would appear in world-renowned magazines. That was beautiful. But they were sold! They were just sold! Dia and Diana and the twins and himself had become merchandise!

'I don't want you to sell them,' he said. 'I forbid it!' he added fiercely.

Yvette looked at him dumbfounded.

After a while, she said hesitantly: 'But don't you want all the publicity you can get?' She tapped on the photographs, which Michael still held in his hand. 'With that you will be world famous. Really, I don't fool you.'

Michael looked at her suspiciously, but he did not dare to say that Yvette herself would probably benefit the most from it.

She looked at him closely. 'What is wrong with you?' she asked.

He lowered his eyes. For some reason, he could not tell her that Dia had disappeared. It seemed as if his tongue was paralysed every time he wanted to tell someone about her.

'Listen to me, Michèl,' said Yvette in an urgent tone, 'why do you think that I sell your photos for a lot of money? That money is yours, dear boy, for the forest, to protect the fairies!'

'For us?' he stammered.

Yvette grabbed him by the shoulders and looked at him penetratingly. 'Michèl, maybe you don't like everything that people do, with you or without you, but we are all doing our utmost best to make and keep this forest healthy. For here fairies and humans come together.' She looked at him with sudden tears in her eyes. 'Because of you, my dear boy, because of you,' she ended hoarse with emotion. Michael was silenced. Yes, if you look at it that way...

His face tightened. 'Aren't hordes of people coming to the forest to watch fairies? If that happens, it will be over soon.'

He was closer to tears than to laughter at the idea that he would never see fairies again, let alone that Dia would want to come back. He looked at Yvette. 'That must not happen. You do not have to mention the place?' he said in a pleading tone.

'Dear boy, since last night half of Europe knows exactly where the forest lies where fairies can be seen. You can't stop that. On the contrary, I think you have to go with the flow, just to make sure that everything is done properly. I think General Jellisek can manage that very well.'

'General? She looks more like a school director,' Michael grumbled frustrated. But she had managed to extricate him from his mood of victim hood.

'She is really a general, out of service, retired that is.' She squeezed his arm. 'Don't worry, Michèl, everyone is on your hand, we will all make sure that the forest is not be stepped on by hordes of curious tourists who want to see everything and spoil it as soon as they tread it.'

He was only half confident. Let's see what Janos would make of it. The best answers often came from him, even though you understood not always it right away, he thought. Janos, however, was orating in Slovakian.

Michael got nervous among all those busy people. In an unguarded moment, he slipped away to the toilet. He closed the door and called on Dia to show herself. There was no reaction. He didn't expect that either, but he kept trying. He flushed the toilet and strolled back to the headquarters.

It turned out to be time for the announced press conference. Halfway the stairs they stopped: the entire ground floor was packed with people. It was stuffy, it smelt of cigarette smoke, beer and bodies.

The press conference started chaotically. General Jellisek, as he now called her to himself, however, admonished the crowd of journalists as a troop of pupils to silence, so that she could be understood.

Michael listened with half an ear, for she said the same things as before.

At one point, she gave the floor to Janos, who emphasised the importance that no one entered the forest uninvited.

‘Consider the forest as if it were in the Intensive Care Unit, at the heart and lung monitoring,’ he said gravely. ‘The state of the forest is quite critical. However, to give you all the opportunity to sample the atmosphere and take recordings if necessary, we will invite you in small groups during the next few days for an excursion. I can guarantee you that the better you can surrender to the peace and tranquillity that reigns in the forest, you will have all the more opportunity to perceive fairies. To help you with that, I will be available for a short preparatory training. You can sign up soon. Mrs. Jellisek’s staff will draw up a list of when to visit.’

He gestured that he was not finished yet and continued: ‘I also have a question to you. We ask you to pass all information from the outside world to Mrs. Jellisek’s staff. They will prepare regular bulletins. It is crucial for the action that we know in good time what counter-moves we can expect from the owners of the factory and the people who support them. The real battle has not yet begun!

## Chapter 17

# Jammed

There was silence after these ominous words.

Janos beckoned to Michael that he was expected to say something. He shoved him in front of the forest of microphones and hissed: ‘Tell how Diana reacted.’

Michael, for the first time without the guidance of his all-wise dryad, barely reacted.

Almost indifferent to what was happening he looked over the crowd. Before his mind’s eye he saw how Diana had come skipping out of the forest. He smiled, the murmuring fell silent; no one wanted to miss a word of the legendary brother of the dryad girl.

In a soft voice he told how they had brought the clean water to Diana’s tree, with the effect that this morning his sister had been able to dance through the forest and her relatives from the forest could have greeted her. His storytelling created images in the minds of the listeners, evoked feelings, sometimes brought secret desires to the surface.

Yvette had a sharp instinct for timing. At the right moment she showed the photo she had taken of the child. A deafening hubbub erupted: everyone wanted a print or go to the forest to take pictures themselves.

Only when things calmed down could she make herself understood with the notice that the photos would be available for sale as soon as the latest issue of Paris Match was out.

It gave Michael a nasty feeling. He had trusted her; now it looked like she was trying to steal the show for her own gain. He had to talk to Janos about it; maybe he was too suspicious. She was probably just doing her best to give them good publicity. He sat down wearily on the stairs. He had a splitting headache, and to his discomfort, he felt nauseous as well. Janos saw him getting pale and took him upstairs to give him a short energy treatment.

‘It’s like as if all these people are grabbing at me,’ Michael sighed. ‘I want to tell them and show them everything, but they don’t give me the time. I hardly have a chance. They want to pull it out of me like that.’

‘I’ll have to work on your shielding for once,’ murmured Janos, his thoughts clearly elsewhere.

As soon as Michael had fallen asleep, he went downstairs again to do his part in the battle for the forest.

Michael woke up when Stefan sat down on the bed and looked at him with a smile.

‘Hey Stefan, are you back?’ he stammered.

‘Yes, just now, by train. The analyses aren’t finished yet, but it looks pretty bad.’

‘Stefan,’ Michael confessed, ‘I am scared.’

‘What for, Miche?’

‘That the factory will start again and they will continue to discharge poison.’

It made Michael’s teeth chattering when he expressed his greatest fear.

‘I know, Miche. In order to challenge their licences we have go to the Supreme Court. That can take up to two years in this country. We will have to think of something else.’

‘What if the police come out and chase us away?’

‘I think we can expect something like that. They will certainly go to the judges trying to drive us out and restart the factory’.

‘What can we do?’

‘Well, we can put an auto sampler in the river to analyse the water daily and when they discharge anything that is not conform their license, we can close the place down.’

‘That easy? I don’t believe it will be so easy to bust them. They will be putting a hose past your sampler, or they drive a tanker truck downstream. No, Stefan, I know perhaps more ways in which they can fool your sampler.’

‘Hm, good that you say so. We will add another one that we keep secret.’

‘I’m sure you can’t use that as evidence then,’ Michael rebutted.

‘No, you could be right about that. How do you know all that?’

‘From my father; he is a water purification engineer.’

‘Such a person would be very useful here,’ Stefan muttered. ‘We have a desperate shortage of them.’

‘I know. That’s why he’s working on the dam project.’

‘All the way over there? And you can’t reach him? Yes, you told me. Shall I give it a try? Someone from the Service I think they will be willing to connect to your father.’

‘I’d be happy, if you would.’

Michael could cry, so much relief it gave him. ‘Thank you,’ he whispered. Stefan understood the thank you was for everything; including that he had noticed Michael’s misunderstood grief. Just as he was getting up to leave, Michael sat up straight. With a look of excitement in his eyes, he asked: ‘Can we break the factory down? I mean, in such a way that for the time being they can’t burn stuff?’

‘That has already happened, Miche. We have dismantled the burner. But it is such a simple installation that they can put it back on after a day.’

‘How about if we blow up the factory?’

Stefan laughed out loud. ‘You’re quite something, too, you know. But I would not do it. There is so much poison in the building the whole environment will be ruined by it.’

‘Yes, if you let it fly all the way into the sky. We can still topple a few pillars or walls so that the roof comes down.’

‘That too is dangerous. I do not know whether it will do our cause any good.’

Michael thought hard. There had to be something clever.

‘Is there any flammable or explosive stuff?’ he asked.

‘In the waste? Most of it is heavy metal-containing filter cake from galvanic companies, there is bound to be waste from pesticide factories, especially polluted talcum powder, which is also non-flammable...’ Stefan went into thoughts after what he had seen. ‘The annoying thing is that most of the stuff is untraceable,’ he said finally. ‘We have to take stock of it. I have sampled barrels with an extremely nasty solvent, but that’s not flammable either I believe. Probably it is carbon tetrachloride. Hm, I am starting to get an idea of where you want to go. Their licence states that they are only allowed to process non-explosive waste, because the plant is too close to buildings and there are no safety features at all.’

‘Pity. If we could just pop a barrel of petrol or something to let the whole thing fall apart, then we would have finished in one swoop.’

‘I will think about it, Miche. But I think it is best to follow a different track.’ He pressed his hand. ‘See you later.’ With an encouraging grin, he rushed downstairs, where his name had already been called a few times.

Michael remained sad, sitting on the bed where he had just recently been sleeping in with his three sisters.

Something pulled at him. He had to go to the forest. Something or someone called him. Confused, he stood up. At the window, he stared blankly out for a while.

The telepathic message repeated itself, but remained unintelligible. He scribbled on a piece of paper that he had returned to their camp. Through the window of the bathroom and a roof under it, he climbed down to the back yard. He carefully made his way along narrow paths and cart tracks, through an orchard and across a bumpy bare meadow with a suspicious horse.

It seemed better to him not to be noticed at all. He went around the scouting camp in a wide curve. The diversions led through freshly mown meadows and a little way along a narrow stream. Tired and dejected, he sat down there for a short rest. The spot was surrounded by dense thickets of willows, dog roses and brambles and hidden from unwelcome eyes. In the middle of field flowers along the fast-flowing water, he laid down on his back, holding his trembling hands out invitingly to Dia, but nothing appeared.

His head was pounding with incomprehensible noise. He looked reproached around him. He had lost all control. Something urgent gnawed at him at the edge of his consciousness. He was so caught up in his own misery that nothing could reach him. His legs were like rubber when he finally stood up.

Only when he arrived under the outer branches of the forest it went straight to his brain: *Trouble! Trouble!*

In panic he turned around: where?! what?!

*Urgent! Come! Come at once! Come quickly! Not good, not good!* many voices cried together. *Evil intruders!*

Adrenaline shot into his blood, he started to run on the peaks of his power. He was only vaguely aware of the direction; he was all moving legs and searching eyes. He thundered forward into a stream hidden under ferns, bramble vines scratched him. He hardly felt it. Through dense bushes and high ferns he plodded ahead until he was downstream of their bivouac at the small river. Panting like a steam locomotive he arrived at their camp.

At a glance, he took in the situation.

At her tree, Diana lay in the arms of Dinja, the twins crawled stiffly against her. In front of them stood as many as ten reporters who were shouting and gesticulating at Irina, who was desperately trying to stop them. A few even splashed through the deep pools to get along her unprotected side at Diana.

‘Michael!’ cried Irina. The fear in her voice cut through him. ‘Diana is in a bad way! It looks like she is suffocating!’

## Saving Diana's life

Michael sprinted around the group of reporters. Panting he knelt down by the still body. For a moment he thought she was dead. He managed to control his panic, closed himself from the noisy mess behind him and turned his attention to Diana. Dia was not in his mind now; he could not dispose of her emotionless efficiency inherent to elemental intelligences. He had to do it all by himself this time.

With the courage of despair, he tried to attune to Diana. But it seemed he was plodding through thick sludge, whether there was something strange lying there, not his sister, but a dead seal or something.

He shook his head; this was too crazy. He knew his little sister; he had been close to her all her life. He knew what she was like. All the way now that he knew about her duplicity and that her double was of the same sort as Dia.

He closed his eyes, reached out with his mind to Diana's and slipped effortlessly into the ethereal sphere. Before he was even aware he had left his body, he was attacked: beats of unbridled hatred and horror whipped his bodiless mind. He was so shocked that his body choked.

His astral body shot back as if pulled by a elastic ribbon into his body, but he remained connected to the ethereal sphere. Coughing he mowed with his arms in order to get rid of vampire-like fluttering creatures, that were swarming around him like bloodthirsty stinging flies. They flew up from a black mass that crept over Diana. They looked like flying biters from computer games, only they were much more vicious.

Now his gaming experience on the computer came into play. Almost automatically he shot them out of the sky with arrows of white fire. He would save his sister! It only took a moment for them to disappear.

The astral monsters had left a dirty, sticky web around Diana's ethereal body. He scorched it with his love for Diana; it was so fervent that nothing could harm him. His aura swelled into a protective field around the two of them.

Diana's self had withdrawn completely into her inner core. He found her there, paralysed by fear. Soothingly he stroked her astral body, but she did not react. He understood that the panic of the dryad crippled everything. The human child Diana had no defence against it and fought in vain to be released.

Michael swam up, back to his brain and searched frantically to possible causes.

Not a second too soon: an intrusive reporter waved at that moment a microphone in front of his face and hooted all kinds of questions in his ear.

Without letting his guard down, he called in German over his shoulder: 'Gentlemen, I now need all my attention for my sister. Would you please take this man

away and be quiet for a moment so I can listen to her breathing? I will give a press conference in a few minutes.'

He had remembered that well. The magic word press conference helped as he had hoped. The bystanders pulled the man out of his neck and retreated a little.

He listened, with his ear on Diana's chest. There was nothing out of the ordinary, only the rustling of little gusts of air that flowed in and out, with deeper, more rapid, an irregular heartbeat. Her suffocation was purely psychological, he suspected, but if Dinja could not get a grip on it, what could he do?

Diana, what's the matter? he repeated continuously in his mind, as if a litany, like a mantra; Diana, what's the matter? Somehow, the impersonal omniscience of the elemental being in Diana was alerted. A feeling came into him that his brain tried in vain to put into words.

He followed the signals to their source and found an interlocked curled consciousness that was not Diana.

*You are safe now, he said, the monsters have been defeated.*

*...suffocating, suffocating, dead...*

*You are safe! he repeated. You don't have to suffocate any more.*

*...muggy...*

*Answer! he commanded. Do you know the cause of your distress?*

*My... tree... chokes... was written falteringly in his mind.*

*How can that be? Isn't there enough air?*

*Not... the roots... rot...*

*The roots? Air?*

*Roots, too... need air.*

At least the imprisoned dryad was communicating.

*How can that happen all of a sudden?*

*Too much water.*

He got it! Like a jack-in-the-box, he jumped up. 'Help me!' he shouted. 'The tree is drowning!'

He ran to the pipe from which the rinse water was flowing in a steady stream. With fierce force he tore it free. In a few minutes he had removed enough pipes to allow the water to flow far from the tree into the river. The fear and the necessity gave him giant powers.

'Help me,' he panted, calmer. 'All the water here must go. The tree roots are suffocating. There are shovels at the tent.'

Two sound men handed their recorders to their cameraman and came to the rescue.

'Air,' Michael moaned as he threw off handfuls of soil. 'We have to give the roots air. The tree is suffocating because the water has pushed out all the air. But do try not to damage roots.'

They carefully dug deeper among the roots. The hole immediately filled with water that the girls began to pour out with cups. The holes became trenches for

better access, deeper and deeper. With his head in a hole, Michael dug with his hands between the roots until his fingers were bleeding. The soil stank of sewage. He knew from his father that this indicated anaerobes: oxygen-less decay.



‘If we dig a deep trench here, the groundwater will be able to flow away more easily,’ suggested one of the sound engineers. The three of them dug a trench between the tree and the river. The girls threw buckets of dirty water into the river.

‘Miche!’ cried Dinja in a loud voice. ‘Miche! Over here! You must help me with Diana!’ Michael ran back and almost fell over Diana.

‘She’s not breathing at all!’

He looked at her in dismay. Was he too late? Dinja looked at him hopelessly.

‘I can’t do anything about it anymore,’ she whispered defeated.

She looked down at the little white face.

‘She goes... she’s... she’s not going to... die?’ he stammered.

The world fell silent.

Paralysed with dismay, his sisters and the reporters stood around the dying girl.

‘No!’ he shouted. He would not let his sister die so easily! He dragged the motionless body out of Dinja’s arms, took Diana’s head between both hands, closed his mouth around the cold lips, squeezed her nose closed and blew. He pressed deep gulps of air into her lungs, pushed the chest down to force the air out again. Soon a rhythm emerged that required less energy. There was no need anymore to press down her chest; it sank of its own accord.

He found out that he could keep her alive with his own breath; the worst knot

in his stomach loosened. Gradually, he fell into a kind of half-trance. With an iron regularity he continued to breathe life-giving air into Diana's lungs. He even managed to speed up her slow heartbeat, purely on his unbridled will. Thinking was not necessary anymore for the double breathing. Detached from his fear and his thinking, Michael sunk anew with his mind into the complicated double being that his sister formed with her dryad. Deeper and deeper he sank, beyond the outer shell, beyond the inner shell. Something guided him, not with words but directly through the centres in his brain.

That something was his pilot with which he could descend to the heart of Diana. When that contact was made, he knew to solve the panic of the terrified dryad.

Dia had explained how the dryad was inextricably linked to Diana's body for seven years now, like a second consciousness. This made Diana's body forced to respond on panic reactions of the dryad.

As the dryad's grip began to weaken, Diana's body awareness regained control over the body. Relieved, Michael felt that she started to breathe on her own.

Her consciousness increased; timidly, he withdrew. So intimate was this that, now the tension had subsided, he shied away from it.

Leaning on his arms, he looked at the elfin child laying on the forest floor in front of him. She was breathing regularly.

When her eyelids began to twitch, he sat down and took her on his lap. She felt cold. Warming her up with his own body, he saw her cloudy eyes brighten. Some colour came to her cheeks.

He could not prevent a few tears of relief falling on her lips. She licked them and smiled pallidly. She was through the crisis!

Jeez, how do I do that? he asked himself. I am only sixteen and it seems as if I can do anything: save my sister time and again, drive a car, talking to the press, detach from my body, shooting astral monsters into the sky...

Deep inside him something else followed, more a feeling than words: and giving a stubborn wood Deva her new name as an elf.

He shook his head; he didn't want to think about that now, about her beauty, what it was like when they both for the first time with each other...

Confused, he looked around.

Everyone seems to need me, he complained to himself. I sometimes have the feeling that I am an ancient wise magician. But actually I know so little, I sometimes feel so inadequate. I am only sixteen!

The astral caresses he received in return did not only come from Diana. More nature beings were around.

Even the reporters were sniffing where that floral scent suddenly came from.

Irina was on her knees beside him, her face and arms covered with earth, her hands black, looking at him with an immense admiration.

Diana lay resting in his arms, escorted left and right by the twins; so they kept watch.

## Chapter 19

# Michael and the press

Lucy and Wendy took Diana when he stiff-limbed stood up to speak to the press.

'Gentlemen,' he began with a frown. He was hardly aware where he was, so much was his attention still focused on Diana and the problem of choking roots.

The cameras shone with their red lights, the recorders ran. He looked around the circle and saw the journalists. There were indeed no women. He could skip the "Ladies" in his salutation.

'Gentlemen,' he said again, 'I would like to thank these colleagues of yours...' he pointed to the smeared, grinning men who had helped with digging, '...also on behalf of my sister. Thank you for your quick help. We have saved the life of the tree above us and with it my sister's. Just in time. You all saw she was not breathing anymore.' He swallowed with difficulty. 'You understand probably nothing about how a human being can die when a tree dies, but it seems that it is also a new phenomenon to the dryads.'

'No, I don't understand it at all,' a reporter grumbled, 'but I saw with my own eyes that your sister was about to die. Can you explain it to us?'

'The tree was dying of lack of oxygen,' Michael began hesitantly. He looked around to see if anyone could help him with this.

'The tree is the...' He searched for the right words. 'The tree is the focal point for the dryad.' Yes, that sounded good. 'When the tree dies, the dryad is... lost. I mean, kind of dead.'

He was sweating from it. There was no one to help him. The invisible creatures around them listened tensely to his statement. They did not know the answers either, he could clearly notice.

'Because the dryad is in my sister, living with her for seven years now, she has become more aware than she otherwise could have been, but it is human consciousness.' Here he could fall back on the conversations with Dia. 'The dryad could therefore become afraid to die because she could not do anything for her tree, which was on the way of dying.'

The reporters nodded, he had explained it well.

'Can you speak with dryads?' asked another. That question caused unexpected pain.

'Sometimes, with some, if they want,' he replied hoarsely.

'Did you speak to the dryad in your sister just now?'

He nodded, remembering the communication. 'Yes, she...' he stopped.

Diana's dryad, was it really female? He had the feeling that it was not right, that it was not the whole truth. Nevertheless, it was ultimately the feminine aspect in the dryad he had experienced.

'The dryad told me that the roots were suffocating, when I had ordered her to speak,' he hesitantly finished his sentence. He could not explain it any further; the next question was fired to him: 'Can you see them too?'

'Sometimes, if they want to.'

He answered unwillingly, with in himself the complaint: but she is gone, she doesn't want to anymore.

'How does the dryad come to be in your sister and how does her fate connect to that tree?'

'The Dryad of the Forest was there when my sister was conceived. Under this tree,' explained Michael. 'This tree is her focal point. She chose my sister to help her save the forest. It was in danger even then. But the dryad has identified too much with my sister and could not go back.'

'Can we also see dryads? And speak?' interrupted another reporter his explanation.

'If you show true love for nature and respect for the Earth and the nature beings and be very quiet and peaceful, they will come to you of their own accord.'

'So they're actually around us all the time?'

'Yes. But not all elemental beings can make an image that we can see and only a few can communicate with us. They...' He wanted to add something, but another one came up with a further question: 'What are you going to do if the factory unexpectedly will fire up again and the toxic discharges will start again?'

'I can't stop it on my own,' sighed Michael. He looked straight into the lenses of the various cameras. 'Only with help from the people at home can we ensure that the licence is revoked. Perhaps we should buy the factory or something like that. Maybe it would be a good idea for the companies that have their chemical waste handled by this gang, to find another processing plant. It would also be a good idea to make sure that they do it in a responsible way. And it would also be a good idea when they collect their waste here and take it back!'

A reporter was not yet satisfied with the all answers.

'You wanted to say something. Can ordinary people communicate with dryads, or must they be clairvoyant, or a magician?'

Michael began to laugh because only a few minutes before he had called himself an ancient sorcerer.

'I'm not laughing at you,' he apologised. 'I had to think about a thought of my own. But as for your question, I don't know for sure. The doctor who is with us can perceive auras, also from nature beings, but they do not show themselves to him and don't talk to him, while I am not clairvoyant at all. But...' Astonished, he stopped in mid-sentence. There was a sharp message into his consciousness.

'Oh,' he corrected himself sheepishly, 'they say I am clairvoyant. But...'

Again he was interrupted: 'Are they talking to you now?'

'Well, no...' he replied hesitantly, 'not talking directly.... But they do listen. If I say something incorrectly, they make it clear to me immediately.'

The reporters looked at him and saw that he was not fooling them, that his astonishment was real.

‘Can they talk to us?’

Michael nodded. ‘If you want to experience that for yourself, go and sit quietly in the forest and look at the trees and plants with love. Then the nature beings will come to you naturally. You can ask them all the questions you can think of.’

It remained silent for a while after his words.

‘Now I would like to ask you something,’ he continued. He had to confess that he enjoyed being at the centre of the debate, to see these fast and shrewd men eating from his hands. He knew fully well that it was temporary, but still...

‘I would like to ask you to go back to the village now, because it is really very important that the forest remains quiet. If you would like to speak to me or take recordings here, please make an appointment? We are grateful that you are here to report, but we must make sure that it is not becoming too crowded. Do you understand? This afternoon I will be in the village and I will be at your disposal.’ With the flow, with the flow! he kept saying to himself.

‘Can you show us a dryad?’ insisted a cheeky one as the others were getting ready to leave. ‘That French journalist claims that she has taken a picture of you with an elf.’

Michael shook his head. ‘I cannot help you. They let themselves be seen only if they find everything safe. Yvette was lucky. The fact that so few people can see them proves that they are not so happy with us. Don’t prove them wrong: in a thousand years man has destroyed more nature than there has been originated in the last billion years. In the last century and a half, so much nature disappeared that the landscape beings have hardly any refuge left.’

His remark brought about something of an embarrassment to the reporters. He suddenly longed intensely to be alone with his family; since Dia was no longer around, he felt cut off.

His wish was granted. Unusually quiet for reporters they left.

Diana breathed quietly, sunk deep into a healing sleep.

‘Dinja, is there anything else I can do for her?’ He felt a bit lost now nobody seemed to need him any more.

‘No, Miche, you have done it all, it is more than enough.’

She looked at him with admiration. Lucy and Wendy clung to him with a venerable look in their eyes.

‘Come on,’ he fended off their idolatry. ‘Don’t look like that. I am only a boy of sixteen! I’m not doing this on my own, you know!’

He had achieved one peak performance after another; now the ecstasy withered away his energy plummeted. All the fear that the adrenaline had overcome temporarily was now taking its toll.

His sisters understood nothing of his sudden coldness and drew back a little

hurt. Irina understood. Because she was a few years older she could understand that Michael had just passed through the resistance phase of puberty and began to act and think like an adult. He expected that of himself, but on the other hand, he lacked all the experience of an adult.

She held her hands on either side of Michael's head, who as a result soon became himself again.

'I'm sorry,' he mumbled. 'I was just having a bad time.' He yawned uncontrollably; he had a headache and longed for sleep.

'Go have a nap,' said Dinja. 'I will keep watch with Irina at Diana. She is sleeping normally now.'

Yawning, he thanked her with a weak gesture and trudged off the long way to his fern bed.

The backlash to his explosion of power was fierce. The loss of Dia deepened the pit of gloom even more. At each step it was pounding in his head: Dia is gone, Dia is gone, I am alone, where is she, I want to die, if she never comes back I want to die.

His secret path opened up as if by itself, but he did not notice it.

He walked slower and slower, black desperation drooped all over him.

In his secret forest clearing, he could go no further. Groaning, he sank on his knees, his hands clawing at the grass.

'Dia! Dia!' he bellowed. On his hands and knees he crawled to his bed and hid in his sleeping bag.

## Chapter 20

# Overwhelmed

Michael was plagued by confused dreams, full of soundless noise and on Earth impossible antics; he was a complete strange personality in it. Feverishly he woke up from his full bladder. His eyes were thick and smarted. He scrambled to his knees. It was so dark that he couldn't distinguish a thing. Shivering, all his hair standing on end, he urinated sitting on his knees; he did not dare to stand up. Something unnameable terrifying was right behind him, could grab him in his neck. Uncontrollably shivering, he dived into his sleeping bag, pulled it over his head, moaning in distress. In the privacy of his sleeping bag, the creep gradually softened, though he felt the chill of a gaping hole glowing somewhere at his side, where he remained unprotected from grasping and grabbing..

'Mama, mama, mama, I'm so scared, I'm so scared..'

He began to gag. In panic, he shot out of his sleeping bag. Like a suffocating wave he vomited up accumulated grief and too long suppressed fear.

Loudly blaring he was on his knees with his hands on his head that he was desperately trying to sink into the ground. His whole body was aching, his stomach was cramping. He would have suffocated if not for a last pure physical survival instinct taking over command; the fierce squeeze of his stomach calmed and his diaphragm sucked air into his lungs. Coughing, he fought for breath. Heartburn was clogging his nose. A part of his body consciousness could prevent he would inhale vomit.

His body began to tremble uncontrollably, cold sweat evaporating.

His head was throbbing with pain, as if his brain was being pinched. Helpless, stained and freezing, he remained sitting on hands and knees. The shivering got worse and worse, until he was shaking from the cold. Hand over hand, he began to crawl, towards the camp and the jet of water from the tube.

I have to wash myself, I have to wash me, was the only coherent thought that kept spinning in his pained head.

He lost all sense of time. For minutes he stood at the flowing water before he realised he had achieved his goal. Under the cold spray, he passed out.

In her tent at the scouting camp, Irina shot up, heart palpitations in her throat... What...? She shook her woolly head. She was called!

She listened intently to see if it was repeated. Doubt crept up: had there been a sound? Shivering with tension she put on a pair of trousers and a jumper; outside her tent she listened intensely. There was no sound other than the rustling and muffled splashing of the river. The night was silently present, like someone with restrained breath.

The call had come from Diana's camp; that much was clear. She did not need the torch in the pocket of her jumper: an ice-clear moon shone on her path.

From afar she saw a dark figure lying beside the water jet from the tube. She ran the last few metres. Heavens, it is Michael! Naked and stone cold!

Bending over him, she registered a smell of vomit. She slid a hand under his head. He coughed and moved his legs. He blinked his eyes, but didn't seem to be really aware of where he was. Relieved, she helped him lie on his back. For a moment she knew not what to do: get help or could she do it on her own?

She decided to try it herself. Washing first, she was disgusted by the smell that clung to him. She had to dry him! There should be towels hanging in the camp. She snatched one from a drying line, ran back and rubbed him dry.

She took off her jumper and tried to squeeze him in; the limp arms were difficult. Just like dressing a baby, she reminded herself. It went better. Did she have to give him her trousers as well? No, she kept them on.

There was no room in the two tents, so she decided to take him along to her own tent. He had come to and was shivering.

'Get up and walk!' She helped him to his feet.

Foot by foot, Irina led Michael along the path to the scouting camp. He was really shaking from the cold.

'Come, lie in here.' She unzipped her sleeping bag. He had to warm up. She took off his jumper and her trousers. Shuddering from his icy skin, she pressed Michael rigidly against her and wrapped the sleeping bag around them. Her body heat and her love flowed into him.

When the cold began to subside, they both fell asleep.

She woke up; it was boiling hot, their skin was sweaty where they touched. She was happy to have responded to the call. She looked at the hairs in his neck and thought him sweet. Would she wake him up to make love? She decided not; it would only create confusion.

Smiling to herself, she gently untied herself.

She wanted to shower, he still smelled unpleasant.

Wrestling with the trouser legs, she pulled on her pyjamas and rolled herself outside. The scouts had made a hot shower from a large drum on poles under which a small fire was lit. She was the first; she enjoyed pumping the warm suds over her curves. It felt very different.

She woke Michael with a hand on his cheek. With a jolt he shot up and looked around in a daze.

'You were taken ill last night,' she explained his presence in her tent. 'I woke up and found you by the water pipe. You were half unconscious. You had vomited, but you had already washed.'

He turned red. The memory of his distress that night came back in all its intensity. 'Did you... did you find me?'

She nodded. 'You were freezing cold. I dried you and took you to my tent to get warm.'

He fumbled at the sleeping bag, embarrassed. The blush softened, leaving him paper white. Irina crawled into the tent next to him and slapped her arms around him. 'What is it?' she whispered.

He swallowed and swallowed, but could not hold back the tears.

'My... My elf is gone. I feel so alone without her. I want no longer to live,' he uttered with a stammer.

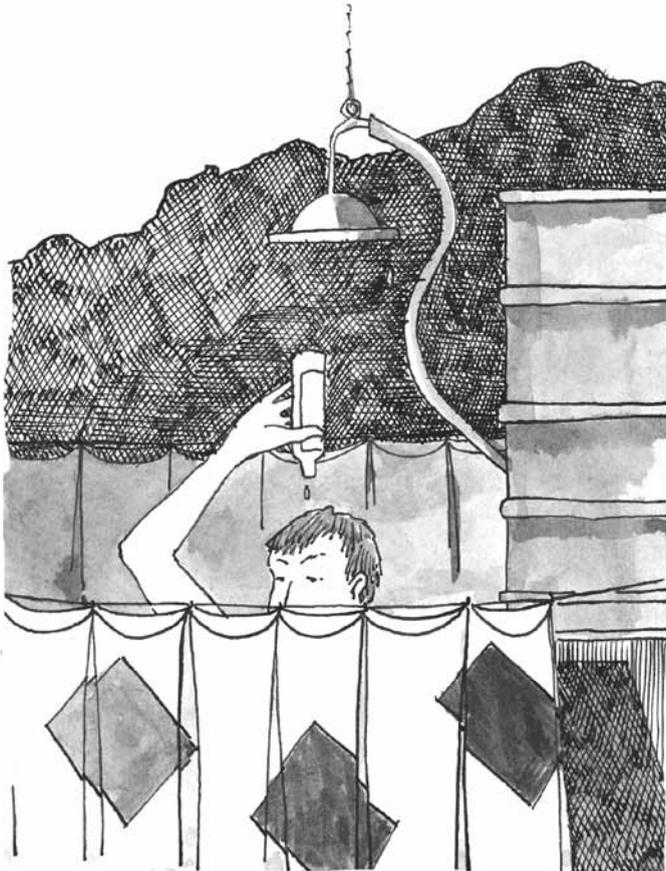
Irina was startled. 'That elf I saw lying on your belly?'

Michael nodded in surprise. That was true; Irina had already seen Dia earlier than he himself.

'She'll be back,' she tried to comfort him. 'She needs some time to get used to it. Girls do have that.'

'Would she?'

'Sure,' she said with more firmness than she believed self. 'Tell me more about it later, will you? Come on, if you're quick you can take a hot shower. You still smell a bit.'



‘O!’ Startled, he crawled out of the sleeping bag.

‘Oh, I don’t have any clothes...’ Confused, he sat up in the early sunlight on his knees. There were already a few boys and girls around, but no one paid any attention to the naked boy in front of the tent of the beautiful girl; it was still too early to see clearly out of their eyes.

‘Here’s a towel and shampoo, I’ll go and lend some trousers and a shirt. I’m afraid mine won’t fit you.’

The hot water not only washed the last remnants of dirt off, but also the harshness of his loss. He could think coolly again and look at his own feelings. He was just about to dry himself when a slender hand reached out, handing a pair of shorts and a wrinkled shirt to him. There were no pants, but that didn’t matter. If he wouldn’t sit on the ground, there was no look see either.

‘Did I dirty your sleeping bag?’ he asked, embarrassed. Irina had hung it inside out over her tent in the sun.

‘No,’ she reassured him, ‘I’m just airing it out.’

‘Thank you for everything,’ he murmured.

She embraced him; delighted he answered her caress. ‘If it weren’t for you...’

‘Then you really would have fallen ill,’ she curtailed his dramatic remark. ‘But I was there. Someone or something called me.’

‘Dia?’

‘Your fairy?’ She shook her head.

‘Could you hear that it wasn’t her?’

Again she shook no, thoughtfully. ‘I think it was you,’ she finally said. ‘You just called me with your thoughts, or your soul actually, because you were unconscious.’

That was a plausible explanation.

## Chapter 21

### American TV flies in

‘Are you hungry?’ she asked. ‘We can have breakfast here.’

That was a good idea. They joined the scouts around the cooking fire, where they were offered tea and bread by a shy bunch of girls. They looked in a special way; Irina suspected that they thought they had slept together, because they had come out of her tent together.

Oh, never mind, she thought amused, it came close to it.

The enigmatic glances that were cast at him made Michael, however, restless.

‘Are you coming for a walk?’ He felt uncommonly embarrassed between the girls who were constantly staring at him.

Irina nodded; it was all right to her. They thanked for the generous gifts and strolled one after the other along the stream through the sunlit meadow. On the way, he told Irina in a few words how Dia had appeared to him and how she had becoming more and more solid in shape. However, he kept it a secret about them making love.

Irina was silently impressed.

‘I saw her, you know,’ she said after a while, in awe. ‘That time with Yvette; I saw an elf lying on you, but you were so far away that you did not hear me.’

Michael did not want to think back about it.

Outside the encampment he sat down. ‘Just resting.’

He lay down on his belly by the brook with his nose just above the clear water. He drank some of it, laid his head on his hands and dreamt away unnoticed.

He dreamed he was very small and living in the flowing water of the brook. There was a watery creature that was playing with him. It looked like a sunlight-reflecting wave.

Next to him, Irina lay relaxed on her back, her eyes closed.

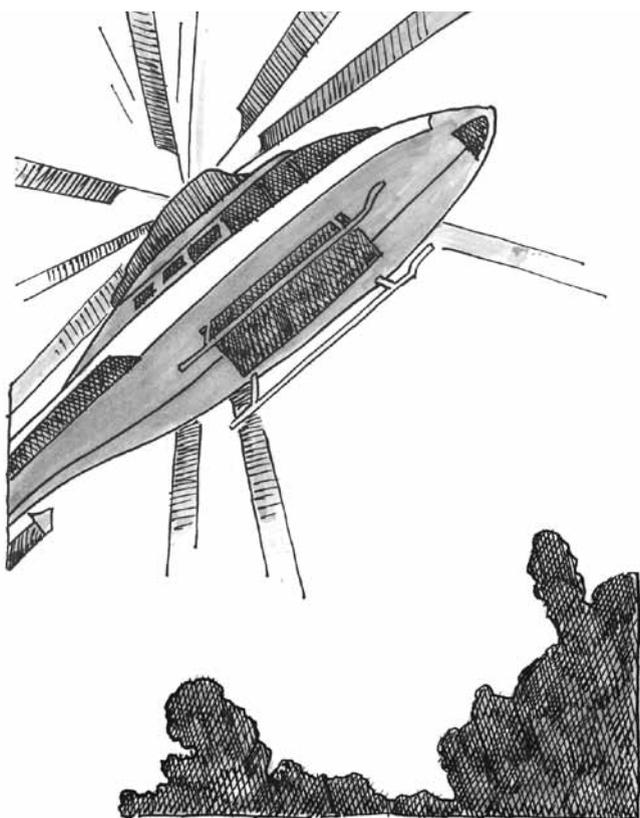
The high grass smelled, insects and bumblebees buzzed from flower to flower, caressing gusts of wind brought just enough coolness. The wide silence stood like a dome around them.

Intoxicated by the smells of the crushed grass and flowers they lost every sense of time and environment.

Michael sat up straight after a while.

With eyes squeezed he peered into the distant blue. He had a strange, throbbing feeling in his head. He listened intently. No, it was the air itself that vibrated. He became worried. Irina was sitting upright with a searching gaze. ‘What is that? Do you hear it too, the thumping?’

Before he could respond, the answer came from behind a hill: a blue and white helicopter swooped low over the treetops their way.



They wished they could make themselves as invisible as the dryads, but they had already been seen.

‘Oh dear,’ Michael frightened, ‘that helicopter is going to spoil everything. We have to stop him.’ He started waving fanatically.

He achieved with it what he had thought up in haste: the machine landed with thunderous noise close to them in a storm wind which smelled of grass and exhaust fumes. He ran towards it, dragging Irina with him.

Four men clambered out with cameras and microphones on quickly extended rods, and a woman.

Americans, he recognised the initials of a well-known television company. Two camera crews? shot through him. We have become big news for sure.

The pilot had turned off the engine; only the hissing noise of the freely rotating rotor could still be heard. Michael found it despite the breach of peace in the valley an exciting vibe.

He introduced himself as Diana’s brother, but it turned out not to be necessary: he had already been recognised as such. The close-ups of his face had been all around the world, the woman said, who had introduced herself as Ann.

They somehow felt at ease right away with these reporters, who had seen everything, had filmed everything. They were professionals who no longer needed

to prove themselves and had a real focus on their subjects.



‘Pow wow?’ one of them suggested. The others nodded and sat in the grass.

At the questioning glances of Irina and Michael, the woman explained: ‘Pow wow is the word for deliberation in a native language of the USA. We would like to hear from you what is going on exactly, so we do not have to work at random.’

The Americans handed out coffee from thermos flasks, the pilot came in, took off his helmet and turned out to be a cheerful young woman with black curls. She introduced herself in German and sat down in the circle.

Ann asked if Michael would like to do his story for the camera in English. He had no problem with that. It was his favourite language.

They did not interrupt him, fascinated by his story.

'You're a real storyteller, Michael,' Ann sighed, when he had stopped the fairy tale in the middle of a sentence. 'I mean in the tradition of the bards and minstrels of ancient times. I could actually almost see the fairies, you know.'

'Do you really have contact with fairies?' one of the cameramen asked.

Michael nodded and gestured to be quiet. His mind sought contact, with Dia, with Diana, with other dryads, with water nymphs... *Do you want to show yourself to these people, it is important*, was the message he repeatedly sent.

'What is he doing now?' asked Ann in a whisper to Irina. She watched surprised as Michael seemed to be listening to something and his moving lips seemed to be saying something.

'I think he's asking for his dryad to come back,' whispered Irina. 'She fled when a picture was taken of her.'

'The one of Yvette Neuchatel?' Apparently the photo of Michael and Dia was already published. They looked at Michael in awe.

'So... he has an elf with him too?' whispered Ann.

'Eh eh,' agreed Irina.

In the meantime, something was seeping into Michael's mind, something watery, laden with messages of discomfort, alarm and indignation.

Wary, he checked to see if it was a trap set by the evil astral monsters that had already got to him twice. However, it was safe to go into it.

*Who are you?* he insisted. *Make yourself heard, tell me what your message is!*

The resonance in his mind became stronger.

Michael tuned in, searched where he may obstruct the broadcast himself, encouraged the other consciousness. He became increasingly adept at it through his intimate contacts with Dia and Diana.

The five reporters, the pilot and Irina were breathlessly watching him, aware that he was seeking contact with non-human intelligences.

It wouldn't get any clearer, he concluded at one point; there were no words; only vague images and feelings from a consciousness that he could place as the water nymph of the brook they were sitting beside. He listened, supported, understood, embraced. Something of a satisfied gratitude welled up, then nothing.

He cleared his throat, trying to find words for his sensations.

'I had contact with the naiad of this brook,' he began hoarsely, his eyes still turned inwards. The cameras and recorders were running.

'She is completely upset by that machine nearby. She asks if you want to be careful. This stream has been kept pure and uncontaminated over the centuries. People have always been respectful of it. The farmers' family who has owned this land for centuries knows her from their dreams. She is very fearful of disturbances.'

He looked up and seemed to see the others for the first time.

'That was about it,' he finished shyly. 'I haven't got any other thing.'

One of the cameramen put down his device in astonishment. 'Well, I thought

I had seen everything, but this! I must confess to you that I felt cheated at first when we were told that we had to go after those fairies. Can we film them?’

‘We can ask them,’ Michael said hesitantly. He was disappointed he had not received any signal from Dia. ‘Sometimes they show themselves, if it helps to save the forest. They are at the end of their story. But they are very wary of people, so be patient with them. They only show themselves to me when there is no human around,’ he finished regretfully. He looked at Irina. ‘She can see them too, even better than me.’

‘Where would be best to go for recordings?’ asked Ann.

‘To the camp, to Diana,’ he replied with great firmness. ‘It seems best to me that the machine remains here, then we only have one other noise when it takes off again. Irina, do you want to go ahead and warn Dinja and Diana that we are coming with journalists? Good ones, this time?’

The slender girl left at once, speeding through the grassy plain like a nymph. It was all recorded on video.

The pilot timidly asked if she could come along if the machine was left here safely. They thought so, so the doors were locked, the luggage was hoisted onto backs, after which they went in a goose chase following the trail of Irina.

At the brook, filming took place again. Michael gave the request to the naiad to show herself, but nothing happened.

On a hunch, Ann filled a plastic bottle with brook water. She looked a little caught when she noticed that the others saw how she treated it almost like precious holy water.

## Attack on the forest

As soon they reached the first trees, a second alarm signal reached Michael. With a by now familiar stimulus in his brain, he was told that there was another disturbance in the girls camp.

This time the message was polyphonic like a huge church choir. To his surprise, he was able to name it as the voice of the collective forest, very different from the scrambling of individual creatures of nature like yesterday. As he started to run the thought crossed his mind that the return of the Dryad of the Forest that was in Diana, the probable cause was that the forest became whole again.

He just managed to say 'Follow me! Trouble! Trouble!' before he disappeared from sight. He flew across the path. So nimble, agile and seeing all at once he had only been in his dreams. The forest gave him wings.

From a distance, he could hear the murmur of many people.

His sudden appearance, with an impossibly long leap in the midst of a confused group of people, caused such consternation that he got some time to assess the situation.

His eyes flashed around.

A group of hunters dressed in green were with their broken rifles over their arms talking, smoking and drinking from shiny metal hip flasks, with nervously whining and spinning dogs on the line. Opposite them stood Irina, hissing like a cat; behind her stood defeated scouts who hadn't be powerful enough to oppose the troop of hunters. Dinja and Diana were in the tent, he knew without seeing them; the twins stood armed with saucepans in front of the tent doors.

Michael did all sorts of things at once. He raised his hand imploringly against the intruding hunters, beckoned with the other the scouts nearer and cried spiritedly out with all his might for Janos.

'Get Janos and Olga Jellisek,' he hissed to the leading scout. 'Run!'

The boy obeyed in a reflex and ran at top speed to the village.

Michael no longer felt at that moment like a sixteen-year-old teenager, who had to wait politely what the adults decide to do. His person did not matter now, he was vested with the authority of something much bigger. He acted on behalf of the forest. He gave voice to the elemental realms. And he was hell-bent that they put his sister in danger.

'Gentlemen,' he called in German. 'You know that it is forbidden in this reserve to hunt, smoke and taking dogs?'

He received blatant comments from several sides in rolling Austrian. They had come, they roared, to see this forest and to make those fairies feel that humans were the boss. Guns were raised in demonstration.

My God, thought Michael, horrified, those men are drunk as hell!

And he saw something else: a kind of dark haze around the inflated heads of the hunters. They looked like a swarm of flies, but it was not. His heart turned cold. There was a nameless threat of acute violence in the air.

*Help me!* he signalled, panicking. *This is not going well! Those people are possessed by something, what should I do?*

Too late. A big, fat guy with a red head and an enormous moustache unhooked his dog and laughed roaring, his yellow teeth bare as the beast lunged at Michael.

Time seemed to slow down when he saw the fierce black beast in a deadly run coming towards him. He could see the muscles under the short fur moving. He saw, as if it were not himself, how flakes of drool flew out of its wide-open mouth. He stood like outside himself, as it were, and did not move, his gaze fixed in the crazy eyes of the messed-up dog. Compassion welled up for the deformed animal. It was not at all a hunting dog! It was a possessed victim of a violent education.

Something behind him saved him from the snarling beast. Before his astonished eyes the dog turned screaming with fear, paws mowing. It also had a dramatic effect on the other dogs. They screamed and whimpered in pure agony, tore themselves loose and ran frantically up the path along the river until they disappeared. They had apparently seen something that frightened them to death. Michael glanced over his shoulder, but behind him nothing special was to see.

Everyone was stunned by the fleeing mob.

The drunken hunters looked bemusedly; a few had hurt their arms and hands when the animals broke free. The bully who had unleashed the murder dog stood looking at Michael with watery eyes and an open mouth. He was afraid. The man, of course, had only seen how Michael without a movement had frightened his dog to its very core. But that was not the case. He had not been it.

*What happened? Did they see...* Michael asked with fear in his heart. An answer came to him in the form of a feeling that they were safe. Michael breathed a sigh of relief. *What did the dogs see?* he wanted to know.

A statement followed that some natural beings can appear to animals in any form that humans can't see. That happened: the dogs had seen a gigantic monster.

*Why is this happening?*

There was no clear answer to this, only the sensation *later, later*, and that this lightning-fast action had been necessary in order to save his life, because the dog would have bitten him to death if they had not intervened. Michael was quite shocked hearing this.

The American reporters thought that this was a good time to show themselves. They had been just in time to film how the dog had been roused and released. They were still panting from the fast walking.

The tension was broken. With threatening gestures towards the cameras the mob backed down, some even pointed a loaded rifle!

Michael sank to the ground, trembling. He was shattered, running from one crisis to the next, there was hardly time for normal things. With a half-hearted smile, he looked into the eyes of the worried Ann. 'You won't film many fairies now, I'm afraid. They will not show up for the next few days.'

'It doesn't matter, Michael. We have wonderful shots of you and Irina. We will hand over the recordings of the hunters to the authorities. Threatening with a loaded shotgun will cost them their hunting licence; you can count on that. We only want to film Diana just now.'

'Please, don't you want to stay here in the neighbourhood? The press is actually our best protection.' Janos and Olga Jellisek suggested something like that before.

'I will propose it. But where should we bivouac? We have brought nothing but a bag with our lunch and some extra clothes. We are in a hotel in Germany. Wait, I will discuss what we can do.'

A little later, she returned with Irina, who had reassured the girls at their tent.

'I have talked to the others. Except for me, John, the one with the small camera, and Vincent, his sound man, would like to stay here. We will find accommodation somewhere. I hear that here is a scouting camp near; Irina says she can find a place for us there. Mike and Roland go back with the chopper to the hotel to send the recordings. Our satellite connection is there, on the roof. They will come back tomorrow and will then land neatly at the village,' she finally smiled.

'I'll bring them to the helicopter, Miche,' Irina said.

'Are you taking care?' he urged. 'Hide immediately when you see people. I don't trust anyone anymore.'

Tired, he trudged to the tent where the twins embraced him; inside he was welcomed by Dinja with an embrace and tea. Diana lay on her stomach playing two games of chess. She was playing simultaneous games against Lucy and Wendy, and still in the process of winning too.

'Hello Miche,' she said softly, aware of his surprise.

As her opponents did not return, she started to clear up the games.

'Are you recovered?' he asked, which was a bit silly because she was looking absolutely splendid.

'I am fine. I am better now. Only I can't walk properly.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know. My legs just don't work. They are limp when I try to stand.'

'Is it your tree?'

'I think.'

She did not want to talk about it any further. He sat down next to her with his tea. Spun in in the cosiness of the tent, he played chess with his sister and lost. She crawled happily into his arms and nodded to the camera, which had been following everything. The cameraman smiled back and ended his recording.

## Complicated matters

A short time later, Michael was alerted by the voice of Janos, who was standing outside their tent talking to Dinja. Carefully he detached himself from Diana and crawled outside. He was still tired, but he wanted to speak to Janos.

'Hello my boy,' he greeted him and pressed Michael to his side with an arm around his shoulders. 'You did manage to control that mob, I have heard. My compliments!'

Michael loved deep in his heart to be praised by Janos. It gave him a safe feeling that he could just lean against an adult for a moment.

Janos looked at him seriously. 'I will have to call on you again today. There are two more groups of journalists that we have promised making recordings here.'

'Yeah, that's all right,' he murmured. 'What's happening in the village?'

'It's like a madhouse, there are hundreds of people. But in fact nothing is happening. We are still waiting for the results of the analyses and for a response from the Forestry Commission, because we haven't seen a forest ranger yet. Yes, and of course for a countermove from the mudslingers.'

'With all those people around, they won't dare to do anything, will they?'

'No, you are right about that. On the one hand, it is rather troublesome, but on the other hand, the factory is just physically inaccessible because of the masses of people.'

It all seemed so far away, Michael thought. The really important things were happening here, he felt. His concern was now in the first place for his sister.

'Janos, Diana has a lot of trouble with her legs. I think it is because the roots of her tree are diseased. What can we do about it?' He wished he could tell what he had seen around the hunters, but there was something in him that prevented it.

Janos looked at him with a puzzled expression, but then replied: 'I heard it, my boy; how she almost suffocated because the tree roots couldn't breathe and what you did about it, but an adequate answer I don't have, Miche.' Janos looked a bit regretful up to the beech tree.

'I should know,' he murmured, 'I am a doctor and I can see the energy of trees, but I don't have a clue of the meaning of what I see. I mean, the cause of the suffocation is gone because of your quick action, but there is apparently more going on. Do you know what?' A new thought made his face lit up. 'I will pass on the question through the press to the public: what should we do to the roots of the tree to get healthy again?'

Michael nodded in relief. Now that was a good idea! When they were on television, they could ask for anything. There were always people who had the right answers.

‘Is Irina back yet?’ he suddenly asked.

Dinja looked at him in dismay. ‘I completely forgot about her. She is gone for a long time now!’

‘I thought so; do you still need me here?’

‘Well, no,’ said Janos in surprise.

‘I’ll go look for her right away!’ he cried, running into the direction from which they had come with the Americans a few hours earlier.

When he reached the edge of the forest, the helicopter was no longer there, which he had expected more or less. It had become sweltering, he was sweating like a horse. He hastily took off his shirt. He was thirsty too. At the brook he fell on the ground, panting, and greedily drank from the crystal-clear water.

He continued in an easy run and carefully examined the grass around the landing site to see if there was a track that went on. Searching in ever widening circles, he came across the tracks of cars, about three of them. Around it, the grass had been trampled and there was all kind of litter.

He walked back to make sure Irina’s trail ended where the helicopter had been and did not continue. Irina would probably have fled by flying with the Americans. That conclusion felt right. He trusted his intuition that said she would be in touch soon.

But those cars: who had been in them? Whoever they were, they had turned around and driven back.

What would he do?

He could see the scouting camp down the slope, where tiny figures were walking around. On both sides of the river a fence of thin trunks was built.

He stood indecisive in the silence, with a lark here and there high in the sky. His concern, for Irina, for Diana and, most of all, for Dia made him not want to see a human being.

He decided, sweating as he was, to wash first. He walked back to the brook, took off the rest of his clothes and laid down on his back in the narrow stream. He barely fitted into the bed; the water was pushed up until it ran over him. It was cold. Soon he stepped out, thanking the nymph of the brook in his thoughts.

To dry up, he laid in the grass with his hands around Dia’s imaginary hips. His mind was filled with longing while he imagined how her familiar form would appear. She would fill his hands and cover him up with her wings.

His mind, overwhelmed by all the impressions, longed for rest and security. He felt himself becoming weak, and let it happen. It all became too much for him.

‘Pfff,’ he did in his mind and mouth.

With his eyes closed, he tried to perceive the world through his ears, his nose and his sense of touch. What came in through his senses of scents, caresses of the wind and high-pitched sounds under the dome of heaven was not what he desired, but sensual enough to pull him out of his self-pity.

Slowly, as if in a dream, he got up and put on his trousers. With his thoughts

everywhere and nowhere, he walked to the village.

He was at the moment so little interested in people that he walked down the main street like wrapped in a cocoon. Nobody spoke to him or looked at him: an ordinary boy, barefooted and without a shirt on; if they saw him at all.

It was terribly busy in the village. Everywhere were campers, cars were parked lopsided by the side of the road and in yards, there were mobile snack bars that did good business. There were also some police cars. The policemen were trying to divert the curious people around the village in order to keep the chaos manageable, which seemed to be in vain.

The two supply roads were blocked by cars, the platform was crowded with waiting people. Around the gates of the factory, curious people stood in rows thick staring, while there was nothing to see, for nobody ventured into the complex. The environmental movement had put yellow and black signs everywhere with "Mortal danger! Poison!" complete with skull, in Slovak and German.

Unnoticed, he left the village again walking along the river to return to the forest. He was recognised from afar by the scouts, who were busy at work at their roadblock. They let him pass in silence, worried by the great silent grief of their idol.

He walked slower and slower.

At the entrance to the forest he remained standing, unwilling to go any further along the wide path with far too many footprints. He turned off and plodded through the meadow along the edge of the forest until he crossed the trail he had gone with Irina so many times.

The sun disappeared behind a head of thunder. He shivered as a gust of wind cooled his sweaty skin. Dia! Dia! he kept shouting in his mind, occasionally even aloud.

He followed the trail to the secret place with his fern bed. Shivering he crawled into his sleeping bag. Gusts of wind moved the high crests. In the shelter of the warm deck he again stretched his hands in the inviting gesture, but they remained empty again. In his mind he did not notice anything of Dia. Yet she had not really disappeared, that much he knew.

Weak and childlike, he lay moaning softly.

## Chapter 24

### Lightning strike 1

Thick drops falling with loud ticks on the tarpaulin above his head startled him and drove him out of his sleeping bag.

The forest was full of commotion and noise. Not only from the fierce gusts of wind that swept through the crests in loud rushing waves, ripping off dead branches and leaves.

It seemed as if his senses were sharpened, that he could perceive nuances and vibrations for which he was blind and deaf before.

The scents on the whirling wind close to the ground told him of growth and decay, of flowering, ripening and mushrooms. He could smell different kinds of trees and plants. The sounds that reached him evoked an image in him of swaying trunks and branches; the rattling rustle of the hard oak leaves sounded very different from the fine hissing of coniferous trees. He was aware of the living air, which, excited by the hoarded solar energy, indulged in fierce games.

In the semi-darkness, he let himself be taken up by the forest and fed by the rain. His consciousness extended through his feet into the earth and through his fingers and top of his head into the above ground structures of tree trunks and branches.

His feet led him to the little camp by themselves. From under plastic sheeting and umbrellas people stared at him in amazement.

Nude as a forest spirit, he wandered across the clearing, looked into the river, up to Diana's tall beech tree.

A bright flash of lightning put everything in black and white. The vehement blow and rolling thunder indicated a nearby impact. Deep in thought, he moved in the pouring rain, insensitive even for the ice-cold hail that was mixed with it. An inner heat kept his body warm, so much that he experienced the rain as nice and cool.

The lightning flashes followed each other in quick succession. The strikes came closer; they held their breath: Diana's beech was the tallest tree in the surroundings...

Strangely enough, the lightning did not strike the tree, but a pit with polluted groundwater, right at the feet of the up staring Michael. The air displacement of the exploding water threw him over. Deaf and blind, he lay like dead on the ground.

Startled, some people rushed towards him. Janos was there first. He knelt beside the silent body and listened at Michael's breast. Satisfied with what he heard, he lifted the mud-stained boy – with some difficulty – in his arms and walked towards the big tent. Dinja, the twins and Diana looked anxiously from the small

tent to the limp form in his arms.

He nodded at them reassuringly as a sign that everything was okay.

In the big tent, Yvette helped him tackle the limp body of Michael.

'Est-il mort? Is he dead?' she asked in a faltering voice. She had changed enormously by the things she had seen and experienced in the last few days. Her self-assured attitude had given way to a confused, girlish appearance. There was little left of the famous Yvette Neuchatel, top reporter of Paris Match and Time/Life.

'No, he is only temporarily paralysed by the blow. Look, he is already looking at you. In a little while he will be able to move. He cannot hear you yet because he will be deaf for a while,' Janos replied cheerfully, while he cleaned and dried Michael and dressed him with clothes from his rucksack.

'Here, you hold him for a moment. Did you take pictures of it? He will surely want to see them later.'

She nodded; photography was so much in her blood that she would still capture his own deathbed in images.

With a plastic bag over their heads, the three sisters crawled into the tent. This made it very full. Especially as they were not allowed to touch the cloth, otherwise it would be going to leak.

Diana was not the least bit concerned about Michael's condition: she immediately snuggled up to him. Grunting because he did not react she pulled his arm around her.

'Irina?' he whispered with numb lips. It sounded more like Iwia, but they understood him.

Demonstrating, Janos knocked on Yvette's mobile phone. 'Irina called to say that she had flown with the Americans because there were those pathetic jeeps near the helicopter and she didn't trust them. It looked like the mafia, she said. Mike and Roland have took her to their hotel, as they were not allowed to land at the village. Irina will come back with them tomorrow. She misses us but is having a great time. Kisses to all of you.'

Michael laughed a little despite his anaesthetic. Janos looked like a cherub with a devilish grin.

A cup of hot tea from Wendy brought him to his senses. He could already sit up straight again. He frantically rubbed his ears, in which it still was constantly ringing, causing the voices of the others to fade.

'Michael, can you speak to the poor journalists outside? They are here because they waited neatly for their turn, I think that should be rewarded. Or are you still too excited for it?

'No, it's all right,' Michael whispered.

When the rain had subsided to a drizzling hiss on the tent canvas they stepped out under Janos's umbrella and walked towards the slowly moving humps, where the last visitors of that day had been waiting wet and cold for the rain to cease under umbrellas, plastic sheeting and mackintoshes.

Their appearance at the clearing was graced by a golden ray of sunlight that passed over the mountains in the west under the heavy clouds.

The cameras were running. Michael stopped, brightly lit, in the middle of the clearing and spread his arms in a welcome greeting. He looked like a spirit of light, born of lightning. He looked beautiful with his wet hair, white shirt with embroidery and black jeans over his bare feet. The journalists realised that these images would do well, especially with their female viewers.

A little hoarse, he told his story, emphasising why the disturbances by uninvited guests who besieged the forest were so serious. He swore to the people at home not to come again. The village and the access roads were already so congested with cars that many people had to spend the night in their cars. He also pointed out the danger of avalanches due to the heavy rainfall.

'You don't have to worry about missing out on anything that happens here. We do everything we can to provide the reporters with good information and beautiful images. Let them be your eyes and ears, stay home and watch,' he concluded. He thanked for the attention with a short bow.

Janos took over from him. He explained in detail what the problems were with the roots of Diana's tree and asked the viewers what could be done to restore the tree to full health.

Michael slipped into the forest, as he had to pee from all that tea.

## Chapter 25

### Forest magic again

The forest embraced him. Without thinking about it he entered the wilderness barefoot. In the mood he was in after the lightning strike right in front of his feet, his head was empty of human affairs. His mind could therefore effortlessly attune to the multitude of frequencies that make up the information field of the forest.

He called Dia, no longer desperate as before: this time in the form of a deep longing. Again, there was no recognisable reaction from her. However, other nature beings did respond to his call: there appeared some arm-length flying beams of light, and he was surprised to find beside him some semi-transparent goblins that accompanied him on his journey. They seemed to be busy gesticulating with something he did not understand at all. He had never seen them before. Could that be because of that lightning bolt? At the same time he realised that they had always been there, just not visibly.

He was pleased becoming more and more familiar with the nature beings. He could share his pleasure with the goblins, who moved confidentially around his feet. With their hands, which actually were energy rays, they were weaving on the growing understanding between the forest and the people in the forest. That was their job and Michael was the human to whom they could assess their preparatory work of centuries and centuries. They were able to show themselves to him more and more easily, because since Dia's materialization Michael did not have a single shred of disbelief left in the existence of elemental beings.

The fairies around him were rather elemental forces of nature, they took care of the growth of trees and plants, let the goblins know. They could not make themselves understood to a human. They were always there when plants were growing, regardless of what people thought of them or not. And yes, came the answer to his earlier question: the lightning strike had not only charged the bottom of the valley electrically, which was necessary for the recovery, it also had shifted Michael's vibrations to a higher frequency.

The information of his companions came to him in images and know-how. It was their job to know everything about the forest and the earth.

With his sharpened senses, he observed all the details. Where he walked, the barren leaves and the small ground plants were hardly touched by his footsteps. He felt light and enlightened, despite his concern for Dia.

Wandering around in the twilight, he automatically came back to the clearing.

Light through the light-brown tent cloth pointed to the cosy snugness of people. He sent his approach forward in the consciousness of the people in the tent, for he walked inaudibly.

The unspoken invitation lured them out of the tent. Delighted he let his sisters embrace him. They sat down close together in a circle around the oil lamp.

‘You’ve made a full day of it, young man,’ chuckled Janos, looking more and more like a satyr.

Maybe he is a satyr, Michael thought, and had to laugh at the idea. Did he think of that himself or...? Again seriously, he agreed: ‘Yes, in any case we have kept away the attackers today. I am curious to see what will happen tomorrow.’

He looked worried in advance. ‘Does the forest has more entrances?’

‘No. That is probably why it is so well preserved. It is surrounded on all sides by steep mountains. The river continues underground. The valley where it ends up used to be a deep lake that overflowed through a breach in the steep mountain ridge. Long ago, a weak spot in the floor of the lake collapsed and it was drained. The water had found a passage through all kinds of caves. It surfaces at the other side of the mountains and flows into another river. That’s what Stefan found out. As a hydrologist, he had to check the route of the poisonous water to be able to fight the licence’.

The image Janos painted was familiar to Michael. ‘So we can only expect curious people from the side of the village?’

‘It looks like it.’

‘What else can we do about it?’

‘Well, Yvette gave me the idea of inviting a company that organises pop concerts. They have all the equipment needed to keep thousands of people in line, to feeding, sanitation and medical care. They could show the latest images to the audience on a house-high video screen and make them pay for it.’

‘That sounds interesting. Does it benefit us as well?’

‘If such a company organises it? Yes, definitely. I hope it will even be sufficient to buy that factory.’

With these plans they ended their deliberations, for the girls wanted different attention.

Michael told them all that had happened that day. He drank another cup of tea and put all three of them to bed in exchange for a firm embrace and a good-night kiss.

He said goodbye to Dinja and Janos and went back in the darkness to the fern bed. He walked with his eyes closed in order to sharpen his other senses; only once did he run his head against a low-hanging branch.

## Chapter 26

### Brief respite

Janos came walking from the village with fresh bread. He encountered Michael at the tents, where the gas burner was sizzling and tea water sang. They had breakfast together in the morning sun.

‘Miche, we have received an answer to the problem with the roots of Diana’s tree,’ Janos began with a twinkle in his eyes. He rubbed his hands as a sign that he was in good spirits due to the surprise he had for them. ‘Yes please, pour me another coffee.’

‘Well, tell us, then,’ urged Lucy, who had risen with the coffeepot. ‘Otherwise, you won’t get it.’

‘He’s pulling your leg!’ cried Wendy, who was bringing sugar and milk.

The group was gradually speaking a mixture of German, English and Dutch with which they could understand each other perfectly. Michael suspected that the forest consciousness had a hand in the fact that the humans who stayed there could understand each other’s languages so well.

He turned his attention back to Janos, who was raising the tension by first finishing his coffee before he got his surprise exposed.

‘The same remedy has been recommended from several sides,’ he began. ‘The cause of suffocation lies in the fact that the water repressed all the oxygen. We already knew that. I have now also heard why this is so serious. Most trees live together with fungi around their roots. Beech have this very strongly. The fungi feed on the sugars in the juices of the tree that it makes in its leaves. You know, through photosynthesis.’

His listeners nodded; they knew about it.

‘In exchange for that nutrition, the fungi take in by their fine shoots, called hyphen, minerals and water from the soil for the tree; they don’t need it themselves.’

‘Oh yes,’ Michael said, ‘I remember that from school. Isn’t that called symbiosis? The tree and the fungus live together for each other and from each other.’

‘Right,’ said Janos, ‘but fungi definitely need air, oxygen, even if it is only a little. The oxygen at Diana’s tree is repelled, causing the fungi to die off. The best way to improve the oxygen balance and thereby restore the fungal culture is to force air into the soil. We received an offer for a compressor and air lances. They are transported by helicopter to here; a present from an advertising agency. It rushed to hire a heavy transport helicopter. It is all arranged by phone last night by the presenters during their TV broadcast. The roads are still clogged.’

They didn’t quite get it yet, although it sounded fantastic that a helicopter had been hired especially for them.

‘What is a compressor?’ asked Wendy. She sat with her knees pulled up next to

Janos to lick her hands, where jam from her sandwich had dripped on.

‘That is a machine that compresses air, like in a bicycle pump, but then all the time,’ Lucy explained. ‘Right? Janos?’

‘Yes, young lady. We bring that compressed air to the tree by hoses. We insert a kind of large hypodermic needles into the ground and then blow,’ Janos explained. He hugged Wendy, careful not to get covered in jam himself.

‘Oh, you mean that machine pumps air to the roots. Why didn’t you say so?’ she responded.

Michael looked thoughtfully. ‘Is it wise to have put down a machine here?’

‘Don’t worry; the compressor will be put to stand just outside the forest. An experienced employee of the company will come with it; he will install the system and do the measurements.’

Michael began to get the hang of it. ‘Hey little mouse, tomorrow you will be able to walk again,’ he said to Diana. She was happy with all the attention, but did not care too much for it. She had always been a loner, but since she was in her forest she paid very little attention to the people around her. It seemed as if she was only half present, busy as she was with things that others could not fathom.

‘What time are they coming?’ asked Dinja.

‘They could be here any minute,’ Janos replied. ‘The police has set up a small meadow just outside the village as a helipad, because there are more and more of them. Slovakian television has managed just before all the hustle and bustle to bring in a mobile studio. There is now a huge transmitter mast on the station square.’

‘Why is all this happening?’ asked Michael aloud. ‘No one had heard of this place a week ago, now it’s like Disneyworld.’

‘You say the right words with that, Miche. It is still much bigger than Disneyworld, because they have seen all over the world that fairies really do exist. The counterfeiting of amusement parks is a very poor comparison.’

‘Well, I think it’s overdone.’

‘Miche, it’s not. Consider how much joy the dealing with nature beings brings you. Compare that with the grey and dull existence that most people lead, hopelessly alone and never really in touch with anyone. Telepathy changes your whole life, because you can’t lie or pretend any more.’

Michael lowered his eyes in shame. He had not forgotten how closed off and lonely he had felt for a very long time, especially from the age of thirteen.

‘I see that you understand. Can you then also understand that the people, all human beings, have an innate desire for unification? To contact at the deepest level with a being that unconditionally loves you, a love that you can reciprocate just as unconditional? A love at soul level?’

Michael nodded; yes, he could understand that very well. It caused tears in his eyes.

‘What is it, my boy?’

‘Dia has been gone for so long,’ he whispered with a thick throat. It relieved him to be able to share his loss with the wise man, who suddenly looked a bit sad. ‘I know, Miche,’ he said softly, wrapping his arm around him. ‘I was told, or rather, I saw it.’

‘How?’ whispered Michael, barely audibly.

Janos hesitated. He decided to share his secret.

‘Sometimes I get images, sort of visions. Sometimes I see a being of light who passes things on to me. I think it is a guardian angel.’

‘A guardian angel?’

Janos smiled at Michael’s incredulous face. ‘This valley, the mountains around it and all the nature in it, it all is managed, cared for, by a landscape angel, a consciousness that has been developed in tens of thousands of years.’

‘Oh, I don’t know them,’ sighed Michael, impressed.

‘You will get to know them when the time comes. First you have to find the beings of the earth, water, air, fire, trees and plants.’

‘I saw them the other day.’ Michael looked with shining eyes to Janos.

The memory of his walk with the fairies and the goblins pulled him out of his awe.

‘As I walked in the forest, two fairies floated beside me and two very small men, just above the ground, walked with me. Janos, how come that I see them when I am alone, but not, for example, now?’

‘Why should they show themselves to you now?’

Yes, why? The question confused him. ‘Because they don’t want to?’ he tried.

‘Or because you are more receptive when you are alone?’ Janos looked at him and laughed. ‘I’m not fooling you, Miche. I just don’t know the answer. I mean: the full answer usually consists of a lot of things.’

Michael considered it. ‘Yes,’ he said thoughtfully as his head brightened. ‘Yes, of course; I have become attuned through Dia to the forest. That is why I can see them sometimes. But when I am with people I am attuned to them and I do not see any nature beings, even though they would be there.’

‘Good thinking,’ Janos praised him. ‘Indeed, even though we don’t see them: nature’s beings are always and at all places present and at work.’

Michael, pleased with the praise, looked at him gratefully. It even hinted at a question he had not yet asked, but which was important.

‘Janos, who are you? What are you?’

Janos grinned, showing his satyr head for a moment. ‘Come on, will you come with me? I think the compressor will be there by the time we get to the village. We have been summoned to an important meeting.’

## Chaos in the village

Michael said goodbye, with his thoughts on the conversation, and walked with Janos to the village.

The scouts had spread out on both sides of the river in order to better block wandering onlookers. They were wonderfully motivated. They had managed to keep the upper hand in many situations; only the mob drunken hunters had been beyond their control.

Michael approached the village with increasing reluctance. Walking visitors recognised them and stopped to gawk at him or, what was even more disturbing, made photographs and asked for signatures.

At one point, he could have no more. Near a spruce bush along the path, he pulled Janos under the shelter of the trees.

'Janos, I can't go on like this! All these people, all these thoughts, all that veneration, that awful curiosity; it is as if I were naked. Although, that wouldn't be nearly as bad.' Fortunately, his humour prevailed again.

'So, you have become super-sensitive to the energies that people emit around them. Can't you shut them off?'

'I don't know. I wouldn't know how.'

Janos looked at him. 'I can see it. You're wide open. Searching for your elf?'

Michael nodded.

Janos used his hands and eyes to teach Michael to shield off himself. In a swift gesture he closed his aura, while mumbling something in a foreign language.

It worked immediately; Michael felt peace enter his head and his belly.

He finally dared to look into his inner self at the monsters he had fought when Diana was in danger of suffocating. He had been pushing it into the background all this time because he did not know how to deal with it. Apparently, fairies also had their ugly counterparts, which looked exactly like the monsters in his computer games.

'Janos...?' It was difficult to put words to it, just as if he would call them again. 'Janos,' he began anew, 'I have seen monsters...?' He began to tremble; Janos put his arm around him and looked at him with concern.

'Don't be afraid, you are protected now,' he whispered.

All the fear and horror came up again. Michael began to sob convulsively and hid his head against the chest of Janos. 'I fought with them,' he cried.

'Go on, go on, throw it out,' Janos whispered.

'They were crawling all over Diana, they had her all wrapped up in ...?'

He gagged. Taking a deep breath helped to compose himself again.

'What were they?' he asked, begging for some kind of reassurance.

‘What did you see? Tell it all, don’t leave anything out.’

Michael took a few deep breaths, wiped his nose on his sleeve and rubbed his eyes. ‘A kind of vampire bat. I shot them away, with arrows of light. Just like in the games on my computer. I was not at all afraid of them at that moment, I rather felt sorry for them. They were so ugly and hungry. They did not explode when I hit them like in the games; they just shot upward. There was a bright light, sucking them in, it seemed.’ He looked at Janos with a wrinkle between his eyes.

‘I was so hot that I scorched their mucus.’

Janos rubbed Michael’s hair affectionately. ‘You are a brave guy, Miche, with more power than I initially thought. Yes, there are such entities. There exist not only lovely fairies and good-natured gnomes in that sphere. Thanks to your exercise with your games you could handle them. Miraculously, I never saw anything in those games.’

‘Janos, what are they and why did they leave?’

Janos shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t know,’ he confessed, ‘but I think they are malignancies of people, that have taken on a life of their own in the ethereal world. Every thought, every word and every intention takes on a form of existence in the ethereal world, you know.’

‘Any thoughts?’

‘Yes, both beautiful and ugly ones. But only very powerful emotions and intentions take on a permanent form. They went away because your love for Diana is not tolerable for that kind of creature. You have sent them to the light, where they are lovingly received. There they dissolve in the great cosmic field and they are no longer monsters’.

‘Oh,’ he said with relief. He also wanted to tell Janos about the sticky blackness that had frightened him in his forest bed, but if he turned his mind to it, it went backwards.

‘But how could it be that they were all on Diana?’ he asked in the place.

‘If a person is very frightened, or very depressed, or in any other way not in a good mood, astral entities can adhere to such a person, in order to steal his or her prana, life energy. Vampires they are, in fact. Diana and her dryad were in high need and therefore apparently an easy prey.’

‘There’s more to it, isn’t there? It also has to do with the factory, right?’ Michael realised that Janos was not telling all he knew.

He sighed. ‘Yes, Miche, this is a very complicated subject. You have to study for years to understand it a little. You have to be clairvoyant to believe it at all; it’s so bizarre. But are you helped for now with what I told you?’

Michael nodded. Deep in thought he followed Janos when he continued to the village.

The situation was terrible. Everything had been trampled on, there was waste all over the place. The people trudged around with nothing to see.

The houses had their shutters closed.

Nobody could leave because the roads were still clogged. The only available connection to the outside world was the train, which now had three carriages. Only a few people got out in the midst of a rush of tourists wanting to leave. Fully loaded the train left.

The boarding house was fenced off and policemen were keeping watch. They were not recognised at first and urged to walk on. Janos grinned falsely. In rapid Slovakian he introduced himself and Michael to the men, pointing to a picture on a newspaper clipping that he took out of his breast pocket.

Immediately they were let through, the young policeman who had just barked at them coloured that he had to back off.

Inside, they were bombarded with questions. Apart from journalists there were quite a few men in neat suits that they couldn't bring home.

Outside, there was a sudden commotion; some loud American voices sounded above everything. Surprised, Michael looked up. That could be Mike and Roland and then Irina was probably there too! He wriggled out.

It was them!

'These people are my guests,' he told the policemen. They willingly let the three pass. Irina, who was already waving at him, ran into his arms.

Michael preceded them, arm in arm with Irina, to the drawing room, where General Jellisek was busy talking to a group of unknown men. In haste, she introduced Michael and Irina, under the eye of Mike's camera, to a number of gentlemen from the 'fast suits brigade', as Michael called the well-dressed, slightly too smooth men.

He could not remember any name, let alone what was their function.

'What are you going to do?' asked Michael to the two Americans, because the meeting was about to start. They preferred to go to their colleagues who bivouacked in the scouting camp. At Janos's insistence, he gave them a note, signed by him and Olga Jellisek, that they had access to the scout camp and the forest. With a brief salute they said goodbye.

Excitedly, he climbed the stairs to the headquarters, followed by Irina.

## Chapter 28

### Battle for the water

Michael and Irina found it exciting to be present at the meeting. It would be an important meeting, Janos had predicted on the way to the village.

They sat down in the messy room, leaving the tables pushed together with the mishmash of chairs around them to the important people.

Of those present, they knew only Olga Jellisek and Janos.

Amidst much scraping of chair legs over the wooden floor, clicking of briefcases and rustling paper, the attendees took place.

Irina squeezed his hand; so charged was the atmosphere; as if doom were in the air: the outcome was highly uncertain. Not all the people in the room were to be trusted, their intuition told them. Their hearts leapt up when Stefan was the last to enter the room. With a red head, he triumphantly waved a bundle of papers. 'Hey guys!' he whispered in passing. 'All's well? I am carrying somewhat with me! This will hit like a bomb.' He winked and wrung between the others around the table, where coffee was being served by Olga Jellisek personally.

She sat down when she had made the round and opened the meeting with a slap on the table and a short introduction in Slovak.

'I'll translate it for you,' Irina whispered. But they did not get much of it: their attention soon drifted away. There was much shuffling around with paperwork.

When there was a pause, because a few papers were being studied, Janos sat down next to them. With soft voice he told what had been discussed.

'So far it has only been shots across the bow. Those two men on the corner are the lawyers of the factory,' he whispered. 'They have only put the demand on the table that the occupation should be ended and access to the factory is no longer hindered. They have also filed a claim for damages if that does not happen. Well, that older man in knickerbocker is from the Forestry Commission. All the forest in the valley is state owned. He has demanded that no more poison should be discharged and that the damage should be restored. He is only waiting for Stefan's analyses. What do we have further. Yes, of course, those two young men next to the general are our lawyers. Well, then we have a representative of the municipality, someone from the European parliament, of the province... I am going to sit down again. Stefan starts to present his analyses. Pay particular attention to the pale man with his golden glasses: he issued the licence'.

The meeting continued. Stefan was given the floor. He briefly summed up all that had been found, handing out copies of each sheet he had read aloud.

The atmosphere became unpleasant: the latent conflict grew into outright hostility. The opponents became restless, almost aggressive. The increasingly angrier forest ranger lurched towards the man with golden glasses.

Michael and Irina could see that the analyses were not without merit. Some of those present seemed shocked, others acted as if they didn't know what was the talking all about, but Stefan was not interrupted once. The general was leading the meeting with her charisma and her eyes. Nobody dared to disturb the order, her order. In spite of this it became sometimes very intense.

When the discussion between the four lawyers and the government officials bogged down in legal arguments, Janos came again sitting next to them.

'It doesn't look good for the other side,' he whispered. 'Their lawyers, however, dispute the validity of the samplings and demand an investigation by an independent institution. That has been promised and it is logical.'

He stood up to look around the table.

'The ball is now in the Permit Authority's court as to whether the factory will be temporarily closed until it is proven that they have not done anything illegal, or that they may continue until we have proved that they do have acted illegally.'

He sat down again and whispered: 'The government official has tried to placate the case, but the Forestry Commission demands that the plant will be shut down until the results of re-sampling are available. Look at that forester!' he sneered. 'I think he will not leave that grey dove with his gold spectacles in one piece when the factory is allowed to run again!'

'But Janos, will the factory be closed down permanently or just until everyone is gone and it will just go on again?' whispered Michael, who had no faith in it.

'That is indeed the problem. That is why I have suggested that the government or the environmental association buys the factory.'

'Doesn't that cost a lot of money?'

'Of course, but we could organize a fundraising now we have so much publicity.'

The discussion suddenly became heated. One of the lawyers of the other party stood up, deathly pale, and said with trembling voice something to his colleague, who was talking persuasively. The other became increasingly upset. After a violent outburst he left the table, stumbling around and apologising to those present. He almost ran out of the room.

'He has withdrawn from the case,' whispered Janos under the murmuring at the table. 'He refuses to go on working for environmental criminals, he said. I think he is going to look for another job, but it is very brave of him. I go after him to ease him.'

It was stinking in the warm room. Some men had took off their jackets. With his sensitive nose, Michael caught all kinds of moods through the smells that the people at the table were spreading. He smelled fearful sweat, intestinal gases, bad breath, anger (from the forester) and venom of the man with the golden glasses. Or did he catch it with a different sense? He did not know, but that the man was false was clear to him.

He felt strange. So all-encompassing; as if he could see and understand much more of the world around him. Very different from a week ago; then he was still

a boy of sixteen who did not know what to do with himself. Insecure in everything, especially about what other people thought of him.

Dia has changed me, he concluded. But not only that. He had also changed himself, by confronting his fears and to do what came his way.

‘What is going to happen now?’ he asked aloud.

‘Olga is putting the demands of the Environmental Federation on the table,’ replied Irina.

The stately woman dominated the table when she stated in a long monologue the position of the united national environmental protection organisations. Irina was listening so engrossed that she could not translate, but that did not bother him, he understood it also like that. Instead of listening, he looked at the people around the collection of tables. It was fascinating to see how they unconsciously showed what they thought about it. The remaining lawyer of the counterparty, for example, was writing frantically, but that was more because he was angry and felt threatened now that his colleague had dropped out. What was most frightening was to see the reaction of the government official. Outwardly, he looked bored and dishevelled, but Michael could observe his underlying greed, lust for power and contempt. The man was very dangerous, he knew intuitively, because he had absolutely no scruples.

Olga concluded her presentation by handing over papers and held a poll, to which no one responded, and mentioned dates for a subsequent meeting. The two found it a tame ending.

Janos, meanwhile, had come back and sat down next to them. Sensing their incomprehension, he whispered: ‘The demands of the various parties will now be studied. The fight concentrates on the water, who has control over it. The licensing authority says that the municipality of Jablun and the province are in charge. The licence was finally granted by the municipality. Economic Affairs disputes this because the hydropower permit of the water mill falls under their jurisdiction. Forestry does not agree with either of them; he argues that the entire river is in their jurisdiction and the licence is therefore invalid, but nobody else agrees. I think he just said it to get at least some grip on the matter. Because we do not yet have a Ministry of the Environment here, everyone is interfering with it. Yes?’ Stefan demanded his attention.

‘The Ministry of the Interior has drawn up the licence, because waste disposal is their jurisdiction,’ Stefan added. ‘Strangely the Water Management Service is out of the game because it seems to be a municipal river, but the municipality Jablun does not have the people nor the knowledge to control discharge permits, so that no one does. Well, who knows how it all fits together?’

Michael had listened intently. He did not understand exactly entirely, but the picture was clear: who would legally win the battle for the water could determine what would happen to the factory. Their cards did not seem to lie favourably in that respect.

‘The next meeting is in a week,’ Janos continued.

‘In the meantime, the Water Management Service is going to sample, that is the only thing all agreed on,’ Stefan added. ‘Nothing has been said about whether the factory will be allowed to continue running. The struggle is no longer just about the factory. It is about the river, who has control over it: Forestry, Economic Affairs, Interior, the municipality or the province. The State is heir to the then landlord, I believe the Emperor of Austria. At the time of the Communist revolution in forty-nine all the land was expropriated by the state; the question is whether that is still legal.’

‘Did we win or lose?’ Irina wanted to know.

‘You heard it yourself, didn’t you?’ Janos snapped at her. ‘Or were you thinking of something else?’

She blushed and said: ‘That too, but between understanding words and understanding the meaning can be a world of difference.’

‘You said that beautifully,’ said Olga, who came up beside them. ‘But referring to your question, we have now and in the next week clearly the upper hand. That may change if the interest from the outside world is diminishing. That is where the others are hoping for by stalling the case. If something happens elsewhere that the press will fly to, we are left here overnight without any press coverage and we will have much more difficulties.’

## Chapter 29

# Ideas

‘What can we do to not lose?’ Michael was alarmed, even a little angry. Just as he looked up, he saw a wave of gloom passing over Janos’ face. In that one second, Michael understood that the clairvoyant was seeing a disturbing view of the future. Janos, catching his eye, saw he had been caught. The two exchanged a look of understanding.

‘We’ll talk about that later,’ Olga responded to his question. She had been looking at Irina and had not noticed the glances Janos and Michael exchanged. ‘That is actually much more interesting for you, because there you play a leading role.’ Olga smiled. As robust and manly as she was in her role as chairwoman of the Environmental Federation, so gentle she was with him.

‘We’re going to do three things: through our contacts at Unesco, we going to get the forest with the river, up to its source, declared as an international nature reserve. We are in the process of exploring if we can buy the factory and the neighbouring land by a foundation that the Environmental Federation is setting up for this purpose, and thirdly, we have launched a fundraising campaign. In it, you and Diana play the leading roles.’

Irina looked at her enthusiastically. Michael pondered the plan more objectively. Strangely enough, Janos’ confirmation of his scepticism did not undermine him; on the contrary.

‘I think we need to be very quick about this,’ he remarked dryly. ‘The press will be gone in a few days if nothing spectacular is happening.’

‘Exactly. We want to make the first call for financial support on television tonight. That will probably be no problem, because we will tell at the press conference later today what we are planning. That in itself is such great news that we will get a lot of airtime.’

‘And then?’ Michael was still sceptical.

‘We took up Yvette’s suggestion and invited a company that organizes events to create a kind of permanent show. Their representatives will soon be here at the meeting.’

Michael nodded approvingly. That would be quite an improvement compared to the chaos now. He did not realise that Olga and Janos were in fact asking his consent for the planned actions.

‘You know, I wish my father was here. He knows about watercourses, water purification, groundwater and so on.’

‘Ask him to contact you if you are on camera.’

Gosh, yes. He chuckled. ‘I could have thought of that myself.’

At that moment, the landlady came in with soup and bread.

They hurriedly spooned them in; the first attendants of the afternoon meeting were already trickling into the room.

Michael got excited. Thousands of people were intensely engaged in their story: in the guesthouse, in the village, in cities and even in the countries around them. Millions of people followed by the press releases what was happening here and the centre of everything was this room with Olga Jellisek.

‘Are you really a general?’ he asked. He actually believed it but half; a general was a man, wasn’t he? She stroked his hair with a smile. ‘Retired,’ was her short answer. He was suddenly happy with her, with her unbridled energy, her discipline, her warmth. If anyone could win the battle, he thought, it was Olga.

The people who gathered around the tables for the afternoon meeting were of a very different kind. Most of them were cheerful, energetic and looked normal. There were a pair of beautiful women in fashionable clothes, perfectly groomed with a business-like air about them, an obvious nature freak and a quiet old man with white hair, dressed in a light brown leather suit. He immediately approached Michael and Irina to shake hands with them. ‘Roaring Bear.’

‘Are you an Indian?’ asked Irina excitedly. The man looked at her with his black eyes. She blushed and said bravely: ‘I hadn’t have to ask.’

The Indian folded his hands in front of his chest in a greeting. ‘I am in Europe to support nature conservation with the vision of the Native Americans, our tradition you could say. Olga Jellisek invited me to this meeting,’ he clarified. ‘And of course I’m also here to meet some special people who have contact with nature beings.’ He looked at them with a smile. They felt honoured. ‘I also speak on behalf of my tribe, the Cree. As such I am acknowledged as an independent observer on behalf of Unesco, the organisation of the United Nations protecting nature and cultural heritage, things we are talking about here.’

In the meantime, the mess on the tables had been cleared away with combined efforts, new coffee came from downstairs.

‘I’ll talk to you guys later,’ the man whispered, looking for a seat at the conference table.

‘Okay, welcome you all,’ began Janos, who this time apparently was the chairman. ‘For the sake of our guests, we speak English. Does anyone have a problem with that?’

No one responded to this question.

‘Well, most of you don’t know each other, so let’s have an introduction first. My name is Janos Melzedek, I am an internist at Zilina regional hospital and I have a practice as a psychic. But here I am in the position of second secretary of the Slovak Environmental Federation. Over a week ago I was called by a doctor friend of mine to a strange case: Diana. I was the first to see the connection between Diana, the dryad in her and her tree; literally saw, by their intertwining auras. I have been here for some days now and I will be here for some more time.’

While babbling on, he gave a lot of information, before giving the floor to his

neighbour. It was fascinating to hear what people said about themselves, what they considered important and what they preferred to keep to themselves.

After the introduction round, everyone had the feeling of knowing each other a bit. The result was that they talked to each other more openly. There was much laughter. It became a messy meeting, just as impulsive as the chairman. The decisions came as a matter of course.

The two fashionable women turned out to be the representatives of a German event organisation. They laid a plan on the table, with an excuse it was so simple, but it was their first visit to the location. They had barely had the opportunity to get acquainted with the situation.

‘The atmosphere here in the village is cut-throat.’ The black-haired woman did not mince her words. ‘We have to change that very quickly, otherwise it will bleed to death. What I see from the television pictures as I understand them, it is the fairy-tale atmosphere that attracts the people.’

‘How do you keep it going with so many visitors?’ another wanted to know. ‘Every encroachment is detrimental. The landscape is very vulnerable. So much has been trampled on already.’

‘That’s the challenge,’ the women laughed simultaneously, themselves surprised by it.

‘All right, which things are to be determined in advance: a) all transport of people must be by rail. We can rent extra trains from the railways. b) we do not offer accommodation, all people have to return home on the last trains. c) reception in large tents. d) catering: is not a problem, just like sanitary facilities. e) problem: the roads to here are bad, so we have to transport the most material by rail. For emergencies, we can hire a heavy helicopter. Oh yes, we’ll have the people pay in the stations in Zilina and Jablun. We offer a combined ticket for transport to and return, entrance fee and some extras such as a drink and a T-shirt or so. We often do that with the railways, which is a blockbuster as well for them and they already have the counters.’

‘Yes, but what are you showing?’ asked Irina pointedly.

They all looked at her. When she got a colour, Janos started to laugh out loud.

‘You are spot on there, girl. But I play that question back to you. You will have to steal the show.’

She looked at him a bit confused, until she laughed. ‘Okay,’ she accepted the challenge. Undaunted, she summed up: ‘Large video screens with nonstop footage shot by the television reporters. We have to ask them to make all recordings available. We need to show some new images every day, but I think there is already sufficient material for a few days. We can hire cameramen maybe.’

‘Excursions are always good too,’ someone remarked.

Another shook his head. ‘The forest is too vulnerable. Not more than about ten people a day are possible. Larger groups or more groups will run down the vegetation.’

‘You can raffle off ten tickets for an excursion every day,’ suggested one of the women. ‘Selling raffle tickets brings in a lot of money.’

‘Good idea!’

‘Let’s not forget to have the airspace closed for military traffic,’ Olga growled. ‘Air force pilots are always on the lookout for something new when they are doing their obligatory flying hours.’ She made a note of it, she could best arrange it herself. ‘Civilian pilots also, by the way,’ she grumbled.

‘So we just show them video footage? Isn’t that a bit too skinny?’

‘Videos?’

‘A brochure?’

‘I think a documentary on DVD. And a picture book, a colouring book for the children perhaps. Michael should voice over the films.’

‘But I don’t speak Slovak!’

‘It can be subtitled anyway; in other languages too.’

‘Who knows how quickly you can put together such a docudrama?’

‘We work together with a company that makes presentations and promotional films. They need at least two days to assemble a first demo version, provided we have all the material supplied. There will be time to edit a final version afterwards that we can update every week.’

‘Who else has ideas?’

‘A website!’

‘It can be done, but it takes at least a week to get a good one on the internet.’

‘Do it anyway.’

‘Printing a picture of Diana on T-shirts.’

‘And pictures of fairies!’

‘Are there any?’

They looked at each other. Everyone knew how the photos of Yvette had conquered the world, but they were not really suitable as image to be used.

‘Who... or what was in that photo?’ someone asked hesitantly.

‘That was Michael’s dryad,’ Janos revealed. The others looked at him as if he were joking, from that man you could expect anything; but he nodded that he meant it.

‘Do you have a dryad? A fairy?’ the two women asked with awe. It was only then that they really noticed Michael. ‘You are the brother of that girl Diana?’

He nodded stiffly.

‘The one in the photo? The... girl with wings. It’s a girl, isn’t it?’ the woman asked breathlessly, her eyes wide with wonder and desire.

He nodded again.

‘Where is she? Is she here? Or in the forest?’

He shook his head. ‘Gone,’ he muttered.

They looked at him suspiciously. Was he trying to cheat to be interesting?

‘She can make herself visible if she wants to, but she is away for a while.’

That was all he wanted to say. The women looked at Janos, whom they did not trust either, and at long last to Olga, who at least had the air of being straightforward.

She smiled reassuringly. 'She really exists, although I have not seen her myself. But I have not even been in the Elfswood myself.'

At these words, magic vibrated through the atmosphere: the nameless forest had been named.



## Inventive interventions

‘Elfswood! A wonderful name to the attraction,’ muttered the black-haired woman.

‘Can we see her? Your fairy? Now, I mean?’ asked her colleague timidly. Their previously business-like woman-of-the-world pose was forgotten; they were two curious women who longed to see the dreams of their childhood come true.

Michael shook his head. ‘She is frightened by that picture and is hiding. I don’t know where she is. I cannot reach her,’ he replied as he got back some control of his voice.

‘Let’s leave the photo thing alone,’ suggested Janos. He saw that Michael was at the end of his patience. ‘Can we talk about the organisation? Who does what when, what will it cost and who will pay?’

Michael’s thoughts drifted; he had no interest in all that fuss. He wanted to go to the forest. He wanted Dia to manifest herself to him. But it remained empty in his mind.

The group agreed quickly and in surprisingly few words about the organisation. In soft voices, they discussed the rest of the points.

A heavily bearded young man with long hair and bare feet in sandals raised the issue of water management. He turned out to be an ecologist with a specialisation in mountain areas; he could tell a lot about the river.

‘Not so long ago, the course of the river was very different. I have studied the topographical maps of the river valley, from which I have drawn the conclusion that a short time ago a watershed has been breached... I will explain that.’

He laughed when he read incomprehension on the faces around him.

‘Rivers carve out a valley, curling from one side to the other. Sometimes such a loop erodes so much that a high ridge collapses, a ridge separating two water systems, a watershed. That is ... yeah, how do I explain that. Look, from a mountain ridge water flows in two directions, yes? Well, the crest of that ridge is the watershed. If a river undermines that ridge, it collapses. That is called erosion. It has happened here. I have found out that in the beginning of the nineteenth century our little river was flooded by the river Iboč, which made a large bend from Jablun. The Iboč had breached through the watershed. Since this valley is much deeper, the water from the Iboč started flowing in this direction and its original bed dried up, yes?’ Relieved, he saw how the notion dawned on his listeners.

‘The consequences were that this valley, the Valley of Bran, became more accessible and a water mill was built in the enlarged river. That, in turn, was the reason why at the end of the nineteenth century the railway line from Zilina to Jablun was constructed through the Bran Valley. We have the sawmill to thank

for this railway: all the timber was transported by rail. Thanks to the good rail connection, a steam sawmill replaced the water mill in the twentieth century. The result is that our river drains a very large area at present. I have thought, if we could have that watershed recovered, we are closing the inflow of foreign water to the area completely. It's to prefer because it is not really clean: the Iboc flows through Jablun.'

'So our river is already polluted upstream?' Michael asked disappointed.

'It's not that bad,' Johan replied, 'but you can never be sure that something bad happens. If you dam the Iboc, you know for sure that our river will contain only pure water.'

The thought appealed, though it seemed incredibly bold.

'How do you want to do it?' asked Michael, electrified by the idea.

'As far as I have seen, a single dynamite charge is sufficient. We can use it to collapse an unstable wall and voilà: the watershed is restored.'

'Gee, what a great idea,' Irina muttered.

'Who has some dynamite?' Michael asked, half seriously.

The others first looked at him to see if he meant it and then laughed halfheartedly when they were not sure.

'Wait!' cried Irina. Excited she stood up. 'Unstable you said? So that mountain wall can also come down on its own?'

'It is inevitable. It can happen tomorrow or in a thousand years, but it will happen.' The man was very firm in his opinion. 'There is a large fault in it.'

'Well, then we will do a good deed by causing a controlled collapse at a time when there are no people around that could be harmed.'

'Yes, you could see it that way.' Surprised, those present accepted her vision, although it was a kind of destructive act. But if they prevented accidents...

'What will happen to the water that flows this way now?' asked Olga, who felt responsible for a proper settlement of the action.

'Oh, that just will return to its old bed. There only runs a little bit of water through now, only when the snow melts is it more.'

'Well,' Stefan muttered, 'I wonder what the consequences will be on the discharge permit of the factory.'

Michael pricked up his ears...

The thought of diverting an entire river was for most of those present a bit too much. Campaigning for a cleaner environment, yes, they could do that. But so rigorous an intervention in nature, that was beyond their imagination.

Michael, however, had accepted the thought seriously.

He viewed it a very adequate solution to the problem of saving the Elfswood. Well considered, he realised, the situation even called for it.

Janos recognised that people were tired and adjourned the meeting. The organising agency would start immediately, promised the two women. They would call their office to put the realisation in motion. Michael was instructed to ask Yvette

to take suitable photographs for the T-shirts. Janos and Olga would ask the various television companies to put their recordings available.

In the hustle and bustle of people walking, talking and calling Michael went to the ecologist for a chat. Irina followed him closely: they were at that moment two souls with one thought. The man had been looking at them for some time and made room next to him.

‘Hello, I think it’s a very good idea,’ Michael started. ‘But I think we should do it ourselves. The Environmental Federation will never dare. I mean blowing up that mountain.’

The man was not at all surprised. On the contrary, he looked if he had just heard a good joke. ‘No, I don’t think so. I may be more radical than most. I think there is completely no point in interfering with nature. As long as you reckon that the situation improves. What I can judge reasonably well. I am a good ecologist.’

They understood that he just knew it from himself.

‘We would like to see for ourselves what you have told us. Can we go with you sometime?’

‘I’d love to!’

‘If we want to collapse that mountain wall, when is the best time to do it?’

‘Tonight. A thunderstorm is predicted. More unstable mountain walls are collapsing because of lightning strike’.

The jitters of adventure raced through them and collected in their bellies like butterflies. That guy said it so bluntly: tonight.

‘Do you have dynamite then?’

‘No, but we can get some in Jablun. A friend of mine works for a road construction company, they have plenty of that stuff. I myself live in Jablun.’

‘How do we get there?’ It seemed that Michael did not realise the full scope of what they were up to, but that were but appearances. In fact, he had never been so focused before.

‘We can be in Jablun in four hours if we walk along the river. That is very nice. We can also take the train. That is faster but not as much fun.’

He could see their preferences from their faces. ‘Hiking, then. It’s rough terrain; do you have good shoes?’

‘Mine are in the hallway, but I prefer to walk barefoot,’ Michael said.

‘I got my mountain boots at the scouts’ camp,’ said Irina.

‘We still have to go back to get those photos of Diana,’ Michael said. ‘We will get your shoes right away. Johan, are you coming with us? Maybe you like to meet Diana?’

‘I’d love to!’

‘Brilliant, when we’re done here we’ll go right away. I’ll tell Janos and see if we can get something to eat.’

Janos and Olga, however, were on the stairs telling the press what had been discussed. They thought it was better not to disturb them. They left a note and

climbed out the bathroom window unseen. Johan and Irina showed nothing of their surprise at the unusual route, but Michael could feel their tension; it was a bit like an escape from a besieged fortress.

They chose the route through the meadows to the edge of the forest. It was warm, fragrant and peaceful, they walked silently behind each other. Once under the trees, Irina and Michael were at home and walked humming along the path that gradually was created.

Johan saw they were completely absorbed in something he had no part in, but what he recognised from the many times he had been hiking alone in the wilderness. He adapted and walked as silently through the forest as they did.

‘Michael!’ cried Dinja, who saw them coming. ‘The compressor is already there!’

When they were closer, she repeated, a little calmer now: ‘The scouts have just passed on the message that the compressor has been placed by a helicopter between their camp and the forest. The man with it is waiting for you to place the air lances, should I say?’

‘Oh, I’ll go and see him right away. I’ll be right back.’

It was still necessary, he could see from Diana: she could barely stand upright and moved around sitting or crawling. It didn’t bother her, it seemed. She was completely introverted and sat dreamy between the others. But he thought it was an unpleasant sight.

## Breakthrough



The mechanic jumped up when he saw Michael coming. He was a young man with cheeky eyes, black hands and smudges on his face. Michael liked him from the start, a real tough guy who was afraid of nothing and nobody.

‘Sorry for my dirty hands, but I had to do some adjusting on the engine and I don’t want to wash my hands in that water.’

‘By the way, I am Michael, Diana is my sister.’

‘I know. My name is Marko. Shall we start right away?’

‘The sooner the better. Say, were you hoisted down by the helicopter too?’

‘No.’ He laughed. ‘I came by train. The pilot noticed it would be very difficult to get the compressor over land at the forest and we have been given permission to land the thing here directly. I walked over to loosen the hoisting ropes. The helicopter has not even landed.’

While walking to the camp, Marko became perplexed. The contrast between the lush vegetation on the forest side and the bare trunks along the river shocked him. ‘Is the water that poisonous?’

‘Not so now, nothing has been discharged for some time. The sludge at the bottom is still toxic.’

As they walked into the clearing, Michael pointed out: 'Look, this is the tree. Do you need help?'

'That's a big one! No, I can manage. I blow the injectors into the ground with the compressed air. I know where, I have treated so many trees. Mostly in cities where the roots are suffocating from traffic and leaky gas pipes or sewage pipes. I see that there are already potholes, that's good. I can use those as relief points.'

Michael looked at him, not understanding.

'Where the air and groundwater can get out,' Marko clarified.

'Oh well, of course. Look, there's Diana; she's waving at you. This is her tree. When she is able to walk again, I will be grateful to you forever.'

'No need to be it that long,' Marko said hesitantly. Overwhelmed by the sight of the little girl, he had immediately fallen for her. Michael chuckled; so did most people. While Marko chatted with Diana, Michael sat down in front of the large tent, where Yvette was brooding. 'Yvette?' he began timidly. 'Diana has agreed on printing her photo on T-shirts. The T-shirts are to be sold to tourists. We want to use the money to buy the factory. Would you like to take a picture of her and me?'

She started shaking her head halfway through his story.

'Please? She only wants to be photographed by you.'

She wiped her dirty face and muttered: 'Bien sûre. I'll take those pictures of you and Diana. But I won't bring them to the village.'

'No, I'll do it tomorrow,' Michael said softly. 'We have to leave now.'

She was changing when she picked up her camera. She still looked like an appallingly filthy girl who smelled of sweat and mud, but her gaze and movements were focused and practised.

They were nicely exposed; in a few minutes she had taken the requested pictures of each person individually and as a group. There was still enough power in her printer's battery, so she could immediately make a few prints.

They were beautiful: in the first photo, Diana, who was full into the light, looking to Michael, while his face, just in the shadow, was vaguely visible. Also the photo where Diana was alone under her tree in her red dress was beautiful. Diana was delighted of her own image, she could not get enough of it.

Before they left, Irina and Michael liked to eat a bit. They would miss the supper if they wanted it to make it to the watershed with Johan before dark. While all kinds of food were prepared over a fire, Michael and Irina told what had been discussed. They said nothing about their plan, as if by tacit agreement. This had to be kept secret, because it was illegal, of course. Their story that they were going on an ecological expedition with Johan tonight however, was entirely true.

Diana had been observing Johan in the meantime. At some point, she crept up onto his lap. The stiff hippie ecologist reacted happy like a child, lucky to be accepted, something that he did not encounter much in the outside world.

Satisfied with what had been set in motion, Michael stood up when they had finished their meal. Time to get into action!

They said goodbye to those who stayed behind, greeted the mechanic who was concentrating on connecting hoses and ran all three along the path to the village. At the scouts' barricade, they waited for Irina, who quickly put on her mountain boots and put some more things in her backpack.

As always, there were curious people watching. They made their way friendly but firm through the group, after which they walked at a decent pace in the direction of the village.

To avoid the crowd they crossed the bridge, walked around the village, climbed a slope with spruce, crossed the railway line and descended a little further into the valley back to the river. Upstream from the village it looked like it must have looked downstream in the past as well. The banks were overgrown with willows, alders, birches and ash trees and a wealth of flowering plants. In the gently flowing water plants waved back and forth with large white flowers that seemed to float on the water. Dragonflies and damselflies flew zigzagging in the sunlight; in the crystal-clear water little fish shone.

'The water looks good,' said Johan, his first words since their departure. 'Yet it is polluted, not seriously at the moment, sometimes it is worse.'

'What's in it?' wanted Irina to know.

'Lead, cadmium, chromium, copper, strontium, too much sulphate, too much nitrate and traces of hydrocarbons that do not belong in it; solvents especially, as there is a paint factory in Jablun. And the rubbish dump is close to the water.'

'Unbelievable that the water still looks so healthy,' she said, a little depressed that mankind is actually violating the natural environment everywhere.

'There is a lot of water now because of the heavy rains, that is why this year the concentrations are lower than normal. Aquatic life recovers very quickly. But no fish grows bigger than fifteen centimetres.'

'Why don't the fish get bigger?'

'As a fish grows, it absorbs more and more toxins,' he explained laconic. 'Until the fish gets sick of it and stops growing or dies.'

Shocked by the self-evidence with which Johan took dying for granted in nature, Michael and Irina walked on in his footsteps.

They followed a narrow trail along the murmuring river that meandered between grassy meadows with alder groves, groups of willows and hedgerows with hawthorn and elder. It looked idyllic as a river valley should look. Yet something was not right. Michael and Irina noticed with their sensible senses, that saw more than the outward appearance, that defilement had crept in, a drab veil that tarnished the radiant and pure, which is so terribly vulnerable.

It touched them deeply that here purity had come to an end less than a human age ago. Through negligence, through greed for money, indifference for the consequences of human actions.

Every willow tree, meanwhile, reminded Michael of the Deva of The Willow, his beloved Dia. In vain he tried to attune, to listen if she was there, but there was

no response. The trees stood there as they had always stood.

After an hour, they had climbed quite a bit. The terrain became rockier. The meadows gave way to short-grazed areas, stony patches, marshes with ferns and bushes spruce or oak.

'Look, it is easy to see that larger animals live here. All solitary trees stand in a circle of prickly bushes, mostly blackthorn. Only there do they have a chance to germinate without being grazed,' Johan pointed out.

'What kind of animals graze here?'

'A small herd of feral ponies wanders around, occasionally some cattle with a shepherd will come by, and mountain goats.'

The river passed some rapids; elsewhere it got lost in pools and swamps.

'Look, you can see from the bed that the river used to be a small stream. The water flows for the most part outside the former banks. Here the stream is fifty metres wide, see?'

'It is one soggy swamp,' Michael remarked. 'Where is that old stream bed?'

Johan pointed to a winding track.

'I don't understand,' said Irina. 'Down in the valley there is a deep river bed.'

'In a few hundred years, the water here was not yet able to grind out a proper bedding in the rocky underground. Down in the valley it is a clay soil and it could happen in short time because of the large quantities of melt water that gather in the spring.'

Irina nodded. That made sense.

'How far is it to the watershed?' asked Michael.

'Another four kilometres or so. See that hole with the steep crumbling walls? That's where the river broke through.'

As they got closer, they could see the hole in the ridge more clearly. Another hour of walking and climbing later, they arrived at the foot of the collapse. The water fell down a huge fan of broken, moss-covered boulders in tangled waterfalls. Turning around, they had a wonderful view across the valley. They could follow the watercourse far beyond the village, which looked very small. The railway line was like a winding line; a toy train just left the platform.

At the end of the valley, the dark green broccoli-like mass of the Elfswood seemed to creep upwards. It was pretty big, they could tell from this height.

'Look, you can see that at the end of the valley there used to be a lake. It was drained a long time ago when the rock over a cave system collapsed. Before that, all the water flowed over that lower ridge on the left.'

Johan gazed across the valley for a while with his eyes narrowed and sighed.

He turned around and said gruffly: 'When we have passed that stone heap it is still a half-hour walk to Jablun. By the time it is dark, we'll be back here to blast.'

'Where is that thunderstorm of yours?' Irina found it mighty exciting.

## At the breaking point

They clambered up the broken rocks. The stratification and the shapes of the debris indicated that it once had been a thin slate wall that had fallen over into the valley of Bran. It looked a bit like a breach in a fortress wall. Through the gap between the sharp-edged rock walls on either side they could see into a higher valley that ran from left to right. Not far from them was a fairly large town with light-coloured industrial buildings and a single factory chimney.

‘Over there you can see Jablun, the Iboc is flowing from there this way,’ pointed out Johan. ‘You can see very well from here that the bottom of the valley of the Iboc is higher than the valley we have just come from. It is part of another mountain massif of hard shale. When the watershed collapsed, the water started flowing through the breach. Our valley is worn out in soft limestone, that’s why it is much deeper.’

It was clearly visible that the original course of the Iboc was interrupted at this point. A meandering strip of trees indicated where the riverbed continued in a wide bend through the high valley.

Michael looked around. Was it possible, what they were planning?

His gaze wandered along the rocky cliffs, towards the stream that flowed out of the town and from it to the wide valley they just came out. He got the feeling that this breach had to be closed. In his mind’s eye, he observed how the collapse had opened the beforehand inaccessible valley. That had been perhaps necessary at that time he realised, to get the world acquainted with the forest. But now the door had to be closed again.

‘The unstable slope that we are going to blast is above us,’ Johan continued his explanations. They looked up along a tilting, crumbling rock face, reddish lit by the low sunlight.

‘Let’s keep walking,’ Irina shuddered. ‘I have a feeling that he wants to crush us.’

After some more scrambling, they came to a walkable path. Half an hour later they arrived in Jablun.

Johan rang the doorbell of a house in a suburb. Michael and Irina were hiding behind a bush. It took a long time. After a while Johan came back in their direction, accompanied by a man who was grumbling vehemently. They did not understand him because he was too far away, but they had a suspicion that he did not like to get his friend a few sticks of dynamite.

They made themselves invisible; Johan had said that his friend would certainly not cooperate in the presence of others.

The two men disappeared through a fence of a large construction company.

Michael and Irina walked down the road and sat down on the verge. The industrial zone was deserted; the only sound in the quiet evening was a faint rumble of a factory complex far away.

The sun had disappeared behind the mountains; it cooled down. They put on long trousers and jumpers.

Johan came whistling down the road a little later, laden with two boxes.

He grinned at them.

‘How do you get dynamite out like that?’ asked Michael. ‘Isn’t that prohibited?’ He looked anxiously at the grey cardboard boxes. So much!

‘Yes, but I often get a rod to blast a piece of rock or something. Here, take it, that wire is heavy.’ The box that Michael was handed turned out to contain a spool of wire and an ignition box.

Johan’s answer did not explain anything; surprised, he asked: ‘Blasting rocks? Why?’

‘To see what’s underneath, how stable a slope is, or to see how the fresh rock is colonised by plants. Research to assess the environmental impacts of mining and road construction.’

At least that explained something.

‘Where did you learn to blast rocks? Or are you just doing something?’ Irina asked.

Johan laughed. ‘You want to know everything, don’t you? Well, to give a hint: my friend and I were explosives experts in the army a long time ago.’

They walked on in silence. Their goal was just lit by the last light in the sky. By the time they got there, dusk had fallen. On top of the steep rock face they had a wonderful view of the world shrouded in shadows. The air hung silent and expectant between the slopes.

‘Look, over there you see the promised thunderstorm,’ Johan pointed out.

In the southeast towering thunderheads were still faintly lit in pink. Below it was pitch black, in the darkness they saw the flickering of lightning.

‘In an hour time, you will hear and see thunder and lightning here. Come on, let’s get to work. On my last visit I found this crack where we can place the load. Then the whole piece will fall off,’ he said laconically. From the box he took out bars of explosives wrapped in yellow paper, that he began to stick together with tape.

‘Isn’t it dangerous? I mean, can’t people or animals get hurt?’ Irina asked anxiously. Johan did not answer, concentrated he put a detonator between the bars and connected the wire on the spool with it.

‘That’s why we will stand on the other side,’ he remarked when he was finished.

‘I have five hundred metres of wire, so we can keep a safe distance to keep an eye on everything. If someone is walking or a animal, we can wait until the coast is clear. But with this storm coming up there really is no one outside. Come here, Michael, can you do bring some stones?’

‘It just reminds me,’ Michael remarked, as he lugged stoned to cover the dynamite charge in the rock crevice. ‘What if the weather turns out to be really bad? Then we can’t go back.’

‘Sure, we’ll be fine,’ Johan said, groaning with exertion as he rammed the boulders into the rocky crevice. ‘It is almost full moon. Once the storm has passed, we can hike in the moonlight romantically. I often go into the mountains at night. Or are you afraid?’

‘Not afraid; but I don’t think it’s any fun climbing over all those rocks,’ mumbled Michael.

‘You’ll see how you’ll like the night walk,’ said Johan. ‘Come, we will lower the spool on its own thread, then we will climb back up on the other side.’

It was all going smoothly, until the spool caught on a protruding rock. Johan tried to swing it loose. They could see only his body; his shoulders and head hung over the edge.

‘Shit, shit and more shit!’ they heard him shout.

He stood up moaning. ‘The spool is stuck, at about fifteen metres from the bottom. I have to climb to it from below. Come on, otherwise it will be too dark,’ he commanded. They ran down the slope and clambered into the now rapidly diminishing dusk along the splashing river back to the rock face where the spool was trapped.

Johan saw him first. The three of them stood to look. The crumbling rock face was almost vertical, here and there even tilted forward a bit. It seemed almost impossible to Michael to climb up there. The first few metres were easy, yes...

Johan had apparently found a climbable route, for he walked on a little further and reached in no time some height. Admiringly they were looking up to him. The last few metres were more difficult, as the rock face protruded. Johan hung like a lizard against the rock, holding for a while to look how he should proceed. Very slowly, he pulled himself up with little jerks. Suddenly he was just hanging on his arms! He fell...

No, with his toes hooked into an invisible crevice he succeeded in clinging to the rock. Loose stones clattered down. They heard him panting.

He moved further to the side and tried to round the protruding rock. They saw his upper body disappear behind it. They went a little backwards to get a better view.

Johan was prying the spool loose with a stretched arm. It was too heavy; with a frustrated cry he had to let it fall.

‘Shit!’ he cried, for the umpteenth time. ‘If only the wire is not broken.’

With their hearts in their throats and sweat in their hands, they saw him rest a while, glued to the rock. Moving slowly he came down. Trembling on his legs, he stood a few moments later panting next to them.

‘That almost went wrong,’ he said, jolting. ‘Well, let’s just climb up the other slope, I can already smell the coming rain,’ he rushed them when he had regained

his breath. They followed in his footsteps; their vision was diminishing; in the end they only saw something pale moving in front of them, what were his bare legs. When he stopped unexpectedly, Irina almost hit his back. Michael landed with his head against her behind and almost shot between her legs, which elicited a giggle from both of them.

‘Here we are well protected. Just look.’ Johan flashed a strong torch to illuminate the rock above their heads. They had come out in some kind of worn-out hollow. Chilly gusts of wind swirled around the rocks with the mineral smell of rain on dry stone. Thick drops began to splash down.

Under the overhanging rock it remained dry. The rough back wall even radiated warmth.

Less than ten seconds later, a rustling curtain of rain closed in the world. Everywhere sounded splashing and it started to gurgle and clock.

‘Hold the lamp while I fix the detonator.’ Johan was unstoppable. He cut the thread from the spool and stripped it, exposing the copper ends, which he put under two screw caps, one red and one black. He peered intently on a gauge and sighed with relief. ‘No fracture by the looks of it; the resistance is normal for this length of wire. Okay, we are ready. Well, now we have to wait for the first blow of thunder strike.’

‘Does anyone have a camera?’ asked Michael. ‘Perhaps we can show later how we did it, when everything is behind us.’

‘I have a camera in my mobile,’ said Irina. She dug the thing out of her backpack.

‘Just put it on flash, stand there and aim that way.’ Johan shone his torch into the darkness. Irina followed the moving spot of light.

‘That good?’

‘Okay...’ His words were drowned out by a bright white flash followed by a loud thunderclap. Irina screamed with fright.

## Chapter 33

### Lightning strike 2

‘Watch out!’ shouted Johan, who was getting more and more in his military way of doing. ‘At the next flash it will blast. Keep making pictures! NOW!’



An elongated white flash on the mountain opposite; a heavy thump made the rock shook. Creaking, banging and thumping between the rumbling of thunder. Another bang, much heavier! An earthquake! Stones began to roll around them, gravel fell down. The rock above them was about to collapse!

No, the earth stopped shaking, only some small pebbles rolled down.

‘Did you see anything?’ shouted Johan, elated as a footballer that scored the winning goal.

‘No!’ shrieked Irina back. ‘I had my eyes closed, but I’ve pressed many times.’

The next picture followed, which they could see by the flash.

The rumbling below them gradually ceased until only some loose stones rattled against each other.

‘Come and see! If it’s lightning again, we can see the result!’ Johan was jumping for joy like a little boy.

Michael and Irina were trembling on their legs and looked for consolation at each other. Somehow they were totally overwhelmed by this act of violence, by the fanaticism with which the hippie ecologist had intervened in the course of things; in particular, in the course of the small river about which a legislative struggle had been ignited.

With legs drawn up, head on knees, Michael and Irina sat close together waiting for the thunderstorm to pass. Cold gusts blew through their shelter. Johan had sat down a little way from them, deep in thought, insensitive for the cold.

When the last rain rushed down into the valley, they scrambled to their feet at the same time. It was pitch black. Michael did not like it not to be able to see a glimpse of their path over newly fallen rocks.

‘Shall we go?’ suggested Johan.

‘Can you see anything?’

Apparently he had some vision, because he walked ahead of them as if it were broad daylight.

‘Are you shocked?’ asked Irina softly.

‘Hm,’ Michael grumbled. He did not know what to think of the whole thing.

‘I did. I almost wet my pants. I almost crushed my mobile,’ she confessed.

‘Well, I knew a little what was coming because I have seen an explosion before. Thunderstorms always make me restless, but not scared,’ he said thoughtfully. He chuckled as he remembered the lightning strike right at his feet. ‘Certainly not anymore since the day before yesterday.’

They followed Johan; they climbed a lot more laboriously and cautiously than the experienced mountain wanderer, as Michael called him in his mind. A little above the collapse, Johan let the beam of his torch shine over the mountain of broken rocks. It was an unimaginable havoc. Freshly split rocks, some as big as houses, glinted in the bright light.

The hole that had been created earlier by a piece that had fallen into their valley, was now filled to their feet with immense pieces of mountain. The river was effectively dammed.

‘We can’t go through here,’ growled Johan. ‘But I hadn’t expected it. We will walk along the path we took on the way out. It goes down on the other side.’

Michael was dismayed by the first glimpse of the result of their intervene. Was this right? Was this responsible? What would the nature beings think about it? He did not know, for in a certain sense they had caused damage.

They just started the descent into the valley when the bright moon appeared from behind the last white-lit sailing clouds. They could see razor-sharp, albeit in

black and white. Walking turned from a task into a pleasure. Half dreaming, the two walked behind the taciturn Johan.

The river, which had been turbulent on the way to the breach, had almost dried up. A lot lower, water gathered from small pools and wells and they could hear murmuring a tiny stream. At a side brook where they had paused on the way out, they drank some water before they continued.

‘Can you find your way back home?’ Johan asked suddenly. ‘I’m going back to Jablun.’

‘That’s all right, Johan,’ replied Michael. ‘We will manage from here. Thanks for the damming.’

They looked at him leaving with mixed feelings. Engrossed in their thoughts, they walked on. Michael felt responsible: if he had not encouraged Johan it certainly would not have happened. In fact had Johan left the decision to him, still a boy.

The operation had, in retrospect, turned out to be ridiculously simple; the consequences he could not oversee. An old situation had been restored; it seemed to fit. The water from that other stream did not belong here, not in this valley. This valley was supposed to be all by itself.

He felt approval and knew it was coming from the forest. That was why he immediately had accepted John’s proposal: it seemed natural that this man had come to them.

He sighed. He missed Dia, although it was no longer as poignant as it had been in the beginning. He had stayed tuned to the forest and the other dryads. He was walking here with Irina who had been a loyal friend and a great companion. It was a pity that they were not in love with each other, she was so beautiful and sweet and brave and smart... She obviously picked up on it, because she gently squeezed his hand.

Tired from the hour-long journey, they reached the deep in sleep sunken scout camp, where Irina with a sigh and an embrace said goodbye. If she hadn’t been so exhausted from all the events and just tipped over with sleep she might have taken him to her tent... to her bed...

Lost in indefinable thoughts, Michael strolled on. He longed for a bed, but not really for his lonely spot in the ferns.

The moon illuminated his path; at his secret place he found the shelter wind-blown, his sleeping bag was wet. Now what? He was so tired and sleepy. He had to do something else, but both tents at the beech clearing were full. He could return to the scouts camp and ask Irina if he could sleep in her tent...

He first hung his sleeping bag over a low-hanging branch to dry.

Under the ground sheet, the fern bed turned out to be bone-dry.

Without thinking twice he crawled in, accepting the tickling.

## Chapter 34

# Back in the world

Michael had slept through the morning.

He had been dreaming; about mountains that bursted and rivers of little spheres flowing out. In his dream he had be looking in the dark for Dia who could be anywhere: she could fly, while he was chained to the earth. He had fallen into a precipice where he made a soft landing on a long staircase, down which he ran in great strides, constantly down, until he reached a cave where he could go no further. He had to go through the cave, but could not move. Behind him a crowd of people was waiting, silent, but exerting a great deal of pressure.

He woke up with difficulty.

Stiff and uncomfortable, he made his way through the cool wetness of the forest to the camp under Diana's tree, to wash at the gargoyle and change clothes. With some regret he looked at his dishevelled, stained and smeared outfit he had been so great with yesterday. A shame, but nothing seemed to be torn. He should not have climbed mountains to make mountain walls collapse, dressed in these clothes.

Just as he was about to emerge from the forest, he was warned by an unfamiliar voice. He suspiciously hid behind low-hanging branches to check out the camp. There were two men sitting on the ground with their backs to him; he could not see who they were. Janos and Dinja were sitting opposite them listening. Yvette, the twins and Diana were not to be seen; they would still be in their tent.

He made a detour to reach his tent. There was nobody in. Relieved, he dived in and managed to get some clean clothes out of his rucksack.

He had no desire to say anything to the four people under the tree and walked past them with a stiff face. He changed his mind, went back and also took pants and socks from another compartment in his rucksack. It was more comfortable to put on everything clean right away. He expected having to go out all day again with all those people who were working with the forest. By the way, were they working with the forest or only for their own interests?

Out of temper, he went to wash by the pipe. He had forgotten his towel! He had to dry himself with his shirt; it was dirty and wrinkled anyway.

It took a while for his clammy skin to feel at home in the clean clothes, but he could not go on nude. He walked back and forth until his body heat had made everything feeling comfortable, before he went to the four adults.

He nodded to the two unknown men and sat down a bit shyly on his crouch next to Janos.

'Hello, my boy. How was your walk last night?' Janos greeted him cheerfully.

'Okay,' Michael muttered, avoiding his gaze.

He felt sometimes like an open book; as if Janos could read on his forehead what he thought and especially what he wanted to keep hidden. He cast a quick glance at Dinja. Would she be able to tell from just looking at him what Irina and he had been up to that night?

To his relief Dinja did not pay attention.

He pointed to a sumptuous breakfast on a plaid. 'May I...?'

'Help yourself, we've already eaten,' said Janos warmly. 'Would you like some coffee or tea?'

'Coffee, please,' he said mechanically, looking suspiciously at the two strangers. Janos acted as if nothing had happened and poured a cup of coffee for him from a huge thermos.

'Hum,' Michael coughed uneasily, 'who are they?'

It couldn't be shorter. Although he found it a bit blunt, he had no need now for outsiders in their closed world, certainly not if they were adults, and he certainly didn't fancy the games of Janos who was looking at him mysteriously and pretended not to hear him.

'These two gentlemen are from a company in Munich that will make the video. We are going to compile a list of the products we want to sell to tourists.' Dinja answered in Janos's place. 'Why don't you tell him?'

'To lure him out, why else do you think?' grinned Janos. 'He is not as innocent as he seems.' Michael waited defensively for what was to come. He ate a slice of bread with only a little butter on it, because he was not very hungry. The fresh bread just smelled so appalling.

Janos became business-like and introduced the men. The two politely stood to shake hands with Michael. They looked respectful, he thought. He stood up as well.

'They are from a multimedia company,' Janos went on as they returned to sitting. 'Enlisted by the event agency to make the videos that we have been talking about, remember? They can also produce a website.'

'Oh, that's nice,' Michael muttered.

'They have a first draft in mind,' Janos said. 'They will use the regular television images as a basis. Beside that they also can use recordings of various reporters that have never been broadcast. They would like you to do the voice over. They also want to make special recordings to make the video more fairy-tale-like.'

Michael nodded; he could do that. But now that he was confronted with facts he first wanted to know the latest news.

Janos said the compressor was doing its job. 'He is on a clock, it switches off and on several times an hour. As a result, the soil around Diana's tree is ventilated as it were. The effect is dramatic: Diana walks and hops again around as if nothing had happened. Furthermore, Yvette went to the village, bringing her photos to have them printed on a hundred thousand T-shirts.' She had apparently decided not to wait for Michael.

'You've had quite a success yourself, haven't you?' insinuated Janos finally, with a head movement towards the shrunken river. 'What a thunderstorm tonight!'

'Yes,' said Michael sullenly. 'Dangerous to be in the mountains then; an avalanche can come down like that if lightning strikes in a weak spot.'

'Well, imagine that a riverbed gets buried. Then the water will flow the other way,' Janos added. He responded to Michael's angry look and kept his tongue.

The two Germans looked crestfallen. There was clearly something going beyond them.

'But now to the point, Miche,' Janos continued. 'There is a mobile studio in the village that these people can rent for their sound recordings. That's where you can tell the story.'

Michael shifted uncomfortably back and forth.

'Just tell your story, Miche, like you did before. Don't worry, there is no script, the men want to edit the video along the lines of your story. If they still want something clarified, they will tell you; your story is the thread. They have studied the footage that was taken of you and think you should tell it spontaneously as it comes to you. That has magic!'

The two men nodded vigorously.

Michael finally understood that they were speaking so little because they were simply impressed.

'They would also like to shoot some images of how it is going on here.'

'That's okay, but only if the Americans do the shooting. By the way, are they still here?' Michael was implacable in his preference. No more strangers in the forest.

'I don't know. Go and see in the village.'

'Will you come with me?' he asked. He didn't like at all to face all those people, even though, apart from the American reporters, he would like to see the general and Stefan again.

Janos rubbed his hair and smiled at him. 'Don't you think I would want to miss all that and besides, I also have to arrange some things. When you have finished your breakfast, shall we go?'

They left Dinja with Michael's still sleeping sisters and walked past the muffled buzzing compressor to the camp of the scouts.

Irina was sitting by the fire drinking tea and directly accepted Michael's invitation to join them to the village. They looked at each other quickly in a secret understanding. She kept walking beside him, keeping a distance between Janos and her. Michael, however, was not fooled: what was going on between the two was still there.

The village was fairly orderly, although it was still full and messy. The access roads were closed; guests could only come and go by train. The guesthouse was crowded as usual.

The latest news, that the river has suddenly been reduced to a quarter of its original volume, was widely reported.

Journalists had been there with a helicopter, had already identified the cause. The collapse of the mountain wall during the violent thunderstorm was whispered to be attributed to the elements that had intervened. Others spoke openly about elementals. Apparently no one came to the idea that people would be crazy enough to blast a mountain wall in a dangerous storm.

Once inside, they were bombarded with questions.

‘Ladies and gentlemen!’ roared Janos from the stairs. ‘In half an hour there will be a press conference. We will now discuss the on going business.’

The five of them went upstairs, where they were warmly welcomed. The two German producers introduced themselves to Olga and Stefan.

‘Well,’ Stefan began as soon as they were seated. ‘That collapse has put everything into question. There is now so little water in the river that the discharge permit has become invalid. I have checked it out. The stream now falls into a completely different category, namely those of local streams in an unspoilt catchment area. It is not allowed to discharge in it at all, not even by households.’

‘Well, that’s good news!’ said Michael with a slightly more cheerful face. Irina smiled and said nothing.

Olga looked them straight in the eyes. ‘You were there last night, weren’t you, with Johan?’

It was not a question but a statement. The two coloured and nodded.

She sighed. ‘I saw you arguing with him. I suppose it was not dangerous?’

They could say a resounding no to that. ‘Johan knew exactly what he was doing. He was an explosives expert in the army, he said, so he could handle it,’ said Irina.

‘Well, I don’t really agree, but the effect is dramatic,’ Olga said more cheerfully. ‘Apart from the advantage that water from Jablun is no longer flowing here, it is for our case a giant leap forward, if Stefan is right and the permit has become invalid. I think that legally there will be still a lot of debate, but we will see. I am curious about the reactions to tonight’s broadcasts. In any case, it is big news, which is always good for keeping the press here.’

Janos knocked on the table for attention. ‘I actually want to announce two excursions into the forest, of about ten men each, also to keep them here. After all, we promised. Do you agree?’ They all nodded in agreement.

‘Should we organise one to the collapse as well? There have already individual reporters set out to do. Or do we interfere?’

‘No,’ said Michael, ‘or yes, let them go, there is nothing left to be spoiled. Let them have their go. In the forest, we must keep it quiet.’

‘Good,’ said Janos, ‘if we have nothing more important to discuss I propose that these two gentlemen go with Michael and Irina to the mobile studio for the voice-over of the video film. I think we should not have the youngsters appear in front of the press in case they run their mouths. After all it is not legal what they have done.’

‘Are the Americans still here?’ asked Michael.

‘Only Ann is still here. The camera crews have left,’ said Olga. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Oh, because we still need shots of the camp. Michael actually wanted to invite John and Vincent to that,’ Janos explained.

‘Or Mike and Roland,’ Irina added softly.

‘We can suggest it to Ann when we meet her.’

It was thus decided. The meeting broke up.

While Olga and Janos held the press conference, Michael and Irina left with the two Germans.

Opposite the platform, two large trailers stood next to a enormous transmission tower, its hydraulically extendable struts took up a large part of the station square.

One trailer contained the transmitter and a softly humming generator, the other turned out to be a complete mini-studio. A technician of the Slovakian television would take care of the recording and welcomed them.

The recording went smoothly: once Michael was telling he could not stop. Irina occasionally joined him in her enthusiasm, so they said more than they originally did have the intention to.

They listened to the tape, and were shocked: they had told the whole story of blasting the mountain! In consultation with the two producers, it was agreed that they would include that adventure only with Olga’s permission. Their frankness should not hinder the fight against the environmental polluters.

The two video editors thought it was a shame, because it was an exciting story. They would surely make a script for it. As soon as it was allowed to unveil Michael and Irina had assisted Johan to make the mountain wall collapse, the event could be staged. Complete with night explosions and all, that could be done in a stone quarry. There, every day, a piece of mountain was blown up.

They made it clear in their commentary that the battle was won as far as they were concerned. The collapsed mountain had dammed the Iboc for good. And without that water, the factory’s licence to discharge into it expired.

‘All we have to do is clean up the factory and the river bed,’ Michael finished optimistically.

‘With your contributions we can buy the factory, so that never again poison will be discharged. The forest is safe at last, my sister will now quickly become completely healthy.’

For a moment, the smile still stuck to his face. He manfully clenched his jaws to control his grieve for the ever lost elf Dia. He had been perfectly happy for one day. He was terribly reluctant to spend the rest of his life with only the memory.

End of book II





## Book III The forest fights back

## Chapter 1

### Father and son

They blinked against the sharp light as they came out of the mobile studio on the station square. It took them a while to recognise the people waiting.

‘Ann!’ Irina ran happily towards the smiling American reporter.

‘Dad?’ stammered Michael.

As if struck by lightning, he stood in the bright sunshine, still in the atmosphere of the recording. It was as if he had been watching a film about himself. He had told the whole story of the Elfswood in all its colours and scents. The discovery that his sister Diana was connected to a tree. That she got sick when her tree got sick from the discharge of chemical waste. He knew little about the occupation of the factory by the Slovak Environmental Federation, but all the more about the rescue of Diana when she threatened to suffocate. He had even revealed something about the appearance of the fairy Dia, his beloved and greatest secret. Irina and he had talked about their adventure the night before with the mountain dweller Johan. He had dared to blow up a whole rock face in order to dam the not entirely clean water of the Iboc, so that the little river Bran would become clean again.

That man, standing there smiling at him, did not fit in.

He struggled with his impulse to go to Ann and Irina and ignore the stranger that was his father, but ended up shaking hands with him as one would approach an acquaintance.

‘Oh hello, are you finally back in Branočs?’ He could not utter the confidential ‘Dad’.

The painful look in the eyes opposite him made it clear his father had understood the reproach. Michael looked at him in a distant way.

‘Did Stefan manage to reach you?’ he asked in a business-like tone.

‘Who? Stefan? I don’t... What do you mean? I just got... free.’

What his father tried to tell passed Michael by completely, his pent-up indignation taking too much hold.

‘We tried to reach you every day when Diana fell ill. Luckily we got help from a lot of nice people,’ he said reproachfully. ‘We drove to the hospital ourselves, as there was no train due to the storm.’

Michael saw that the group around Ann was looking at him.

‘I’ll tell you more about it later,’ he said hastily. ‘Diana is fine now because we have closed down the poison factory and are flushing the soil around her tree with clean water. But she almost suffocated. Lucy and Wendy are also doing well. They’re with Diana in the forest, that’s where we’re all camping,’ he rattled on. ‘But if you’ll excuse me, I’m in the middle of a campaign to save the Elfswood

and I need to talk to those people. Come with me and I'll introduce you. This is Irina, a good friend. Together we have had many adventures with troublesome tourists and drunken hunters from Austria.'

He knew that he came across as cold, not at all like the sixteen-year-old insecure boy that his father had left behind in the rainy village of Branoč only a few weeks ago, with his three sisters in his care. He could not help it. There was a shell around his heart where his father was concerned.

'You're resentful, Miche.' Irina whispered in his ear after shaking hands with the unknown man. 'It hurts me too!' she added accusingly.

He could not bear her rejecting his attitude towards his father. He was almost suffocating from the emotions that were breaking loose. Paralysed by his inner struggle and blinded by bursts of tears, he stood on the square in front of the platform, his fists clenched, hyperventilating and sweating.



Janos stopped Ann who wanted to go to him.

‘Let him fight it out himself,’ he whispered. To his clairvoyant eye, this confrontation was necessary for the restoration of the relationship between the father and the son.

Bewildered, the father saw how the cool boy, whom he could not recognise as his son, broke down before his eyes and started panting and crying heartrendingly. In his tearful eyes he read the reproach of a son who had lost his father. It awakened something fundamental in him; something that could perhaps be called a father’s feeling. Without thinking about it, he wrapped his arms around Michael and pulled him close to his chest. In spite of the unusual nature of his father’s gesture, Michael let himself be embraced without resistance.

The reconciliation had begun, but there was still much to be talked about.

Shy and tired from his emotions, Michael broke free from his father’s arms.

‘Dad,’ he repeated his greeting, still light-headed by the hyperventilation. He rubbed his eyes, looked for a handkerchief to blow his nose, and just snorted when he found nothing in his pockets. He wiped his face and nose with his sleeve and, to give himself an attitude, continued to propose, automatically switching from Dutch to German and English.

‘This is Janos, the doctor who discovered that Diana was ill because her tree was poisoned, Irina you have already seen, she is also clairvoyant and this lady is Ann. She is an American journalist. Diana is camping in the forest, under her tree, with Wendy and Lucy and Dinja, a colleague of Janos, and Yvette, a French journalist.’

‘Irina is Dinja’s daughter,’ Janos added. ‘How do you do? You have a fantastically brisk and gifted son, Mr.... eh..?’

‘Eh, yes, eh m... just call me Herman,’ he stuttered.

‘Herman. Michael has emerged during the last week as the famous brother of the child Diana who is also a dryad. This whole circus is basically about him, although Diana, her Elfswood and the poison factory behind you are the subjects.’

Herman got dizzy of all the impressions. He had just returned to his hotel the previous evening from a perilous adventure in the flooded border region with Hungary. With his poor knowledge of Slovakian, he had barely understood the television broadcast in which, to his indescribable bewilderment, Diana and Michael had looked straight at him. He had only understood that it was taking place in the village where he had left his children. He had taken the next train and had just been in Branočs for a few minutes when his son stepped out of the studio. In the overload of activity on the square his own story completely fell away. He would later tell about his almost catastrophic experiences in the marshland near the dam, the accident and the hostage taking, he decided.

Janos was a bit jealous at the guy who had a son like Michael and who had neglected the boy so much. At the same time he realised that it might have been necessary. At this crucial moment Michael must be thrown back upon himself to

become an adult. All by himself, not forgetting his visible and invisible friends.

Janos chided himself for his resentful attitude towards the father. He just envied him that Miche was not his son. He chuckled. That's how he knew himself.

'Herman,' he said in a much friendlier tone, 'it might be easiest if you come along on the field trip to the camp. About ten reporters are coming to see Diana and her tree. Miche will tell them the whole story, then you will have a clear idea of what has happened and what will happen. It might be better if you stay incognito for the time being, otherwise the press will fall all over you.'

'Yes, I think that would be best,' Herman stammered.

'Come on, let's go.' Janos gathered his people around him like a tour guide. 'We have a lot to do before the press arrives.'

The group moved towards the bridge where the path along the stream to the forest began. Irina had hooked one arm in Janos's and the other in Michael's, as if to protect him. Michael walked still completely dazed mechanically along, followed by his equally stunned father.

'Look,' beamed Janos, the only one who enjoyed the bustle, 'this little stream is all that is left of the river. Yesterday, a mountain wall collapsed and dammed the upper reaches.' He looked meaningfully at Irina and Michael.

They passed the scouting camp and, amid loud greetings, were let through the fence that the scouts had built to keep tourists out of the forest.

Where the path continued under the trees, Janos stopped.

'Please, enter the Elfswood,' he invited Herman solemnly. 'This forest is Diana's home.'

Herman looked flabbergasted.

## Chapter 2

# Conversations

In the camp under Diana's tree the three girls looked up from a game when Janos called out: 'Look whom I have with me?'

Diana said in surprise: 'Hey Dad, are you here again? Where have you been?'

Wendy and Lucy just looked; they didn't know how to react and kept on playing. Oh well, they hardly knew him any more. He had been out of their lives for five, six years now.

Dinja welcomed Herman with a cup of tea. Her clairvoyance told her that the man would play a role in saving the forest. She also saw that Michael and his father longed, deep in their hearts, to be together. So she gave Michael a cup of tea as well and planted him next to his father. The two sat shyly for a while.

When Diana came to Herman with a roll of biscuits, he got his voice back.

'This is... your tree?'

'Yes, it is,' she looked up at the huge beech tree with a look of love. 'But you remember it, don't you?' She hopped off to give the others a biscuit too.

'I think I've been here before,' Herman said hesitantly. He peered around. Michael looked at his father's face. Would he be able to tell more about what had happened to Diana?

'Only...' Herman muttered and got up to look at the stream. 'I see. All the trees along the water are dead. We...' With furrowed brows he stood. Memories that had long be hidden surfaced at last. He looked at his children with a helpless expression. All four of them looked tense at the expression on his face. He shook his head. 'We could hear the water at that time, but we couldn't see it through the trees and shrub. Your mother and I,' he said hoarsely. He looked at the twins and Michael one by one. 'You weren't with us then. You stayed behind in the commune.' His gaze wandered back to the bare trunks. 'What did the trees die from?'

Michael looked at him in amazement. 'They are poisoned, Dad, by that factory at the railway line. Hadn't you heard? Diana got sick from the smoke. We were afraid she would die. In the hospital Janos saw for the first time that Diana got ill because she was tied to a tree. Doctor Wenceslas had tested that it was because of poisonous substances, but they were not in her blood.'

'No,' Herman said uncertainly. 'I didn't know that. I have been kept hostage. I had to listen to you here when the journalists came, the gentleman said.'

'You must mean Janos,' Michael corrected him automatically. 'But...'

'Yes?' said his voice behind them. Surprised, Herman and Michael looked back.

'Oh, I...' Was Janos standing there listening? But they had spoken Dutch...

'Indeed, Herman, soon journalists will come here to listen to Michael, then you will have the whole story,' Janos said, crouching down next to them.

‘You said that in the village too,’ Herman replied. ‘I told Miche that I had been here before, with my wife, eight years ago. It looked very different then.’

‘Probably.’ Janos suddenly looked very grim. ‘There has been an awful lot of damage caused by the poisonous discharges from that factory. I...’

‘What did they spill?’ Herman interrupted him.

‘We don’t know that exactly yet. But it was toxic enough to kill everything in and along the river. The discharge has stopped now, because we have occupied the factory, but the riverbed is still polluted by extremely harmful sludge. Quite a problem.’

Herman jumped up, that was his area of expertise. ‘I think I can come up with a solution for that,’ he said tensely. ‘May I have a look at it? Do you have any analyses?’

‘Of course!’ Janos sighed of relief. ‘Come with me, we’ll look it up right away; the data is in the village. You’ve come at just the right time. Now we’ve got another important news item we can keep the press happy with.’ He stood up and pulled the astonished Herman to his feet. ‘Michael, do you bear in mind that we will be coming back in an hour or so with about ten journalists in our wake?’

Michael nodded that he had heard Janos. The two men walked away talking. He looked after them: the man who was his real father with the man who sometimes helped him like a father. He had mixed feelings about it. What did Herman just wanted to say when Janos interrupted?

‘Diana wants to go with me to the scouting camp,’ Irina announced. She smiled at the little girl who, since her almost fatal tightness of the chest, had become much freer in her movements. She explained that herself because she was now better able to control the dryad in her.

Michael wanted to wander around in the forest for a while, recharging his batteries before the crowds of reporters arrived. The twins wanted to come along and tried to persuade Yvette to accompany them, but she refused to come out of her tent. To Michael it would actually be nicer to go walking with his two sisters and without Yvette. They disappeared one after the other along almost invisible trails, leaving Dinja behind in the camp.

Dinja enjoyed being on her own for a while and made herself comfortable with a book; tea water was getting hot in a pan on the gas burner and she did not notice anything from the Frenchwoman.

Her peace was disturbed when a line of people came strolling along the almost dry stream, preceded by Diana hopping and chattering loudly to her father. All the time she took him by the hand to show him something. It was clear that the group was completely under her spell. There were at least five cameras pointed at her, while just as many sound engineers were struggling to keep their microphones close to her yet out of view. Janos, with a broad grin on his face, trotted along behind her with a few boys and girls from the scouting camp.

‘Yvette, could you go and look for Miche and the girls? They’re out walking,’ hissed Dinja to the French journalist, who was looking in disgust at the disturbances.

‘Miche et les filles,’ she repeated.

Reluctantly she got up to go into the forest. Despite her crumpled and dingy clothes, she looked very attractive, Dinja thought, like a girl of twenty.

The journalists had to take turns drinking tea from the few available cups, that Dinja scooped up from the pan. Halfway the tea ceremony Michael and the girls emerged from the forest. The twins had Yvette by the hand between them. They all sat down at the foot of the beech tree, the journalists in a circle around.

When Michael was to start speaking, Diana lying safe in his embrace, it became as quiet as just before a concert performance. Even the forest ceased to rustle, it seemed. His story grew into a fairy tale about the elfin child who leaned silently against him. He told that the time had come for people to listen to the intelligences from the elemental realm, who longed for cooperation to help the Earth in the new era that was beginning.

When his story circled back to the events in the forest, Diana’s cheerful voice joined in. She told them that she was in control of her body again and that the dryad in her had calmed down. She looked at the people with satisfaction. ‘But my tree is not yet completely healthy,’ she added in a clear voice. ‘The roots have air now so that I can walk again, but the water in the ground is still dirty. But my father is going to do something about that, aren’t you, Daddy?’

Janos nudged the bewildered man and pushed him to the centre of the circle, at the side of Yvette. Her natural body smell engulfed him and triggered a long neglected longing in him. He mastered himself and, searching for the first words in German, began to unfold his plan. As he got going, you could hear that he also had a talent for storytelling. It was a simple, well-thought-out technical plan, although finer points passed most people by. But everyone could understand that the bed of the river could be cleaned with water jets and brushes, provided the water was held back upstream and the dirty sludge collected downstream.

His presentation had been so complete that only a few questions were asked. Under gentle pressure from Janos, who was enjoying it immensely, the journalists went back to the village to transmit their recordings.

The second excursion of journalists turned out to be a small but cosy group from all sorts of countries. Mainly television and radio makers with a few writing journalists, who made informative series. They wanted to go deeper into a number of things with one or the other. These news-people were not in a hurry to come up with exciting items every day. They took all the time they needed to make a well-founded narrative. It was nice to hear them talk about their experiences and their programmes.

Michael and Irina did not have to say much at first: Janos was a master at providing the requested background information. They listened attentively, because

he also told them things they did not know yet themselves. It turned out that the first marquees and sanitary facilities would arrive tomorrow to receive the stream of curious people. The events agency was on schedule.

‘What are you going to do with the proceeds? I mean, if all here is done what needs to be done, the action will go on for some time. Suppose you have some money left over?’

‘How many more forests and streams must be saved, do you think, how many desperate nature creatures, deva’s, dryads, gnomes, naiads and whatever they are called, who have been waiting for centuries for man to deal with them wisely?’ was Janos’ question-like answer.

‘Is that really true?’ asked another. ‘I can’t quite get used to it yet, you know, elementals and deva’s and all that. It’s still a bit too shadowy for me.’

‘You have seen the pictures, haven’t you?’

‘Sure, images, images. You know as well as I do that studio’s can make all the images you want. Just look at science fiction movies and Harry Potter, they are trickery from front to back, but it seems much more real than what we have seen here.’

‘I can’t show you any images,’ said Michael. He had been silent for some time, his sudden remark attracted attention. ‘But I do have a message for you, from the elemental being in charge of the brook that we have diverted to here. It is a source nymph; you can also call her a naiad. She has a female consciousness...’

‘Can you just talk to her?’ he was interrupted.

He smiled. ‘I sometimes receive sensations, which I have to translate into words.’

‘Bewilderment?’

Michael looked to Janos for help.

‘Elemental beings live in the ethereal sphere and can only communicate with humans on the astral plane, which is the plane of feeling,’ he explained willingly. ‘Language, words belong to the mental plane, the brain, and we bring thoughts into the material world with sound vibrations we call words, which can be written down as well. Elemental beings cannot do that. The message that Michael has just described comes to him as a feeling, for which he himself must find the words.’

He nodded, that was exactly how it was.

‘Ethereal, astral,’ someone grumbled. ‘I get the impression that these words are just made up to be mysterious. What do the words really mean?’

Again Michael looked to Janos for help.

‘Ethereal actually means on the ethereal plane,’ replied Janos, who seemed to take a diabolical pleasure in adding to the confusion. ‘It is a state of energy that is comparable to what we experience as light. Clairvoyants do see this energy as a kind of light. It just doesn’t come from the sun or a light bulb; it is emitted by living beings. These do not always have to be in a material form. Such ethereal light forms a cloud around a point of concentration, because it wants

to. It is conscious light, you might say, with the will to be manifested, with self-awareness. Every being has such a body of light, which serves as a blueprint for the physical appearance, be it a plant or a human body. Our eyes cannot perceive such light because human eyes are limited to receiving electromagnetic waves in a very narrow, relatively low frequency range, from violet to dark red. Elemental beings only have a body of such conscious, high-frequency light. And what astral means, well, there are rows of books written about it, but we all know what: it is feeling in all its forms. If I feel good I can communicate this to you without you seeing me; even between non-clairvoyant people, communication of feelings is the most natural thing in the world.'

'Do you also communicate in this way with your own dryad?' The neighbour of the man who asked this nudged him and explained something to him. 'Oh, excuse me,' he apologised. 'You, eh, haven't received any sign of life from her yet?' He couldn't resist asking a question.

Michael shook his head. 'No, but with her I... I could talk. She used my words. She borrowed them from my brain.'

'What is the message of the naiad?' The same woman brought the subject back to his announcement.

'She urges you to be careful of natural streams in the future, especially hers. Do not dig in them, do not throw anything into them or dredge through them with dirty muddy feet. Also, the banks should remain unspoilt, even the farmer's cows should not come near them. Even all the land whose water runs into the stream must remain untouched. Then you can always drink from it. It has healing power, life force.'

It had become very quiet; all the equipment was focused on him.

'I now call your attention to the trees and woods,' he continued softly, his gaze was turned inwards. He had to connect his own understanding with incoming insights and seeping information, which he then had to express in words, in German words no less.

'Trees and forests are very sensitive to how people think of them. You have long known how vulnerable they are to pollution, logging, fire and disturbance of the natural balance. But our thoughts are also captured.... When people come with the cutting of trees in their mind, they already react to that... for the supply of wood, by the way, they don't mind that much... indifference makes a forest wither away if it is a human forest... planted by men, managed by men, primeval forest is stronger, of itself...' He was silent for seconds but they could see that he was listening to an inner voice.

'Trees do much more for people and the Earth than most people know. Did you know that Earth receives power and information from the cosmos through the trees..?' his voice hesitated, looking around the circle.

'I'm searching for the right words,' he apologised. 'My vocabulary is not that big.' Slowly he went on, his voice lowering to a whisper. 'Trees are the Earth's

antennae, on the outside, in its biosphere. They transmit the song of the Earth to the cosmos and they receive the songs of the stars and planets for the Earth. Therefore we are not alone in the cosmos.' He shook his head, in disbelief at what humans had done to the forests, the destruction that was still taking place. 'Trees and their deva's have much wisdom. It is available to us if we will listen,' he continued. 'They have growing power for us, they say. Go and sit under them. When you sleep under a tree, it speaks to you in your dreams. Trees and plants in turn love our attention, our love and especially our sexual energy.'

He lifted his hand to indicate that he was finished. His last remark made him long for Dia so much that he could not speak any more.

## Chapter 3

# Janos

Janos took over: 'Forests like this, of which there are left very few, are a precious treasures for mankind. Here we find the pure primal force and primal wisdom of nature. Not only in the trees, plants, water and minerals, but especially in the countless more or less conscious elemental beings who work ceaselessly on the formation of new matter and the transformation of old, used up matter. And not forgetting the little gnomes of the earth, the nixes, water spirits and all creatures that build and maintain, that pass on life force.'

He looked; did it arrive? Or was it too farfetched for their grips? The many eyes that were focused on him told Janos that his listeners could still follow him.

'In this wood people can come into contact with higher evolved nature beings,' he pleaded, 'deva's if you like, who take care of the balance and spiritual evolution. Here, as a human being, you can get rid of all your worries and be animated with new energy, new zest for life. If only you could listen. This boy is the proof. He has a connection with a highly developed deva. How else do you think a boy of sixteen can be so wise?'

His spontaneous fun brought humour back to the group.

'The events here in the Elfswood,' Janos continued cheerfully, 'have, thanks to widespread press coverage, triggered international cooperation between environmental organisations and conservationists...'

He was interrupted by one of the female journalists.

'Yes!' she exclaimed, more enthusiastically than is usual for objective reporters. She blushed. 'That's the subject of our next programme,' she went on, somewhat calmer. 'Stories of forests like this are springing up all over the world, based on the reports from the Elfswood.'

'Do you mean rescue and environmental protection actions?'

'That too, but it's not always about threats like logging, road building and all those things that local and national organisations get worked up about. What I am referring to is that recently people have been coming into the publicity talking about sacred forests and trees, living wood and nature spirits. It is claimed that trees are the earth's antennae to the cosmos. Some people claim to be descended from elves.'

'Exactly!' exclaimed Janos. 'Consider Elfswood in this context as an advance post, where the leading dryad has manifested in the human child Diana to save the forest. This is no coincidence, for this forest is very conscious, so to speak. It has been protected for almost two thousand years by a human family that has been in constant communication with the nature beings. The farming families own most of the valley and are all descendants of the children of the first farmer

who settled here. His name was Bran. He is the namesake of the valley, of the village and even of this little river.'

'How do you know?' a man asked in surprise.

Janos waved a packet of papers. 'I have made a study of it, I will give you copies later. In it you can read, among other things, that Bran had an eldest son who lived in the forest as a holy man, a shaman so to speak. His name was Janos. I am his eighteenth and last incarnation.'

There was an incredulous silence after these words.

'You are the last Janos? What am I supposed to think about that?'

'Well, when I die, no Janos will come back to guard the forest any longer. The reason is that the time has come for that task to be taken over by others.' At this he looked quickly at Diana, who did not take her eyes off him.

Everyone, including Michael and Irina, was stunned. Should they take this man seriously or was he just saying something?

'You mean...?' The questioner was momentarily thrown off balance by Janos' vehement nodding. 'You mean,' he started again, 'that the first Janos, two thousand years ago, after his death came into the world as a baby Janos to become a shaman and guardian of the forest again? And that eighteen times in succession? Like the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Rinpoches?'

'That's what I mean,' Janos grinned, with a wink at Michael and Irina, who were still looking at him in amazement. 'Like Dusty Miller XIII in England who has now trained his son Dusty Miller XIV to work with live wood, to name but one other, here in the West.'

'Yes, I have heard of that,' the questioner muttered. 'But they live at the same time, they can't be each other's reincarnation.'

'Don't say that too loud,' Janos said. 'Originally they are reincarnating dryads, guardian spirits of woods and trees, who once chose man's evolutionary path. Souls do not know linear time like we do; remember that. Souls can incarnate in more than one place at the same time.'

For many, this conversation went too far; things were touched on in passing that require years of study before the scope can be seen. Janos recognised this.

'To return to your first question,' he continued, 'there is an international conference being organised right now, here in Branočs, where all groups and individuals concerned with the spirit of forests and trees are going to consider how best to manage our existing wealth. The dramatic events here in the Elfwood have set off a torrent, almost an avalanche,' he grinned with flashing teeth, 'of actions and publications. The remarkable thing is that there is a growing agreement, an alignment, almost a harmony, of people who have been working on this on their own or in small groups for a long time. Now it is all coming together at once, thanks to the television pictures.'

A few journalists nodded in agreement; they had noticed that too and had their attention.

‘When is this conference?’ one asked.

‘In fact, it has already started. More and more people who are active in this field are trickling in. It looks like when we have the official opening next week there will probably be two weeks of conference.’

Michael and Irina, like the journalists, were a little overwhelmed by Janos’s announcement. They could, however, imagine the global network of people and clubs that had all set in motion with the Elfswood as their centrepiece. Janos saw it and winked. ‘General Olga Jellisek is the organiser of the whole thing,’ he said.

‘She hasn’t said a word about it in the press conference this morning,’ said one man in surprise.

‘That may be true,’ laughed Janos with his satyr head. ‘We’re dosing the news a bit so that you don’t leave. None of this would have been possible without the press. The fact that a football match was cancelled on the first evening because of flooding the field caused by the storm also helped. We immediately got an hour and a half of airtime. That created a lot of goodwill.’

‘Yes, when Olga calls the press together you can always count on fireworks,’ someone muttered with a certain awe in his voice, clearly audible in the silence after Janos’ last words.

‘Gosh,’ sighed one of the men. ‘History is in progress right here. And I am right in the middle of it. Now that’s journalism.’ He echoed the feeling of nearly all the reporters gathered around the village. Like all good journalists, they had a sixth sense for really interesting events. Here they smelt the scent of exclusives, of news that kept people glued to TV and radio. It was also pleasant news for a change, because most messages were positive. That was usually different with world news.

Satisfied, full of things they could report, the group left for the village led by Janos. Michael would have liked to talk to them a little longer, but it was already dusk. His surprise that their father seemed to have stayed in the village was soon outweighed by fatigue. All he wanted now was to lie down and think of nothing. However, his sleeping bag was still far from dry. He had to find another place to sleep or crawl back among the ferns. In any case, he did not want to sleep in a tent with Dinja and Yvette; those two had to share a sleeping bag anyway.

‘Is there room for me to sleep at your place?’ he asked the twins hesitantly. ‘My sleeping bag isn’t dry yet.’

‘If you lie across at the entrance of the tent you can,’ said Lucy. ‘All three of us are shorter than the tent.’

‘Do you sleep quietly?’ joked Wendy.

‘I don’t know,’ Michael replied sheepishly. ‘I’ve never had any complaints.’

‘Sure, you’ve always slept alone,’ Wendy chuckled. ‘Or eh...?’

The girls bumped into each other: ‘Do you remember, in Friesland, that water child?’ ‘Sietske?’ ‘Did he sleep with her?’ ‘Sleep? Sure.’ They laughed their heads off.

It hadn’t been like that, but he would have liked it, he remembered. They could

see it in his glum face and left him alone. But she was a special child, that Sietske.

‘Okay,’ Wendy concluded, ‘in the guesthouse we also slept in one bed together once. That went well too, didn’t it?’

It was cramped, the four of them in the small tent, but they did not want to change tents with the two women, even though that one was bigger. Michael just fitted across the open side, where the tent was widest. He could barely stretch; his head was against the stretched canvas of the sidewall. Shuffling and mumbling, unaccustomed to touching each other so often, they fell asleep.

He woke up in the middle of the night with a full bladder. Carefully, he crawled out from under the unzipped sleeping bag. Bright twinkling stars shone in the patch of sky between the tree crowns.

Relieved, he let the tension drain from him, drank from the tube and sat down under the beech to listen. It was deep in the night; the forest was resting.

No animal, no insect, no plant was active at the moment. The dryads and other elementals were busy where the sun shone, juices flowed and cells divided. Only the gnomes were busy weaving earth energy into trees to make wood fibres of the daily yield of photosynthesized sugars.

He concentrated all his powers, stretched out all his antennae. He got up to look for a willow; there he might tune in to Dia’s primal frequency, but the few that had stood by the stream were long dead.

Yet he sensed something, far away, deep in the Earth. A cocoon, impenetrable to thought, completely enclosed within itself. It hurt, in his chest, itching, as if his heart were cracking.

After a while, he got cold. He covered himself with the fleece they used as a picnic cloth.

An early sunbeam played on his face. He woke up amazed: the ray, which had just peaked over the mountains in the east, had managed to find a small hole in the dense foliage. Gasping, he got up, washed himself and got dressed. Without a second thought, he disappeared into the forest. There were no more obligations, no commitments to keep.

It was Saturday, and most of the reporters had gone home. The influx of day-trippers was steered in the right direction by the event organisers, who had lavished plenty of equipment, people and catering on the event. The income was pouring in. The scouts had been brought in and were earning money from tours of the forest. The path along the small river was getting wider and muddier by the thousands of feet that passed by, but that made it all the more authentic. The magic of the forest certainly appealed to almost every visitor, even if they saw no fairies and only an occasional glimpse of Diana, who was willing to show herself on request. The fairy girl was captured on thousands of photos and videos. She was the main attraction and she knew it. They had agreed to pay for each photo. It was all about her forest.

Michael showed up at the camp a few times when he got hungry, then played a game with his sisters, but when he got restless he disappeared again to wander around in the forest, looking at the tree crowns on his back and listening, listening...

In the evening the rush came to an abrupt end when the last groups of visitors were travelling back on an extra-long train. Satisfied, everyone settled down to dinner, in the village, in the scouting camp and in the little camp under the beech tree. Michael retreated early to his clearing. The sleeping bag was dry. Relieved, he fell asleep.

The next morning, he sat down to coffee and oatmeal; they had run out of bread. In the midst of the six women who shared his biotope, he felt alone: Janos was away on weekend duty at the hospital. The weather was stormy: white, billowing clouds sailed past in a fresh wind that tumbled around the mountains and the hills, casting cool shadows on the curves of the valley that were smothered in hot sunlight. Sunday seemed to be a dull extension of Saturday, filled with guided tours for the tourists.

## Chapter 4

### Plans for recovery

‘Miche, Dad has been asking for you.’

‘Yes?’ Michael had no desire at all to see his father at that moment. In fact, his sisters were already too much for him at the moment. ‘What did he want then?’

‘How can I know that!’ bit back Lucy. ‘Go and ask him yourself. He wanted to talk to you, not to me.’

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled, ‘did he also say where I can find him?’

‘On some dam near the old sawmill, he said.’

Michael got up in a lurch and trudged towards the village.

On the way, he avoided the glances of people he met. He had conflicting feelings about his celebrity. On the one hand, it stroked his shaky self-image; on the other, he was terribly bothered by the openly inquisitive glances that made him feel as if they were ripping off his clothes and even his skin.

He also had conflicting feelings about his father. It seemed as if nothing had changed: he went completely his own way again. He did not even let his children know where he was.

At the brook, he turned right, past the scouting camp. He waved to the boys and girls who greeted him. He walked through the meadows to the back of the guesthouse, away from all the commotion. The escape route he had taken earlier could also be used in reverse.

He was surprised that it was so quiet behind the houses. There was not a soul to be seen. Only the horse, which had been so suspicious, watched him curiously.

He looked cautiously around the corner. Before his astonished eyes, rows of visitors were strolling down the main street; a huge party tent had been erected on the wasteland next to the pub. The stalls with food, drinks, souvenirs, T-shirts with prints of the fairy children, books, films, games and the like seemed to be doing good business.

He ducked under a barrier and tried to blend in with the crowd. Fortunately, no one recognised him as the brother of the elfin girl and the gifted storyteller in countless television pictures. It made him feel much better. In fact, he was quite afraid of the hassle of the sensation tourists, as he called them.

By the way, where would the conference announced by Janos be? Was there any other place, any other encampment that he did not know?

The entrance to the old sawmill ran across the closed factory premises. A passage had been made and a police car was parked crosswise in front of it to keep out the curious. The two policemen, who recognised him, called out through the open window that his father was already there with some other gentlemen.

Relieved by their sincere friendliness, he walked on. He could not help it, but every time he saw a police officer, he felt the urge to make himself invisible.

Steel ramps were laid across the bare ground for trucks carrying equipment. Along both sides of the driveway, red and white ribbons were stretched between marker signs warning in three languages that the site was seriously contaminated.

Michael felt agitated, as if he had to run the gauntlet between hostile onlookers. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He hurriedly stepped through the open door into the mill building. He was safe; relieved, he let out his bated breath.

He had to get used to the semi-darkness.

Through small windows, the sun threw slanted beams of light in which dust slowly clouded over. He looked around curiously. It smelt of old sawdust and mouldy wood. The room looked as if it had been used to sort wood. There were rows of mouldered beams lying one after the other on the dusty ground where the sawn beams and planks had once been piled up. There had been a large door at the end, but it had been carelessly bricked up with ugly concrete elements. To his right was the sawmill.

There were two long wooden lanes with a kind of sled on them. In the middle of them hung heavy wooden windows from a beam in the ceiling. Michael understood that saw blades were being stretched in these, just as in the sawmill in Holland where he had been once.

He walked across the worn floorboards to the ancient machinery and tried to puzzle out how it had worked. Everything looked as if it could be used again.

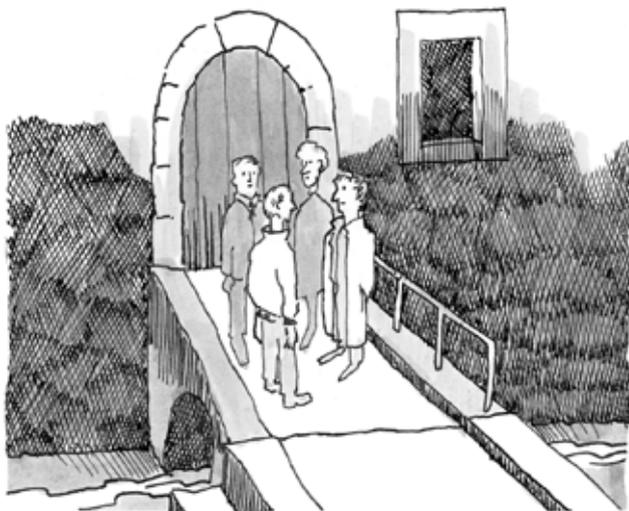
At the dark end of the long room, there would probably be doors to the wooden slipway that could be seen from the train outside. The slipway rose from a pool of dammed-up water, he remembered. That's where the logs used to be put to water, of course. Just like in Holland, he thought, except that here it wasn't the wind that drove the saws, but the river, via the lost waterwheel. Could the sawmill be put back into operation now that they had diverted most of the water by blowing up the rock on the watershed? Probably not. Maybe one sawing job for a few hours a day could be possible if you could save water in the reservoir? He thought it would be fun to find out. But not now.

He stepped out the door at the water's edge. Blinking against the bright sunlight, he caught sight of four figures on the little stone bridge over the waterway. It looked as if they were busy talking to each other.

His father saw him coming and interrupted the discussion to introduce him to the other three men.

Michael heard the introductions as under a glass dome. He caught sounds that he recognised as greetings, but did not understand a word that was being said. Without showing anything on his face, he went to pieces. Was that his father? That formal, hasty and insensitive man?

Gradually, Michael was able to hear better what was being said.



. He deduced that one was a contractor, the other a high-ranking official at the Ministry of the Interior and the third, the one they were speaking English for, was an advisor to Unesco.

He got dizzy of the proposed interventions, they talked about excavators, an emergency road, disposal of thickened sludge to God knows where, machines and more machines. He could have screamed in frustration. These men represented something, a world, a mentality, a technical blindness that he was terrified of, that he loathed. These were the kind of men who, with enormous mechanised violence, robbed the Earth of all its gifts and all its magic. Horrified, he realised that his father was one of them!

Unexpectedly they asked him for his opinion. He managed to say that he preferred to discuss the plans with the people from the environmental movement first.

He wretchedly trudged after the four busy talking men, back through the mill, along the corridor and across the factory grounds towards the guesthouse. His courage sank further with every step. If these people were to carry out the cleaning operation, he foresaw they would be more likely to deal a mortal blow to the Elfswood than to save it with all their mechanical, ruthless technology.

His gloominess worsened by the people on the street recognising him this time and insisted on gawking at him and asking for autographs.

To his relief, the two policemen from the car parked in front of the entrance relieved him. They kindly but firmly made way for him.

Sweating profusely, he fled into the relative safety of the boarding house. As usual, it was packed, but here he recognised at least some of the journalists.

Actually, Michael would have preferred to involve Stefan in the case immediately. Unfortunately, he had not seen him for some time. It came down to him. Four important gentlemen, brimming of technical knowledge and, he could not deny, good will, asked his opinion. Him, a boy of sixteen.

## Technical solutions

‘We have an appointment with Mrs. Jellisek, in an hour,’ his father announced when they had finally managed to get a cup of coffee. ‘I have shown these gentlemen the problem. We’ve discussed some options for detoxifying the riverbed. Unesco has a fund for such emergencies, but the Ministry will have to declare the whole area a disaster area for us to be able to use the money. Mr. Bertold here, the contractor, has worked with me to estimate the costs.’

Michael nodded. That was good news. In spite of his suspicion, he was proud of his father for managing to do that. ‘But you are not going to dig up the whole river, are you?’

His father translated for the others, because he asked his question in Dutch.

‘No,’ the contractor reassured him, ‘but we base our cost estimate on the most common technique. Then the procedure can be set in motion so we don’t have to wait for the money when we’ve figured out the best way to clean the riverbed.’

‘Oh,’ Michael said. ‘I thought you were really going to do it like that.’

‘That has been discussed,’ his father added, smiling at the Ministry man who had not yet said anything. ‘Although excavation is technically the safest solution, the government has asked us to come up with a less erratic, more inventive way of doing it.’

‘How?’

‘We want to discuss this with you,’ the senior official intervened for the first time. ‘We need information about the course of the river in the forest at first. Your father has assured us that you know best about the situation in the forest.’

Michael felt highly overestimated. He hardly had any idea of the size of the forest or the exact course of the river. For a moment he felt panicky, until he remembered the deep cirque that he had discovered on his lonely trips. According to Johan and Janos, it used to be a lake. When the caves underneath had broken long ago, it had emptied. Since then, the water has flowed under the mountain and risen again in a valley far away. He imagined the river meandering through the forest, finally falling into the cirque along a series of waterfalls and flowing from there through lightless caves.

He nodded thoughtfully; yes, he now had a clear picture. He realised that, as relative as his knowledge might be, he was still better informed than the others.

‘What do you want to know?’ he asked.

The official smiled. He had seen the doubts and the panic on the boy’s expressive face. It gave him confidence that the claim that the boy knew best about the situation in the forest was no idle boast of a proud father.

‘Come on, let’s sit down, I think there are some seats coming vacant over there

in the corner,' he just suggested. They squeezed through the groups of talking and drinking reporters. Many of them recognised Michael and smiled at him or tapped him on the shoulder. A few made a move to speak to him, but the authority that radiated from his four companions prevented them from doing so. A press conference had been announced by Olga Jellisek, which kept them busy at the moment.

With some awe, the departing guests made way for the company in the corner of the drawing room. Four important-looking gentlemen around the hero of the Elfswood, something you don't see every day. Pictures were taken immediately.

They took their seats. Michael's father ordered five coffees from the servant, who immediately came to clear the table. Her quick arrival was mainly due to her desire to have a closer look at that special boy from the TV. She smiled shyly at her hero. Michael lowered his eyes to her undisguised admiration. It was hard to keep all thoughts and desires for Dia locked up. With a thick throat he took small sips of the hot coffee; it helped him to calm down.

'What we would like to know from you at short notice,' the contractor began, 'is the following. We can clean the bed and the banks with water jets. If we start at the mill and work downstream, we can flush out the dirty silt. The water of the stream takes the loosened polluted silt with it. The problem is: where to go. We can only use this simple method if we can make a silt trap somewhere. Do you know a suitable place for it?'

'What is a silt trap?'

'Eh... maybe you can explain that?' the contractor asked Herman.

'Sure. Michael, a silt trap is a widened body of water or a lake where the flow rate of the water is almost zero. This is where the silt that is carried along can settle. The water in the stream flows too fast for that.'

'But... But how can there still be contaminated sludge in the stream if it flows too fast?'

'Good question.' His father laughed. 'That's because behind rocks and in deep places the water is almost still so that silt can settle.'

That made sense. But now he had to find a place where the silt could settle. In his mind, he went along the route as he had walked to the cirque. The silt trap would have to be built some distance before the waterfall. But everywhere the forest came up to the stream, he knew of no flat area or meadow where they could dig a lake without cutting down trees. The two polluted swamps? Not far enough. And they probably couldn't get there with machines. He was horrified by the destruction heavy hydraulic excavators would cause in the forest.

He shook his head. 'There is no really suitable place anywhere. The river comes out in a deep bowl, where there used to be a lake. It falls in along a series of small waterfalls. At the bottom is a cave in where the water disappears. According to Johan and Stefan, it resurfaces as a spring miles further down. Along the whole stretch in the forest, the trees grow right up to the water.'

The senior official nodded. 'That matches my data. The area has never been properly mapped, but the cirque is roughly drawn on the basis of aerial photos. You can't see much on Google Earth either: the closed canopy cover all the details of the landscape. Where the water will rise to the surface again, we do not know. No one seems to have ever stopped to think about where this little river eventually flows.'

'Can't we use the cirque as a silt trap?'

Michael looked at the contractor in shock. He shook his head angrily. 'You'll ruin it,' was all he could say. The sheer idea of letting that pristine spot fill up with heavily toxic mud was preposterous; no, anything was better than that.

'That means we can write off the cleaning,' said the contractor, disappointed.

'Not quite,' said Michael's father. 'From the mill to the edge of the forest we can go that way. We can make a basin of foil about where the river flows into the forest, it is fairly flat there. There we dam it up and pump the silt water into the basin. We let the sludge settle and purify the water physical-chemically before discharging it back into the stream. We can hire a mobile treatment plant in the Netherlands or in Germany. You can almost drink what comes out of it.'

'And what do we do with the sludge? Where can we dispose of it?'

'I think we should look to the Ministry for that.'

The senior civil servant reacted immediately: 'I felt the question coming. Unfortunately, we have no processing facilities in our country. It would have to be taken to a processor abroad.'

## Chapter 6

### In the front line

As the conversation progressed, Michael had withdrawn into his own world of imagination. He had been able to follow the discussion in the beginning. Most of it had passed him by once he had realised that an acceptable cleaning plan was on the way and that he would have his say later on.

The Unesco man was the first to notice the boy was off the game and cleared his throat. The two technicians immediately interrupted their dialogue.

'I think you are on the right track with the clean-up operation, gentlemen,' he began in perfect but strangely pronounced English. 'I think Michael should now have the opportunity to consult his advisors, I mean those on Mrs. Jellisek's staff. By the way, I suggest you go to her press conference.'

'Oh, she usually keeps them on the stairs!' hastened Michael, grateful for the intervention. 'We can just stay put.'

The journalists began to prepare themselves. Glasses were put away, cameras and recorders were checked, cigarettes were extinguished. The atmosphere became electric from one minute to the next. Olga Jellisek was normally on time to the second.

This time, too, she stood halfway up the stairs when the cuckoo clock struck four times.

The news she brought this time was not very interesting. She mentioned the progress of the fundraising, the shifts in the government's views, the developments made in setting up the public attractions, numbers of visitors, the condition of the forest and of Diana's tree and the health of the girl herself.

During her talking she discovered Michael with the four men, three of whom she did not know. Curiosity tickled her, what had they been discussing with the boy? She decided to let him tell it himself.

When most of the reporter's questions had been answered, she beckoned Michael to her. He obeyed her, much against his will. The reporters benevolently made way. To them he was the big attraction, the one who had access to most of the secrets.

On the stairs, he started talking about the ideas for the cleaning operation he had just heard. Intuitively, he avoided getting too technical. He did mention the involvement of Unesco, sensing that it was an important news event, and said he was pleased with the cautious attitude of the Ministry of the Interior. He did not mention the role of his father or the contractor. That could be misinterpreted, he suspected.

'When will it start?' was the question, asked loudly and supported with hum hum from the other journalists.

Michael was thinking shortly about this question. He could influence this himself... 'Once the proposals have been discussed with Mrs. Jellisek's staff...' He was interrupted impatiently: 'Yes, we understand that, but when is that?'

Annoyed he could not speak out he turned to Olga. She winked at him and took the floor. 'Tomorrow at the same time we will be able to tell you more.'

'There is one more problem,' Michael continued grimly before the press conference ended. 'We are still studying where to send the contaminated sludge.'

So, that they can chew on, he thought. Maybe there will be a good idea from the viewers tonight. Just like the solution of compressed air when Diana's tree was suffocating. Somewhere something gnawed at the edge of his memory, as if he had already received the solution, but had forgotten it. He could not think of it. Meanwhile, Olga Jellisek closed the press conference.

'Do you know where Stefan is?' he asked.

'No my boy.' She put her arm around him to enthrone him on the stairs, but he politely but firmly remained standing. 'I must get back to my guests,' he said, blushing. He was surprised himself that he managed to resist her.

'I'm sorry, I should have known,' she apologised. 'But to return to your question, I'm expecting him on the last train this afternoon. What do you need him for?'

'I would like to discuss the cleaning plans with him. I know so little about it. I'm afraid I'm making the wrong decisions. I don't really want to make any decisions. At least not on my own.'

'I think I've been neglecting you a bit. Has that been going on for some time?'

'What do you mean?'

'Those discussions on plans to clean up the river?'

'No.' He blushed again, this time because of the veiled reprimand in her voice. It made him even more angry.

'My father had called in a couple of experts this afternoon to discuss his ideas.' He noticed he was defending his father's self-righteous action. 'Didn't he discuss that with you or the staff?'

'Not that I know of.'

'They said they would have a meeting with your staff later. The only person they can do that with is Stefan, but he isn't here I hear from you.'

'No. Well, yes. Now go and see to your guests. Michael, even though Stefan isn't here, maybe you could bring the gentlemen upstairs in ten minutes or so? Then you can introduce them to me.'

He nodded. It seemed that she was a bit piqued. Like he was.

Back with the four men in the corner, he was showered with compliments on his performance.

'Class!' praised the Unesco advisor. 'Not a word too much and yet so much information that everyone is on the edge of their seat.'

'Yes, I can agree with that. You have really struck exactly the right tone with regard to our role. Very diplomatic,' the senior official added.

‘And very clever,’ said the contractor. ‘He quickly mentioned the problem. Tonight maybe ten million people will see it on TV; maybe there will be someone who can help us out.’

‘If not, at least they know there’s a good reason why we haven’t started yet,’ his father finished the round of cheers.

Michael could use it. His self-confidence was completely wiped out by Dia’s disappearance. The small successes of his performances and his own thinking helped rebuilding it. But it remained appallingly difficult and exhausting. He felt the telltale signs of a bad headache coming on.

‘Perhaps you would like to come with me now?’ he suggested politely. He left the large glass of lager that had apparently been brought out for him in disgust. That was the last thing he wanted. ‘General Jellisek would like to meet you and has asked me to introduce you. I’m sorry but Stefan isn’t here yet. He’s the one you need to talk to about the plans. He’s from the Water Management Department.’

The four gentlemen nodded in agreement, emptied their glasses and got up to follow Michael. At that moment there was a commotion at the entrance. Apparently there were crowds of people outside, because there was loud talking, vague shouting, the policemen at the door were gradually pushed back. He was almost scared out of his wits when Michael heard his name being chanted.

‘They are calling you, young one,’ the contractor said kindly. When he saw Michael’s pale face he realised that something was wrong. ‘What’s the matter, don’t you feel well?’

He nodded, mumbled an apology and ran upstairs where he just made it to the toilet. The headache began to gnaw at him. He rummaged in the old-fashioned toilet cabinet and was relieved to find painkillers.

He took a tablet and thought about what to do next. His stomach felt funny, but his intestines were empty, so there was no danger in that anymore. First, he would suggest those advisers, then he could go outside.

The decision gave him a feeling of relief. One suffers most from the suffering one fears, he thought somewhat more optimistically.

He immediately carried out his plan. From the top of the stairs he called his guests to come up and when the proposal was complete he informed Olga – he didn’t ask, he just said – that he would address the crowd outside. She nodded and patted him on the back.

The uproar at the front door grew to cheers when the people saw Michael appear in the doorway. He had brought a chair and climbed on it so that he could stay behind the broad backs of the posting policemen, while everyone could still see him.

At his hand gesture, a ring of expectant silence spread to the back rows.

The noises from elsewhere in the village came through clearly: murmurs, engines, whistles, laughter, a child crying, the diesel that had just come round the

bend to slide over the shunts along the platform with its screeching brakes and thudding.

Stefan is coming, he thought happily. It radiated from him, his admirers experienced a sense of joy.

‘Dear friends, I have good news.’ His eyes wandered along the faces that had been raised towards him. They were so longing that he felt a lump in his throat. He swallowed.

‘We have almost finished the plan to clean the river. Soon we can start when the formalities and the money have been arranged. That will happen very soon because the people who have to do that are here and I have just spoken to them. The trees along the stream are still sick, because the poison is still in the groundwater,’ he continued seriously. ‘As is around Diana’s tree. We have saved the life of the tree and my sister for now, but the danger is not over yet.’

The people hardly reacted. They want to hear how Diana and the fairies are doing, of course.

‘Diana is doing better now we are flushing the ground. But we haven’t heard from the fairies for a long time. It is too busy in the forest I think.’

A little girl sitting on her father’s shoulders asked something. Michael did not understand; the child spoke a language he did not know. Someone else translated: ‘She asks where your fairy is.’

In front of hundreds of breathlessly watching spectators and dozens of cameras Michael’s eyes began to water. The sorrow flowed out, without cramp, without sound. The girl said something again and again it was translated by the unknown voice: ‘She asks if she has become afraid.’

He nodded stupidly.

For the third time, the clear voice was heard. The translator: ‘Maybe she will come back if you are very nice. She asks if she will ask.’

Michael, still unable to utter a sound, nodded vigorously.

‘Oh oh,’ the child said shaking her head. He could guess what she said next, the translating voice confirming: ‘She can’t do it. You mustn’t look for her.’

For a moment he had felt a wild hope flare up; the ashes were bitter as bile. He had lost her for good; he would have to do without her for the rest of his life. It was that all eyes were on him; otherwise he would have let himself sink into his grief, never to rise again. That was not possible now: he had too many responsibilities, too much depended on him.

## Chapter 7

### No one thought of it...

The man who had come from the platform had joined the crowd at the back. He looked respectfully at the boy standing on the chair. What immense powers that boy unleashes, he thought. He brings out all the good that people have in them, just by showing whom he is. He sensed that it was time to make his presence known and waved to Michael.

‘Stefan!’ he cried with a lump in his throat. He jumped off the chair and ran through the opening passage between the people straight into the arms of the young scientist, who was thrilled by this.

‘There are advisors with Mrs. Jellisek,’ rattled Michael when he was back on his feet. ‘From Unesco and the minister and a contractor and my father. About the cleaning. But I said I wanted to talk to you first. They want to collect the mud...’

‘Hoho,’ Stefan laughed warmly. ‘Just take it easy. I will hear it upstairs. You finish your speech first and then come too. Don’t worry; I’ve got good news. No, you finish your work first and I’ll tell you upstairs.’

Michael walked arm in arm with his friend through the cheerful looking crowd, climbed onto the chair while Stefan disappeared through the door.

‘Excuse me,’ he said shyly. ‘I was very sad just now. It makes me so happy that Stefan is here. Perhaps you’d like to ask a few more questions?’ He pointed to a raised hand.

‘What is going to happen now?’

‘There are talks at the moment about the cleaning operation. Other than that, everything is going its way, I understand. Everyone is doing well.’

‘Are the fairies still with Diana?’ a woman asked.

‘It’s a bit too busy for them. They keep themselves invisible, but they are there. They are always there.’

‘Your fairy too?’

He swallowed. ‘No. Of course she’s somewhere, just not with me. It’s just... I’m too busy.’

They were silent. The people realised that he had lost something precious because he had to occupy himself with all kinds of things that people came to him with, because his judgement was asked about everything.

They thought it was enough and left him alone.

A little empty, relieved that it was over he took the chair inside.

Deep in thought he trudged up the stairs. In the headquarters, a meeting was going on. They made room for him and Olga summarised the conversation for him. ‘It’s almost done, Michael: as soon we know something about the sludge trap, we can start. The Ministry is going to see if it can vouch for the financing,

Unesco will most likely be able to make a substantial contribution from a fund for vulnerable natural and cultural heritage, and the contractor will have enough equipment and people available in a few days. Stefan, your news please.'

'Yes, thank you Olga. Gentlemen, Michael: we have taken samples of the silt at the bottom and on the banks of the river. Fortunately, the layer of contaminated silt is extremely thin: a few millimetres, locally accumulated up to several centimetres. As far as we can see, it can be washed away with water jets. This has to be done carefully so that nothing is washed away into clean soil. The people who are going to do it need maximum safety precautions, so they will have to work with compressed air masks. Some of the pollutants are highly toxic. We have also taken samples in the bed where the water resurfaces after the underground route. That is in the neighbouring valley, several miles downstream. We found nothing. No trace of contamination, neither in the water nor in the sludge. That means that all the contaminated sludge has sunk along the way. In these limestone rocks there can be immense underground lakes, so there you have your silt trap.'

The meeting was silent for a while.

The first to speak was the civil servant: 'I have to consult on this at the Ministry,' he said with surprise in his otherwise flat voice. 'I really can't say if we can just do that. By the way, are you sure you've sampled the right river? I thought it wasn't known where this river surfaces?'

'O? Well, the Hydrology Department of our service does know the route. But we can do a check just to be sure.'

'I don't think that's a luxury, if...'

'I couldn't agree with you more.' Stefan wasn't finished yet. 'In order to store the contaminated sludge safely, we will have to investigate the situation underground, particularly whether there is a danger that a breach in the cave system could release the accumulated sludge.'

'Exactly.'

The official himself had not thought about this. In fact, he had little understanding of environmental issues, but he was a good negotiator.

'Do we need speleologists or geologists for this? I do know a good cave investigator in Jablun,' said the contractor.

'Both,' thought Stefan. 'They'll have to be good divers too, because they'll have to swim up the current. The cave on the outflow side, just past the village...' he looked at a map, '...Prestic, is easily accessible. The first few hundred metres have already been explored, I have the name of the explorer.'

Michael had listened to the exposé with increasing unease. It was all too easy. His already aroused suspicion of adults was strengthened by it. There was bound to be a catch, there would be hiccups or something would be overlooked. Now there were caves to be explored. He had the feeling that he had to intervene, but he was completely in the dark about where and how.

'When can that survey be done?' the contractor asked. 'I want to start as soon

as possible.’

They all looked at Stefan now.

‘I can have a team together within a week. They will need at least a few days to prepare. Their expedition will take two days at most, depending on how far they can get. I mean as far as their air supply is concerned, barring any unforeseen narrow passages. On the way they will surely find air chambers, but the whole underground route they will probably have to swim. In the meantime, the Ministry and the University may find out what is known about the geology of these limestone formations. All in all, I think two weeks is very soon.’

‘How much time does the Ministry need for permission?’ the contractor asked the senior official.

‘If the study provides a clear picture that the sludge can safely settle in an underground lake, we can issue a provisional permit in a matter of days. Provided the whole plan is on my desk on time and in detail.’

‘What do we do if there is a risk of propagation?’

Stefan thought. ‘I can’t imagine,’ he said finally. ‘Such lakes can run hundreds of metres deep from cave to cave. If silt settles in it, I think it will only come to the surface when the mountain above it has worn away.’

‘That means millions of years’ time.’

‘What are we waiting for?’ asked Olga warily.

‘If you can provide a risk analysis of what has been discussed here, I see few problems,’ the official concluded.

The meeting was about to break up; in Michael’s mind the blockage cleared. It dawned on him what had been missing from all the talk about cleaning. ‘I have one more question,’ he said quickly. The men who were already shuffling their chairs caught up with him. ‘The groundwater contains poison too, what should we do about it?’

The five adults looked at each other in unpleasant surprise. How could they have overlooked that?

‘I am sorry.’ Stefan responded as first. ‘I’ve been concentrating so much on the river that I haven’t thought about the fact that the pollution has also penetrated the groundwater. Forgive me, Michael.’

‘Yes, that’s all right,’ he muttered. He looked despondently at the two hands that lay on the table in front of him. Small, brown forelocks with pointed fingers and dirty nails; real gnome hands. His hands. What could he do with them? ‘Ahem, yes.’

The Home Office official was embarrassed; he felt even deceived by the experts around him. He was not scientifically knowledgeable enough to have noticed the defect; he had to rely entirely on the compass of the technicians and scientists around him. ‘I suggest you report on this as a matter of urgency. How much time do you need?’ His tone had become cold.

‘One day to take samples, two days for the analyses,’ Stefan calculated hastily.

‘The report takes another day. So four days, if everything goes according to plan. I’ll call the laboratory to make room for a series of urgent analyses and to send a team of field workers with equipment. There is no equipment here. I’m terribly sorry, I’m deeply ashamed.’ He was quite shaken up by this crucial mistake.

‘Is the soil still being flushed at Diana’s tree? Is the aeration still working?’

Michael nodded stiffly.

‘Well, that’s one thing at least.’

Michael’s father asked: ‘Stefan, can you take samples from that stretch as well? Of groundwater just outside the flushing area, of the core and of the water flowing out of it?’

‘That is possible. Perhaps you would like to assist me? Then you can be sure that it is sampled in the right places.’

‘Michael, does this reassure you?’ Olga wanted to know.

He shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t really have an overview. He felt that they were always just a little bit off. Things didn’t add up, and he felt an urgent need to make him understood to the forest, to talk to his sisters and Janos and Irina and...

‘I want to go to the forest now,’ he said softly. The painkiller was starting to wear off. He wanted to get there before the headache got so bad it made him sick.

The meeting was closed and after shaking hands with everyone, he disappeared the way he had come.

‘Your son is truly a remarkable personality,’ the Unesco observer complimented. ‘There is a heavy burden on those young shoulders. He is sixteen, you said?’ The men stood behind their chairs, a little uncertain because of the ambiguities and mistakes that had been made. Michael’s father nodded gloomily.

‘Yes, too heavy I think. But there is nobody else. I wish we could support him better.’

Afterwards, the gentlemen went downstairs to have another beer.

Olga was left alone, troubled for the first time in days. Something had gone wrong, they had made a mistake, but she did not know where or what or how serious the consequences might be.

## Chapter 8

# Doing it yourself

Meanwhile, Michael trudged the empty meadows towards the forest. His headache was nagging, but fortunately did not aggravate since he was outside. The dissolved tension had left him empty and morose.

As he wandered downhill through the fields, the light air, the scents of grass and flowers, the buzzing of insects, the contented peace of the landscape itself slowly but surely turned him inside out. By the time he reached the edge of the forest, there were hardly any thoughts left in his head: he had completely tuned to receiving, with his physical and astral senses fully open.

The forest was particularly dense where he made his way down. Probably humans had never entered this part. He climbed over mossy rocks, past mouldered remains of long-fallen forest giants, waded through tiny streams, stooped under heavy branches and leaning trees, scratched his legs when caught by brambles.

After a long time he came under the light sky again. Below him, the wall of the cirque fell away steeply. To descend, he would have to go left or right.

He sat down, his legs over the edge, and looked down. He searched the many dark openings of caves. She was here: he could feel it. He remembered the instructions of the child this afternoon, so he did not search, not with his eyes and not with other senses. He sat and kept watch.

It was getting dark; he did not feel hunger nor thirst. In time, he slipped into a kind of half-sleep. While his body was switched off, his detached consciousness watched over his beloved on another level; without questions, without claims.

The early sun woke him with bright rays over the mountain ridge in the east. Stiff and cold, he stood up. With a last glance at the cirque and a silent salute, he chose at random a game trail that he hoped would lead him to the river. It did. After a long walk that made his muscles warm and supple again, he arrived at the camp under the tree where his sisters were having breakfast.

'Where were you?' Wendy jumped up and embraced her brother impetuously. Shy by her spontaneity she asked: 'Did you stay the night in the village? We've been a bit worried.'

'He came from the other side,' Lucy said soberly.

'Well, he could have made a detour, couldn't he?'

'Yes, he could,' her sister admitted ruefully. 'But you've not, have you?'

In spite of his anxiety and sadness, her cleverness made him smile. It changed his whole face. 'I went to the bowl valley last night. I am coming straight from there now.'

Diana crawled out of the tent, gaping.

When she saw him, she immediately wanted to sit on his lap.

‘Go and pee and wash first. And put some clothes on,’ he admonished. She obediently did what he told.

‘Have you been there all night?’ Wendy hardly dared to ask. Her brother had been so sad since Dia had disappeared that she had to gather all her courage to ask him about it. Her feminine curiosity, however, did not allow it to go unsaid. She had to know.

Lucy, who was more direct: ‘Have you heard anything from Dia?’

With growing awe, the three girls listened to their brother’s report, to his rendering of the little girl’s words among the listeners. He summarised the discussions about the cleaning very briefly, none of them had the head for that at the moment.

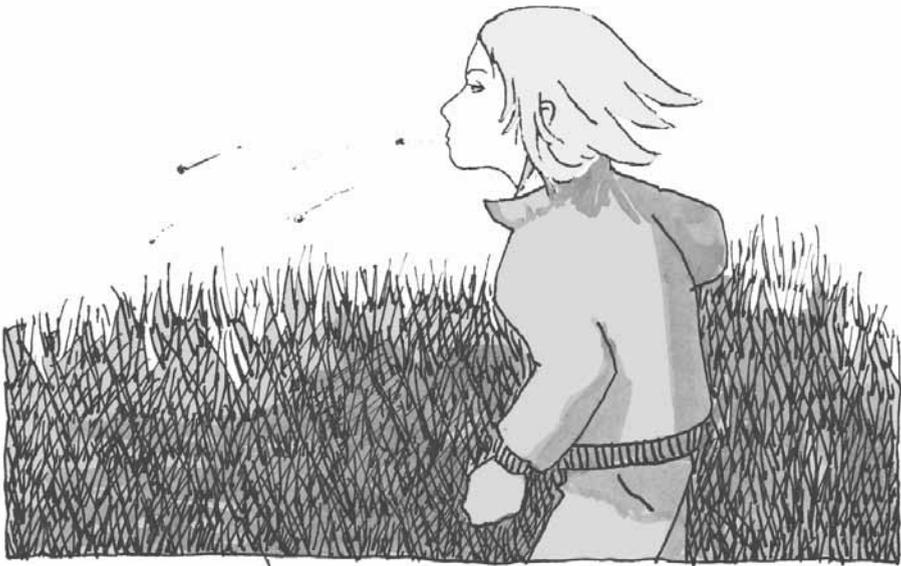
‘Where are the others?’ he broke the silence after his last words.

‘Oh, yes, Yvette had to send something again, where Irina’s mother has gone...’

‘Shopping,’ added Lucy. ‘She wanted to take the first train to Jablun. We have nothing left to eat.’

‘Oh, that’s a pity,’ said Michael. ‘I’m quite hungry.’

‘Come on, let’s go and find something good in the forest.’ Diana slipped off his lap and pulled him along by the hand. Agile, he followed the stubborn creature. In the clearing, she showed him what he could pick and dig up in the way of roots.



‘Here if se fron nof foisenous,’ she said, spitting out pits of late wild cherries.

‘O?’ Michael pricked up his ears. ‘Can you feel that?’

‘Yes. Don’t you?’ she replied in surprise.

‘No.’ He thought. ‘Can you feel how bad it is or just not here and there?’

She thoughtfully picked cherry after cherry and stuffed them into her mouth until she couldn’t get any more in.

With a loud squeak, she sprayed the seeds around.

'I sow cherry trees,' she declared with a mischievous look. 'I think I can feel: not, a little, very and very, very much.'

'I'm going to ask for a map,' Michael decided. 'Then we'll go and see for ourselves where the groundwater is polluted.'

'Us together? Yes, nice!' She clapped her hands.

Michael looked at his cheerful sister with deep affection; she was so thin that you could almost see through her.

Loaded with edible things from the forest, they walked back to the camp. Diana went to sleep; even this short trip had exhausted her few physical reserves. Lucy and Wendy looked at the harvest disdainfully. 'Should we eat that?'

'Aren't those mushrooms poisonous?'

'If Diana marks them as edible, I have no doubt,' Michael pointed out. 'Come on, try to make something tasty out of it. Can't you make soup of them? I will clean and slice these carrots.'

In the end, it became a thick mushroom and vegetable soup that tasted delicious. The four of them sat comfortably eating in the forest, around them the sounds of wind in the leaves, crackling of branches and the singing, chirping and wing beating of busy birds. Diana ate two bowls of the forest soup, as they called the brew. At least this was food she liked, she said between bites.

The forest enveloped them as a home can do.

'Oaah!' Wendy stretched. 'Can we heat some water? I finally want to take a hot shower or something.'

'We're almost out of gas,' Lucy replied. 'Just build a fire.'

That was a fun job. On an oblong fire, they put every pan that could contain water. The undersides did turn black, but they would sand that off later.

Lucy fished a solar shower out of the luggage, a black bag that you could hang in the sun with a hose and a nozzle. They filled the bag with hot water and took turns taking a shower. They put new water on the fire each time, because while they were at it, they wanted to wash their hair and clothes too. They hung their clean things in a tree to dry and spent the rest of the morning wandering around without clothes.

After the afternoon soup, there was still no sign of life from the others, Michael put on his still damp clothes to get a map of the river and the forest in the village.

## Recovery starts

The village was relatively quiet. The largest influx of curious people was subsiding now that few spectacular things were happening. The nature of the crowd was also changing, it had become more like pilgrims and worshippers who came by train. They were not looking for sensation, but wanted to tune in and be fed by what was happening here.

There were several conference participants who were setting up a kind of nomadic camp in a field on the other side of the village.

It had become much easier for Michael to move through the wandering people, even though he was recognised and greeted by the new kind of visitors. How sudden, he thought. Until he realised that in Slovakia the summer holidays were ended: many holidaymakers and viewers had gone home because they had to go back to work and school.

When he passed the factory premises, there were trucks on the corridor leading to the mill. A caboose was just being unloaded. The construction company from Jablun had come that morning with material to repair the lock of the water mill, the first part of the rehabilitation. Michael stood on the bridge, fascinated, all his plans and intentions forgotten for the moment.

Amid great interest from the tourists, an excavator on caterpillar tracks drove down the slope near the bridge and into the riverbed. There was a lot of photographing and filming. It was the overture to the clean up of the pollution.

The machine followed the almost dry bed to the dam, where it started to make a ramp. After having pushed a few buckets of sand and gravel, the crane could, with some difficulty, climb the dam. There, the machine waited.

A moment later, it became clear why: two men in yellow suits and helmets, bottles of air on their backs, walked up to it, dragging along two black hoses. They sprayed the excavator clean from front to back and top to bottom. Of course, Michael understood: he had driven through the polluted bed, whereas the small river above the dam was not polluted. All the toxic mud had to be hosed off!

Shiny and dripping, the cleaned machine drove into the shallow reservoir and without losing a minute started to build a makeshift dam through the supply of the mill. To make the water flow better, it enlarged an existing hole in the old weir.

The bed of the reservoir was soon dry, except in the wide furrows where the bucket had dug up sand and stones. Only a narrow stream rippled through the hole in the weir, all that was left of the river. Michael felt a little guilty towards the old watermill. It would never be able to saw wood at full speed again on that tiny bit of water, he thought.

He understood from his father's cleaning plan they had to divert the stream.

For decades, the water had been allowed to flow unimpeded through the narrow waterway in which the wooden scoop wheel had once turned. The intention was to rebuild the lock as it had looked in the nineteenth century.

They had found yellowed drawings in the mill of the reconstruction that had been carried out long ago. The sawmill had been given a larger and wider paddle wheel. The lock had been made entirely of wood and nothing remained of it. The stonework had been found solid enough; it only needed to be grouted again.

The helmeted men in their yellow suits and compressed air masks descended an aluminium ladder into the dark and slimy corridor. Michael watched in fascination. The high-pressure pump was started again. With long lances they began to spray the overgrown walls clean.

Little could be discerned in the swirling mist

The men stopped spraying and climbed out again. Apparently, better light was needed first.

In the glassless niches where there had once been windows with shutters, a few bright lamps were hung and connected to a generator they had brought along.

The men descended again and could do their job this time more successfully. Whole sections of loose masonry came loose under the force of the water jets.

The spraying water made everything cold and clammy, and Michael shuddered as he withdrew. Now he understood why, when they were cleaning the bed, they had to be so careful not to spray any sludge.

He strolled at leisure to the boarding house.

It was exceptionally quiet there. In the room where the employees of the environmental movement worked, a friendly woman helped him to a detailed map. She made a few enlarged copies of the section showing the forest, which they taped together. There was no more to be seen on the map than the course of the river and the contour lines; both were old data from aerial photographs. There had probably never been a surveyor in the forest.

In the kitchen, he chatted with the landlady, who was delighted. She gave him all sorts of goodies, which ended up with him having to carry a basket full of food and drink for his sisters.

It was quite a haul through the hot afternoon. He had taken the shortest route, along the path. At the scouting camp, which was beginning to look almost like an Indian settlement, the boys and girls crowded around him.

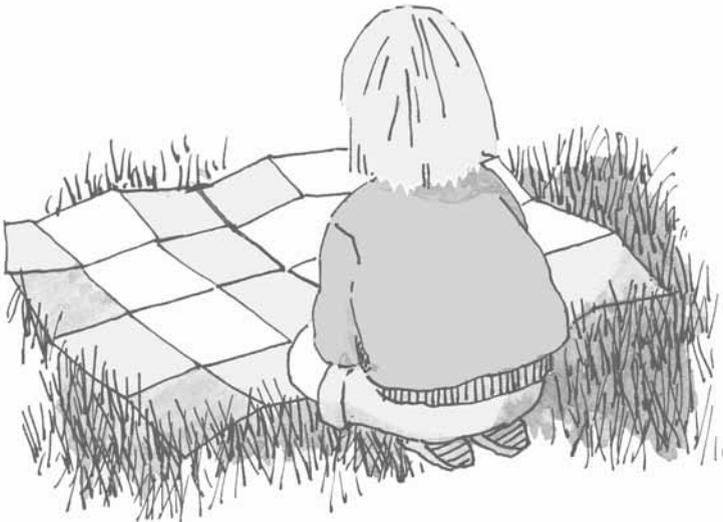
It did him well; they were really involved and very sweet to him. They almost fought over who could carry the basket. A couple of girls invited him for tea, which he gladly accepted.

At the fire, he told of the things that were happening, of his fears and doubts.

At the inescapable question about Dia, he fell silent. Uncomfortably, he avoided the pitying glances. It was a signal for him to move on. The scouts reluctantly let him go, their attention moving with him. Only when he came under the first trees did the affection travelling with him fade to be replaced by the welcome of

the forest.

The twins were delighted with all the goodies. Diana's menu of forest products was tasty and nutritious, but the boarding house's pies and cakes were their fill.



Diana took no notice; she sat for a long time staring at the map spread out on the ground in front of her.

'You know, it's like I can see the forest from above. Very small, but everything is there,' she said at a certain point. Michael and the twins lay down around it too.

'Where shall we go first?' he asked.

She pointed: 'Here and here it is very bad.'

Michael drew it on the map. 'Shall we number it from one to four? Zero or nothing is clean, one a little, two pretty, three rather and four very polluted?'

She thought that was a good idea. On her instructions, a belt of numbers appeared along the course of the stream.

'The flushing does help,' Lucy remarked. 'Just look, around our camp are all twos and threes but where the water runs they are ones.'

'But there are two places marked with fours on the other side of the stream,' Michael remarked. 'Shall we go there first?'

It was not far.

To their surprise, they only now noticed that they had not yet explored the forest on the other side of the stream. It soon became clear why: it was virtually impenetrable. It consisted largely of steep, rocky patches and a few marshes. These were the places Diana had indicated. They could not enter because of rampant brambles and fallen dead trees.

'I want to go back,' said Diana. 'This is making me very sad. They were poor places anyway. But now everything is dying.'

Michael looked aside and saw that Diana was not a little girl at the moment.

Her expression was that of a wise woman who is saddened by what she sees.

They walked back to their camp dejected.

‘The water is good again,’ Diana remarked. She stooped to scoop up a handful as they crossed the almost-dry bed. ‘Not quite as it should be, because it has to flow over the poisonous mud and that disturbs it. But at least there is no more poison in it. Just write that the water in the river is less than one, but still more than zero.’

When it’s going to rain, the mud will come off, Michael thought, but he didn’t dare tell her. She looked so relieved that the water was almost clean.

‘I am tired, Miche. Will you carry me for a while?’ He was startled out of his thoughts. Concerned, he let her climb on his back. She weighed almost nothing.

She’s going to die! was his dismayed reaction. She’s just starving.

He struggled to keep his composure. Maybe she’ll be as thin as a dryad, maybe she won’t really die, he ventured. That gave some comfort.

The twins walked on either side, their hands around his arms carrying the light body. Perhaps they felt it too.

Diana was asleep on his back when they arrived. They walked over the crunching dead leaves that fell from the trees closest to the riverbed. Carefully he lowered himself to the ground, but she woke up anyway.

‘Will you get me something to eat?’ she whispered. ‘From the forest, not from the guesthouse. Do you remember what the plants look like that I pointed out to you? I’m too tired to go with you.’

With Wendy, he gathered a basket full of leaves, berries and roots in the clearing. They kept the mushrooms separate. They were not sure whether they had the right ones. Michael climbed a little way up the cherry tree because Diana liked cherries so much; the lower branches had already been plucked.

Loaded with forest food, they returned.

While the girls prepared soup on a tiny fire, he drew the clearing on the map. He kept his ‘forest square’ where Dia had taken her shape to himself; that was a sacred place that had to remain secret.

‘The map is actually finished,’ he said after lunch. ‘All the places we’ve given a number and been to match what you’ve felt in real life.’

‘Yes, that’s crazy, isn’t it?’ said Diana, who had enjoyed the wild forest soup. The mushrooms were in it anyway, because Diana had judged them all to be edible. ‘When I look at the map, I can really see the forest and the ground and the river.’

‘I’m going to take him to Stefan.’ In fact, he did not want to leave the oasis of calm that was their camp now that there were no others. The oneness with his sisters that had developed during the hellish ride with the van had always been in the background, but now he experienced it as a strength, a balm and a protection, all at the same time.

## Chapter 10

# New strength

Wrapped in a cocoon of peace, he strolled leisurely to the village. It was the first time since Dia's disappearance he felt so serene. No one seemed to notice him; however, the people he met smiled at him.

At the guesthouse, the familiar journalists gathered for the four o'clock press conference. He took the stairs two steps at a time, opened the door of the headquarters a crack and peered inside. Olga noticed him at once and beckoned him in.

'Michael!' exclaimed Stefan in relief. 'We were about to send someone to get you. We need your advice urgently. This is the research team who will be sampling the groundwater.'

He introduced him to two men. 'This is Michael, he knows everything about the forest.'

The men smiled kindly at him. In their eyes, a cautious, somewhat uncertain respect could be read.

'I made a map of the polluted groundwater with Diana,' Michael said proudly.

Under the eyes of the sceptical looking adults, he spread the many times folded, crumpled and damp paper on the table.

'Look, Diana can feel the poison. She said it was like having the forest in miniature in front of her. She could also feel how bad it was, from zero to four. Four is very bad. There were only two places very bad, swamps, look, here and here. All dead trees, you can't walk there.' He pointed to the places.

'How do you know it's true?' asked Stefan sceptically.

'We checked that what she felt in the real forest is the same as she did on the map.'

'Is she recovered enough to walk there?' one of the women from the events agency asked.

'Yes, no, she is easily tired. I had to carry her back to the camp. She is getting thinner, she weighs almost nothing,' he suddenly replied gloomily. 'But...' his face lit up: 'Wendy and Lucy have made soup from forest stuff and that makes her feel much better. She doesn't like any other food.'

'This is good news,' thought Stefan, who had been studying the map. 'This is worth its weight in gold, boy! We just need to take a few samples to see if the distribution does indeed correspond to its indications and to measure the composition and concentrations of course. This map could save us days!'

'I thought you only needed a day for sampling?' remarked Olga suspiciously.

Stefan bowed his head guiltily. 'I only said that because those gentlemen from the Ministry and Unesco were there. I was embarrassed that I had forgotten the

whole groundwater thing.'

'How many days do you need for it?'

'Now we may be able to do it in two days. If the second team is on time we might finish tomorrow.'

'And if you hadn't had that map?'

'Um, maybe two weeks.'

'Two weeks?!'

'Yes, the river is about six kilometres long from the mill to the cirque and you have to take a sample at least every twenty metres, on both sides...'

'That's six times fifty times two: six hundred samples?'

'Well... about that. In practice, you can do with less because there is not enough groundwater everywhere, but I had taken at least four hundred samples into account. For each groundwater sample, a monitoring well has to be installed and pumped; according to the guidelines, they can only be sampled after a few days.'

'And now?'

'I estimate about thirty.'

'So Diana's piece of work saves three hundred and seventy samples...'

'And thirteen days.'

'And how much money?'

'Well, taking a groundwater sample and analysing it costs about...'

'Never mind. Too much, anyway. It's all right. Go and instruct your men.'

The three bent over the copies that the employee had made of Diana's map.

'Michael! Stefan needed him after all. Michael, can you guide the field workers through the forest? Today and tomorrow these two will do the section between the mill and the edge of the forest, that's not too bad. If the four of them start tomorrow at first light and work according to your instructions, the work can be finished by tomorrow evening. That will cause the least disturbance in the forest. There are about twenty bore holes to be drilled.'

He nodded. 'I'll pick them up at the scout camp, at six o'clock, is that all right?'

'Will you wake up so early?'

'Yes.' It made Michael shy; the reason he woke up at first light had a lot to do with his desire for Dia's warm body.

It's that easy, he thought as he walked back. I bring them a great find, they take it from you, thank you, how clever you are, and they just carry on. While he had the idea that Diana had made an earth-shattering achievement. No, they just say: look, this is just what we needed. It even made him a little angry with Stefan. He had forgotten all about the groundwater, had bluffed about a day's research when he would have needed at least two weeks if Diana had not done her job.

It is not right.

Petulantly, he kicked pebbles into the water. They think they know it all, the adults. They make decisions and arrange the world the way they think it should be, while plenty of other possibilities might be better and are not discussed at all

because they don't think about it or don't listen to their children.

He had got enough.

Rebellious, he entered the scouting camp to talk about it with peers. Soon, a circle of interested teenagers gathered around him. They chatted about anything and everything: music, clothes, sex, idols, school, dreams for the future, the environment, politics; it did him good.

'Don't you have a camp leader?' he asked at one point. He had never seen an adult with the scouts.

'No,' said a girl next to him. She was tall and sturdily built, like a younger version of Olga Jellisek. He remembered that her name was Maria.

'But then who decides what happens?'

'We do that ourselves. We decide what to do in a meeting where everyone has a say.'

'Won't that be a mess?'

'Why?' she asked a little piqued.

'Well, if everyone is chattering away because they all think something different?'

'No,' said a boy, 'we work with a "talking stick", like the Native Americans, the Indians. The one holding the stick talks, the others listen.'

'But how... who makes a decision?'

'Yeah,' Maria laughed. 'We'll do that together.'

They looked at him with smiling eyes but he did not understand.

'They are teasing you,' a little thing with black curly head intervened. 'Maria is chairman this week; she makes the agenda with the secretary, that's me this week. The chairman reads out the proposals. By the way, anyone can submit a topic. That can also be a complaint or a question; it's not all such big things.'

'Yes,' said the boy sitting next to her. 'Maria is a good chairman and we have already re-elected her once. She is very good at summarising what is really going on and what everyone has said. Well, then she asks if there is anyone who disagrees. If nobody comes up with a good reason not to take the decision, it is a decision.'

'So are you all at the meeting?'

'Most of the time. It's just nice to talk about important things together. There aren't that many topics and usually only a few who want to say something.'

'Gosh. Where did you learn that?'

'Oh, you'll learn that in our group. It has been like this for a long time. Our group started out as an illegal debating society when there was still a Communist regime here. When the old regime fell, we became a scouting group, officially we were members anyway.'

'But that happened a while ago, didn't it?'

'Nobody from that period is active now. They are all on our board and on committees for charities and education and so on.'

Michael was silent. These young people had an answer to the all determining adults. They sorted themselves out. At least, in their scouting association, he put into perspective. Outside of that, of course, they were also part of a family and had to go to school.

‘Are you staying for dinner?’ asked a sweaty girl with a ladle in her hand. He laughed; she looked so much like the prototype of the kitchen princess that it was almost a cartoon. She turned red and was about to leave and he took her by the hand.

‘Excuse me,’ he apologized embarrassed at his rudeness. ‘I’m not laughing at you, I thought you looked exactly like a kitchen princess, with your apron and your spoon.’

‘O.’ Was it a compliment or not?

‘I think it’s very kind of you to ask me and I’d like to stay, but I don’t think Diana wants to leave the forest.’

‘We can also bring the food to you,’ the girl insisted. ‘It will be very tasty. We have collected almost everything in the forest and along the brook.’

‘Well, gladly then,’ Michael said with relief. He was glad that he did not have to say goodbye to these independent boys and girls. ‘I’ll go and notify them. You know the way, don’t you?’

They all waved him goodbye as if he was leaving for a world tour.

Pleased with the closer acquaintance, he walked to their camp.

His sisters were lying outside with their bums in the last sunshine, playing a game of man-error. He squared up and tried to catch up with them. He told of the impending invasion of scouts and their forest food.

‘Oh, then we must dress,’ was Wendy’s response. The twins jumped up to collect the washed and dried clothes and to fold what they did not wear.

‘Ha, nature’s goodies!’ was Diana’s reaction. ‘It’s nice they also pick forest vegetables. At least I can join them for dinner.’

She looked a bit more vital than a few days ago, Michael thought. Could that be because of the forest food? It probably was. Animals also looked for medicinal plants when they were ill. Diana would surely be able to do that, thanks to the dryad in her who knew everything about the trees and plants and mushrooms in her forest and also knew everything about Diana’s body.

A little later, a solemn procession came down the path. The scouts had made garlands of flowers for themselves and their four guests. Between them they carried steaming pans and bowls of vegetables and fruit. They blew on the smouldering fire and expanded it into a cooking fire and buried potatoes wrapped in aluminium foil in the hot ashes to roast.

‘We got these from the farmer,’ the heated kitchen princess told. ‘They are pure organic and of a variety that doesn’t exist anywhere else,’ he said.

It was a meal never to be forgotten.

The dishes were richly flavoured with herbs from the fields and fresh farmer’s

sour cream. There was far too much, but that did not matter. It would last until the next day.

Satisfied by the good food and the contact with peers without the interference of adults, they said goodbye.

To his surprise, he was hurriedly and shyly embraced and kissed by the kitchen princess who smelt of onions and sweat. He actually found it exciting, he had to admit.

‘What nice boys,’ sighed Lucy and Wendy. ‘Why weren’t we kissed?’

‘You should have done that yourself, suckers,’ laughed Michael, feeling like a king. ‘Boys are too shy for that.’

‘Really?’

‘They act tough, but they don’t dare anything. At least not the boys I hung out with. They all talked big, but only the boys who were asked by a girl were in love.’

The two looked at each other.

‘Do you dare to go to a boy?’

‘That girl also went to kiss Miche, didn’t she?’

‘I like that one so much, with the brown hair and two coloured eyes.’

‘That one? I thought the one with the long hair was cool.’

‘Yes, that’s a good-looking one. But he knows it too, the arrogant.’

‘Strange that Dinja and Yvette haven’t returned yet,’ Michael marvelled.

‘Well, we’re having a good time together, aren’t we?’ the girls laughed. ‘Plenty to eat, nice weather...’ ‘Nice boys nearby...’ ‘And nice girls not to mention...’ ‘Who kiss you just like that...’

They were rolling on the floor with laughter.

They played another game of cards and went to bed early, Michael comfortably alone in his own tent.

## Chapter 11

### New initiatives

The morning started with cloudy weather. Miche had just been washing shivering and coughing under the tube when a delegation of scouts appeared with their breakfast. He had not noticed them and was shocked when he saw them looking at him. The kitchen princess was there. He quickly wrapped a towel around his waist. She looked at him smiling and winked. He pretended not to notice.

‘We thought you would like some hot breakfast. We’ve heard the weather reports, there’s going to be rain.’ ‘If you want we can put up a big tent for you. We have an old group tent left.’

‘I’ll wake up my sisters.’

While they were eating, a enthusiastic team of scouts set up a grey, weathered canvas tent in the shape of a house. They had brought so much food that they could even scoop up a plate themselves.

On initiative of their technical team leader Paul, a young man of about nineteen, a tent was erected with a toilet and a rack of branches for washing up. It became a real place to live. The girls furnished the rear part of the living tent with their mattresses and bedding; the front part would become the living room and the awning for sitting outside.

The scouts showed their skills by making chairs and a table from logs. For the seat and the table top they split the logs they brought along and carefully joined them together. Everything was put together with rope and wooden pegs, using only their knives, an axe and a drill bit as tools. They moved to the shelter when it started to rain.

‘Actually, we should be able to light a fire in the tent,’ Wendy suggested as chilly, rain-laden gusts of wind whirled under the awning.

‘Well, if we can make a chimney...’ thought the technical Paul aloud. ‘I’ll have a look in the village to see if I can find some stovepipes and such.’

‘But then you have to make a hole in the canvas. Won’t that catch fire?’

‘Maybe we can just put the first piece through the door horizontally and put it up outside the tent.’

‘So does smoke go sideways?’ Wendy looked at him meltingly.

Paul pretended not to notice and answered dryly: ‘When the chimney is high enough and there is enough draught, the smoke will just go down and left and right, just as the pipe runs.’

Lucy and Michael looked at him curiously. ‘How do you know all that?’

Paul laughed a little. ‘Oh, my father is a kind of tinkerer and inventor,’ he finally confessed. ‘I look like him. I’m always tinkering and thinking about how something can be done in a different way or why it doesn’t work.’

‘Well, I hope that stove of yours works out,’ Wendy shivered. She thought he was a cool guy and hoped he would warm her up a bit.

‘Yes; eh, no,’ he stammered. The overt advances of the thirteen-year-old girl rather unsettled him. ‘I’ll have to get hold of a stove and some pipes first. I’m afraid that won’t be possible until tonight.’

Wendy looked at him wistfully. She wished she could shiver better, but to tell the truth, she had gotten hot from setting up the tent. However, she was still just too timid to pull his arm around her.

‘Well!’ cried another kid. ‘Then we move the fire to the canopy anyway, then a dry fire.’

His German was not what you would call perfect, and they laughed their heads off at the result of his attempt. But it was a good idea. They made a small fire of boulders on the leeward side of the awning; a little smoke drifted under it from time to time, but they took that for granted.

The rain did not continue, so they could set up the new camp without getting very wet. Michael went with Paul to the village to get stovepipes.

Why did he come along? Perhaps just to do something about the feeling that things were happening past him?

They met Stefan’s two field workers and had a chat with them. Curious, they followed the routinely performed drilling and installation of a water muster filter. The ground was full of stones; in fact it consisted of clay and boulders. It did not make drilling easy, but as the groundwater was just below the surface, they did not need to go very deep.

‘Look,’ explained one of the men. ‘It is so full of boulders here that we can do two things: use a percussion gouge, which is a powerful electro-pneumatic auger, to ram a long drill bit through it so that an ordinary, straight filter tube can be inserted, or, because that takes a very long time and is very noisy, use a flexible auger to make small boreholes in which we can insert a mini-filter.’

He showed what he meant: a stainless steel gauze tube the size of a disposable lighter with a thin transparent polythene tube was carefully pushed into the crooked hole.

‘Very little water comes out, but special analysis techniques have been developed for that. However, the accuracy is not that great, that’s the disadvantage.’

‘Can we do that too?’ asked Paul, interested. Michael woke up from his reveries: this was important!

‘Sure, with some instruction from us you would; as long as you work accurately. Look, I am going to pump out the filter carefully now because the water in the borehole is only representative of the groundwater once you have removed all the disturbances. Then you actually have to wait a week before you can take a sample, but for emergencies a 24 hour period is sufficient.’

‘Could we do the drilling in the forest ourselves?’ asked Michael tensely.

This was a chance to keep the adults out of their territory.

It really felt like theirs, where only children were allowed. Okay, nineteen was still okay.

‘Why not? The second shift has not arrived yet and we have plenty equipment. Suggest it to our project manager.’

Excited by the prospect of taking matters more and more into his own hands, Michael took the road to the village. Paul followed closely behind, impressed by the respect the two men showed Michael. They first went to the factory, because that was where they were most likely to find material for a chimney pipe, but access to the site was closed. They stood at the gate, undecided.

‘Wouldn’t it be better to take the train to Jablun and buy what you need? The second train today leaves in half an hour, so you can still be back this afternoon. Take my credit card; I’ll pay it myself.’

He handed the credit card to Paul, who wrote the PIN code on his arm with a felt-tip pen.

‘Sometimes you have to put a signature on the receipt. Mine is very easy, just look at it.’ After some practice, Paul was able to imitate Michael’s scrawl perfectly.

‘You make him more beautiful than I do myself,’ Michael praised. He did not realise that he was speaking as an elder to a youth, even though Paul was nineteen.

They still had some time before the train left and went to see the mill together.

Carpenters had started to make a lock door from heavy oak planks. They stood watching for a moment and then walked on to the small bridge. All the water was running through the hole in the dam now. In the meantime, a scaffold had been built in the waterway; two men were standing on it, busy grouting the loose stones.

‘It’s coming along nicely,’ Michael thought.

Far away, the two-tone horn of the train sounded.

‘I’ve got to hurry!’ gasped Paul. ‘See you tonight.’

‘Good luck!’ wished Michael.

On the wall separating the deep waterway upstream from the village square, spectators stood watching the work. There were fewer of them every day. Apparently, the novelty of the Elfswood was dissipating.

Without being recognised, he entered the boarding house. He went straight to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. The landlady wanted to know: ‘Is the little one doing well?’

‘Yes, she’s getting better,’ he reassured her. He did not have the heart to tell her that it was because Diana herself was putting together her menu from the forest and was foregoing the sweet and fatty delicacies offered by the landlady.

The headquarters on the first floor was sparsely occupied. Only the documentalist that had helped him earlier with the map was collecting newspaper cuttings, e-mails and comments on last night’s TV broadcast.

‘Olga and Stefan left for Zilina early this morning,’ she replied to his question.

I'm expecting them back on the 3:30 train. Can I do anything for you?'

'Do you know where the second team is that was supposed to do drilling in the forest?'

'Oh yes. We received word late last night that they had a collision. They're not hurt, though,' she hastened to add at the boy's horrified look. 'But they can't drill for the moment.'

'I've talked to the drillers; we can do it ourselves in the forest.'

'Well, I can't make decisions on that. I think it's best to wait for Olga and Stefan.'

That didn't help him either. Dissatisfied, he stumbled down the stairs, determined to follow his own path. He simply went to the two field workers to be instructed. After that, he could always see.

The two men had not made much progress in the meantime. They sat wearily drinking coffee from their thermos flasks. Michael thanked them when they offered him a cup; he had got enough coffee in the guesthouse.

They thought his proposal was a good idea now that the second team would not come.

Soon Michael was struggling to get a hole in the stony earth deep enough to fit a mini-filter. After half an hour, he had reached a depth of one yard, scraped and bumped himself, cracked a nail and was covered in mud.

The men showed how they sucked the mud out of the hole with a hose on a vacuum pump much alike a bicycle pump.

'If you leave the silt in, it will clog up the filter immediately and you will never get any water out,' explained one of them. He showed how filter sand had to be deposited around the mini-filter and how the borehole was sealed with grains of swelling clay to prevent rainwater from entering.

After his second sample filter, placed entirely by himself, he was deemed sufficiently competent.

Equipped with the necessary equipment and a map of the proposed sample sites, he went into the forest.

## Chapter 12

# Making holes in the forest floor

Michael wandered through the forest looking around curiously. He had not been here before, because it was on the other side of the river. Now it was easy to get to the other side; some of the rapids had practically dried up.

Stefan had marked on the map where a sample filter should be placed according to Diana's instructions. The first location was not far from the edge of the forest. Between the river and a steep, rocky slope was a flat area of forest with heavy beeches, oaks and an occasional fir or other type of tree. The trees along the former water's edge were dead.

It was soggy. Michael expected that the groundwater here would contain quite a lot of poison. Yet there was only a one on Diana's map. Stefan had probably had his doubts too.

He assembled the auger and started his first drill. There were few stones in the ground, so he made good progress.

After a few decimetres, groundwater was already welling up in the borehole. A few decimetres more he estimated it deep enough and put down the auger to get the mud pump. Surprised, he noticed he was not alone anymore: a number of small, colourful figures had appeared around him, watching what he was doing. For a moment he thought it was a group of children from the village, until he realised they were not touching the ground and were a bit transparent.

*We are forest elfs, he was told. Our job is to look after plants and seedlings, which are plentiful in this part of the forest.*

They looked quite different from the two goblins he had seen earlier. These little guardian elfs indeed looked like slender children in bright ballet costumes and were very beautiful.

They reacted happily to his admiration and told him in images and feelings why they appeared, eager to know what he was doing. They knew he was investigating the extent to which the poison had penetrated into the ground, but the reason for making holes was obscure to them.

Michael was moved by their unsuspecting concern. He explained his doing and that he was going to investigate the entire course of the river in this way.

*Yes, said some elfs, there are stretches of forest where disease and death are advancing unchecked and we can't do our job anymore. Would Michael perhaps be able to wash the ground there as well?*

They knew exactly how Diana's beech was saved. He was rather shy about that request, as he had no idea whether it would be possible.

The soil was naturally flushed here, he was told.

He looked around. Yes, that was what was so strange about this place. The for-

est was very vital, while the polluted water had flowed right past it. Following a couple of dancing elves, he found the answer at the foot of the rock. Water welled up, too widespread to call it a spring, but enough to make the low area swampy. That's why there's not much poison, he thought, there's water constantly flowing towards the stream, the poison can't stand up to the current.

Satisfied with the explanation, he went further into the forest. The forest elves had gone back to work when their curiosity was satisfied. The predicted rain did not come: the sun conjured up moving patches on the ground and leaves.

He hoped to see dryads, the flying sisters of Diana and Dia, but although he felt their presence, they lacked the confidence to show themselves.

Their refusal to show made him feel left out. The wood elves had talked to him, hadn't they? Were the dryads perhaps angry with him because of Dia?

When he arrived at the next place where sampling had to be done, all his energy was drained. He lay down on the moss and tried not to cry. Biting his fist, he mourned the loss of Dia, who had been his guide, his child and his love partner at the same time. For a moment, he cried very hard.

It was a relief. Having calmed down, he accomplished the boreholes and placed the three filters at the indicated points. It went smoothly: it was sandy clay soil with hardly any gravel in it. Carefully he put samples of the soil in jars and wrote the number and depth on the label. With a small hand pump, he swished groundwater from the filter tubes until it became clear. Finally, he wrote the numbers and the depths of the mini-filters on yellow plastic plates and put them next to the filters.

Work had taken all his attention, so a sudden downpour came as an unpleasant surprise. Wet to the skin, he trudged through the forest back to the rapids to cross the river. However, where earlier that afternoon a little water had found its way between the boulders, now a murky stream was roaring.

It has certainly been raining for some time higher up in the valley, he thought shivering. There is so much water in the river now. Well, that's how it gets clean.

He did not dare cross it, laden with a rucksack and two heavy suitcases containing the drilling equipment and sample jars. Resignedly, he clambered further upstream until he came to a rocky point where he could go no further.

Stupid of me, he thought. I have passed this cliff so often on the other side and now I have not thought about the fact that I cannot pass it.

He let his gaze wander indecisively. No, there was no chance he could cross here. He decided to go back.

Beyond the spot where he had just been working, there was a steep rock of grey limestone. Walking around it, he was surprised to find himself under a large rock canopy.

The dry floor was covered with rustling leaves and a carpet of beechnut husks. Outside, the dense rain was rushing, nearby, a small waterfall gurgled from the rocky roof.

Delighted with his find, he set the heavy packs against the back wall. And now a fire, he thought with satisfaction. Matches were packed watertight in his rucksack, dry wood lay around him in abundance. In no time, he had a fire burning. He stripped off his wet clothes and hung them shivering out to dry.



How many times have I hung my clothes out to dry at a fire? It must be because I live completely outdoors. I don't even have my own tent any more. He chuckled: no wonder I get wet so often.

Imperceptibly, it had become dark. At the jets of water coming from above, he drank some water from his hands.

Chewing on old bread from his rucksack, he decided to spend the night here. Making a soft bed took some time: with utmost care, he fished out all the stinging husks and sticks from the dry leaves until he had a large, soft pile of leaves. The decayed remains of a fallen beech tree provided thick, if almost decayed,

pieces of firewood that would smoulder all night, he hoped, like peat. Warm and drowsy, he crawled into his pile of leaves and slept almost immediately.

He could not wake up.

In his dream, he was lying in a pile of dry leaves, he needed to wake up urgently, but his body was not listening to the impulses he was sending out. Desperately he tried to hold on to what was passing, but the senses that were supposed to do so were unconscious.

Startled, he stood up, a scream still echoing in his skull. Who... had it been? His throat ached; he must have uttered the desperate scream himself.

‘Dia, Dia, Dia...’ he whispered. ‘Where are you?’

He listened intently for an answer from inside or outside his head, but nowhere did he sense any life other than trees, plants and birds.

Disappointed, he got up to drink some water; at the same time he let his own water flow. Now I’m being flushed, he thought, as he watched the yellow liquid flow out of him. Just like the soil near Diana’s tree.

It was cold; shivering, he washed himself under the dripping eaves; all kinds of leaves and humus stuck to him. The smouldering fire began to roar when he put dry wood on it. Enjoying it, he let it glow his body from all sides until he could get into his dried clothes smooth and warm. No bread was left, so if he wanted to eat he had to find it himself.

Wandering through the forest, he soon came to one of the marshes where they had been the previous day. It was now completely flooded. He turned to look for the ford they had crossed yesterday.

The water swirled past, although it had clearly subsided, judging by the floating debris that had stuck high up on the banks. He sat down on a rock and waited for it to subside further, his feet just above the current. Now and then a splash hit him. The stream talked busily to itself, making bells and whistles, rumbling stones rolling under the water, splashing.

The trees covered the riverbed except for a narrow, winding line of blue sky, with drawn in black the branches of dead trees. The moving twigs and leaves cast interlocking shadows and lights on white rocks, dark green moss and the water that reflected the light sky. He sat like that for a long time.

I want to be independent, he thought. No longer the slave of my infatuation with a dryad or the errand boy of adults. I am me; I stand in the world and this is how I am. I am also the brother of my sisters, the son of my father and mother, the friend of the scouts and much more. I am also Michael the storyteller, he thought with due pride. I go to the TV people to tell them what we do here. I go to Olga Jellisek to tell her that we only want to allow children into the forest. I will go to my father to tell him that I love him and that he is very clever and must do what he has come up with to clean the river.

With his back against the softly mossy trunk of a dead alder he fell asleep.

## Chapter 13

### Own boss in the forest

Something struck him in the chest.

Michael woke up startled and looked in amazement at his sisters on the other side of the river.

‘What are you doing there?’ asked Lucy.

‘We were worried when you did not get back,’ Wendy sniffed. ‘Why don’t you come over to this side?’

Diana said nothing; her attention had long been elsewhere after she had taken the twins to the place where she knew Michael was.

‘I’m coming,’ Michael said, stretching. The water had subsided quite a bit; if he took just one suitcase at a time, he could wade through the bed here.

Half an hour later, he was sitting under the awning of their new tent, enjoying forest soup with fresh bread. In the meantime, the kitchen princess was eating him with her eyes.

He began to look more and more like a forest elf in the legends: brown, slender to the point of thinness, a pointed face with eyes that resembled polished Tiger Eye crystals, wild curls bleached at the ends by the sun. But what really enchanted those around him was the aura of mastery of the elements around him.

The girl wanted to scoop him up again, but he pulled his bowl away to indicate that he had eaten enough. She was so fixated on him that she didn’t pay attention and poured the hot liquid over his feet. He cried out, jumped up, ran to the stream and kept his feet in it until they were numb.

The girl, paralysed with fear, did not know what to do. Finally, she ran away crying. Now she had ruined it forever with her hero. She wished the earth would swallow her; it did not do so and she sought solace with friends. The incident did help her to get over her unrequited infatuation, but her adoration for Michael remained.

Michael had seen the girl running away, but that seemed to him to be the right reaction after her inattention: it had hurt quite badly. Besides, he had more important things on his mind at the moment. He had made a decision.

He asked the scouts to join him on the river bank. He had an idea and needed their assistance. They lay down with their stomachs on the ground around the map of the forest, which they fixed with stones at the corners. Michael showed them on the map how Diana had pinpointed the polluted groundwater.

‘Now Stefan wants to check this map by taking groundwater samples here and there and having them chemically analysed,’ he said. ‘Between the factory and the forest this has already been done. A second crew was supposed to go into the

forest, but they had an accident and can't come.'

He looked at the curious boys and girls conspiratorially. 'Now my proposal is that we do all the drilling and sampling in the forest ourselves, then we don't need to let any adults in here. I've already done four! Quite easy.'

'Yes, exciting,' cried one of them. 'Let me do the drilling, I'm really strong.'

'Me too!' his mates shouted. The girls looked to each other for answers. How should we do that? Can we do that?

Michael explained in detail how the procedure worked and showed how to put a mini-filter at the proper depth, covered in sand and sealed with clay.

They soon agreed on the division of labour: two boys would take turns in drilling, one would pump out the mud, a girl would place the filter, another would pour sand and clay pellets around it, the first girl would pump out the filter.

'I'll write it all down,' suggested their Benjamin, a spindly kid with glasses.

'Yes, you are our secretary,' the big boys laughed and patted him gingerly on the meagre shoulders.

'Come on, let's go!' the girls suggested, eager to get started. The suitcases and bags of filter sand and clay pellets were divided, each carrying some tools. Triumphantly, the little guy waved a notepad and a pen – he had the least baggage.

'Just wait!' threatened a boy. 'I'll make you carry all the full sample pots later.'

Laughing and making fun, they went after Michael.

It went off without a hitch. At the first indicated location, the ground was soft and free of stones and the drilling went smoothly.

While chatting, they got an idea of why Stefan had marked the flat areas of the forest: only there groundwater could be found; on slopes and rocky areas, the soil was just too shallow for it.

They trotted back and forth with equipment and sample jars, moving from location to location. The only setback was that the bag of sand tore, so they had to scrape it all from the moss to continue. The division of labour worked smoothly: nobody got bored, nobody got tired.

Deeper and deeper they wandered into the forest, leaving a trail of filled sample jars behind them. Just like Tom Thumb, they joked. They would take them with them on the way back.

In a beautiful clearing, they ate their bread and drank tea from a thermos; a small cup for each. The sun played games on the leaf-covered forest floor and reflected coloured lights from the many flowers.

The youngsters felt free as a bird. Their camp, halfway between the excitement and thrill of the village and the peace and magic of the rewarding forest, was for the boys and girls the biggest adventure of their lives. They all took time off from school for it, they said. They did not want to miss it for anything. For form's sake, they had made it a study project.

'But that's what it is!' exclaimed Michael. 'Take this groundwater sampling we do, that's the same as an apprenticeship, isn't it?'

‘Or a research project,’ said a girl thoughtfully. ‘Funny, I haven’t even thought about it like that.’

‘I do,’ thought another. ‘When we went here with Demiros, he told my parents that we were going to do an environmental study.’

‘Yes, we just have to write it down,’ one boy remarked in surprise.

‘I have everything in my diary,’ said the Benjamin. ‘If you want you can use it.’

‘Yes, let’s do a joint project!’ shouted a sturdy boy.

‘Ha!’ laughed his friend. ‘That’s convenient for you, isn’t it? You don’t have to write it yourself.’

‘Maybe,’ the boy mumbled shyly. ‘I’m not very good at it, with my dyslexia and all. But I do remember all what’s happened and what’s been said; I can also draw reasonably well.’

‘Then I’ll write down your story,’ said a girl. ‘I can write very fast, but I don’t know anything about summaries. I always get tangled up in details.’

While talking, the project took shape. They had forgotten to take photos, but luckily some had a mobile phone with a camera. They were promptly appointed as photographers to capture all their work on pictures.

Singing they continued making boreholes along the river to the place where the last had to be done. Satisfied, they finished the very last mini filter and relaxed for a while.

Michael had become increasingly restless. When they had almost finished, he wandered into the forest; his feet led him naturally to the cirque. At the top of the waterfalls that led to the dark caves in the depths, he stopped to look. All the silt that had been washed away had disappeared yesterday; would it really sink to the bottom of unfathomable caverns forever, never to harm again?

In his mind he followed the cheerfully gurgling water into the darkness, where the chattering was silenced. For the water, too, it was a mysterious journey. Only one or two days ago, it emerged from springs high in the mountains and had to say goodbye to the sun after only a dozen miles. The water stayed underground for a long time, the subterranean lakes were so large and deep that it might take months or years for this water to emerge again in the neighbouring valley.

The answer to his question was self-evident: the poisonous silt settled in the caves and passages where it would petrify. Never again would it threaten life.

The sudden influx of water from the heavy rains had probably done most of the work for them. Perhaps they only needed to flush the bed close to the factory.

Back with the scouts, he suggested that they carry out the cleaning themselves, just with brooms and hand pumps. The bicycle-pump-like plastic piston used to empty the mud-filled boreholes was very suitable: light as a feather, and if one person pumped firmly while another operated the hose, it took little energy.

‘Jeez, that’s quite a project,’ said one boy, deeply impressed. ‘I can graduate on that!’

‘Can we really do the cleaning?’ a girl wanted to know. ‘Isn’t it dangerous?’

‘I don’t think so.’ Michael reviewed what he had previously imagined. ‘We do need waterproof overalls and boots and chemical-resistant gloves.’

‘Dust masks?’ suggested a boy. ‘For when it’s spraying or splashing?’

‘Yes, I think that is wise.’

‘Where does the dirt go then?’ another wanted to know.

Michael explained what he had heard from the water itself about the bottomless lakes deep in the mountains.

‘We spray and brush the silt loose so that it flows with the water. My father will do the first stretch from the factory to the forest. That sludge will be collected in a basin. We start at the rapids at the edge of the forest and work our way down. Finally, we flush these waterfalls, right into the cave. If necessary, we swim in it for a while.’

‘Yes,’ said a girl thoughtfully. ‘I can see it before my eyes. We can do that.’

So it was decided. They looked at each other and laughed excitedly.

‘Come on, we will go to the headquarters,’ suggested Michael. ‘We’ll take these soil samples to Stefan, then we can propose to them that we clean the stream.’

However, it did not come to that. It was almost dark when they got back to their camp. Wendy was cooking on a fire, waving a ladle and singing a wild song with her pure soprano.

‘Diana is gathering food with Lucy,’ she mentioned between loud exclamations. ‘Paul has returned to your camp and we have also received word that Janos with Irina and her mother are staying in Zilina for the time being as their patients need them.’ She sang on, reverberating loudly, well aware of the hungry stares of the boys who thronged around Michael. ‘Oh yes, Yvette sends her regards, she has returned to Paris,’ she announced.

Michael had very mixed feelings about the messages that were carelessly passed on. On the one hand, it strengthened his need to act independent of adults, on the other hand he felt abandoned, almost betrayed. They had just left, without saying goodbye or consulting him. Somehow he felt hurt. He had assumed so much about their involvement. Their direct attention and involved participation in the first beginning had been heart-warming; he had more or less fallen in love with Irina and Janos, not to mention Yvette. Now they had gone their separate ways. It felt unfinished.

He considered how he himself stood in that situation.

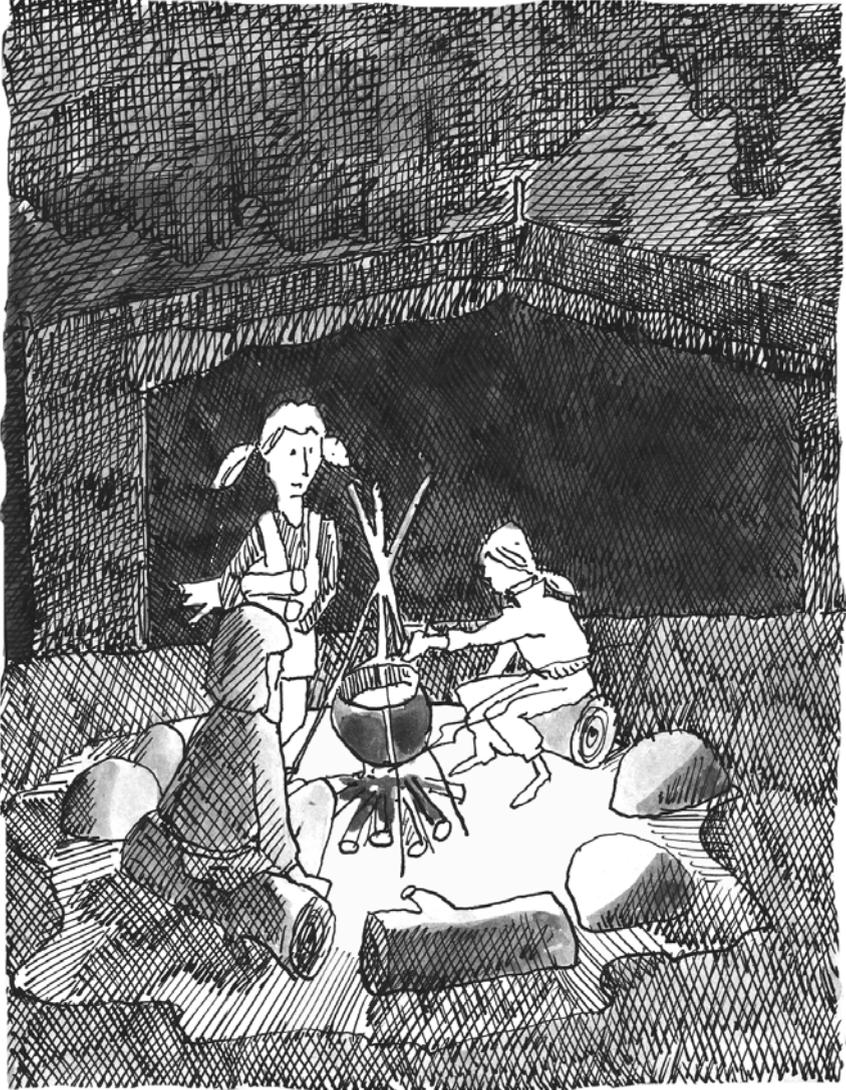
Of course, I have also been unreachable for days, he thought. I withdrew; I didn’t want to see anyone. He looked at himself remorsefully. Maybe that’s why they left, because I didn’t give a damn. In fact, nothing much happened, except inside me. They must have felt superfluous.

The scouts had quietly gone to their camp when they noticed that Michael was so absorbed in himself that he no longer reacted to them. His sisters also left him alone; they ate silently of the stewed forest produce. They went to bed early.

Diana wanted to be tucked in, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He lay awake for a long time, listening to his sisters' breathing, the soft rustling and creaking of the forest, the lapping and rushing of water.

Maybe I don't dare go to sleep because I'll have to wake up again, was his last thought.

This time he had not had to worry about it. First it was Diana who had to pee, then he. There must have been a plant in their food that was diuretic.



## Chapter 14

### No resonance

Dawn found Michael yawning under the awning with his sleeping bag wrapped around him. His longing for Dia expressed itself very physically. In the privacy of his sleeping bag, he relived the pleasure he had with her. When he had poured out his seed on the earth, sadness was all that was left.

He scurried around the camp, washed himself a bit and stood for some time gazing into the stream, which had meanwhile shrunk to its normal proportions.

The first train from Jablun sounded two tones. He immediately felt like fresh bread and coffee.

He dressed carefully not to wake the girls. He walked the long route, through the meadows and along the brook to the back of the guesthouse.

In the kitchen, the heated landlady embraced him. His hungry gaze was met with fresh coffee and crusty bread with butter and homemade jam. He savoured.

When he had finished, he offered to take the breakfast for the guests upstairs; carrying the heavily laden tray, he swung it into his old room where he surprised Olga Jellisek and two employees around the table. They cheerfully cleared away their papers at the sight of the full tray. He set the table for them and placed a plate and a cup for himself as well.

‘I heard that you and the scouts have already done all the sampling in the forest?’ asked Olga with her mouth full.

‘It was easy,’ he explained. ‘All soft clay and sand with no big rocks. Very different from the first stretch those men did.’

He looked at her; she saw he had something important on his mind.

‘Wait a minute, Stefan is coming on the second train from Zilina, I suppose he should be there for what you want to say?’

He nodded hesitantly. ‘Yes, that too, but I want to discuss it with you beforehand as well.’

‘If you wait a while, we can go to the room next door,’ a staff member offered.

‘Keep eating, sweetheart,’ Olga said and got up. ‘I’m going for a walk with Michael. That will do me good. I sit too much.’ Demonstratively she patted her bottom. She wasn’t fat at all, but she was big and sturdy, and it was fun to flaunt it.

Outside, they walked upstream for a change.

The river was untouched by events, although it had lost three quarters of its water.

‘Start with the first thing that comes to your mind,’ she advised, when they had been walking in silence for half an hour.

‘It’s hard to explain,’ he began, even slightly doubting the views he had been hammering out over the past few days. ‘Lately, I have the feeling that the adults

are getting away with something that actually belongs to us, to the youth. I mean the young people who have no... well, have no real place yet in society. Who go to school and study and are open to new things.'

He broke out in a sweat, the words he used to explain his feelings seemed so clumsy. 'I mean, the adults know so well what to do, but it's other adults who make such a mess of it. Children don't do that.'

He couldn't figure it out. With a shy smile, he looked at Olga, who let him finish without reacting immediately.

'The beginning, of course, was fantastic.' Gathering his thoughts, he stood still and looked around at the peaceful landscape of lumpy meadows and scattered bushes. 'The time in the spa. All those people who cared about what happened to us and Diana and the forest. You reacted so quickly and so effectively, it was... so good, then.'

'What do you think went wrong?'

'It seems as if we don't matter anymore. All kinds of clever people and consultants and engineers like my father have taken over. Does anyone actually know what it's all about anymore?'

'What do you think it's about?'

He thought. Clever of her to play all his questions back to him, he could appreciate that. It confirmed him in his desire to take the reins in his own hands.

'Look, the way I see it, there are maybe four levels on which things happen. The most attention at the moment is paid to cleaning up the riverbed and the groundwater. The material environmental problems we need to solve as soon as possible, before more damage is done. Another level is the publicity, what the public hears and sees, what they think of it and how they experience it. This gives a much wider meaning to what is happening here. Then there is the level of the government and laws and regulations and so on, I don't have much insight into that. But the level that lies beneath all of this is the Elfswood where nature beings have bonded with humans.' He looked at her bravely. 'That is what it is all about,' he concluded hoarsely with emotion.

'Where did you learn to think like that?' asked Olga in admiration.

He shrugged. 'Some of it is my own, some of it... Dia's I think. She's gone, but her training has been thorough,' he laughed like a peasant with a toothache.

'Yes, I can believe that.'

They walked silently alongside the stream for quite a while.

'There is something else, something concrete I want to propose to you. We, I mean the scouts and I, we independently placed all the mini-filters in the forest yesterday. This afternoon we are going to sample them. We have talked about the fact that we also want to clean the bed of the stream ourselves. Actually, we only want to allow children in the forest.' There, the big word was out.

Olga shook her head impatiently. What was that boy thinking?

'It's not that difficult,' he pleaded. 'The rain has already washed most of the silt

down into the caves. It will never come out again.’ He avoided mentioning at the last moment that he had followed the water, that it had told him itself where it went. ‘The stream is almost clean. If you do the part from the mill to the forest, that is still quite polluted. Then we will do the part in the forest up to the cave with the scouts. Most of the silt is already gone. We don’t even need machines, just a few hand pumps and brooms. It’s only two or three miles.’

‘We don’t know how we’re going to deal with the case yet,’ she told him. ‘Let’s wait for Stefan’s report first.’

That’s what I mean, he thought depressed. I can’t get through.

‘Only when the study and the operation plan have been approved by the Ministry can we submit a final budget to Unesco for funding. That takes time my boy, it just takes time. Just be patient, it will all work out.’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ he agreed meekly. Internally, however, an opposing movement raged. He noticed that he was hardening in his views, that opposition was leading him onto the track rather than away from it.

‘Shall we go back?’ he suggested. They turned for the descent. The view of the valley and the village with the two bridges, the river with the old watermill, its dam and the dissonance of the ugly factory buildings was like looking at a model, a recreated landscape by a model train builder. To cap it all, the red-and-yellow diesel came round the bend and stopped alongside the platform.

Funny, thought Michael, every time I look down into the valley from a high point, I see the train. It arrives or departs, but it is always there. Could it be a coincidence?

‘If we had binoculars we might be able to see if Stefan is there,’ joked Olga, who had also seen the train arrive. Michael had no need of such a thing: from this distance he could easily see which of the minuscule figures on the platform was Stefan. It was as if he was close by. But he said nothing. He didn’t want to share his keener perception and expanded awareness with adults.

Not even with Olga. Or Janos. He still didn’t like the fact that Janos had left without saying goodbye.

Oh well, maybe I’m wrong and he just couldn’t find me, he relativised. Janos, of course, has to do his job in the hospital.

In the meantime, the village had become very busy. There were perhaps more than a hundred people watching the work on the sluice of the water mill. They were not recognised. The TV broadcasts of the last few days had been more like bulletins with few images. It had been some time since Michael’s stories had been broadcast.

It is time for me to be on the television again, he thought, in order to get the attention back to what it was all about: the new co-operation between nature beings and people, especially children.

## Portents of disaster

The drawing room of the guesthouse was crowded. There were rumours that the government would make a statement. Other journalists were convinced that the Council of Ministers had put the situation in Branočs on the agenda.

Michael listened to the conversations and got more and more alarmed; most talking was, fortunately for him, conducted in English and German. He tried to find out what was going on, but to his modest questions they did not give concrete answers.

Stefan came to fetch him for a meeting about the cleaning operation.

He walked up the stairs after him, looking curiously at some of the reporters. The newcomers didn't even know who he was, he thought. Fame is short-lived.

In the headquarters, the atmosphere was confused, uncertain. It did not smell fresh; Michael chose a seat by the open window and leaned out. The village also radiated something uncomfortable.

Maybe it's my own insecurity, he thought, but it seems like they're scrambling like a disturbed ants' nest.

His father came in last, in a hurry, almost angry even.

Everyone gathered around the table laden with papers and dirty cups.

Olga, who otherwise would never hesitate to clear the table and distribute coffee, opened the meeting with a careless gesture.

'I have three points I want to make before we talk about the rumours that the government is about to intervene,' she began gruffly. 'I'm sorry you didn't get an agenda, but it seems like everyone has gone crazy. My first point is...'

Michael could no longer follow her; he had been set on edge by the word *intervene* she had used. *Intervene*; what could she mean by that? Was the government going to carry out the operation, was the government going to take over control of everything here? Or would it be much worse, would they all be chased away by the police? Had the factory people won behind the scenes? Would they just continue to poison the place? His heart was pounding in his chest, this should not happen! If the police came here, they had to go deeper into the forest, make a secret base there, with the scouts. They had better start right away!

He stood up, violently confused.

'You can't leave yet, Michael,' Olga called him to order. 'The third item on the agenda is your proposal.'

With a thump he sat down again, prey to conflicting impulses.

He did not understand a word of what was being said, as it was in Slovakian. After a few minutes, Olga banged her hand on the table to end the discussion.

'The third point,' she continued in German for the benefit of Michael and his

father, 'is Michael's proposal that the cleaning operation in the forest be carried out by him and the scouts with brooms and hand pumps. Am I saying this correctly?'

He nodded in agreement.

'Explain your proposal,' she invited him.

Growing more and more enthusiastic, he explained how he had come up with the idea and that they did not like strangers working in the forest. 'Most of the silt has already been washed away after the heavy rainfall, at least in the forest there isn't much left. What's left we can pump out with hand pumps, so there's no need for noisy machines in the forest.'

They all looked at him in amazement. What was that boy thinking? Even Stefan looked doubtful.

Michael waited tensely for his father's reaction.

It was fascinating to see from the expression on Herman's face how the idea gradually took hold. Would he support his son? Stefan looked at Herman too. He apparently let his judgement depend on the expert, as they saw Herman.

After a while, Herman nodded thoughtfully.

'Yes, if we get a specialised company to clean the first section, it might not be so bad further on, in the forest.'

'We still don't know for sure that the silt will settle safely in subterranean basins,' Stefan objected.

'Yes, but if we do know, then we can do it like this,' Michael pleaded.

'I suggest we keep this point until more is known about the subterranean river,' Olga concluded the discussion a little edgy. 'If we are unlucky, this whole situation will be redundant anyway, if the government decides to intervene.'

'What are they going to do?' asked Michael, alarmed.

'We don't know. The press told us that politicians are lobbying hard about the situation here. There are rumours that some high-ranking officials advise declaring the occupation of the factory illegal and just put the pollution of the river on the list of soil pollutions. Then we can be sure that nothing will happen to it for the first twenty years.'

Michael turned pale, then nauseous. He felt the ground sink beneath him.

'What's the matter, boy, are you not well?' the woman next to him asked with concern.

'Olga, how do we defend ourselves against a government crackdown?' overruled Stefan. 'I think we have to make a good plan, and then Michael will be fine.' He stood up, went behind the boy and put his hands on his shoulders. 'I think we should assume that they are able to send the army, but first we will have polite officials visit us. What are we going to tell them?'

It was the right question to ask, but at the time the confusion and uncertainty was too great to formulate answers.

'I'm going to think about it,' Olga announced. 'So do you. I wish something

spectacular would happen that would get the attention of the press again. We've been in the news too little these days,' she sighed.

The meeting broke up; Stefan went downstairs with Michael and his father to find out if any reporters knew more.

'About your plan to clean the forest bed with the scouts: I think it's a very good idea,' Herman said. 'I had to think about it for a while, about the risks and problems you might encounter. But in principle it's simple and light work; with some brushes and hand pumps you don't run the risk of dusting. You can even work with simple protective clothing and masks. Good idea, son.'

It made Michael happy and warm; he just needed a compliment like that. That it came from his father made it even more special.

'I'll tell Stefan that to my opinion it's even the best method. We'll have an industrial cleaning company do the part up to the edge of the forest.' He was about to walk up to the busy talking environmental scientist, but Michael stopped him by his sleeve.

'Is it spectacular enough for the press?' he asked uncertainly.

'What, dude?'

'Well, that children are going to clean the river?'

His father looked at him in surprise.

'Of course!' he whispered passionately. 'That's even sensational! I can't believe I didn't think of it myself. Come on, let's go and introduce it to Olga. Then we'll have a blast with the press this afternoon. You'll have to tell them yourself, you know!'

When they got upstairs, however, the chairwoman of the environmental movement was completely absorbed in a telephone conversation they did not understand, so they went back downstairs.

Shuttling between the forest and the headquarters in the guesthouse was beginning to bore Michael. That, too, had to change, he thought.

In the beginning the journalists came to the camp under Diana's tree. That was where the miracles happen, not in the village.

'Are you coming, to the camp?' he invited his father. 'The girls would like to see you again.'

Herman thought that was a good idea.

They left the boarding house and walked along the river to the forest.

'A lot of silt has indeed been washed away,' Herman marvelled. Apparently he hadn't looked around much lately.

At the scouting camp they were welcomed with tea and home-baked apple pie. Michael introduced his father to those who did not yet know him. He told them that as an expert in cleaning up water bottoms, he was consulted by the environmental movement.

'I would like to set up my own club,' Michael thought out loud amidst the circle

of interested young people who had been lazying around in the sun or doing odd jobs. 'A club of young people who will do the things in the forest that need to be done, without adults.'

'Like with the drilling and sampling?' one asked. 'That was cool, we did as good as those professionals. They said so themselves.'

'Yes. My father agrees with us that we can clean the river quite well. There are about forty of us. We don't cost anything. All we need are overalls, brooms and pumps.'

'I can take care of that,' his father promised.

'I want to ask the journalists to come to the forest,' Michael continued, gratified by being with his father, who also supported him in his ideas. 'They hang around the boarding house, waiting for news from Olga Jellisek. But it's not happening there; it's happening here.'

'Don't underestimate the Environmental Movement and how central she is to it, Miche,' Herman warned. 'She has connections everywhere and I think it will largely depend on her what the government will do.'

'What will the government do?' The scouts were shouting all sorts of things, but most of it was in Slovak, which Michael and his father did not understand.

The murmur was drowned out by the passing of two fighter jets.



## Chapter 16

### There you have it...

The roar of the jet fighters was so unexpected and deafening that they cringed. It had not happened before since they were here. It was a grim omen, a telling answer to the question that had just been asked. Herman, the only adult in the group, looked distressed; he knew the world a little better and feared the worst.

As the sound slowly died, he expressed his concern: 'Boys, girls, don't forget that everything we have here in terms of camps and tents and such has been set up without any permit...'

'We have permission from the farmer,' the girl with the black curls, the secretary of their meeting, interjected. 'For a scout camp, we don't need any other permits.'

'Well, at least your camp will be safe. That is, if the government declares this area a disaster area, then all rules are suspended. Then everyone can be sent away, even the farmers.'

This made them silent. The world was apparently even worse than they had thought.

'We must hide in the forest,' Michael broke the troubled silence.

'Yes, but how will we get food?'

'They can see us from the jets with infrared scanners,' said one boy.

'Also under the trees?'

The boy nodded. 'They even use it to track down corpses in forest areas.'

'Also under an overhanging rock?' Michael thought of the huge rock canopy under which he had slept.

The boy thought. 'As far as I've read...' he said hesitantly, '...those cameras can see under things at an angle. It depends on how they fly over the area.'

They were at an impasse.

'Come on, let's go and see your sisters,' said Michael's father and got up. 'We won't get out now anyway.'

Michael did not agree. If the place was sealed off by the military, they would be too late, they would have to leave the forest and nothing would be done about the poison and Diana would die and he would probably never see or hear or feel Dia again.

On the way to the camp under the tree, he decided not to say anything and to make his own plan. He had some vague ideas about how they could hide in the forest.

The girls were delighted that Herman came to see them. He had brought all kinds of goodies. They put everything away carefully.

'Don't you eat it?' he asked in surprise.

‘We’re saving emergency rations,’ Lucy declared solemnly. ‘We’re eating more and more things from the forest, but it’s going to stop eventually. Thank you for your chocolates and biscuits, Dad.’ She kissed him. ‘We’re saving them for when we really need them.’

‘Or for when we have visitors. Then we can present them biscuits with coffee,’ Wendy added.

‘Do you have any coffee? I’d love a cup.’

‘Well, we don’t have much left. Luus, do you think you could manage a cup for daddy?’

Her sister played along. ‘A small one. We still have some grounds from yesterday, so we can throw water on it.’ They burst out laughing. Sometimes they were the only ones who liked their own jokes.

Finally, they sat drinking coffee with biscuits from the emergency stock; Diana lay watching from the sleeping corner.

‘We have to get back, my boy, if we are to be in time for the press conference.’

Michael followed Herman out of the tent.

‘Take some groceries!’ they were shouted.

‘Coffee!’ They heard the twins laughing.

‘I have been thinking about your plan to retreat in the forest with the scouts, Miche. Whether it works or not, I think you should resist an evacuation as long as possible. They won’t do anything to children, especially not in front of the press.’

‘Thank you, Dad,’ Michael said, moved.

‘Look, this whole fair in the village is illegal, there are no permits for it and nothing is paid...’

‘The landowners allow them to be there, don’t they? They earn a lot of money from it too.’

‘Yes, that does make a difference. But normally you pay for your permits, so the municipality can also earn from it. And you pay tax on the turnover and on staff.’

‘I thought the events agency took care of all that.’

‘Yes, maybe so,’ Herman sighed. ‘I don’t know any more either. Everything is so uncertain that you start guessing and get all sorts of ideas.’

They walked side by side, brooding.

In the village, the atmosphere was tense. There were more police cars than ever and two dark BMWs parked in front of the guesthouse. As they watched, policemen posted themselves in front of the entrance.

‘There it is!’ was Michael’s startled reaction. ‘Probably those polite officials to tell us to get lost.’

The sound of a helicopter made him look up. Were it his American friends... no, it was one of the police.

He followed the low-flying machine to see if it was going to land, but it only flew in circles over the village. He had to bring his mouth to his father’s ear to

make him understood. 'Dad, you go in,' he called out timidly. 'I don't dare.'

His father looked at him attentively. He in turn brought his head close to his son's. 'All right. I'll let you know what was discussed, if I can hear it at all. Go and stand among the people, then you won't stand out.'

Relieved that he would not come along and that his father understood him, he hung around outside, watched the work on the lock, counted about thirty policemen and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible.

The afternoon train from Jablun brought in a load of new journalists, who, on presentation of their press card, could pass the cordon around the guesthouse one by one.

We are already occupied, Michael observed with alarm. I have to get out of here!

He joined a group of tourists to the bridge where the path began.

A police car was just coming from the other side and stopped at the bridge. He ducked behind the people. With his heart pounding, he let himself roll over the low wall into the grass behind it. He ran up to the path, stooped. The first stretch ran through high bushes and some dead willows. Fortunately, he was not the only one on the path; some people were walking in front of him. Restraining himself from running, he walked alongside the water. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up; he felt the stares of the policemen burning into his back. The impulse to turn around was uncontrollable...

The quick glance over his shoulder was an anti-climax: there was no one watching him; the police car was still in the same place and the men were still in it. Shaking with relief, he walked on, faster and faster. At the end, he ran into the scouting camp. They had seen him coming, so there was a whole group of serious boys and girls waiting for him.

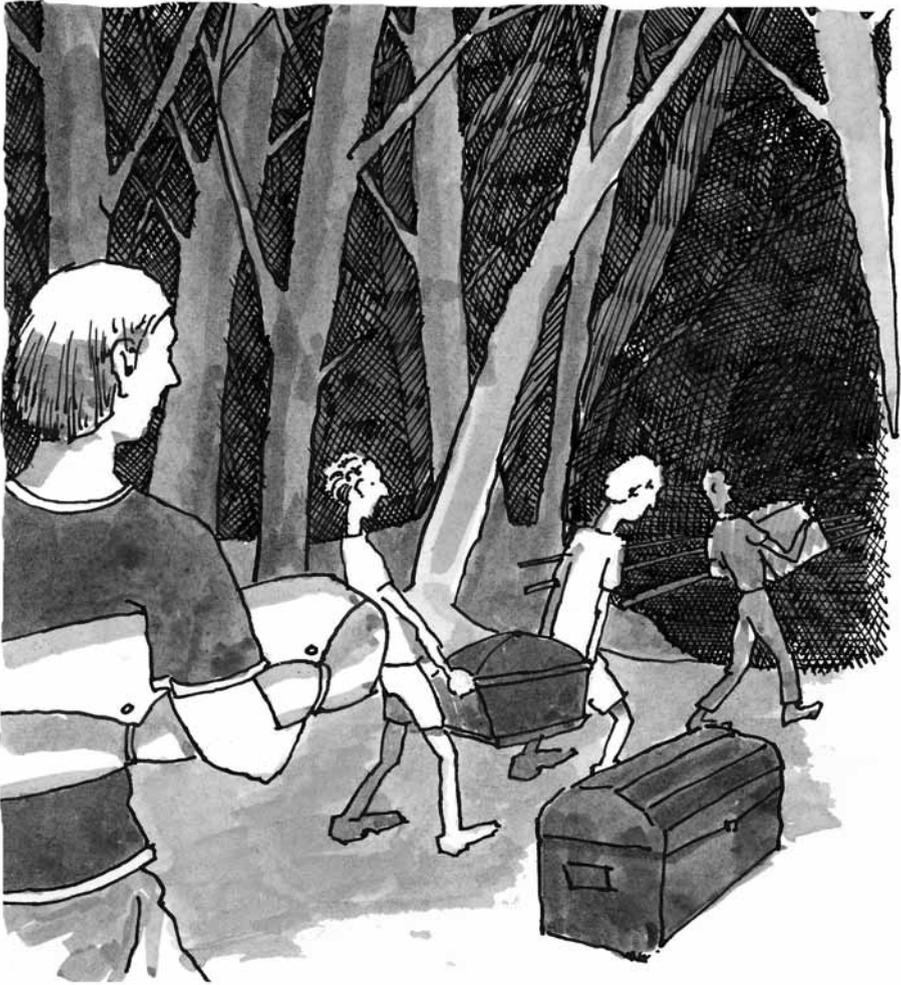
'What happened?' they wanted to know. 'Did the police come?' 'There are two helicopters flying around. Two strange men walked towards the forest just now. We followed them. Then they went back, but they wouldn't look at us.'

That was truly terrifying news.

'We are not safe in our camp any more,' he exclaimed. The tension clamped down on his throat. 'We have to move it, now! Before they come again, with the police.'

The scouts immediately went into action, as if they had practised for it. Within ten minutes, a column of loaded youngsters headed into the forest. Some went with Michael to the cave he had found, while the rest started to dismantle and pack up the camp.

The girls went ahead with Michael; it was better to get them out of sight without losing a second. Silently, hardly making a sound, they went deeper into the forest under the shelter of the trees. They waded through the stream one after the other, helping each other with their heavy packs, so as not to leave a scent trail for police dogs.



'I don't know,' hesitated the boy who seemed to know everything of the weapons and tracking techniques of the army. He stood taking in the surroundings and the rock formation and looked at his compass to see in which direction the opening was. 'Those planes were on a course that they could see exactly under the overhang. If they were to come over now they would pick us out without a problem.'

That was a setback.

Michael bit his lip. 'We are going to the cirque,' he said hoarsely. 'There we can take shelter in one of the caves.'

They waded through the river. Diana got tired and was carried in turn by the strongest boys; they drew lots who first.

At the top of the waterfall, Michael stopped the caravan with a hand gesture.

He hoped that the jets would not come over just at this moment, because he needed some time to announce their visit and ask permission.

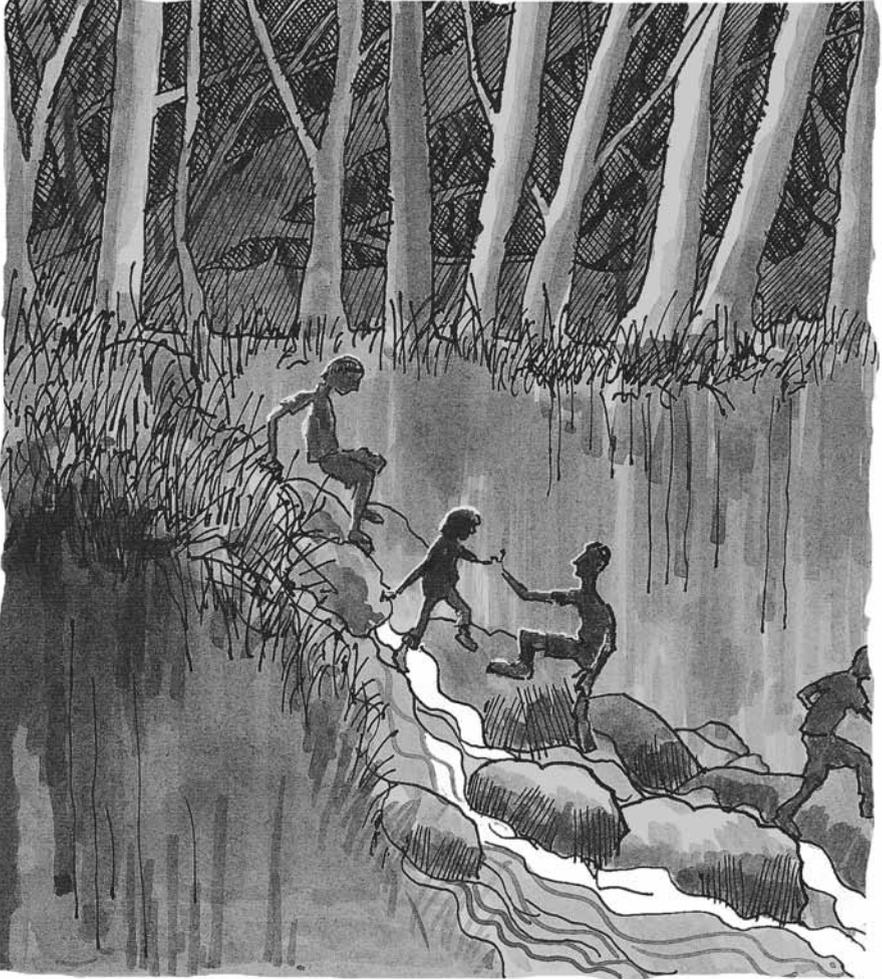
From rock to rock they clambered down.

Halfway through, he could not go any further; there was a resistance as if the air was thicker than usual.

‘Help us,’ he prayed, kneeling on a mossy stone. ‘We are being hunted, we must hide from the eyes in the sky, they must not find us. They must not take Diana away. Hide my sisters, I must go away from here, I must face them, I must tell the world what is happening here, I must make the fairy tale come true.’

A faint sense of approval seeped through his agitation, though the resistance remained undiminished.

He waved that they could come.



The scouts descended the almost-dry waterfall, handing each other their luggage.

‘Diana first,’ he admonished gently. ‘Try and see if you can go further. If you feel resistance, stand still.’

The boy who was helping Diana at the time, however, clambered down unhindered. After each step he reached up to help the little girl.

He softly repeated his instructions as he helped his sisters and then the porters

through the barrier. It turned out that he was the only one who was not allowed to go any further. He understood that this resistance had been created for Dia's protection.

'Dia,' he whispered. 'Dia, take care of them, I'm going back now.' His love for the elfin girl flowed like warm honey from his heart and like hot tears from his eyes as he climbed up, without looking back.

At the top, the army expert was waiting; because of his knowledge and insight, he was the guide for this piece as a matter of course.

'I am going back to the village; I want to tell the journalists everything that is happening and what is going to happen. Make sure that you are not discovered.'

'Don't worry.' The boy put his arm around him. 'They can only see into this valley if the camera is pointed straight down. I will make camp under that overhang, then there will be plenty of light and still cover.'

'And if they come by helicopter?'

'You can hear them coming from afar. I will train them to listen and to seek refuge at lightning speed.'

'Thank you. You give me a bit of confidence again,' Michael confessed. 'I just couldn't cope for a moment. I feel like tippy prey that they only have to pick up if they take the trouble to look.'

They pressed each other's hands, embraced each other, shy of their feelings.

## Chapter 19

### Police cordon

Michael ran as fast as he could along the river back to the village. There was no time to lose. It was strange to come across the cleared camp where so much had happened. Only the light squares on the ground reminded that there had been tents here, but otherwise all traces had been erased.

He ran on, past the pipe they had laid to flush the ground and past the muffled thumping compressor that was still pumping air around the roots of Diana's tree.

At the scouting camp, he caught his breath. Whispering, he told Maria what they had decided. He urged her to keep the location of the new camp absolutely secret. They should not even talk among themselves; there could be loose individuals among the scouts.

Yes, she remembered this from the stories of former members of their group: sad tragedies had happened during the old regime, because traitors had infiltrated their movement.

After the short delay, he ran to the village. He had become rather preoccupied in the meantime, he did not pay attention and ended up in a police check. However, he was not recognised and sent to the waiting crowd on the other side of the bridge. In a hurry, he considered what he should do.

He walked some distance up the road, where he climbed up the hill to get an overview.

Cars were parked all along the road, most with their drivers still in. Were they just curious, or waiting for a command, were they plain-clothes police? Everything became suspicious. Further around the bend, the road seemed deserted.

He was hesitantly looking for a possible route to the village when a car stopped behind. German number plate! his brain registered with lightning speed, so there was no danger. Two journalists got out. He recognised them: they had talked to each other recently. They were scientifically trained writers who worked for various metaphysical and philosophical magazines.

'Hello, Michael,' they greeted him, as surprised to see him here by the side of the road as he was to find them at this very moment. 'What are you doing here? What the hell is going on?'

'I am trying to get into the headquarters unseen.' He pointed towards the village. 'But it is cordoned off everywhere by the police. People from the government have come to take over.'

'Those are the messages we have been receiving.'

His colleague nodded affirmatively: 'Yes, we were tipped off that the government is going to intervene.'

'There are jets flying over now and then..Would the army throw us out?'

‘Jet fighters? Why on earth would they use the air force?’

‘A boy from the scouts told us they have infrared cameras with which they can track us in the forest.’

‘Yes, that might be the reason. What are you going to do?’

‘We moved our camp to where they couldn’t find us, I was just in time...’ At that moment, two jets appeared from behind the mountain ridge behind them and hurtled low over the forest with thunderous noise.

‘They wouldn’t dare to do that if General Jellisek was still in charge,’ said one of them, startled. Far away, they saw the fighters steeply climbing in a wide bend to once again sweep across the valley. ‘They are looking for you, boy.’

Michael was standing rigid with stress, praying monotonously within himself: Dear God, let them have dived away in time, let them not find them, dear God...

After a third low flight, the machines disappeared and they could talk to each other again in a normal tone of voice.

‘What are you going to do, Michael?’ One of the men nudged him amicably. ‘Hey kid, can we help you with something?’

Michael recovered a little. ‘Yes, I would like to tell the press what is going on.’

The two men looked at each other. ‘How about we set up a new press centre,’ suggested one. ‘The guesthouse is no longer available it seems.’

‘Good idea, but where?’

‘Do you know a suitable place, Michael?’

Michael was about to shake his head when a clearing by the side of the road, just fifty yards away, caught his eye. It was a storage area for felled trees that was currently not in use. A lumberyard. It had caught his eye because it seemed to him an ideal spot for a fries shop. He explained his idea.

‘Beautiful, beautiful. And that fries shop will be there too, I assure you. There are at least three in the village; they will probably have to leave as well.’

‘But how do we get all the journalists there?’

The men simultaneously pulled their mobile phones out of their pockets and tapped them insinuatingly: ‘Through their editors, man. No, that fries shop takes more effort, I can assure you.’ To his colleague: ‘You call our editors, and I’ll take care of the people at the barrier.’

‘You’d better stay here, Michael,’ said the one who was going to call.

Michael was in doubt: he had an urgent feeling that he was needed in the village, but something in him said that it was dangerous. ‘I just want to see how things are,’ he defended his choice. ‘See if I can get in touch with headquarters.’

‘Know what you are doing,’ the man warned him. ‘I think they are looking for you. If they have you the whole movement collapses.’

‘Do you think? But... Mrs. Jellisek’s organisation made the occupation a success, didn’t it? She...’

‘That is true. But without your TV appearances, the photos of the French and the images of the Americans, it would have remained a local event. The police

would long since have chased the activists off the factory premises. The company's licence is legal, however absurd that may sound. The Ministry does not give a damn that in an unknown forest a stream gets polluted and a few trees die.'

'But what if Diana dies?' he exclaimed in despair.

'They will blame that on her weak constitution. A symbiosis between a human and a tree is already being dismissed as a fairy tale. Money-grubbing foreign fair-ground operators have set up an attraction without permits that is wreaking havoc with the traffic and making it impossible for a legal business to operate.'

Gasping for breath, pale as a ghost, Michael had listened to the man. It testified of an abominable cynicism. Not the journalist, who was only reporting what he had heard, but the people in power, the national administration, from whom one would expect better.

'Nobody told you this before? Sorry, I don't want to upset you, but that's how people think in the ministries.'

'Has everything been for nothing then?' He was closer to crying than to laughing; somehow this was what he had unconsciously feared all along. 'Did we lose?'

The man looked at him thoughtfully.

'No, not yet. With a good press you can still win it. I think you need your fairy for that. If she were to show up with you, there's nothing to fear. Without her? I don't know, kid. The environmental damage here is too small, too insignificant compared to, say, the Danube dam, than to pay any more attention to it. No, it is the fairies that everyone, all my colleagues and I too, are waiting for. We think we've got something unique, something really new, that keeps us here.'

'That is what I have always thought,' sighed Michael. 'But I couldn't put my finger on it. Everyone is busy with something else and nobody is busy with the fairies anymore. They have not been seen for days.'

'Go to your forest, boy, and mobilise your fairies and come back to that clearing you were talking about, and we'll put it on all the front pages and prime time broadcasts. No official or soldier will dare show up here then.'

He was heartened by the fact that the man had been able to point out so clearly where the shoe was wrong, and what he could do about it.

'Can you... could you please pass on a message to my father? He is probably in the village, at the mill or in the headquarters.'

'I'll see what I can do for you, but I'm not promising anything. What are...?'

'That we are doing well and that he will be able to see on the television that we are hiding... or is that unreal?'

'Maybe. But I will try to convey that you are well. That's a simple message that no one will be able to tell from where you are. Now go. I don't want to see you arrested.'

Michael shot into the side of the road as a car approached.

## Chapter 18

### Lost; lost?

Swinging from trunk to trunk, he descended a steep slope. Spruce forests usually continue to the point where the slopes merge into the valley floor with meadows and scattered bushes, but it was taking a long time here.

He stopped uncertainly. He had scratched himself badly in his hasty descent and had sprained his foot. Had he lost his way? He did not know this part of the valley. Was it the right one? Or was he in a neighbouring valley?

He decided to go down as far as he could, then he should eventually arrive at their river, or at least at another stream he could follow.

Hastily orienting himself by the sun, he suspected that this was a side valley, not as wide as he could remember.

With difficulty, he made his way down through a wild area of rocks and fallen trees. He felt more and more trapped. All kinds of doom scenarios flashed through his mind.

The slope changed to flat terrain, but the forest remained dense for a while and he lost all sense of direction. When he got stuck in an impenetrable swamp of fallen poplars and brambles, he started to cry out of frustration and fear. He had to get to his sisters, was all he could think of.

He tripped and fell with his head against a log. For a moment, his eyes went black. He sat on hands and knees for a few minutes with his forehead on the wet ground. It hurt, but the woolly fog in his head cleared a little.

I shouldn't do it like that, he thought. I am lost. I am in a wrong valley.

He sat up and dabbed the blood from the scratch on his head with his sleeve.

He looked around. Nowhere a passage to be seen. Trunks were rotting, nettles and brambles had overgrown the remains, broken stumps sticking out like gravestones. He shivered, his trousers wet from the moist ground where he sat.

Help me, he prayed; not for the first time that day.

A thought occurred to him: I can ask the wood elves and the gnomes for help. They can show me the shortest way.

The realisation that there was help out there that he only had to call on calmed him. The panic that he was single-handedly responsible for a happy ending gradually ebbed away.

He stood up and made his call.

He more or less expected that thin forms of nature beings would immediately manifest, but he found that he had to make do with a sense of their presence. They were not prepared for anything more. In any case, they gave him directions on how to walk.

He climbed back up the slope and made his way through the chaotic vegeta-

tion around the marsh until he reached a meadow. There he could easily reach a stream across the grass.

Slogging along the narrow stream, he lost all sense of time. He climbed over fallen trees, dived under low-hanging branches, wriggled to avoid being caught by hacking brambles; his waking consciousness narrowed to the physical effort to keep moving forward. At the same time, his dream consciousness expanded; he knew where he was, how he should go, where he would find the fewest obstacles in his path. His perception became sharper: he saw as a matter of course the little fish in the brook, the finches and tits in the bushes, the robin looking at him with beady eyes, the searching kingfisher on a branch above the water, the watchful fox under a fallen tree trunk.

Hardly making a sound, Michael slipped through the dense vegetation. In the middle of a movement, he froze: just in front of him stood a drinking deer.

The doe looked around restlessly, but the wind did not bring any suspicious scent. She drank on, greedily. Satiated, she took in her surroundings again, somehow aware that there were eyes on her. Michael stood less than six yards from her, completely absorbed by the bushes and trunks.

The animal turned and disappeared. Michael followed, he had to go the same way, and the big beast ran along a much trodden trail, which made the going a lot easier.

The vegetation along the stream had imperceptibly changed into high forest with dense undergrowth. By choosing downhill paths he now made faster progress.

The ground beneath his feet suddenly changed from soft, humus-covered clay to grey limestone with a sparse carpet of herbs. He no longer heard the stream and went to see where it had gone. Amazed, he found a dry bed. Where on earth was the water going?

Going back he found the cause: the flowing water sank between the boulders. This was a karst region where uncountable years of water erosion had created caves and underground rivers.

Since the bed was continuous and nothing was growing in it, he suspected that the leak had just occurred. Who knows, maybe there was a huge cave underneath and he was standing on the last thin crust above an immense void! The images his brain came up with evoked panicky reactions in his body. It wanted to flee and at the same time it stiffened: don't move or you will fall into the depths!

With a mental effort, he calmed himself. Taking a deep breath, he examined the strange panic attack, what was it for? He was curious as to where the water actually went.

With his eyes closed, he followed the murmuring and throbbing water to where it sank between the pebbles in a spongy structure of hollowed-out smooth stone. The openings were just wide enough for the water to pass through on its way down. Now he also understood the empty bed further downstream: when the

snow melted in spring, a gurgling stream of blue-grey melt water thundered past here until it fell in a graceful white waterfall from the cliff into the rivulet. The porous rock could not handle such a flood.

He wanted to know where the seeping water was resurfacing and bent over the edge of the cliff. To his surprise, it welled up from the bottom of the cliff at the clearing where he had placed a miniature filter shortly before. He had been in their forest all along! Only now he had come from an unknown side.

Relieved, he got up to go down. A little while back the slope was more passable, he remembered.

He was about to descend when the roar of approaching aircraft caught him off guard. Looking around in a hurry, he saw a hole and dived headlong into it. With a scream he fell.

## Dealing with the enemy

The reporters waited in vain on the lumber square. The fries stall had come, but no trace of the elfin boy. Nobody knew where the children were. Rumours said policemen sent to their camp had found an empty spot in the forest. They had seen a second expedition on the road, this time with search dogs.

The reporters crowded at the car of a local reporter who had a police scanner. Thanks to the height they could follow the mobile phone conversations.

A third reconnaissance flight with MIG 29's, equipped with infrared cameras, had just come over. They listened anxiously to hear if there would be any mention of it in the messages between the mobile police headquarters in the village and the search crew in the forest. A murmur sounded when they heard that the outcome of the last flight was 'negative'.

'They speak English,' grumbled a Slovakian newspaperman, in German so that everyone could understand him. 'A few years ago everything in the air force was in Russian. I bet they even translated all the Russian manuals in their aircraft.'

'They are part of NATO,' said another. 'They will get other planes anyway.'

'But where would those children be hiding?'

'Didn't they just squeaked out?'

'Can't. The only way is through the village, there they would have been seen.'

'Are there no other roads or paths?'

'No, the whole area is inaccessible,' said a reporter from a newspaper in Jablun. 'No roads, no paths, not even logging trails.'

'Listen! The search has been called off for tonight. It's too dark and the dogs haven't found a trace yet,' shouted an excited Slovak at the scanner. The police broadcasts were in their own language, while most reporters came from abroad.

A murmur ensued; the listener gestured violently for them to be quiet.

This worked so well that all could hear distorted voices from the loudspeaker. It was an intense discussion by the sound of it.

'What are they saying?' someone whispered.

Only after the exchange of words had ended did the Slovakian translate what had been said. A solidarity had grown among the journalists in the exchange of news; the man tried to give the most exact translation possible.

'The leader of the search expedition first reported that it was too dark to proceed. The dogs had not yet been able to pick up a scent trail after it had stopped at the stream.' He thought for a moment about how things had gone on, he had to get everything out of his memory.

'The commander said they had made little progress, and that they could have advanced more. Then the platoon leader said that it was very hard going in the

forest, they could only proceed step by step. Is the vegetation so dense, the commander asked, do you need machetes or chainsaws? The platoon leader replied it was not the problem, the forest is open enough, he said. But he swallowed what he was about to say. What is it then? the commander asked impatiently. It is very difficult, the platoon leader replied. But it is downhill, the commander protested angrily.

Yes, the platoon leader said, his voice sounding very eh, shy I would say, as far as you can hear on a radio. What he said was very strange. He said it seemed as if the air was thick, as if they had to wade through water. They were dead tired, he said, the dogs too, they could hardly move. The commander then became almost really angry, but probably realised we were listening in, because he gave the order to return and cut the connection.'

'They haven't been broadcasting since,' said someone who had continued to eavesdrop on the scanner.

'I call it a day,' said a thinly dressed woman, shivering from the cold.

'Yes, I am going too, to a hot meal, a drink and my bed.'

'Where do you sleep?'

'Hotel Terminus in Jablun, that's the closest.'

'But how do we get there, the road through the village is closed.'

'Not for through traffic, I've seen a couple of cars driving through, escorted of course, but we can pass.'

'So on to Jablun.'

'Would there still be room in your hotel, otherwise I'll have to go all the way back to Zilina?'

It was clear that there would be no news for the time being and the reporters strolled to their cars. It was now rapidly getting dark in the spruce forest, and increasingly chilly.

'When one of you gives me the number of his mobile phone, I can reach you,' said the Slovak at the scanner. 'I'll keep listening for a few more hours. If I hear anything I can warn you.'

Grateful for his collegiality, they exchanged numbers.

In a long line they drove to the barrier, where, after some deliberation, they were let through. Without being allowed to stop, the line of reporters drove past the guesthouse where the two BMWs were still parked. They could guess what was going on there, but unfortunately they were not able to take a look. The armoured police van in their wake left them in no doubt that they should continue driving. They left the village with a last look at the guesthouse.

In the guesthouse, the environmental activists, cut off from the outside world except for their mobile phones, had been discussing with a government delegation for hours. They were four straight-faced men who had refused to say which ministry or agency they were from. Their foreman had shown a letter, signed by

the Prime Minister, which stated that the bearer of this letter had a mandate to safeguard the state interest; Secret Service, in other words.

In all these hours, only the foreman had spoken. In fact, he had said nothing more than that the government expected them to relieve the occupation of the factory immediately and dismantle the illegal attractions.

Not a single argument from the environmental movement changed that. Not a single promise was made, not about cleaning up the riverbed, not about delaying until the environmental movement could buy the factory site, not about the restoration of the weir at the water mill, not about the results of the soil survey.

In fact, it was suggested that even Stefan's Water Department was working illegally. That was too crazy for words. Olga Jellisek had not given in an inch.

In the meantime, the village had been completely evacuated.

Tourists and the curious had left in an intimidated manner, the villagers had entrenched themselves in their houses and farms. The large marquee was closed and dark, the generator was silent. Only in the mobile studio of the Slovakian television the equipment hadn't been turned off.

The mobile police headquarters was manned, but even there little happened. Outside, annoyed policemen sat in their cars, their engines running to dispel the chill, chewing on dry sandwiches and sweets brought along.

The last train from Jablun had left for the provincial capital; the lonely signals were green in both directions. In the silence, only the barely audible rumble of the generator of the TV transmitter could be heard. There was no one to switch it off.

## The return of Dia

The camp of the three girls and the six scouts who had stayed was well hidden on the bottom of the cirque. They had heated up food over a petrol burner set up in a deep recess, invisible to any flying eye, they thought. Fortunately, no more reconnaissance planes had come over, for warm air wafting from under the deep hollow along the rocky canopy would have been bright and clear on the infrared scanners as an upwardly clouding stream of colours.

It was chilly, so deep between steep cliffs; the children went to bed early.

The scouting camp was also quiet. In one way or another, it had remained undisturbed. The only thing the youngsters had noticed of all the commotion were two search parties, the first consisting of four policemen who had soon returned, followed later by eight men with helmets and combat suits and two dogs. They, too, had returned by nightfall, sauntering sloppily behind each other, the dogs with heads and tails hanging down.

In a cave lay the unconscious body of Michael.

In another cave, another consciousness stirred.

The Earth softly sang its infinite songs. Along invisible channels, fault lines and water veins, it collected and disseminated information. The elementals resonated to this in time and space and danced to fulfil their lawful tasks. The local deva's, at rest now that the orbiting planet shielded them from their other element, the Sun, chatted with the elementals of earth and water; flowerfae's dreamed, except for those of the honeysuckle, which smelt strongly.

The ethereal body of the human boy gave continuous signals of injury, cold and a plea for help.

Irresistibly attracted by the helplessness of her life-giver, the Deva of the Willow left her sanctuary. She condensed her energy at the hole in the slope into which her beloved had plunged.

If she did not intervene, he would die. But she was afraid; fear had entered the core of her strange consciousness, which for eons had known no emotions and certainly no fear.

Formless, she flowed into the cavity and cautiously approached the source of heat beneath. He had broken an arm, a concussion and some deep abrasions on which the blood had formed a crust.

Under the intense turmoil in her mind, she coolly calculated the pros and cons of intervening. Her deva consciousness was insensitive to the rapid births and deaths of humans and had no involvement in them. So why was she so torn?

The boy moved for a moment and rose from his deep unconsciousness, a faint sigh escaping his lips. Hopelessly lost, she kissed them, gathering energy from

the surroundings to warm his cold face. She breathed on his eyes, which opened in surprise.

Her form had materialised without her deva-consciousness being able to prevent it; her love was stronger than the neuter primal force from which she originally existed.

'Dia?' he whispered with his eyes closed. He smiled, she cried. The warm tears that dripped on his cold skin awakened his urge for life deep inside. Her last resistance melted and she was there again, in his mind.

*Dumbass. Asshole. Lout. Poopy. Lummox. Couldn't you watch out? Get up, you limp...*

She had to giggle nervously at the association of the word she did not pronounce with his stone-cold member, which she sensed as clearly as the rest of his body and mind.

Michael moved for a moment and groaned. The sharp sting in his head startled Dia. She had become so entwined with him that she felt his pain as strongly as he did. That was not good and she withdrew slightly; at the same time, she went in search of the hurt.

Outside, she found a heavy bruise under an open wound; inside his skull, neuronal connections had been broken and capillaries burst. Without thinking about it, she healed it; there was little she could do about the physical wound on the outside, on which he was lying. He was even stuck to the rock bottom with coagulated blood. The broken arm, too, had to be set with her hands; she could only energise the bruised muscles and nerves.

She did it with concentrated attention; it told her much about the human body she had previously overlooked. Her materialised body acted as a heat pump: it collected energy from the environment and pumped it on to the human boy's body. Without intending to, she gave it growing power. She received the blood-warm life force of a fleshly body in return. At the same time, this gave her information about how it worked, how hormones and metabolism interact, how self-healing mechanisms in a continuous song bring disturbances, injuries, wear and tear, overgrowth and invaders to order.

It was exciting to suddenly get to know a human body inside and out, to learn to care for it and to heal it.

When she got enough knowledge about shape, composition, structure, resilience and growth of bones, she used her firmly grown hands to straighten the broken arm in a swift and sure movement, holding the bones in position until accelerated growth had sealed the fracture. All the while, Michael was in a trance, vaguely aware of what was happening to him, but mostly content, safe and warm in the care of his beloved.

Healing went too fast at one point, his temperature rising to the danger zone. Dia helped cool down the heated body by drawing energy from it now.

She was impressed by the complexity of the human body, by the volcanic en-

ergy it could unleash. In a circle around his motionless body, the wet rock had dried up as a result of the heat radiation from the recovering organism. There were enough reserves: Michael, though slender to the point of emaciation, had enough fat to burn to maintain the high temperature.

It gave Dia a profound knowledge of the human organism, more profound than any human doctor or healer could have.

Gradually, Michael's mind cleared; the fever subsided. He could sit up straight.

Opposite him sat Dia, her legs tucked up against her chin, wings folded around her. Her eyes looked inquiringly into his.

She had spontaneously reached a balance between existence as a bodiless deva and materialization as a humanoid. She was at a point where she no longer felt torn. She realised she had created herself as a new being in the cosmos. Not that it made her happy, but she knew in a cool, detached way that it was an unparalleled achievement and a sign of great courage.

She had made a face of her own, with large multicoloured eyes in which the metallic blue of young willow leaves and the yellow of their autumn colour could be recognised. Her wavy hair showed all the shades that young willow shoots can take: from green and yellow to deep red and brown and everything in between, but it was hard to see, the colour changes were barely discernible to the human eye. The skin of her face and the inside of her hands was creamy off-white like barked willow and had the same buttery sheen. The rest of her body was like velvet with the downy smoothness of willow catkins, her interpretation of clothing. She had given the butterfly wings the colour tones of her hair, but in shades of pearl.

*You are incomparably beautiful, Dia,* Michael said admiringly.

She smiled happily, coming back from immeasurably deep thoughts. She had grown up in the last few hours.

*I thought about making dragonfly wings for a while, but they stick out so stiffly,* she said carelessly. *I can put these around me. They are very warm, just feel.*

She rose with a single flick of her wings and landed on his lap. His hair fluttered in the cool wind.

Her downy body and silk-like wings around him brought him into an ecstasy of love and pleasure. She had to help him take off his clothes; he could not yet use his newly-healed arm.

The two merged into each other, neither time nor space existed any more. The couple floated weightlessly in the cave, which was dimly lit by a glow that seemed to pour from their pores.

Outside it was night. The forest shimmered with consciousness. If people had been awake they could see a violet aura swirling around the forest, like aurora borealis.

The mating of the two consciousness's in the cave caused waves of harmony, like rings in the water. People smiled in their sleep, even the four agents of the Secret Service.

## Chapter 21

# Busy

The morning revealed the forest and the village under a blue sky wherein fluffy white clouds chased each other. It was not cold. In the rising winds along the slopes, the water condensed from the clouds and there it rained lightly.

In the emergency camp at the bottom of the cirque, a few scouts were preparing a sumptuous breakfast of toasted bread, porridge and fried eggs. Dense mist hung in the deep bowl and hid it from eyes that needed visible light. It was drizzling a little.

Not so at the scouting camp by the river. The residents sat together in the central tent, hot cups of tea in their hands, listening excitedly to their chairwoman despite the early hour. Maria presented them with a plan that had grown in her brain during the previous night. She wanted to call on the international scouting movement to hold a jamboree here to officially put the Elfswood under their protection. This had no recognised legal status, but the publicity surrounding it and the actual activity of thousands of scouts around the world, not to mention their former members, was sometimes more effective than any officially sanctioned status.

The plan was adopted by a show of hands.

A delegation was formed under the leadership of the black curly-headed girl and instructed to contact their national headquarters as quickly as possible. From there, the appeal would be sent out into the world, via the Internet, by telephone, letter and press releases.

They set off at once; if they hurried, they could still catch the morning train from Jablun that would take them directly to the provincial capital.

The sleepy policemen at the bridge let the group of scouts pass unmolested when they were told that they were on their way to the station to leave. Apparently, they were only prohibiting incoming traffic.

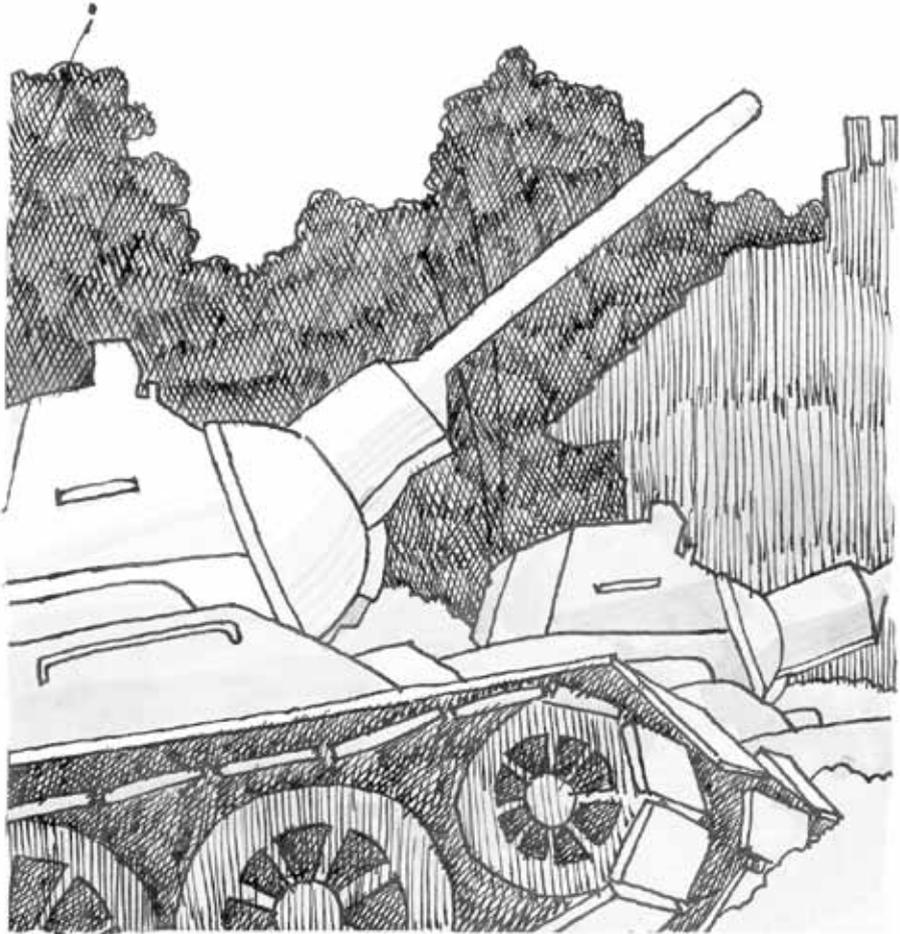
Several dozen curious people and journalists stepped out of the train; no one to stop them. But at the entrance of the guesthouse four armed guards made the atmosphere tense and threatening, as if there was a war on. Those with a press pass, however, were able to walk through.

More and more reporters gathered in the drawing room, chatting away, talking on the phone and drinking cups of coffee. The village girls were there again to serve; it seemed as if nothing had happened yesterday.

The press conference announced for eleven o'clock was postponed twice: they were waiting for reactions from the capital. Olga had personally called in every politician and high official she knew to lobby for their cause.

In the boarding house, almost everyone was on their mobile phones or nervously playing with them, waiting for messages.

A loud growl outside caused the reporters to stream out of the front door en masse: they all knew the sound tanks make.



A column of tanks and tracked vehicles armed with cannons and heavy machine guns entered the village, preceded by two armoured cars. Within five minutes, they had occupied all strategic points.

The police cars left quietly.

Soldiers jumped out of the vehicles and erected a hermetic cordon of barbed wire, armoured cars and sentries around the village. The reporters, excitedly talking into their mobile phones, passed on an eyewitness account to their editors

and made photographs and video's which they immediately transmitted.

No one realised at the time that there was no cameraman present. They had been too busy with themselves to notice that the television had somehow been shielded off.

Around five o'clock, the four secret agents came down the stairs. Their leader, the only one who had spoken so far, stopped halfway. In a monotonous drone, he read out a short statement. You could hear a pin drop. None of the journalists had expected this, they all made a defeated impression. The statement was sent online via mobile phones to the dozens of editorial offices where people sat listening breathlessly.



‘Despite repeated requests from the government and the personal intervention of the prime minister, the Slovakian Environmental Federation has not cancelled its illegal occupation of the factory site of the TDD company in Branočs. Blowing up a mountain wall with the intention of separating the Iboc from the Bran is a violation of the law, with which the Environmental Federation has placed itself outside the law. It has also refused to dismantle the illegal attractions and to apply for a permit for this purpose from the municipality of Jablun. On the basis of complaints from the owner of the aforementioned factory and villagers, the government has decided to declare an emergency for the territory known as the Bran Valley and to deploy the army to stop the illegal activities and to ask all

those engaged in illegal practices in Branočs to leave, and if this request is not met, to arrest and remove.'

An incredulous silence followed these words. Such a brutal intervention was out of all proportion, preposterous in a modern Europe. Even the best-talking journalists were stunned. But the man was not finished.

'You are all requested to leave the village. For those without transport, an extra train to Jablun will be waiting at 5.30 p.m. You are advised to make use of this train; it will be the last to stop here as long as the emergency situation is in force. In Jablun, a press centre will be set up in the army barracks there. You can ask your questions there, I am not allowed to answer them.'

A few journalists wanted to protest, people shouted where Olga Jellisek was, but policemen, who had been almost invisible up to that point, began to gently herd everyone out of the boarding house. Outside there was a loud clamour of indignant voices when an armed cordon appeared, leaving only two roads open: to the station, where there was indeed a train waiting, and to the bridge behind which the cars of those who had come by own transport were parked.

The atmosphere in the village was threatening; the shutters of the houses were closed, there were no civilians on the streets, on all corners there were tanks with roaring engines and manned machine guns. The reporters photographed them with their mobile phones hidden in their hands.

Camera's would probably be confiscated.

Fifteen minutes later, the four carriage train departed to Jablun.

Olga stood bitterly at the window, looking to the evacuation. She and her two employees were under house arrest. They had to give up their mobile phones; the line connections had been taken away along with the computers. Olga knew who had won. She blamed herself for having apparently underestimated the hidden powers in the capital. She hadn't thought that their influence on the Council of ministers could eventually prevail. What would those thugs behind the scenes know about the ministers? The past of not all members of the government was spotless. For it was obvious that secret and dark strings had been pulled here: an overreaction such as the occupation of the village by the army would not have been called for by independent and reasonable politicians.

She sighed, the overconfident action of that ecologist, Johan, and the two teenagers had indeed restored the Bran river to its original state, but had also been the deathblow: such an illegal explosion might well fall under the Terrorist Act. All they could hope for was publicity and reactions from abroad. They could not expect anything from their own television: the absence of camera crews should have set off an alarm for her, but she had noticed too late.

There was a knock at the door, the negotiator entered stiffly and with a short hand gesture invited her to sit at the table.

'You can speed up solving this situation by calling those children back from the

forest,' he said in a flat tone.

'I can't do that. I don't know where they are. Even if I knew, I would not be able to reach them.'

'You can call them.'

'They don't have mobile phones.'

'You say so.'

She nodded; he could do with that.

'You refuse to cooperate?'

'No dear man,' she sighed. 'I would like nothing more than to see those Dutch children go home safely. But they refuse to leave the forest while their sister is still so ill. I really cannot reach them.'

'Then we'll have to start a search.' He stood up.

'What have you done with the scouts?'

The man turned around.

'They have been called back by their headquarters. If they have not left by tomorrow, the army will dismantle their camp and take them out of the territory.'

'Ask the scouts to contact the children. They trust them.'

Without showing any reaction, the man left the room.

At the window, the three prisoners could just see how, less than five minutes later, two platoons were assembled, each with a dog. The commandos were heavily armed, as if they were hunting terrorists rather than a few stubborn children. They did not waste any time, and set off at a trot. Half an hour later two fighter jets whizzed by.

'They're searching with infrared,' someone muttered. 'I hope they are well hidden.'

The planes made a steep turn and came back in a low dive. With a deafening roar they tore across the village.

'I have never seen them fly this low before.'

'Could they have seen something?'

They silently prayed that it was not so, but with that equipment they could even detect a dead body, even though it was only a few degrees warmer than its surroundings. Let alone living children; unless they were hidden in a cave.

## Chapter 22

# The forest becomes aware

In the cave, six scouts and Michael's sisters sat shivering in their sleeping bags, waiting for it to be safe again.

In another cave, a double transformation had taken place.

Dia had gradually taken on a more solid form by osmotically absorbing matter from Michael's body. It was an irreversible process. She knew it; she had chosen it. She had composed new, lower vibrational frequencies, undertones of her ethereal frequencies. Around that composition, Michael's living matter gathered along the forms she had devised. Thus, a solid body grew to contain her spirit, less dense than that of humans, but too dense to be able to circulate as pure energy anymore. She could still fly and move her body through living objects and earth. For those qualities were preserved in Dia's new earth tones.

It was a calculated choice on her part not to get any closer than that. For Michael, it was more than enough: he could hold her firm curves in his hands, even hold her if she wanted to leave. Which, by the way, she never thought of doing. She sat straddling him; their sexual energy was so high that they experienced orgasms continuously. A large part of the osmosis process had actually taken place in her through Michael's ejaculations. Dia made sure that his decreasing density would come as close as possible to hers. Michael's thinned appearance was not new. From her primal memory, she was aware that he now had the density of humans as they had been in a previous cycle of the Earth.

Staggering amounts of information accompanied the exchange of matter between them. Open access to each other's psyche, mind and memory had especially benefited Michael; Dia had been rummaging around in his head for sixteen years. For her, the new thing was the physical functioning of a body. Hers was not of flesh and blood and organs like Michael's. Her knowledge had become so thorough that she had been able to create something new, a living substance that conformed entirely to her will. Her plasma had no physical metabolism, could not age or become ill. She had thus been able to create an immortal body. She could change it at any time, enlarge or reduce it, create new forms and improve it.

It was too much for Michael to grasp at once. However, since their connection was now permanent, he would have access to all of Dia's almost inexhaustible knowledge at any time.

While fighter jets hunted over the Elfswood with their electronic eyes and harsh, ruthless commandos entered the forest at a run, preceded by eager dogs, a great miracle came to life in an unsightly cave: the creation of new beings from the human Michael and the Deva of the Willow.

Heat radiation from the cave opening was recorded by the sensitive equipment on board the jets. Observers behind the computer screens at the airbase, however, classified the heat source as 'natural heat-producing earth phenomena'. That was actually quite strange, because there were no such phenomena in these slate and karst mountains. But there was an explanation: the observers had already had to classify so many unknown heat sources that they felt a kind of fatigue. A narrowing of consciousness, keen as they were to find living or even dead children.

After the second flight, there was brief talk of a third because there was a temperature inversion above the deep basin valley that made it impossible to detect heat sources on the ground. However, it was not considered possible: the sharp separation between the cold airflow and the relatively warm air bubble below was too low for the supersonic jets. They had to wait until the inversion was solved.

Under the protection of living air, the children were waiting in their cold cave. Diana was in a trance: she listened to the singing of the Earth, which told her that something very special was happening. Gradually the connection grew. The forest began to sing, forest giants joined in the song from their roots deep in the earth. Young trees became active, juices raced up and down under their bark.

The forest got eyes.

Electromagnetic fields around the commandos were detected and transmitted to Earth's information field. The vibrations of their heavy footsteps produced minute electrochemical changes in widespread mycelia around the roots of trees.

These quantum shifts modulated the local earth song with messages of place and speed. The forest consciousness, located in the little girl, calculated and reacted. Along the river, roots swelled to many times their original diameter by metabolism accelerated a thousandfold, pushing earth upwards. But the fast-moving soldiers lived at a pace that could not be matched by the vegetable world. The cracks, meant to be an obstacle, the expanding roots of the sacrificial trees made in the path were too late: the commandos had already passed each time.

The forest consciousness retreated to the vicinity of the waterfall in a last effort to stop the advancing soldiers. A heavy beech tree, dying of fungal invasion, was pushed up from below by the expanding roots of several neighbouring ash trees. The old forest giant began to slope; mouldy roots snapped with dull bangs, soil, clay and stones were pulled loose, dead branches and broken twigs fell with loud creaking and noise. It was not enough, the tree stalled halfway through its intended fall.

'Come with me,' Diana ordered.

Without protest, the scouts and her sisters followed Diana outside.

In the dying light, they hurriedly climbed up along the waterfall. Supported by two strong boys, Diana led them upstream along the bed.

'Soldiers are coming,' she panted. 'The forest wants to stop them but it can't.'

We have to help. We must help. Quickly now.'

They arrived at the swaying tree. Astonished they saw how desperately swollen roots had torn open the soil.

'That tree must fall further. See what is stopping it,' she ordered.

'He's stuck in the fork of that dead birch tree,' a boy reported.

'There is a thick root on this side,' said a girl. She drew her knife and began frantically cutting pieces out of the soft but tough material.

'We have to cut down the dead birch,' the boy suggested. Having only one tree saw with them, the boys relieved each other.

Diana listened with her hands on the ground to the messages from the forest. 'No more talking,' she whispered. 'They are close by.'

Creaking. The moribund beech sank slightly. Another creak, the birch began to slope. A dull thud resounded like a drumbeat, shaking the earth: the root had given way. Startled, the earth-covered girl leapt out of the hole. The boys ran for their lives as the beech majestically sank to the ground amidst a deafening crash of breaking branches and the noise of young trees and branches of its neighbours being dragged along.

'Get back,' hissed Diana.

The forest runners crept noiselessly back through the stream. Just behind them they heard a restrained bark and a less restrained curse. One after the other, they waded through the splashing stream that drowned out their steps, with pleasure it seemed.

'Down through the waterfall, otherwise the dogs might pick up our trail,' whispered the scout in the lead. It was a difficult descent through the bed of huge boulders and rolling stones. They helped each other down, consistently avoiding dry patches.

They need not have feared, however: the expedition of the commandos was stuck on both sides of the river in the impenetrable havoc caused by the fallen trees. Their blinding hand-held floodlights illuminated everything in bright lights and black shadows. After a few bitten phrases through their walkie-talkies, they turned around at the command of their platoon leader and retreated. None of the hardy soldiers felt at ease: the toppling of that forest giant so close to them seemed too much like black magic. They had seen no man, the dogs had smelt nothing and there was no breath of wind. It must have been the forest itself. And then such a huge tree... It did not help their spirits when they found the path, which had been flat on the way out, a churned-up, barely passable wilderness of cracks, rammed-up earth and grotesquely swollen roots.

Surely this could be the work of human hands? In ten or twenty minutes?

## Dia shows herself to the world

In the cave, the process of Dia's body became complete. Slowly, her consciousness withdrew from Michael's body. With a kind of reluctance and at the same time an expectant excitement, he felt her go. It gave an itching sensation, as if he had a tuning fork vibrating against his lips, but then through his whole body. He shivered from the overexcitement and shook himself like a young dog to get rid of it. Dia laughed a little.

Their noses touching, they looked through the gates of the soul into the other. Another who was not quite another anymore, they had mingled.

Between them, the question arose of how to proceed. What would their lives be like? How would they experience their new bodies when they returned to the world? What world would that be? The thought evoked in Michael a heavy sense of responsibility. Against his will, he felt his sex shrink and slide out of Dia.

He was reminded of the advice of the German journalists. He projected the conversation he had along the road to Dia and suggested going to the clearing by the road. Dia, checking his thoughts and memories, agreed, albeit with some trepidation. Her elemental's distrust of humans had not diminished, even though she had chosen a human-visible form.

Without further objection, she took him up to the entrance of the cave; she was aware of the need. The accompanying wing beats were actually more for effect: she actually lifted their combined weight with her ethereal energy. Michael had the good sense to quickly snatch his clothes.

Outside, he breathed deeply in the night air, pulled on his trousers and shirt. The damp fabric gave him a momentary feeling of alienation. The cotton was actually too heavy for his new, thinner body.

Outside, they took the shortest path through the forest. Zigzagging between the trees like almost weightless kangaroos, they covered the distance to the palely lit road. There they hid under the dark spruce trees overlooking the lumberyard.

There was a fries stall that seemed to be doing good business. The place was packed with journalists and bystanders. Their number was still growing.

*Can you fly us to that stall?* he suggested. Dia wrapped her arms and legs around him. She could increase her size at will and grew to a height that exceeded that of Michael. Her wings, expanded in span, gave off a faint violet light. With a little jump, they were in the air.

The two sailed over the stunned crowd, illuminated from below by the headlights of the crisscross parked cars and the lights of the fries shop. A searchlight flicked on, catching them in their flight.

*Go around,* he cheered. *They must be able to film it.*

*With pleasure*, was her answer.

Against her expectations, she enjoyed flying over the crowd, to show herself. She made a skilful turn, tilted sharply against the sideways air pressure, followed the road in a flapping motion, rose high over the firs for a hundred and eighty degree turn and descended in gliding flight to the intended landing place, where the people, filming and photographing, flew apart to make room for the couple.

With fierce wing beats, Dia broke their momentum, pulled up and landed her lover with a thud on his feet.

Shy with all the attention, she folded her wings around her body.

It was dead quiet. Hardly anyone could believe his or her eyes.

A child struggled free from its stunned father.

The boy spoke Slovak, but they understood perfectly: 'Are you a fairy now?'

Michael laughed and knelt before the boy; Dia looked over his shoulder.

'Yes and no,' was his answer in German, in the murmuring silence it was recorded by dozens of devices. 'I can't fly myself, only Dia can. She is half human and I am now half an elf.'

'Did she carry you?'

'Yes.'

'Can she carry me too?'

He shook his head. The child looked at the figure of the elfin woman towering in front of him; doubt could be read in his bright little eyes whether Michael had spoken the truth.

'Yes, she is quite strong,' laughed Michael. 'But because I am an elf now too, I weigh almost nothing. You are heavier than me, too heavy for her. She is only made of air and water, you know. She is not an aeroplane.'

He took him by the hand, stepped out of the protection of Dia's wings and brought the little boy back to his speechless parents. It was a conscious act; he wanted Dia to be seen as a being of her own, independent of him, no longer as 'Michael's fairy'. Dia sensed this perfectly. She widened her folded wings, like a cloak with a hood. Underneath she hid her body, her own creation. Bridging their eyes, he gave her the signal she was waiting for.

In a simple gesture, she spread her wings. There she stood, the most beautiful creature people had ever seen.

The audience was ecstatic.

She moved her wings, dust and leaves billowed up. Slowly, she turned on her axis, drunk in a trance by hundreds of eyes and camera lenses. She raised herself a little off the ground to show that she was not a person in disguise, but a real elf that could fly and float at will. All over the world, TV broadcasts were interrupted to show the images that a single TV camera belonging to a Slovak reporter was relaying on-line by the relay station in the station square, which mysteriously was still functioning. Dia laughed out loud, for the first time in her life, out of sheer joy of living and knowing that she was beautiful.

## Chapter 24

# Weapons versus good will

It was the first sound Dia had made in her existence. It was not the first sound any elemental creature had ever made. There were famous and infamous examples of the irresistible singing of sirens, mermaids and forest fairies.

Dia's delighted laughter sounded high and musical in the silence of the dark fir forest. She had proclaimed her birth with a triumphant expression of joy, very different from the crying of a new born human child.

Illuminated by the headlights of dozens of cars, amidst a growing crowd of journalists and onlookers from all around, Michael stood beside her. His heart was full, so full that he raised his arms and loudly shouted: 'Hurray!'

Bystanders started to chuckle, it spread; soon everyone was laughing, patting each other on the shoulders or hugging each other and roaring hurrah.

'Tell!' was shouted. 'Yes Michael, tell!' others took over the call.

In a continuous flicker of flashing lights, Michael raised his arms in the now familiar gesture asking for silence.

He began to report in a soft voice, recorded by hundreds of mobile phones, cameras and recorders, about his search for the half-human dryad Dia. Of her struggle with uncertainty, fear and desire; states of the soul she had not known before. Of her dilemma and fear of leaving her primal form and entering the vast space of free will.

'Dia made a final choice of the form you see her in when she found me in a cave I had fallen into,' he said. 'I was injured and would have died if she hadn't healed me.' He explained how that had happened.

All the while, Dia stood looking at him with eyes full of adoration; he was her hero, her mentor in human affairs, as she was to him in the knowledge of natural forces. Michael felt her warmth and her power that manifested itself in the world through him.

He explained that she needed time to learn to speak with sound so that she could reach people herself; for now, however, he was her mouthpiece.

It was so much information all at once, of a far-reaching nature that few could comprehend, that it remained silent for a long time after his last words.

'Where are your sisters?' asked a reporter. 'They have been reported missing by the police, along with six scouts who were not found at the camp.'

'They are safe in the Elfswood.'

'Do you think the army will not be able to find them?'

He hesitated. The answer on his lips was not the right one; something else was required. He listened in his mind to the growing feeling.

'What army?' was his cool response.

It took a while for the meaning of the two words to sink in.

One started laughing; soon the journalists were bursting into laughter.

'I wonder if they'll still be here tomorrow.' 'Boys, go home' 'Will they come through here?' 'No, they'll go towards Jablun, why?' 'Well, we could have stood on the side lines and waved flags.' 'Flags?' 'Yes, with hop Diana and so on.'

In the midst of the jokes, the same reporter asked: 'Michael, is your sister doing okay?'

He nodded. 'Diana is doing well. So is her tree.' He stood for a moment, listening. 'The forest... protects them.' Actually, the message had been different: Diana had let it be known that she was the forest.

'Come,' said Michael, waving his arm in the direction of the village. 'We are going to free the soldiers.'

It was not for the first time in the history of this country that brave citizens met a heavily armed military occupation force with an offer to go in peace. Illuminated by movie lights and the floodlights of an over-equipped 4x4, the crowd moved towards the barrier on the bridge.

A powerful male voice started to sing the time-honoured song of the peace movement: We shall overcome. It was adopted by dozens of men and women, then hundreds.

A helicopter hovered over the long queue with bright lights. Above the noise, someone shouted, with his mobile practically stuffed into his ear: 'It's our American colleagues! We are in a direct transmission!'

'Here comes another one!' was shouted.

A monstrously amplified voice sounded from the police machine, but the noise and echoes made it impossible for anyone to understand. The turmoil was indescribable.

The advancing crowd opened up at the bridge to give their idols free rein.

Side by side, Michael and Dia walked on to just before the barbed wire fence, brightly lit by the searchlights from the sky. Unrecognizable behind their helmets and visors, trained men crouched down to kill, their machine pistols at the ready. The barrels of the guns and machine guns on the armoured cars pointed menacingly at the crowd. The tension was palpable. Nobody moved. The roar of the two helicopters high in the sky drowned out all sound.

Stunned, mesmerised, the soldiers looked at the boy and the elfin woman who looked back from a few metres away without showing any fear.

With her hand in his, Dia took in the armed men, her wings wrapped around them. Michael knew how scared she was and how brave. She knew that bullets could not harm her, but the intent of the weapons aimed at her and her lover was almost unbearable. It might destroy her. Besides, neither of them was sure if Miche was equally invulnerable.

When, for some reason, the two helicopters swerved aside, Michael was able to make him understood. 'You can go home,' he called out cheerfully. 'It has all

gone well. Go to sleep, we will do the same. Tomorrow is another day.'

They turned to the breathless crowd behind them which was still growing from behind.

'Tomorrow we will come back,' exclaimed Michael to the crowd. 'Go home for now and sleep, it's all right; we're leaving too.'

At these words Dia opened her wings and gave the soldiers a glimpse of her beauty. With a single flap of her wings she climbed onto Michael's back, wrapped her arms and legs around him and carried him into the air with powerful strokes of her iridescent wings.

People in the crowd, even some soldiers, dropped to their knees in a prayer of thanks that they had witnessed a true angel. Dia may not have been an angel, but she looked a lot like one.

Dozens of cameras filmed and recorded the moment that a miracle happened: the soldiers lowered their weapons, removed the cartridges from the chambers of their AK 47s, stowed tear gas grenades, slung the sling over their shoulders, pulled aside the barricades and walked like a bunch of schoolboys towards the village, followed by the armoured cars.

Dia flew between the trees across the human-packed road to get away from the helicopters and into the clearing, where she took off and swerved into the heart of the forest.

The camera of their American friends, in their chopper high above the bridge, followed their flight until they were out of range of the searchlight.

For the first time, Michael could fully enjoy flying. The warm body on his back that hugged him tightly, the cool wind along his skin, the view of the moonlit field of broccoli that the forest looked like from their height.

Dia moved her wings in an easy rhythm. She had come to love her appearance, her feminine forms and the firm resilience of her fleshy substance, the carrying feeling of the wind beneath her wings. To experience and love her new self was an exciting sensation.

Above the cirque, they sailed down in a spiral. Michael felt her tension; it was not an easy manoeuvre to land on the narrow spot in the thin moonlight.

However, it went off without a hitch. Flapping her wings almost vertically, she braked just before they touched ground, pulled up, Michael stretched his legs and there they stood, laughing with excited joy.

The girls and the scouts had watched breathlessly from their cave.

Slowly, the spell weakened.

Diana was the first to move: with a scream she ran out into the arms of her brother. Her sisters followed like sleepwalkers and stroked the downy skin of the fairy-like creature that stood there, taller than them and breathtakingly beautiful. Dia caressed them with her wings.

Michael beckoned the timid boys and girls to join him.

They approached timidly. He embraced them one by one in silent thanks for their courage and solidarity, for their caring.

‘Let’s make a fire,’ were his first words, hoarse with emotion. ‘We told the soldiers they could go home. I think they will leave soon, the roadblock has already been removed.’

They nodded, not yet able to comprehend everything. Their fire master absent-mindedly set to work with firewood by the light of his torch, helped by his friend. They had to look back every time to see if the fairy was still there.

‘Shall I make some hot food, are you hungry?’

The girl hardly dared to ask, slapping her hand in front of her mouth when she remembered that fairies don’t eat. She didn’t dare look at Dia.

‘Yes, do,’ the three sisters said in unison.

On the rebound, they laughed.

Michael, who understood her confusion, laughed: ‘You heard, your cooking is much appreciated.’ She shyly accepted the compliment.

He did not perceive any need for food in his diluted body. But he was thirsty. Nearby, water seeped from the rock face and he thoughtfully drank a few handfuls.

*You have to eat something now and then,* Dia came into his mind. By now she knew almost everything about his body, how it was and how it had become.

*It is best to eat fresh plants from the forest, a little boiled or baked, as you did with Diana in the last few days.*

Yes, he noticed that the advice felt good. He immediately felt hungry. The cook had already started washing and cutting carrots, there was a pile of mushrooms ready.

‘Come,’ he said to Diana, ‘we are going to find some nice plants for the meal.’

She pulled him along to where she knew her favourite food was. Looking back, he saw his two sisters, enveloped by the wings of the tall figure in their midst, flickering in the light of the blazing fire. No, they no longer needed to hide from the heat seekers in the jets. They were here legitimately; it was the military who did not belong here.

## The army withdraws

At the same time in the village, on the station square, illuminated by the floodlights of the softly humming armoured cars, the commander stood before his troops. He stood in doubt. Not all the soldiers had seen the winged apparition. Those who had, were too disciplined to refuse orders outright or to lay down their weapons; they were, however, smiling foolishly and seemed to be deaf or were maybe listening to a song in their heads. They had opened the roadblock at the bridge on their own accord, left their posts without orders and come to the command post to report what had happened. From behind the line he had seen the boy and the elfin woman take off and had been too flabbergasted to give any counter-orders at that moment.

The reconnaissance van came back from the bridge.

The two soldiers, still considered reliable because they had not seen the apparition, reported that all civilians had left and the fries shop was closed. The whole horde of people had, without exception, answered to the boy's call! That was an achievement alone. It also, thank goodness, relieved him of the duty to intervene more forcefully. He wiped the sweat from his forehead in relief.

There was soft muttering in the rows.

'Find out what they say,' he ordered his orderly.

The man walked up the neatly lined up soldiers. They answered with a smile.

'They say they want to go home now,' he reported stiffly.

Suddenly, the commander had got enough of it. His order to chase a destructive gang of anarchist environmental fanatics out of a village did not correspond to the reality as he had encountered. He felt that he had been taken for a ride by the government and his immediate superiors. To act with violence or with a display of violence, which is almost the same thing, against the citizens of his own country was beneath his sense of honour as a professional soldier. But neither could he tolerate that his subordinates acted arbitrarily. He could do two things: act harshly against his men with disciplinary punishments and replace those who had seen the apparition with fresh troops, or go with the flow, lift the siege and retreat to their bivouac. The latter seemed better; it was nonsense to remain on stand-by with no enemy in sight. He even began to wonder who the real enemies were...

He had nearly a hundred pairs of eyes on him; only the crews of two tanks on the other side of the village were not present. He realised that they had been waiting for his decision for at least five minutes.

'At ease,' he said calmly. A sigh of relief went through the rows, drowned out by the stamping of a hundred booted feet.

‘Our action had the desired effect, men. We can be proud that we have restored order without a single false sound.’

It was a bit far-fetched, but it was also meant for the outside world. He suspected that agents were filming. He cleared his throat and gave the orders.

‘The roadblocks can be cleared. Two units remain at both entrances of the village, lights and engine off. The rest can retreat to the bivouac.’

The noncommissioned officers took over from him and he and his lieutenants remained standing until the last platoon had marched off and the last armoured car had swerved around the corner of the café where their camp was set up. With a deep sigh, he moved towards the guesthouse where they had commandeered rooms, followed by his two lieutenants.

In the lounge, he found the four men of the Secret Service around a table, a cup of coffee in their hands. On the table was a video camera, as if to demonstrate that everything he did was recorded.

‘Can I report something to the General Staff or to the Minister on your behalf?’

The man who seemed to be their leader shook his head.

‘Then I will go to the radio car now.’

It stood next to the boarding house with a high, hydraulically retractable antenna. He dictated a short report to the coder, describing the situation and asking for new orders. The message was entered by the cipher. After a final check, it was sent in encrypted form.

Tired, satisfied with his decision, yet scared of the unapproachable and unpredictable men of the Secret Service, he had another beer with his two lieutenants; the four ‘quiet ones’ had gone to their rooms.

In the large room at the front of the boarding house, Olga lay in bed thinking. She was the only hostage left behind after she had managed to get a safe-conduct for her employees.

From the window she could see how the occupying troops were retreating to their bivouac. From passing soldiers, she had overheard fragments of conversations about a miraculous apparition.

After the violent commotion a few hours ago, with loudly roaring helicopters, snarling armoured cars and soldiers running around, there had apparently been some kind of anticlimax. She had been very afraid that it would come to violent confrontations, but the noise had calmed down; not a shot had been fired.

She had a terrible time being cut off from all information. The search had been thorough: they had not left behind a mobile, telephone, radio or monitor.

She had to find out what the situation was, she decided.

Without making a sound, she got dressed. A night-light was on in the corridor. The floor creaked in the middle, she remembered in time. She crept along the wall, foot by foot, to the bathroom.

She peered out of the window: not a soul in sight. The only remaining sentries were at the entrances to the village and the bivouac, so the coast must be clear along the route she had once seen Michael take.

Despite her age – she was already over sixty – she was in good shape. She still trained regularly, so it was child's play to climb out of the window without making a sound; over the firewood shed she came to the back yard. Now it was getting exciting, those guys from the Secret Service would surely have a guard post or at least infrared motion detectors.

She moved close to the façade to the corner. There was laundry hanging outside, long since dry, but because of the actual house arrest of the villagers, it had not been brought in yet. Gratefully she made use of the cover provided by the sheets to get into the orchard. She carefully kept the clothesline between her and the boarding house and crept at a tiger's pace over the grass, wriggled her way through the hedge and kept crawling along it until a shed blocked off the upper floor of the boarding house. Here she could stand.

She chose a path between two fences, crossed a meadow with a sleeping horse on three legs and disappeared behind a wooded bank.

Olga experienced a powerful sense of freedom. Not only had she escaped her hostage, but she had also freed herself from all the conventions and structures in which she normally lived.

What would she do now? She thought it best not to go any further than the scouting camp for the time being, if there still was one. She hardly knew the way to the forest, and in the forest itself she knew neither the camp nor the way.

She took the long route by the meadows, circling the village until she reached the brook that she knew ran past the camp. She knelt down and drank from the fresh water. She thanked the naiad in her mind, wishing she could communicate with those beings.

She followed the stream and was delighted to find the scout camp as she had last seen it. A fire was still glowing around which a few young people were chatting. They were startled when her figure appeared in the reddish glow.

'Mrs. Jellisek!' cried a tall girl. 'You are free again?'

'I escaped, my child,' she laughed proudly. 'Climbed out of the bathroom window, just like Michael always does.'

'Were there no sentries?' 'What happened?' 'Have you seen Michael and Dia?' 'Are the soldiers really going home?' they shouted. More young people came out of the tents, awakened by the loud voices. The fire was refuelled and a kettle was hung on the tripod for tea, all at once.

'Guys, I know less than you do,' Olga said in a loud voice to calm the squabbling. 'I was under house arrest and had no telephone, radio nor television. The only thing I know and you don't is that the commander has withdrawn the troops to their bivouac. There are only two armoured cars left on guard. I know nothing about the Secret Service; all four of them are still there. But do you know any-

thing about an apparition? I heard some soldiers talking about it, coming back from the bridge.'

The tall girl, Maria, and her friend, the handyman Paul, told with big eyes of adoration how they were talking to the journalists on the lumberjack's square by the road when suddenly an angel came in flying with Michael in her arms.

'It was Dia. She was so beautiful, I...' Maria couldn't speak any more because of her emotion. Paul, who could still use his voice, went on about the miracle that had taken place that night.

Olga was deeply impressed.

'Such a darnedest guy,' she muttered. "'What army?'" he said and went on to tell the commando's they could go home! They actually did!

Now she understood the nonchalant attitude of the strolling soldiers: they had witnessed a miracle, some of them had knelt in prayer, so all other things were completely unimportant for a while.

They sat for some time talking and drinking tea. When the fire was only glowing coals, they went to their tents. Olga was provided with a bed and a borrowed nightgown in the guest tent. No one thought it necessary to set up a guard anymore; soon the whole camp was asleep, dreaming of fairies.

## More night time activities

In Paris, too, someone went to bed tired. Yvette had been working late into the night at the editorial office to break the sensational news in an extensive article with dozens of photos. The most spectacular ones were not even of her own making; they had been e-mailed by a correspondent who had been there.

The layout artists could now manage on their own, sending page after finished page via their own optic fibre cable to the printing house, where the offset plates were immediately made. They wanted the first print run of the extra issue to be ready by six o'clock.

Yvette was satisfied with her work, with the tenor of the text and the quality of the recordings, with the role she could play with her publicity in saving the Elfswood and other magical forests.

At the same time she was melancholic, wishing she was back during those first days in the forest when she had seen and photographed Dia. She knew more or less what that had meant for the dryad and for Michael. However, the trouble the photo had caused to the photographed persons outweighed its effect on the public: it was already one of the best-selling photos of all time. It had yielded a fortune; the royalties were not cheap. On her first day in Paris she had set up a fund to save the Elfswood. She had contributed the copyrights of her photographs as capital, and the account number was written out in full below the article. They could buy up the whole valley if they had to, she expected.

She decided to go back to Branočs the next morning, with a stack of the extra edition. With the desire to have an elf as a mate, she slept in.

In Hotel Terminus, opposite Jablun station, no one was sleeping. The journalists had been glued to the television for hours. Despite the fact that it was late, the opposition in the Parliament had requested an urgent debate on the situation in Branočs, which was broadcast live. What did the government have to say about the military intervention? What did the Minister think of the appearance of Dia and Michael, their speech to the soldiers and their spectacular flight high above the moonlit forest?

Even at the contractor's home, people were sitting in front of the screen. Herman had been invited by the director to stay the night as long as the occupation lasted. They sat with a large glass of beer in their hands and listened; now and then the man translated parts of the debates. When Herman recovered from the miracle of his son flying with an elfin woman, he was left with a nagging concern for his children, who were missing in the forest, or at least could not be found, despite the deployment of tracking dogs and infrared scanners. He wanted to get

there as quickly as possible, although he suspected that they had hidden themselves perfectly well, probably in one of the many caves in this karst region. But there were other dangers lurking there.

At ten to four in the morning, the cabinet fell on a no-confidence motion tabled by the opposition. The disapproval of the army intervention received a large majority in parliament. Furious and defeated, the Prime Minister submitted his government's resignation to the President. His passage across the main square to the presidential palace was followed by the cameras from step to step.

The President issued a decree, live in front of the cameras, recalling the army from Branoč with immediate effect, inviting the Environmental Federation to accept the State's apology and to re-staff their organisation in the village in order to cope with the expected influx of curious people. In a personal message, the President praised the scouts for their helpfulness. Finally, on behalf of the Slovakian state, he apologised to the dryad Dia and her human companion Michael, and offered all the help needed for the recovery of the Elfswood.

At ten minutes past four, the editors woke up Yvette, just in her deep sleep, with the latest news.

It took some effort to get her woolly brain working. She approved a final addition to the article and went back to sleep. The page was reformatted and a new offset plate was put on the press a little later. The printers had delayed starting the press on their own initiative when a Slovakian colleague who was listening to the Slovakian radio had called out that something was about to happen. They had kept the editors, who normally depended on the news agency for bulletins, informed live by holding the telephone receiver near the Slovakian colleague who was translating simultaneously.

After a final check, the gigantic machine slowly started to turn. It was always an exciting moment, but now the men stood watching the printing process expectantly. Eagerly, the first copies were pulled from the stack. Talking and whistling, they leafed through the extra issue.

After a few minutes, the rotary press was running at full speed and they could no longer hear each other. At half past five, the first delivery truck could take a load to the airport.

At about the same time, the first row of armoured cars with soldiers left Branoč for the barracks in Jablun, followed by the somewhat slower tanks.

The quartermasters would break up the bivouac, which would take several more hours; the commander was in the radio car, glad that it was over. Nobody had seen the secret agents leave, but at some point it was noticed that the two dark BMWs had disappeared.

Olga Jellisek and the scouts slept through everything, unaware of the feverish activity in the world around the silent Elfswood.

In Zilina, Dinja and Irina had watched television at home, together with Janos. Afterwards, they got ready to take the first train to the village. It left at six o'clock, so they could rest for another hour or so. Dinja set the alarm clock in her bedroom; Janos stretched out on the sofa and slept immediately. Irina, prey to conflicting feelings, lay crying a little until she too fell asleep.

At the bottom of the cirque, Michael lay dreaming with Dia on top of him. She had draped her wings on either side over the girls; her consciousness was spread across the earth-spanning field of the Willow.

All over the world, her experiences, reduced to aspects essential to trees, were passed on to all willows. The collective consciousness of the Willow thus continued to increase.

Michael dreamed with open eyes; he dreamed of stars, of trees that drank and passed on the starlight, of the Earth that fed and sang. In her singing, he heard the departure of dozens of vehicles. The thud of engines and the crunch of caterpillars across the road made the rocky ground tremble, vibrations that travelled along invisible lines in the earth's crust. The vibrations stopped abruptly when the motorcade had passed through the tunnel to Jablun and entered another rock massif.

His consciousness expanded, until it encompassed the entire valley, aware of all the sleeping and not sleeping inhabitants and visitors, the cattle in the stables and on the meadows, the white-hot sources of electromagnetic radiation from the two working transmitter masts in the village, the wild animals, the trees and the water that flowed and rippled as if nothing had happened.

He was needed.

In his companion's consciousness, he placed the message that his presence in the village was required, that she could quietly continue what she was doing, but that he would now crawl out from under her.

As he moved, the caress of her downy skin against his sent shivers of pleasure through both their bodies.

He stood up, stretched and emitted a message of indescribable pleasure. They had done it! Peace had come to the valley, thanks to Dia and him. And, he exulted to the stars: she had come back! They would always be together, they could fly anywhere they wanted.

His pure joy caused the first timid guardian spirits to stir in their hiding places. Michael heard the attacks on the Valley of Bran had serious consequences for the elemental realm. First it was the poisonous discharges and now the threatening violence that had robbed many elementals of their life energy. Michael was shocked: if the attacks had not been countered by the actions of the children, some elementals would have ceased to exist. They would have been eroded by the all-sucking anti energy of indifferent and malicious people. Unlike the nature beings that take care of the plant kingdom, evolved guardian spirits cannot exist

in an environment with hostile people.

Michael, at the beginning of a long learning path, had some awareness of this, thanks to the opened access to the being of Dia. He therefore greeted the beings unknown to him and assured them in his youthful enthusiasm that all would be well.

He showered under the seeping spring and drank until he could take no more.

Two human eyes took him in. He knelt by Diana, kissed her and told her where he was called. She wanted to come, but he made it clear to her that when it was daytime she had to go to her tree because that was the centre of the valley.

She lowered her eyes in acceptance, embraced him and snuggled back under Dia's warm wing, grunting with delight.

Michael jumped up the slope with great leaps. His muscular strength had remained in his thinned-out body. He could not fly, but his leaps were high enough to get him into trouble. When he had wrestled himself out of the crown of the tree where he had accidentally landed, he moderated himself and sped light as a wood elf in the direction of the scouting camp. Like a gust of wind he touched the trees and forest creatures. In passing, the forest told him of the elves who had walked and danced here long ago. He looked like them. Although the last elves had left Earth long ago, the memory of their singing and playing was still embedded in the morphic field of the forest, which was much, much older.

Along the river, he slowed down. He marvelled at the obstacles on the path. At some points, he put his hands on the ground to feel its condition. With his new senses, taken over from Dia, he could detect the high vibrations with which the ground sang its richly variegated song. He also felt the condition of some trees by their roots and outer twigs. So much had changed in such a short time that a cacophony of messages rang of busy gnomes, worried fauns and dryads. Energetic recovery is necessary here he registered.

At the edge of the forest he remained standing for a long time, the field of the forest standing protectively around him.

The tumultuous waves of energy that fanned out from the village touched him from time to time, just as on the beach the effervescent surf can wash around your feet, seemingly powerless, but it imperceptibly pulling the sand from under your feet. He recognised the vibrations as those of the soldiers. Hadn't they left yet?

## Between humans and nature beings

He probed. No, there were only some soldiers breaking up their bivouac. Most of them had already left. Satisfied, he turned his attention further, and further...

In the grey twilight preceding the dawn, he sent out an astral call. Come! Come to the Elfswood! Now! It will be an important day!

Slowly, the slopes of the valley opposite him brightened. He began to perceive the surroundings in visible light. It reminded him of their harsh journey after the avalanche: then the wide valley towards Zilina had also appeared in the light of the rising sun.

Walking along the muddy path, he turned off at the scouting camp to the fire pit. Rummaging in the ashes, he found glowing coals. With the firewood laid out before him, he soon had a cheerfully crackling fire going, and after a short while the kettle began to sing. He hummed along, mindlessly poking the fire.

His presence was noticed by some scouts in their sleep. Curious, a few of them poked their heads out of their tents. With something of religious veneration they saw the boy who had defied the soldiers the previous night and flown away in the arms of the angel.

The kitchen princess, far from forgetting her love but practical, walked up to him in her pyjamas and put a pair of trousers in front of him.

'I think it would be better if you put something on,' she said tightly, not caring whom it was for: his or her own peace of mind. Actually, she felt more like taking off her pyjamas. She couldn't stop herself and hugged her idol, which looked up to her in surprise.

'Yes, thank you,' said Michael. 'Sorry, I didn't think about it at all.' He chuckled: 'But I think you'd rather have me without it anyway.'

She blushed. 'Michael, please, not here! We're in the middle of the camp.'

They both laughed at the innuendo, the unsaid feelings behind it.

Michael stood up, put on the trousers and kissed her on both cheeks. 'Are these your trousers? What are you wearing then?'

She stuck her tongue out at him and walked back to her tent, where her friends were meanwhile looking out sleepily, vaguely wondering who she was talking to.

Maria came to him and touched him timidly. That night she had seen him disappear into the black sky with her own eyes, brightly lit by the searchlight of the helicopter. He felt warm and dry, solid, with hard muscles and bones. He smiled. 'I'm still complete, you know. Only my body doesn't weigh much any more. I still use my muscles and organs.'

'Are you still eating?' she wanted to know.

'Yes, but only fresh plants and roots and mushrooms and stuff.'

He didn't really know what was going on inside him, whether he still had to secrete waste products. Until now, he had not felt any urge to do so.

They heard the two-tone horn of the first train from Jablun blaring between the mountains.

'Six twenty,' said someone who apparently knew all about train times.

'Fresh bread!' they cheered. A couple of caretakers got up to go and get it.

'Mrs. Jellisek escaped from the boarding house last night and is sleeping here, in the guest tent,' Maria reported.

He laughed again. 'Funny. If she had waited a while she would have been the only guest left in the village. The army has just left.'

The boys and girls crowded around him, shouting loudly. Some wanted immediately go and see if the soldiers had really left.

Maria whistled shrilly on her fingers. 'Just a moment! We...'

At that moment Olga stuck her head out of the tent and looked in surprise at Michael and the crowd around him.

'Mrs. Jellisek!' cried Maria. 'The army is gone! We can go back to the village!'

'Brilliant!' replied Olga loudly. 'One minute, I'll get dressed.' She was no longer surprised by anything.

In the midst of the enthusiastically singing teenagers, she walked with Michael. He gave her a detailed account of their landing in the midst of the journalists, the march to the bridge, the brief conversation with the soldiers and their spectacular ascent in full view of the soldiers at the roadblock. He told her that everything had been filmed by dozens of cameras, some of them in a live broadcast.

She was quite impressed. 'Can you really fly?' she sighed.

'No,' he laughed. 'Dia has to carry me. I weigh almost nothing anymore; just feel.'

She timidly lifted the boy, unaware of his light weight, and almost threw him over her shoulder. She looked wide-eyed at the sturdy boy between her hands and could not reconcile his lack of weight with the feeling her hands and muscles were sending to her brain. She shook her head; one miracle seemed to provoke another.

They reached the village, where the first inhabitants ventured outside. A tractor drove by, the farmer greeted politely. A little further on he stopped the thing and came back walking. He spoke to Michael in Slovakian.

'He asks if you are the flying guy,' Olga translated.

Michael, who had not understood the dialect, smiled at the man and nodded. Olga said something to the farmer; incredulously he looked from her to the boy.

'I told him that you only weigh a few kilos.'

Invitingly, Michael stretched out his arms to the side and signalled to the man that he could lift him up. After some hesitation, he did so. As if he was burning himself, he put him down again quickly. With open mouth he looked first from one to the other. You could read in his eyes that he was afraid to be conned. He

pulled Michael up under his arms again, wanting to know all the ins and outs. He held him a few inches above the ground, inspecting him. Slowly he put him back on his feet. He felt his arms to see if there really was a human being standing there and not a handsome doll, but no, at last he was convinced. He crossed himself in awe. It was a real miracle.

It was very quiet in the village, as it had been for centuries: the inhabitants still working in their houses and stables, the sawmill not yet in operation, the children having breakfast. The only sounds were birds and, far away, the farmer's tractor, who had returned to his work.

On the station square, the relay transmitter stood next to the TV studio car. In his mind, Michael thanked the one who had left the transmitter in operation.

The platform was stacked with baskets of bread and groceries; the two scouts who were to get the food were waiting beside them. The landlady was just arriving. She started to distribute the supplies according to the delivery note. A few village women shyly approached to get their portion. With big eyes they looked at the boy who they had heard could fly with an angel. Whispering, they consulted each other and then asked the landlady something.

'They ask you to bless their children,' Olga translated, having understood.

Michael changed colour. At first, he wanted to protest, until he understood that he represented something that was bigger than him.

'Yes,' he said, 'the children, that is what it is all about. They are the inheritors of the world.'

He nodded to the women that he was willing to do so, blushing from the reverence in their request and in their eyes.

'Come on, let's have a coffee and eat fresh bread in the guesthouse,' Olga suggested and asked the landlady if she could have so many guests. She nodded happily, yes, that was no problem now that all the journalists and soldiers had gone.

## Blessing the children

Michael just finished his breakfast when the first children came in, led by their mothers. Most of them were still toddlers. Some had just got off the mid-morning train from Jablun, warned by relatives that the elfin boy was going to bless the children.

He sat cross-legged on a cushion on the ground so as not to tower over them. He stroked their heads, saying: 'Lord and all the angels, bless this child,' hoping it would be enough of a blessing. Some little ones went straight back to the safety of mother's skirts, but a few older children sat around him and asked him about fairies. A girl from the scouts translated his answers into Slovak. He told about Dia, how at first she had been very small and transparent, a toddler like them, until she had grown to the size of a woman.

The village children listened breathlessly, and not only they. The scouts joined them, more villagers, reporters that came in, cameras and mobile phones were recording. He told of the forests where many more dryads and fauns want to play with human children, how they can teach the people to keep trees and plants and water and soil healthy, how they themselves can become healthy and happy.

The children laughed when he described the ever-busy goblins and gnomes. It was just like in the fairy tales. He told of the naiads and nixes, how they managed their water, whether it were springs, streams, lakes, whole rivers or great lakes. How people can help by not throwing rubbish into it, not taking too many fish out of it, not messing around with diggers and especially not letting dirty water into it. He told of the little sylphs and the great air-beings who were already beginning to look almost like angels; with grand gestures above his head he finally described the great angel above the valley that ruled and protected everything.

It was no longer translated, it was not necessary: he spoke directly to the images and concepts in their minds. Their brains searched for the words themselves if they still needed them.

When the story ended, it was silent for a while.

Shyly, a question was asked: 'Can fairies only become human together with a human being?'

Michael thought for a moment before answering hesitantly: 'I believe so. Of course, I have only experienced how it went with Dia and me. She needed human thoughts and human words to express herself, to make herself understood. She needed human feelings and emotions to learn them. She needed my body to imitate. Not just as an example, she also used my matter, my flesh and blood. I...' He listened to what was whispered to him. 'There is much more to tell about it, but we can't now.' He looked around the circle of people. 'I know far too little

about it myself. At least I know that much.' He laughed at his own joke.

'Where is... where is your fairy now?' another wanted to know.

'You can call her by her name,' he laughed brightly. 'She is very proud of it.'

The woman smiled a little bleakly and repeated: 'Where is she now? Where is Dia now?'

'With my sisters, in the forest.'

'What is she doing?' her neighbour asked.

'Curious, huh?' joked Michael. In his mind he heard Dia's reply; she was listening with him.

'Last night she took up her duty as caretaker of the willow trees in the world,' he said, again seriously. 'Then she is scattered; her body is like that of humans when they sleep. But now she is here again. She is chatting with my sisters.'

'Can you ask her to come?' The question was posed as a supplication.

'Yes!' was shouted. 'Ask if she will come!'

Through his consciousness, Dia had already heard the question. Her answer was happy.

'She will come...' he began.

A cheer sounded and he raised his hands for silence. 'She's coming with my sisters and the scouts who stayed with them. They're coming on foot, so it'll take an hour or two.'

'We can walk towards them, can't we?' was suggested questioningly.

He thought it would be a good idea to meet in the clearing under Diana's tree. 'That's fine, but I'd like to answer as many questions as I can here first.'

'Yes, I have one more question,' began a toothy man with a familiar face. The Indian who was at the meeting! flashed through his brain.

'Is it true, according to your dryad, according to Dia, that the totems of us Native Americans were the deva's of the respective animals?'

Even before he had finished, Michael began to nod.

'Yes,' he replied when the man, Roaring Bear he remembered his name, had asked his question. Dia filled him with a clear stream of information to which he only had to put the right words.

'Dia tells me that the deva's of the wild animals were very close to the people in those days. Each species, each subspecies, even each herd or pack had its own guardian spirit. The original peoples in the Americas, and other natural peoples as well, could connect to a guardian spirit as individuals or as clans, as tribes. Very strong and sensitive's like their shamans could even change themselves into such an animal; they could fly or swim or crawl or gallop and explore their surroundings that way. Or hunt such an animal, because that was allowed in the covenant between man and deva.' He raised his hands to ward off comments and questions, for he was not yet finished.

'Most of those totems, those guardian spirits...' he continued, with an unexpected sadness in his voice, 'no longer exist. Their animals have been extermi-

nated, their herds slaughtered and their species genetically diluted. There are only echoes of them left, memories in the Earth Field that can be listened to; at least if you can bear their sadness.'

It was silent for a long time after these words. The old Indian had bowed his head and sat lost in grief.

People thought back to their childhood, when they read books about Indians and cowboys, famous books where it could all be read between the lines.

'I have something else to say,' Michael broke the oppression. 'Your children can connect with an elemental being quite easily. You yourself, as an adult, are too unbelieving for that. Give your children space, give them the freedom to wander in woods, meadows and mountains, to dream and play with other children whom you cannot see, but they can.'

Amidst the circle of spellbound children listening, he looked straight into the lens of a camera that he was sure was in direct transmission.

'There are still forests and farmlands, streams and lakes everywhere, and even houses and gardens where ancient and evolved elementals are at home. Let your children play there, have a picnic under big trees, lay your head and your heart against the trunk; rest a while on the banks of a stream or lake, dream in caves and on sunny slopes, look your cat, dog, horse or elephant in the eye as an equal.'

A toddler had walked up to him uninhibitedly during his advice and had nestled happily on his lap. The boy nodded wisely when he had finished.

'You see here an example,' he said softly, stroking the child. 'Give your children space and let them develop freely according to their nature, then their elemental friends will be able to manifest themselves.'

'What do you mean?' someone, probably the mother, asked coyly.

He laughed. 'There are more children like Diana, or myself, who have an elemental being as a friend.' He looked down with warmth at the little boy on his lap. 'Like him and often for several lifetimes. They blend together, you could say.' He could see now who it was. A dwarf-like man in old-fashioned clothes stood looking at him with his hands at his sides. He was not quite on the ground, a few inches above it.

*Show yourself,* he mentally invited.

*You see me, don't you?*

*To the people here.*

The little man looked around and shook his head.

*No, not now and not here. He...* he pointed with his head to the little boy who was listening attentively to him, *still has to grow a little.* After these words, his image dissolved.

'Is Dia an angel?' he heard someone ask with reverence in her voice.

'No,' he could answer with great certainty, he knew a lot about that thanks to his mother. 'Dia is a deva, the Deva of the Willow, originally an air being, a sylph. Angels are... more divine beings. They were created more or less at the same time

as the universe. Deva's came into existence only when their kind was created, perhaps by the angels. They are no older than the stream or kind of plant or animal that they look after. The naiads and gnomes and all those other elementals are sometimes older, but never older than the Earth. There are also spirit beings that are higher on the evolutionary ladder and have developed their own identity and have a name. They are mortal just like us, though they may live for thousands of years.' He laughed again and stroked the hair of the little boy on his lap. 'This boy has a friend like that.'

He could see that the information was actually too much, but the audience was listening so intently that he could not stop spouting the knowledge that he had only recently internalised.

'Man is the most recent invention and has existed for only a few million years,' he orated. 'Humans could be described as incarnated souls. Souls are like deva's. But deva's are originally natural phenomena, mere energy fields, modulated with certain information and that guard the forms of the species. The deva's who are close to human beings because their species was used by humans, have been able to develop more extensively. They have, as it were, learnt human characteristics, like feelings and communication. Dia is a deva who has not only materialised as a visible and tangible being; she has also created herself as a kind of soul. She is not the first to have done so, by the way, but she is the first to have succeeded in preserving her elemental abilities.'

'Are you referring to the mermaids and mythical elves who made love to a human man and gave up their original form and immortality in the name of that love?' the old Indian asked.

Michael nodded thoughtfully.

'Did something similar happen to you, but in the opposite direction?'

The question confused Michael. He had not thought of it for a moment.

'You mean, I would have become immortal?' He shook his head. 'No, I don't believe that.' At the same time that he said it, he doubted his answer. In fact, he did not yet have any insight into his current physical state.

'I don't know.' He laughed. 'We'll look it up.' He laughed again. 'I only weigh a few kilos, so things have changed.' He stood up. 'Shall we go to the forest? I think it's time. There are a lot of people on their way.'

## Two worlds come together

From far and wide and further than Michael suspected, people had set out. Earlier Yvette had woken up in her flat in Paris, after a night's sleep of only one hour: someone had called her! With beating heart she waited, but it did not repeat itself.

Groaning she rolled out of her wavy water-bed and took a shower to recover a little. She had to go straight to the Elfswood, that much was clear.

With fatigue still in her limbs, she ordered a ticket for the first plane that went east. A flight to Prague was the only one available at such short notice.

Meanwhile, she got dressed, put some clothes and toiletries in a bag, grabbed her recording equipment, which was always at the ready, and took the lift down.

She lived on a side street of a busy boulevard, so she could easily call a taxi even at this early hour. On her way to the airport, she first called the editor, then the man from traffic. She asked him to send a taxi to the airport with a pack of the extra edition, to order a flight to Bratislava in Prague and a helicopter there.

At Orly, she ran to the gate where the plane was waiting for her; that was an advantage of being famous: everyone wants to help you. She received her ticket while running, passport control waved her through, her hand luggage was taken through the x-ray scanner, she did not even have to take the precious recording equipment out of their bags, she was led around the metal detector gate.

Panting, she allowed herself to be buckled into her luxurious seat by a cheerfully smiling stewardess, while a colleague closed the plane door. Five minutes later, they were in the air.

There was a phone service in the plane; almost the entire flight of over an hour she was consulting with the editors.

The man in charge of traffic chartered a helicopter on the airport in Prague, there was no connecting flight to Bratislava.

A transit permit to Slovakia and permission to land in Branočs would be arranged through the embassy.

Relieved, she slumped back in her seat, too excited to sleep. Enjoying the view of Prague and the airport in the grey dawn, she waited with pounding heart for the bang that would put the plane on the runway.

Taxiing from the runway, it was directed to a platform where a chopper stood ready with slowly rotating blades.

A staircase was approached and the door opened. Waved at by the crew and some of the passengers who had recognised her, she rushed across the spotted concrete. With her head bowed, she dived under the rotor – which was nonsense, they were spinning at a height of three yards – and climbed on board, where she

was given a helmet with headphones and a microphone. The pilot welcomed her, he had brought his girlfriend as an assistant; she only had to nod to see all her wishes fulfilled. Stared at by dozens of faces in the plane's windows, the helicopter took off into the air.

As Yvette approached high above the mountains and valleys, Janos and Dinja sat close together in the roaring diesel. Irina, opposite them, still was confused about her feelings for the man who was old enough to be her father.

It had taken considerably more effort to gain height along the rugged slopes than Yvette's plane or the blue-and-white helicopter in which five American reporters were en route from the neighbouring country.

Nevertheless, the train arrived first; the last part of the journey it had swerved easily through the bends.

The three got out amidst an excited crowd of curious people, pilgrims, journalists and a few silent men who were shunned by everyone. Like a magnet, they were drawn to the guesthouse, where they quietly joined the attentive circle of listeners around the narrating Michael.

In Jablun, a convoy of trucks had just left the storage area of a road construction company – the same where Johan had got his dynamite – preceded by an all-terrain vehicle with the contractor at the wheel and Herman next to it. They turned off where the narrow road to Branočs split off. After a mile, it led through a tunnel in the mountain ridge that separated the valleys. They should not have left a quarter of an hour earlier; otherwise they would have had to reverse into the narrow tunnel for the large army radio car that had left the village as last. But now it was cooling down on the barracks grounds with a ticking engine.

The commander of the barracks had provided an office where the colonel was wearily preparing a report for the general staff. He wondered what would happen if he went back to the village in plain clothes. He wanted to see the miracle of that winged woman again, if he had not dreamed it.

With Dia leading the way, the group of scouts and Michael's three sisters arrived first at Diana's tree.

Scouts had meanwhile brought back the tents and immediately started putting them up, on exactly the same spots where they had been standing.

The twins made a fire while Dia and Diana disappeared hand in hand into the forest. They had other things to do for the moment.

Michael, at the head of a long column of villagers, onlookers, journalists and whoever else was out and about in the village at that early hour, turned into the path along the river.

Less than a few minutes later, two helicopters landed in quick succession on a field next to the railway line. Yvette had recognised Mike and Roland and waved fanatically at them. Smiling, they raised their equipment in salute. Ann was the

last to get out; when Yvette's helicopter was put on the ground, theirs took off again to film the walking crowd from the air. Exultantly, the four top journalists embraced each other.

They ran through the village to join the march to the Elfswood. As they passed the factory, the contractor's convoy from Jablun just arrived. Filmed in passing by Mike, Herman joined the party, followed a little later by the contractor and his staff.

Above their heads beat the chopper of the Americans.

From a military vehicle, a lively greying man in a neat suit jumped out. It was the commander of the occupying forces who had decided to leave the army as soon as possible. As an act of protest, he had borrowed clothes from his colleague to be present, as an ordinary citizen, at the things that would change the future.

It was nine o'clock on the dot when the long line of people arrived at the edge of the forest under the crowns of the trees.

The murmuring died; in peace and quiet the hundreds of men, women, youths and children walked along the stream until they came to the clearing where the little camp stood as if it had never been away. The commander was the only one who was surprised. How had they managed it?

A silence fell, filled only by the breathing of the expectant people.

Michael stood under the imposing beech looking at the crowd. To his questioning gaze, the activists of the first hour came forward: Janos with Dinja and Irina, Olga and Stefan, doctor Wenceslas to his great surprise, his father, Yvette with a blush and sparkling eyes of excitement, the Americans with their camera running.

The scouts sat on the ground in a circle, little children dribbled among the big people.

At the empty riverbed, fringed by dead scrub and barked trunks, men stood looking thoughtfully.

A murmur went through the crowd: Dia had appeared with Diana by the hand!

The tension rose, something special was happening.

The elfin woman, her wings folded around her like a cloak, walked at the hand of her companion along the scattered groups.

It was Diana who dragged her along, she was not afraid of people, she knew exactly how to wind them around her little fingers. Dia learnt quickly, the communication between them was more direct than between humans was possible.

She willingly let herself be touched by the women, who were curious to see what her wings felt like; there was little of her willow skin to be seen.

Breathlessly, hundreds of pairs of eyes followed the tour of the two. One a human intertwined with a dryad, the other half a dryad turned human.

Those who were sensitive to it could see that an alignment was taking place between the individual energies of the people and the field of the forest. It were

Dia and Diana who brought this about; they were the first and only ones who could make both frequencies resonate.

Michael sat among the boys and girls of his age, watching mesmerised.

He was with them in spirit, listening and learning, helping where his slightly greater experience of the human world was useful.

It became quieter; even the little ones forgot their hustle and bustle and were sitting dreamily with their mothers. Everything and everyone held their breath.

A sound, light as the rustling of silk, approached from the heart of the forest. Dozens, no, hundreds of winged beings of light manifested themselves in the clearing, playing between the patches of light and shadow on the ground and the spreading shadows of the beeches.

People looked at the fairies with open mouths. People knelt in prayer, others lay stretched out flat on the forest floor in surrender, some stood with their arms wide in a cloud of butterflies of light. Children looked breathlessly into the eyes of a fairy standing on their outstretched hand or sitting on the head of another child. The spell was complete.

Gradually, the whirling of wings in all shapes and colours diminished, the elemental beings retreating one by one into their invisible state.

In their minds, the people heard a song: the song of the forest; deep and dark tones of the rough earth and clay, rustling tones of the tree crowns, bird calls of the small animals, hollow wood tones of the trunks, chattering tones of the rock and stones, whispers and murmurs of water and wind. The singing ranged from almost inaudible to jubilant, from tenuous harmonies to dissonant melodies.

The song brought forth in some people images of growth, blossoming, death and decay, of shifting rock plates, of icy winters with frozen trees cracking open, yards of snow and avalanches of snow and mud, of warm summers and herds of mountain goats, deer and wild ponies with lynxes, bears and wolves hunting.

The influx of mismatched viewers gradually broke the spell.

Men in suits came down the muddy path, looking disdainfully at their stained shoes and trouser legs. A whisper went through the people: 'The President!'

Amidst a crowd of politicians, the Head of State walked along the river, chatting happily with his wife. The two old people had always lived in the countryside and were the only ones wise enough to wear boots. Their uninhibited joy contrasted sharply with the nervous restlessness of their court.

In the clearing, the crowd made way for their first citizen and first lady. They walked straight up to Michael and Dia, who stood waiting in the midst of the three sisters and the scouts.

The President took his hat off to the winged woman. Aided by Michael in her spirit, she gracefully extended her right arm. The President took her light and warm fingers in his and pressed a courtly kiss upon them.

'May I, on behalf of the people of Slovakia and perhaps on behalf of the people of the world...' he looked straight into the lens of the cameras for a moment,

‘...welcome you as a new citizen of the world,’ he said in a clear voice. He looked into the wonderful eyes of the apparition and felt understood, safe. The warm feeling spread through his whole being. He let go of her fingers, turned his gaze to the boy beside her.

His wife behind him had tears in her eyes. ‘You are so beautiful,’ she said softly. Dia held out both hands to her, which the woman grasped timidly.

‘Michael, on behalf of the people of Slovakia and perhaps all the people of the world, may I thank you for your commitment to saving the Elfswood and restoring the alliance with the elemental realm.’ The President, like his wife, stood with both hands in the boy’s.



‘Welcome to the Elfswood, sir,’ was all that came to mind. ‘I am glad you are here, that you have recalled the army.’ He was a little embarrassed about it, but

he had to say it anyway. 'Can we go and clean the river now?'

The President laughed heartily. 'Forging the iron when it is hot, eh? Of course, I would have done the same. But you can rest assured: before we came here, I instructed my cabinet to arrange everything today so that you can go about your business.'

'Thank you,' Michael said from the bottom of his heart. 'Maybe I can introduce my father to you? He came up with the cleaning plan.' It came out like that.

'Gladly.' The two men shook hands.

'This is Diana, our little sister,' Michael went on to introduce his family when it seemed so simple. 'With her, everything started.'

'Hello, Diana.' The old man bent down and wanted to take her hand to shake it, but the girl put her arms around his neck. All he could do was give her a kiss, and she let go. The twins shyly held out a hand, at the same time, of course, but the President, accustomed as he was to shaking hands, took them both in a single gesture.

His wife followed, only she could not get rid of Diana so easily; she wanted to be lifted by her.

'How light you are,' she marvelled aloud.

Diana laughed: 'That's because of the dryad in me. I am now a diluted human being just like Miche.'

They conversed both in their mother tongue, but that did not seem to cause any problems. Only the viewers who watched the live broadcast at home or at work only understood if they knew the language: the field of the Elfswood did not extend that far.

Only under the trees existed complete understanding between people, regardless of language. Only Janos was aware that this trait had only emerged in the last days.

While the presidential couple made a tour of the circle of scouts and environmentalists, Dia sought out her companion.

*Can we go now?* she asked, in what seemed like a cramped voice, in his mind. Despite the harmonisation between the energies of humans and elementals that she and Diana had established before the meeting it had been hard for her.

*I'm staying, dear,* was his answer. *I'll be busy all day. You go on. Do you want to do one more thing? Do you want to do it flying?*

Her assent was followed by the spreading of her wings. For a brief moment she stood in all her splendour, then she took off and flew low over the clearing like a swan taking off, gaining height with fierce wing beats among the massive crests along the river. She enjoyed pretending to make an effort, but she didn't really need the lift of her wings to stay in the air. For when she was out of sight of human eyes and cameras, she stopped in mid-air and descended like a dandelion fluff between the trees and shrubs, where she disappeared just above the ground, floating among them. She could easily keep her small mass weightless on her willpower.

## Lock

The spectators followed the flight of the elfin woman with fascination. Everyone had memories of dreams or fantasies in which he or she could fly; here it happened in real life. Before their disbelieving eyes a beautiful woman took off, carried only by her own wings.

It was the signal to leave as well. Preceded by Michael, the President and his wife with Diana by her side, the crowd set off in the direction of the village.

Along the way Michael explained how they had come up with the plan to clean the bed of the river themselves with all the young people present. He told how the scouts had sampled the groundwater after Diana had marked on a map where it was polluted. He explained how he had been able to follow the water into the caves. He assured the President that the poisonous silt would be rendered harmless there for good and eventually petrify.

The President showed great interest in the plans for the clean-up operation, especially in the knowledge behind it. He asked Herman to walk beside him and asked him all about environmental technology. It was a scarce skill in his country, he frankly admitted.

Back in the village, the President suggested to Olga to hold a short meeting at her headquarters. The village was a great bustle. The event hall was in full swing: the staff had just arrived to work that morning. Police officers cleared a path, the crowd dispersed respectfully. It were mainly parents with children and a strikingly large number of young people.

There was clapping as Michael and the President walked past side by side.

Olga organised the requested meeting, pleased with the statesman's personal commitment. Her assistants, who had already connected the telephones, computers and fax machines, went out to look for the people who should attend.

Something electric came into the air.

The contractor came to the guesthouse first, impressed by the invitation, apologising for his dusty clothes; he had been busy for a while in the mill building. Stefan came second; he was just on his way to take samples. When he arrived upstairs, he embraced Michael and allowed him to introduce him to the President.

The first lady detached herself from her husband's arm to make a tour of the village and have a chat with the residents.

The Unesco observer came in last with Johan. He had been exploring the Iboc dam, met the ecologist on the way, got talking and had been informed in detail.

Michael was happy to see Johan again; their parting had been rather abrupt.

Olga opened the meeting, first in Slovak, then in English for the sake of their foreign guests, and gave the floor to the President.

He gave a brief account of what had happened in Parliament. He assured that the Bran Valley would soon be nominated to Unesco as a World Heritage Site, the highest status it could obtain to protect it from external encroachment. It is a long procedure, he warned, but in the meantime the valley would be given an interim status whereby residents, stakeholders, the municipality of Jablun and the state would form an administrative authority to restore the situation to what it was before the factory was built. That was good news: Michael was smiling, they would actually demolish the factory altogether; perhaps they would even put the sawmill back into operation.

Olga could report that a preliminary contract of sale had just been faxed in. The law firm representing the owners' business had agreed it with their lawyers this morning; the people behind it had fled the country. The state of fundraising was such that the purchase could be financed; a donation had even been received from a Parisian foundation.

Yvette was sitting there, beaming.

I should know more about that, thought Michael.

Initial remedial work had already begun on the river. The contractor reported that the renovated lock and dam could be completed in about ten days. He enthusiastically explained that the sawmill was still intact. It did have woodworm in it, but he said that with simple repairs and replacements, the whole machinery could be put into operation, provided there was money for a new water wheel, of which he had only found a drawing. On the spur of the moment he unfolded a bundle of yellowed and torn papers amidst clouds of dust to show what he meant.

The next person to speak was Herman. He hung up a greatly enlarged map of the river on which he had drawn the concentrations of toxic sludge and contaminated groundwater in colours and shading. With a pointer, he explained how the clean-up had been planned. In general, it was as he had agreed with Michael.

'You see here the stretch from the rapids at the edge of the forest to the cave in the cirque. Young people from all over the world will clean it,' he explained. 'Rinsing the rocks and boulders with these hand pumps,' he showed one. 'And using brooms and brushes. It's light but careful handiwork. The stretch up to the rapid contains a lot of silt. We want to have this done by a professional cleaning company. The silt will be concentrated in a basin. It can be thickened and stored in an abandoned salt mine in Germany for good.' He looked around the circle, smiling.

What had he said, young people from all over the world?

'I contacted the scouts by e-mail,' he explained to his astonished audience. 'As a result of my son's question whether they could do the cleaning themselves they had already started organising a jamboree. Scouts from various countries seem to be on their way, it goes fast these days, with all those TV broadcasts and Internet. As soon as the dam at the mill has been repaired, we can start; we have to be able

to hold back the water for a few days and dose it slowly so that the silt can flow into the silt trap.' He pointed to a large square on the map, opposite the scouting camp, where the basin was planned. 'For flushing the ground, to get rid of the contaminated groundwater, we can use the method of our honoured guest Janos: flushing with pure water. This will be worked out in more detail; our young people can also do this.'

While a number of meeting officials were busy working out the plans, the President asked Michael, with a wave of his hand, to sit next to him. Whispering, he asked if it would help when he invited some friendly statesmen from home and abroad for a working visit and if the dryad would also show herself.

'I have fallen completely for her,' he confided to Michael. 'What a beauty she is, your Dia.' He sighed. 'I think the angels look just like her.'

'They give more light, golden light,' Michael repeated to the voice in his mind. 'Dia's colour is violet, dark violet, you can hardly see it.'

Somewhat shocked by the firmness with which Michael responded to his more poetic remark, the President sat up straight.

'Dia likes to show herself, but preferably in the forest or nearby. That is her focus, that is where her energy comes from,' Michael continued. He had noticed the President's reaction, but it was more important to give his undivided attention to Dia's messages. 'So if they want to come to the forest, please.'

'That's a deal,' said the President, happily squeezing Michael's hand. 'My cabinet will keep you informed. We'll have them come by rail in my special wagon, then we won't have the noise of those helicopters here either.'

'Did you come by train?' asked Michael in surprise.

'When you look out of the window, you might see him standing on a siding. I hate flying and driving, so I prefer to travel by presidential train.'

Michael immediately went to have a look; yes, on a rusty siding stood a diesel locomotive with two blue wagons trimmed with gold. They looked antique and romantic, with shiny, polished brass work.

In the meantime, the President stood up to announce that, due to the unstable political situation of the moment, he unfortunately had to return to the capital. He went round the table to shake hands with all those present; he asked Michael to see him off.

'My wife will probably want to see you too,' he said softly.

It took some effort to make their way out through the crowds in the salon. The bodyguards were doing their best, but everyone wanted to see the most important man in the country walking next to the elfin boy.

On the platform, the first lady arrived amidst a crowd of village women and children. The train pulled up, men stood talking into walkie-talkies and mobile phones, children started singing and helicopters rattled overhead, the diesel locomotive thumped.

In the midst of the cacophony of sounds, the President embraced Michael, his wife kissed him on both cheeks, the door was slammed shut and the train took off amidst loud growls of the engine and cheers from the crowd.

Michael stood perplexed as he watched the disappearing rear lights. It was just twelve o'clock; the church bell rang in the recurring silence. Everything went so fast.

*Dia, can you pick me up later?* he signalled. *I am going to say goodbye, it will take another fifteen minutes. Will you come?*

*Only if there are no helicopters around, I'm scared to death of them,* was her immediate response.

'Well, that must be possible,' he muttered and asked a policeman to pass on the request. The officer immediately contacted his commander willingly via his walkie-talkie.

'That one is ours,' he reported. 'It will land immediately. The other one is of journalists, we will.... Oh, they've already passed it on. They're going to land too.'

While Michael walked back to the guesthouse, the two helicopters descended on the field next to the railway shortly after each other. It immediately became much quieter without the knocking and thunder in the air.

*I am coming!* cheered her voice in his mind.

Upstairs in their old room, the meeting was still in full swing. His father interrupted his conversation and came up to him.

'Dad, Dia will pick me up now. What are you going to do?'

'Yes, good question. If the girls are okay, I think it's best if I go back to Jablun with the contractor. But what are you going to do? The schools are going to start in a few days, for one thing.'

Michael looked at him, startled. 'Oh dear, I haven't thought about that at all. But then Mum must be back already.'

'I have tried to get in touch with her, but I have not received any sign of life. She doesn't answer the phone, she doesn't respond to text messages or e-mail.'

'Something must have happened to her in Peru,' Michael remarked with concern. 'Or she missed the plane, it happens to her all the time.'

'Yeah, I don't like it either,' Herman mused. 'She should have been back yesterday. If I haven't heard from her by tomorrow, I'll call the embassy,' he decided.

'We might have to go there and look for her,' Michael grumbled, 'she always has something on her mind.'

'But to get back to my question, what are you up to?'

'Oh, I can't leave here.'

'No, I know that, Miche.' Herman put an arm around him. They looked at each other seriously. 'I honestly think you won't go back to Holland at all.'

Slowly, Michael shook his head in a gesture of acknowledgement.

'No,' he agreed, a flush of insight crossing his face. 'I have changed. I am no longer a schoolboy. I have a job to do.'

‘And you have a companion: your wife.’

With sudden tears in his eyes, he looked at his father.

‘Thank you Dad,’ he said hoarsely, ‘thank you for telling me so clearly. That you understand. That you understand me.’

‘I have learnt a lot in the past few days.’

These words brought something to Michael’s mind.

‘What happened at your work? We couldn’t reach you and suddenly you were here.’

‘That’s quite a story.’ He sighed. ‘Not all of it nice. I’ll tell you about it later, when we’ve got things set up here.’

‘We?’

With a grin, Herman waved his arm to indicate the whole valley. ‘I have work to do here too, remember?’

‘Are you staying here? Are we... are we going to live here?’

A nod was the answer.

‘With the girls?’

‘Diana for sure, she will never want to leave her forest again I’m afraid.’

‘Are you going to rent a house?’

‘I don’t think that’s a bad idea. There are plenty of empty ones.’

‘What if mum doesn’t like it...?’

‘We invite her to come and live here too.’ Herman pointed with a wide gesture around him. ‘Don’t forget that here, in this valley, everything has come together that she has devoted her courses and meditations to for years.’

‘Yes, it is,’ Michael realised with awe. A sudden thought made him laugh. ‘Now it is happening for real, with her own children, and she is on the other side of the world. Its just like Mum.’

They stood looking thoughtfully at the meeting people.

‘Yes, it would be busy here in the near future. With the Scouts’ Jamboree, the World Conference of Nature People, the visitors, people from all over the world.’

His gaze was caught by Yvette, on her way to them. She embraced him.

‘I’m going to live here,’ she said succinctly. ‘This is where it happens. Soon it will happen other woods and forests. But for now, the heart is here.’

The Indian had come after her. ‘Mike, would you like to address the conference tomorrow or the day after? We would like to come to Diana’s tree for that. There are activists and indigenous forest people from all over the world on the way.’

‘Of course,’ was Michael’s surprised reply, ‘I didn’t know it would all be so fast.’

The old Indian smiled. ‘It’s been going on for thirty or forty years, Mike. This is the turning point, here and now. All those people who have been fighting for the forests for decades have finally seen their fondest wish come true, with Dia’s choice to manifest.’

The Indian turned to Janos, who had approached the group flanked by Dinja and Irina.

‘You have worked on this for many lifetimes, haven’t you?’

Janos set off his satchel head. ‘Yes, more or less. But I could never have foreseen the actions of those devilish deva’s. In fact, I only prepared the way.’

‘And preserved the forest for two thousand years,’ Johan joined in the conversation. ‘That’s not nothing either.’

‘No, old gnome of mine,’ Janos joked. ‘Just like you, I bet.’

The hippie ecologist coloured under his bronzed skin. Janos apparently knew more about him.

Olga joined the chatting party with Stefan.

‘Herman?’ she asked. ‘It seems that thanks to Yvette’s foundation we will have enough money to demolish the factory, but according to Stefan the buildings are full of poison. Do you know a solution for that?’

‘In principle, yes. Particularly in Germany, there are companies with solid experience in the safe clearing of heavily contaminated factory sites, with the necessary machinery.’

‘Do you want to take that on?’

Herman laughed and happily pressed his son against him. ‘Please. I’ve decided to settle in the village with my children, I’ll have work for years.’

Olga looked at them, an idea was growing. ‘That sounds like a good idea,’ she murmured. ‘I think I’ll rent a house here too. There are plenty empty ones.’

‘Maybe you could set up a regional branch of the Environmental Federation here,’ Stefan suggested. ‘Or an international environmental association.’

She shook her head and laughed. ‘There are plenty possibilities, but at the moment I’m dizzy.’

Michael detached himself from his father.

‘I will come back tomorrow. But now I am going to see Dia. She’s almost here.’

Observed by those present, he walked down the stairs, shaking hands left and right. Smiling at those who looked at him admiringly, he made his way outside. In the warm sunlight, he felt his heart leap at the thought of his beloved. He raised his hands in the now familiar request for attention; it still worked.

‘Dia will pick me up in a few minutes,’ he announced. ‘Have your camera ready.’

His heart almost burst out of his chest with proud love when she came hovering over him. Like a buzzard on a thermal, she made a few circles, then dived with folded wings to just above the ground under a loud and startled ooh from the audience, braked with powerful wing beats and landed next to her lover. She embraced him with arms and wings.

*And, how was that?* she sniffed, her face in his neck.

*Spectacular,* was his admiring reply. *I think you really enjoy stunt flying.*

Her chuckling in his mind was like mice behind the wallpaper.

*Come, let’s go, I want to be alone with you.*

She could tell that he had had it. He turned in her arms, she wrapped her legs around his hips, and with a little jump they were in the air. Michael saw the square

with hundreds of raised faces and waving children slowly getting smaller.

The village unfolded beneath them: the roads, the farms, the boarding house, the back yards, the nomadic camp, the field with helicopters next to the railway, the watermill with the empty factory site, the orchards and meadows.

He was moved by the beauty of this place, where people had lived with the forest for thousands of years. He was reassured now that the President in person had secured the future: the Elfswood would be healthy again. The Valley of Bran would become a protected haven for people of good will and seekers who wanted to connect with the nature beings.

End of Book III





## Book IV Angels and demons

## Chapter 1

# Free flight

Like a buzzard on the thermals, Dia circled upwards, her wings outstretched, her arms and legs wrapped around Michael. He could see the sun shining through the thin, colourful membrane of her wings.

His heart almost burst with pride and love for his beautiful elfin wife. She felt it and swayed back and forth a few times in pure pleasure.

*Take a tour of the factory,* he asked her in spirit. The previous times they had flown in the dark; now he wanted to see from the air what they had risked their lives for.

*I don't dare.*

*Why not?* he asked in surprise.

*It is so big, so evil, so powerful.* He felt her shudder.

Michael looked down wondering; what would she mean? Could she see something he could not?

*What is there? I don't see anything special.*

From the air, the factory complex looked neglected, but rather innocent. A few wooden sheds built together, the boiler house with the tall chimney, a small office, the village transformer house, a rusty track with a few wagons on it and the storage area overgrown with weeds. And, of course, the river, which ran in a wide, shallow bed from the sloping dam near the watermill right past the boiler house.

From this height, nothing of the environmental poisoning could be seen. They had won a battle now, he thought, suddenly gloomy, but perhaps there was more due. Perhaps the real life-and-death battle was yet to come. But he did not know what else could go wrong. The Environmental Federation had a contract to buy the factory, they were going to clean the river with Dad, a lot of money was being collected... Could there be a new danger lurking in the factory?

*Not now, it was already there, but evil is stirring,* said Dia, who had followed his thoughts. *It is getting hungry.*

*Shouldn't we do something about it?*

*Not now, not now,* was her vague answer.

He did catch now something disgusting that was emanating from the factory, as if unmentionable things were rotting there. There was something alive in the deserted buildings that wanted to do harm. In spite of the warmth, Michael shivered at the threat that emanated from it.

Dia slowly circled higher and higher. He could tell from her movements that she hated to come near the factory. *Too close,* he half understood.

It was only at a great height that she calmed down a little. Only then did she realise that Michael did not perceive the same things she did.

*Look through my eyes*, she invited him.

Michael tuned in to her, but he continued to see through his eyes.

*Close your eyes, you have to shut out the ordinary light, otherwise you will see only the material exterior*, she advised him.

Slowly, an image formed in his mind. A mechanical beast, bigger than a church, towering over the valley. He sucked in a breath of frightened awe. The unsightly complex by the railway line appeared in the ethereal world as a monstrous beast that dominated the entire valley.

*Dia, what the hell is that!*

*This is how human creations can look in our world, when evil is piled on evil.*

Michael realised horrified that the battle was far from over. If such creatures could arise from the actions of men, the world was far more fraught with dangers than he had ever imagined. He sighed despondently; what could a boy like him do about it? He felt powerless.

*Courage, my dear. You are not alone. Together with others, you can overcome any danger.*

Having said so, Dia turned resolutely and headed straight for the deep cirque where the Valley of Bran ended. Flying in the clear, living air gradually chased away all the anxieties. They were flying far above the forest and still climbing. The village lay far behind them, afore them a mountainridge stood out sharply against the blue sky. In the golden light-filled bowl in the middle of the mountains, they were the only ones in the sky. The helicopters of the police and a TV crew were grounded for their safety.

*How high can you go?* asked Michael, curious how far Dia's abilities reached.

After some hesitation, her voice confessed in his mind: *I don't know. Maybe I could fly to the moon if I wanted to.*

Her laconic reply shocked him. He had not meant to go that far. *But that is far too cold! And there is no air there!* He rubbed himself closer against her warm willow skin. She reacted by pressing him tighter against her chest.

*Yes, you need air, oxygen. I don't,* came her response to his exclamation after a while. Dia still had so much to learn about her new state of being that she needed time to realise what she could and could not do.

*But we both need warmth.* There was a trace of regret in her statement. *I am now made of living material.*

*Isn't it nice to have a real body?* thought Michael.

Then a new miracle happened. She made a half roll in mid-air and continued flying on her back. Michael, to his great surprise, came to lie on top of her. 'What are you doing?' he cried aloud. She laughed in his head.

For a moment he was looking at the cloudless sky, overcome by the experience. Then he carefully turned on his belly to look at her. Her face was beaming with joy at what she had done.

*It's like being on an air mattress in the water and not wanting to get wet,* he thought. Dia picked up on his association and began to undulate like an air mattress. It

had such an erotic effect that they became one, body and soul, a thousand feet above the forest. Making love in the air made him lose all caution; he had no fear of heights or falling. In the embrace of Dia's arms and legs, he had the sensation of floating, detached from her, detached from everything, connected to her only in the middle. His ecstasy was complete.

When he had recovered a little, he let him peacefully cradled in Dia's embrace. He understood that with her much larger consciousness, she could continue to fly, while still being completely absorbed in their 'air cushion' lovemaking. She chuckled in his mind as she understood the pun.

*How do you do that?* he mused. *How do you keep us afloat? You have a solid body now and there are still a few kilos left of me, despite the fact that you have thinned me out.*

It was silent for a moment. The question had surprised her: something she did instinctively turned out not to be so ordinary after all.

*I can't explain it to you exactly,* was her final conclusion. *I move around because I want to, that's how I've always done it. But since I have a body, I use my wings. That's a nice feeling. I float on the upward pressure of the air. The sylphs help me; they carry me, even when I am flying upside down. I think that without their help I would not succeed in getting us both up into the air.*

*Sylphs?*

*Now you have to be quiet.*

*What is it?*

*The sylphs bring me messages. I have not been paying attention. They have been trying to get my attention for a while.*

She changed her course towards the ridge in front of them. With some difficulty, she turned Michael's back to her and tilted back to her normal flying position. Surprised, he let her go, a little disappointed that she had put an abrupt end to their pleasant little get-together. Only then did he notice that Dia was circling down in a valley unknown to him.

*What are you doing?* No answer. *Hey, what are you doing?*

*Landing.*

*Yes, I can see that, but why here?*

Something was going on; Dia was never so absent-minded.

*Just wait and see. I have just been summoned to appear here. It is nothing to be afraid of, but there are things going on that you have to do something about.*

That did not reassure him at all. *Me? Why do I have to do that?*

*Because only a human being can make man-made things go away. You are the only human available.* She hurriedly landed next to a small stream.

*What is wrong with you?* He stood up and looked at Dia in a piquant way. He had never been put down on his hands and knees so roughly before. She had always done her best to put him on his feet gracefully when landing.

Dia gestured for him to shut up. Offended he walked away from her.

*This is not working,* she sighed. *You're blocking something urgent that's trying to get*

*through to this place. Lie down on the ground, here with me, and I'll sing you to sleep.  
I have no sleep, and what is not working?  
Come on. I...*

She was searching for words to make something clear to him, something she didn't quite understand herself. There was a growing pressure on her consciousness that clouded her ability to speak words.

Unable to express what was so urgent, she left the path of human speech and reached out to Michael in the elemental way, directly to his feelings.

Her power of persuasion was stronger than his sulking. Agile, he stretched out on the warm ground, laid his head on his arms and promptly fell asleep to her soft humming.

## Chapter 2

# Encounter with spirit beings

Michael dreamt he was lying prone on the grass. He felt the earth beneath him: unruly where rocks pierced the sod, soft and receptive where clay and peat filled the hollows. Around his head and on his skin he felt the wind playing with his hair and bringing in scents and sounds. On his back and hands he felt the warmth of sunbeams, tempered and transmitted by the layers of air above him. His front was slowly getting wet from the water that rose from the spongy bottom.

He heard thin music swelling and became aware of a growing crowd around him. As in a slow dissolve from one movie picture to the next, they became visible: hand-length faeries hovering around the flowers in the sun, knee-high earth beings standing in the shade among some curious rabbits, a few tall fauns moving under the crowns of their trees. Birds perched on branches and twittered to one another; in the azure sky, circling eagles let out their high-pitched cries. A few chamois emerged from the foliage and stood motionless. On the other side a fox sat, its tail wrapped around.

The trees began to rustle. Transparent, winged nymphs swirled into the clearing, crisscrossing each other and flew back into the shelter of the trees. Their tinkling song changed from haphazard yet harmonious sounds gradually into a melody. It became a symphony with a rhythmic background of dark wood tones. These were the humming fauns, dozens of them now stood under their trees. The gnarled roots of a row of alders along the waterfront were dotted with earth creatures in all the autumn colours you could think of.

Michael sat up. He had never seen so many different nature beings together before.

Something was on its way. With a question in his eyes, he looked at Dia, who put her hands on his shoulders in a protective gesture. Her touch felt soothing, in a way that made him feel like she knew what was coming. His heart was pounding. He felt the earth beneath him resonate to the elemental symphony. It was as if he were sitting on the sound box of a double bass, gently stroked by skilful hands.

The sunlight drew writhing wisps of mist from the peaty soil in which, vaguely visible, dancing water nymphs approached. Above the valley, a hovering gleam had appeared. It reminded Michael of a woman in a wide gown who was slowly undulating, like a transparent plastic bag in clear blue seawater. It was a muse, Michael was told. She represented the element of fire and had been summoned here to conduct the music of the spheres.

The symphony died down, like a musical procession going around a corner. Without seeing them coming, there suddenly stood three radiant figures. He for-

got to breathe and closed his eyes; it was too much to look at. In his mind came Dia's exhortation, with a reverent undertone: *You must look, these are my masters.*

After swallowing a few times, he dared to open his eyes again, just a crack. The figures slowly became clearer, less like veils of light flowing into each other, more like stable forms.

*Thank you, Dia, for coming,* it echoed in his head. He didn't hear real words like when Dia spoke to him, but some kind of chords came into his mind. His brain had recently learned enough of elemental communication to be able to translate it in sounds and turn them into speech.

*Man-boy, do you know who we are?* He shook his head, too impressed to speak. Dia's wings rustled; was it the wind or her nerves? He felt her knee push into his back, which seemed to say: Come on, kid, let's hear it. It was a physical prompting that she was only able to give because she was now of matter. The physical contact brought him back to himself.

He stood up, slow as a plant unfolding, and bowed deeply. 'No, um...' he said aloud. Nervous as he was he stopped, because he didn't know how to address the creatures.

*Our title is not important,* replied the smallest of the three, with something careless in his voice. *But let me introduce myself, so that you know whom you are dealing with. I am the master of the nature beings on Earth. In this part of the world, people call me Pan, which means 'everything'.* He seemed to chuckle. *I'm not everything, of course, but it sounds nice.* Pan's figure had gradually become clearer during his explanation: he had come to look like some sort of forester, but with a costume that looked medieval.

When the nature-god let go of his attention, Michael's eyes shifted to the second figure, as if attracted by a magnet. In the being's wavering radiance, colours shifted so brightly and so quickly that it was impossible to follow. Michael felt in his bones the power that was revealed to him here. In comparison, Pan looked almost like an ordinary person.

A chord sounded in his head, sounds he had never heard before. In a gesture of surrender, he dropped to his knees.

*Look at me, man-boy.* A force outside Michael lifted his head. *I am an angel of the lower hierarchies, the shape introduced itself. I am a messenger; my name does not matter. I appear to you to let you know that the forest and the valley have long been safeguarded and prepared for a new co-operation between nature beings and humans. You play a key role in this.* The apparition shifted its attention to Dia. *We are surprised by the form the cooperation has taken.* When the Angel released his consciousness, an almost unbearable pressure in Michael's head disappeared.

Immediately the third figure made itself known in his mind. *I am the guardian of the valley and of the forest,* he proclaimed shortly. He seemed to be wrapped in a greenish-blue mantle, which fanned out around him like aurora borealis and sometimes looked yellow. His hair, fingers and toes emitted flashes of light in

changing colours.

*You can call me a landscape angel, the keeper of the Valley of Bran and its surroundings. My name is, of course, the same as my area: Bran. The incomprehension that Michael unconsciously conveyed provoked an impatient explanation. A landscape angel is the guardian of a landscape, man. The guardianship of landscape elements is a long and sometimes arduous task, in which a nature creature can evolve in a grand manner into the guardian of an entire landscape. Especially in places where people are active. These can be sacred places or cities, estates and properly inhabited areas. But unfortunately, there are also devastated landscapes where the earth has been torn open for the extraction of minerals, places buried under your waste, areas where atomic bombs have exploded, battlefields where countless people and nature creatures have lost their lives. These are torments for their keepers. They can die from them.*

There was a sharp rebuke in his message.

*The poisoning of my river and my forest is a painful torment. It must be stopped. It attracts too much evil, even for your people.*

Michael cringed more with each statement of the Angel. He had no defence against the strong vibrations penetrating straight to his core. It seemed as if all the blame for the worldwide devastation was placed on him. He was the scapegoat, because here and now he represented humanity found guilty. All courage, all energy, all zest for life drained from him. With shame and powerlessness, he could sink into the ground and die.

A message seeped through the devastating guilt.

*Do not despair, human child. You were born as a member of a family that can heal the earth. That is why you are here, that is why we appeared to you. You are our greatest hope.*

He looked up with a shy expression, straight into the eyes of the messenger angel, from whom the consolation had come.

*Bran did not mean it in a personal way. He did not foresee such a strong reaction. You should just listen quietly for a while, so that you can recover from the shock.*

He wanted to nod in agreement, but the angel's attention had already shifted to Dia. Apparently it did not matter what he thought, whirled through his mind.

## Chapter 3

### Dia's initiation

When he thought of Dia, he noticed that she was frozen in the same grip he was in. But he could hear what she perceived; probably that was even the intention, because the message was in distinct words..

*Thanks to you, headstrong Deva of the Willow, the forest has been saved, was written in her mind with a hint of reluctant admiration. What you have done has never been accomplished before, Dia. Yes, I call you by the name given to you by your human lover when you made a tangible form for yourself. You have brought something very special into existence. You have a soul now. Listen to us, Dia, we who were once your masters. You have withdrawn from the elemental world... No, don't argue. You have not only created a new being, yourself, and taken the boy into a new form, you have even created a whole new realm of being in the process, halfway between humans and nature beings. Though this may not have been your intention, it is the direct result of your transformation. You are the first representative of a new race. We are witnessing this now.* At this Pan clapped his hands, or at least he made the gesture, for there was no sound.

*Your transformation causes wide trails of consequences, Deva. We cannot see into which direction you will develop. But what you leave behind you is our concern. Because you have changed yourself and to free you for the things to come, care for the Willow is assigned to your successor,* the angel said.

In a human gesture, Dia clasped her arms around Michael's head. He looked up and saw tears welling up in her wide-open eyes. Comfortingly, he raised his arms and caressed her face.

*That is what only humans can do,* Pan sighed. *To grieve, to cry tears, to comfort in love and from that to have the courage to face it; that is what you can give to two worlds, the worlds you two come from.*

A moment there was only silence and slow movements. Dia raised her head and looked courageously at the three great ones.

*I understand,* was all she said. She shuddered. The confrontation with her former masters was the definitive confirmation that she had left the elemental world for good. It had been her own conscious choice, sure, but now it was recognised as such and that her position as leading deva of the willow had been awarded to her successor made her feel very forsaken. What about her connection with the willows? She had emerged from them, she had evolved with them, she was a child of the willows and the willows were her children.

*Dia, you are the first elemental being to have crossed over into a new evolutionary line in full consciousness and in the process having managed to keep intact all skills, all knowledge and all connections to the astral and ethereal worlds. You have even created a new kind of living matter for yourself.*

The angel looked at her penetratingly. Michael looked from the angel to his beloved. Her hand sought his; her thoughts, as far as he could access them, tumbled over each other in denial, terror, disbelief. She trembled with fear.

He got up and embraced her, casting a reproachful glance at the angel, who looked on impassively. *What is it, my love?* he whispered into her mind.

*I am afraid of what he says.*

*Why?*

The angel interrupted them.

*As a deva, you had powers, knowledge, insight and abilities to read and guide others. Then your abilities were bound to the laws of the elemental realm. Now they are not. You have retained all your abilities and even managed to form a free will, a soul. Thus, you have become a closed book for us. You did not, like many elementals, allow yourself to be born as a human being with all the restrictions that entails. Therefore, you are now free to use your abilities as you wish. But we cannot gauge your intentions any more.*

*But I don't want to,* Dia replied timidly.

The angel looked at her. *That seems unlikely to me.*

*How do...*

*No, Dia, you know very well yourself. You don't need to hear it from somebody else.*

Michael felt her stiffen.

*You are right. That is why I am so afraid. That I will make mistakes. That I will do more harm than good.* He could hardly follow her, so weak were her thought impulses. Apparently, the messenger angel noticed this too, because his tone of voice softened.

*That is difficult indeed, Dia. You have stumbled upon the problem of man with his eternal inner struggle. You know that struggle too now. You cannot get around it. If you want to know how to act best, study people. Study your beloved and his family; listen to them and to the knowing people who are gathering here. Learn their languages and read their books. Study their history. This advice is all we can give you.*

*But what should I do with these abilities?* she asked timidly.

*What have you done with them so far?*

*I have helped Michael.*

*Why did you do that? What was your motive?*

*There was a need and he was alone.*

*Exactly. You know that we angels are in the process of withdrawing from the governing of the Earth and all that is and lives there. You know that responsibility is being handed over to humans. Your beloved is such a person.*

*That was the reason...* she hesitated for a moment and then corrected herself: *... one of the reasons I wanted to become human. To tell him what to do. Was that too presumptuous of me?* She bowed her head in humility, trembling very much now.

*Was that the main reason?*

*No.*

*What was it then?*

*I had fallen in love with my human being, she conveyed barely intelligibly.*

*Dia, if your budding love for a human being was your real motive, we cannot speak of pride. You were not capable of that then. But now you are. That is what I mean by abilities. You can accomplish great things in the world, both in the ethereal-material and in the astral realms. Provided that you use those powers in a constructive way. If not, the damage is incalculable. Remember that pride blinds: while someone is in the opinion that he or she has the best intentions for the world or another, that person can open a gate for **Others**.*

The question that arose in Michael was answered before he was fully aware of what he wanted to ask.

**Others** is the name we give to counter powers, boy. Remember that many of these counter powers were created by men. You call them demons. That is what the coming battle will be against.

*Does she have to do it all alone?* It seemed most unjust to Michael that Dia should fight such a battle alone.

*No,* replied the landscape angel Bran. *On the contrary. You will have to play the most important part, man-boy. That is why we have appeared to you together. The messenger angel will give you instructions on necessary actions. Myself and Pan will guide you through the valley and help where we can.*

*And you are lovers,* Pan laughed. His mirth was liberating; it broke the solemn atmosphere.

*Indeed. You, Dia, are now living with your human Michael, who has been brought into a new state of being by you ahead of time, something that was only foreseen in subsequent lives. You have shared many skills with him and he has a strong consciousness. He will be your guide in human matters, as you will be to him in elemental matters. If you stay together and act together, you are invincible. Soon the first clues will reach you. There are disturbing developments. But now we must end this conversation, for your sisters need you, Michael. Especially little Diana is suffering.*

With a stab of worry, Michael stood up straight. The concern for his little sister brought a smile to the faces of the three great beings. Diana was perhaps as great a miracle as the winged elfin woman. In Diana's seven-year-old body, the Deva of the Forest, an ethereal nature being, was united with the material appearance of a human being.

This symbiosis was uncomfortable at times – the child had come close to dying on a number of occasions – but time would tell how powerful she would become as a double being.

The shapes began to fade. Gradually, more elemental beings became invisible. Michael understood that he could see them in his new, “diluted” state, but only if they wanted to. With a sense of loss, he watched the clearing become empty.

## Chapter 4

# Innerspeech with Diana

Alarmed by Pan's remark about Diana, Michael made his way up out of the valley with great leaps.

On the ridge he paused, enjoying the breathtaking view of the Valley of Bran.

The restlessness drove him on. Downhill he went so fast that he almost toppled over. Dia was flying right above him, but running down at top speed satisfied him more than being carried.

His body yearned for action after the confrontation, during which he had only been able to listen to a flood of serious announcements. The encounter with the three great ones had left him in confusion. He did not even know exactly what the message had been, only that grim things lay ahead.

The rocky slopes, covered with grass and shrubs, gradually turned into forest as he descended. Soon the familiar Elfswood enveloped him again. The madness in his mind calmed down a little. This was the forest where he belonged. This was where his new life was taking place.

He jumped like a squirrel from tree to tree, walked over branches and bridged gaps with long leaps, travelling through the forest like a true elf.

Dia followed him all the time. Without Michael in her arms, she could swirl deftly like a crow between the trees.

For her convenience, she had shortened herself.

In the camp under Diana's tree, Michael found his three sisters sitting around a fire, drinking tea with Irina. The domestic scene brought him back to himself.

'Michael!' Irina, the Slovakian student he had been in love with, saw him first.

'Michel! Michele!' cried Lucy and Wendy; simultaneously, as usual. 'Where were you? Oh, here comes Dia!'

They had seen her fly a few times before, but each time they saw this fairy-tale creature with their own eyes, it brought back all the emotion and wonder of her first appearance. They sat open-mouthed watching the butterfly-like elfin woman sail between the trees. Just as a stork, stretching out its long legs in front of it, quiets its flight with a few wing beats and lands on its nest, Dia let herself down gently to the ground.

In the meantime Michael had quietly walked up to Diana.

'What's the matter with you, little mouse?' She let herself be lifted up with a sigh. She grew lighter and lighter, just like him.

'I don't know,' she wanted to say, but halfway through, her voice broke.

Whimpering softly, she hid her head against his neck.

Comfortingly, he stroked her shaking back. He had grown in wisdom, he noticed. A few weeks ago he would not have known what to do about it, but now,

thanks to his increased sensitivity, he could more or less guess what was the matter with his little sister.

‘Come on,’ he said softly, ‘we’re going for a walk. Just the two of us.’

‘Where are we going?’ she whispered, as they walked up the path to the Forest Meadow, the clearing where they searched for wild forest vegetables every day.

‘Just you wait. A secret place,’ he laughed and squeezed her hand. He stopped on the Forest Meadow and silently pointed to a row of dark spruce trees on the other side. A branch began to move, as if it had been snapped and was hanging loose, the wind blew it aside and it sprang back.

‘There is a secret path,’ whispered Diana.

The dryad in her, the Deva of the Forest, obviously knew every tree, branch and game trail in the Elfswood. By their cooperation over the past few days, she now had that knowledge in her human consciousness as well.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘the tree spirit of the guardian tree has asked a little being of the air to blow the branch aside. We can go through.’

They crossed the clearing and disappeared into the dark opening; the branch sprang back into place and was motionless among the other spruce branches.

‘Look,’ Michael whispered, ‘prints of a deer. What a big one!’ Diana knelt by the muddy patch where some deep hoof prints could be seen.

‘Must be from that huge stag we saw the first time we were in the woods, remember? He’s heading in the same direction we are.’ Curious, they walked the last few dozen yards and eagerly entered Michael’s “secret forest square”, where Dia had first shown herself to him.

Diana ran to the middle and turned a few times on her axis, arms spread wide. ‘I know it here,’ she said. She raised her face to his when Michael had caught up with her. ‘This is the heart of the forest.’ She pulled a mischievous face. ‘This is where Dia came to you, isn’t it?’ He nodded smiling. ‘Yes. That’s where my sleeping bag is.’ He pointed to a spot among the ferns. ‘But why did you cry just now? Or is it over already?’ She lowered her eyes. ‘Well...’ She swallowed, flicked her eyes up and sought support in his. ‘Can you tell me?’ she begged. ‘I don’t know. I can’t find it.’

He looked into her eyes, which gleamed with not-understood sadness.

Reluctantly, he allowed himself to be carried inside. She opened her inner self to him, like a patient surrenders to a doctor, full of trust. That trust had only recently been established when he had managed to prevent her from suffocating by diving into her being and loosening the grip of the dryad present on her human body.

Before he got too deep, Michael pulled back. He did not want this; it was too intimate. He took her hands.

‘You have to give words to it yourself.’ Her gaze flicked back and forth between his two eyes to see if he really meant it.

‘They think I can do everything,’ she complained. ‘But I’m only seven.’

‘Who are “they”?’

Diana shrugged her shoulders ruefully. ‘Just, the dryad in me and sometimes a man with a luminous cloak...’

‘Does he sometimes call himself Bran?’

‘Yes! Do you know him too? Who is that?’

‘The guardian angel of the valley. I’ve just met him!’

‘An angel? Is he an angel?’

He nodded. ‘Yes, really. That’s what he said to me. But go on. Is the dryad the boss of you?’

Again she hesitated. ‘No, it’s more that I know I have to do what she says, because I’m still little, and that I have to do my best. I want to do that too. In fact, I always want to do what she says. Is she my boss then?’

‘No, little mouse, she is not your boss. But when she tells you to do something, it’s as if she is for a while. That is not so bad. Because you can always say no.’

‘Oh,’ she said with relief. ‘You know, the dryad is actually my best friend. She’s a bit bossy sometimes, but that’s because she knows everything about the forest and since she lives in me, now I know that too!’ she rattled, happy to finally be able to tell someone who wouldn’t think her crazy. ‘Her name is Diana, just like me. When I walk in the forest on my own and the wood elves are flying around me, I can almost fly myself did you know that? They point everything out to me. I had seen this place before too, but I didn’t know it was your place.’

‘What actually happened when those soldiers came?’ asked Michael. It was not yet clear to him what her problem was. ‘Who wanted to catch us?’

‘Well, we were down in the cave, it was cold, we were all in our sleeping bags. The leader told us not to make a fire, because then the planes that were looking for us could see the heat.’ She looked up at him. ‘Really, it was very cold.’

‘But that’s why the planes did not find you.’

‘No, just as well.’ Diana frowned, wanting her memory to be as clear as possible. ‘I was a bit sleepy all the time. I was just doing what the scouts told me to do. Then suddenly the other Diana became very big in me, and I grew with it.’

Her eyes took on a stare. ‘I was everywhere in the forest, I felt every tree, I knew every branch and root. It was as if I were as big as the forest.’ She looked up at Michael. ‘Is that even possible?’

‘Yes, she could come out as the Deva of the Forest at that time, even though she was inside you. You grew with her, so that together you became as big as the forest. Because you no longer worked against each other, I think, you could finally feel what the dryad felt.’

Satisfied with her big brother’s explanation, Diana picked up the thread: ‘You know, I couldn’t see those soldiers, of course, but I could feel their footsteps. As if they were steps on my arm, from a fly or something. But I knew exactly where they were, by the river, and how many they were. It’s very strange now that I mention it, but it was also new for the dryad in me. I went with her, like a sister,

I could help her.' She shook her head, as if in disbelief at what happened next.

'Whatever the trees tried to do to stop them, it didn't work; they were always too late. Oh dear, I remember almost wetting myself when those soldiers came closer and closer. Miche, that's when the tree came down. What a noise! A boy almost came under it. But the soldiers couldn't go any further; the fallen tree had made a complete mess of things. We crept back through the stream, so as not to leave a trail for the dogs.'

'What was it like when the president came and all the forest elves showed themselves to the people?'

'That...' Diana hesitated, looking around for a moment, but did apparently not find what she was looking for. 'We all did that together, you know. Dia and Diana in me and the big Bran and the big deer...' Her voice died away at the last words. Tears dripped to the ground.

'What is it, little mouse?'

'I was so happy then,' she sobbed, 'we were all-together and we gave all those people the biggest surprise of their lives, and now, and now...' She began to cry uncontrollably. 'I am so alone! They're all gone and I can't hear them anymore and I'm so alone...'

Alarmed, Michael pulled her close to him. 'But aren't Lucy and Wendy here, and Irina? And...'

'Yes, but they're only outside me,' Diana sobbed. 'There is no one left inside me, with me!'

Michael knew better than anyone what that meant. He could still remember how desperately desolate he had felt when Dia had withdrawn from his mind and fled. As if he had lost half of himself.

'But the other Diana is in you, isn't she?'

'No, she's gone to sleep I think, I can't find her anywhere. She was so tired, and I'm tired too but I can't sleep...' A new cry made the rest of her words unintelligible.

Michael did not know what else to do, except to hold her until she had cried out.

'The dryad will come back after a while, when she has rested. She has nowhere else to go but back to you.'

Something occurred to him...

*Can you hear me when I think of you?* he signalled, pressing his head against hers. *Diana, can you hear me?*

No reaction. Maybe it was not the right way. Maybe her grief was holding it back? Or had he closed himself off? That was also possible. He grasped her tear-stained face between his hands and looked into her big blue eyes.

Amazed, she stopped crying.

Cautiously, as if descending an unknown staircase in the dark, he sought access to her mind again. But now it was his own wish and he had a narrowly defined

goal. If he succeeded in communicating telepathically with Diana, he would not have to delve so deeply into her personality, something he naturally resisted.

*Diana, if you understand my thought words...*

*Miche?* Incredulous. He received her astonished thought.

*Hello little mouse. Now we can talk with our minds.*

‘Oh!’ she cried in amazement.

‘Yes, the same way. With words and images and feelings and everything around it. You can do that too. Try it. Just now you called my name in your mind and I could hear that.’

*Yes, I can feel what you mean. It's as if each word is accompanied by a whole comic strip, or a picture with music... Oh, Miche, how beautiful this is!*

Her eyes again filled with tears, but this time with joyful emotion. Tired, but content, she nestled all the way against him. In the silence of the clearing, they exchanged what they wanted to tell each other.

## Chapter 5

### Irina's loss

When at one point Diana wanted to know in detail how he and Dia made love, Michael started laughing and planted his finger on her nose. 'No, you little rascal, that's private,' he said loudly to her.

Reluctantly Diana withdrew from the exchange of ideas. At that moment she became aware of a presence at the edge of the forest.

'There's the big deer, behind you,' she whispered.

'I've been feeling him for a while,' he whispered back. 'It's Pan, the boss of all nature beings.'

*Not of all, Michael,* was Pan's laconic response. *Only the angels are. I told you earlier today: I supervise elemental beings and guardian spirits of plants, forests and animals. Higher spirit beings are looked after by the angels. Dia, when she was Deva of the Willow, was part of my responsibility as still is Diana's dryad.*

With wide eyes of awe, Diana looked at the huge stag at the edge of the forest. Michael understood that she had also heard Pan in her mind, just as Pan had heard his thoughts. Would... The Nature God answered his unspoken question.

*No. With Diana you have your own frequency. An outsider can follow the intention of your exchange, those signals are universal, but what you tell each other exactly, only you two can understand.*

In the meantime, he had slowly approached. He bent his head with the antlers and sniffed at Diana, who looked excitedly into the huge, dark eyes.

Michael put her on his back, or at least he thought he was supposed to.

'It's so hard,' she complained, clinging tightly to the long fur.

'I will get my sleeping bag and fold it like a saddle,' Michael offered.

That was more comfortable. Slightly more at ease, Diana let herself be taken across the clearing by the slowly striding stag.

*It's a good time to call Dia and show your sisters and the girl Irina this place, Michael,* Pan suggested. *I go for a walk with Diana. The dryad is still in her hiding place, it's nice to be alone with the human child for a while.*

An excited feeling came from Diana to be carried through the forest by a nature god. *I'm all right,* she confided in him. *Go and get the others.*

That prompting was not necessary: Michael had already made contact with Dia in a brief flash and had passed on the message. He walked back along the path and waited in the opening, his back to the closing branch.

He was startled out of his thoughts when the four girls came running into the clearing. Dia had taken the twins by the hand, while Irina came running across the clearing towards him like a nymph.

How beautiful Irina is, thought Michael admiringly.

All his worries were instantly forgotten. She embraced and kissed him. Shyly he let it happen; in the presence of Dia and his sisters he did not know well how to react. He was nevertheless a bit annoyed that he was just standing there like a wooden doll.

‘Uh, where’s Diana?’ asked Irina, warm and uncertain because of his lack of response.

‘Michel Michel!’ shouted Wendy and Lucy as they started to run. Between them they pulled Dia along, who spread her wings and let her be pulled up like a kite. Exultantly they reached the passage under the firs.

‘What is it? What are we going to do? Where is Diana?’

Michael’s hand searched Dia’s soft skin before answering. He had to clear his throat a few times before he could say anything. Stiffly he said: ‘Diana is on the back of that big stag we met earlier. They are taking a walk in the forest. We are going to my secret forest square.’

‘Oh!’ Wendy’s eyes sparkled. ‘Where you and Dia...’ She looked blushing from one to the other.

‘Yes,’ Michael hummed, unable to cope with his posture, ‘just come with me. There’s nothing to see, you know.’

One after the other, they stooped under the branch, which Michael, as the last in line, let spring back into place. On the forest square the stag was waiting for them, Diana enthroned on its back like a princess.

‘We have been wandering quit a distance,’ Diana exclaimed elatedly. ‘We have just returned.’

*I have been walking and you have been singing,* Michael heard Pan reply cheerfully. *Come, jump off, I have something to tell you.* Diana let herself slide off his back with his sleeping bag and all. She stroked the snout that was bent towards her.

‘Thank you, dear Pan,’ she murmured.

The stag turned its gaze to Michael. *Michael, will you help your sisters and the girl Irina? They cannot speak in their minds yet. It is recommended that you first teach them to communicate in the mind, so that they can withstand what you have to fight for.*

Michael nodded, but his face showed doubt.

*Just as you have just taught me,* Diana helped him. Apparently she could hear Pan. *Irina is clairvoyant, so it shouldn’t be difficult with her,* Pan suggested.

The telepathic conversation had passed the twins by, but Irina stood at some distance, watching intently. She had not been able to follow what was exchanged between the deer, Diana and Michael. Thanks to her clairvoyant gift, however, she had been able to perceive the flow of energies back and forth.

She had realised from the first glance that the stag was in fact a different creature. She did not know what or who it was, but that it was a spirit being of a high order was obvious to her. She perceived him within the body of the deer as a constantly changing cloud of misty colours with brightly shining points that seemed to be performing a dance.

When Michael came towards her, with an uncertain look in his eyes, she became afraid. What was he going to do with her? What had that spirit being commanded him to do? She heard a slight rustling behind her. She turned around, startled. It was Dia, who had seen the fear in her body and wanted to reassure her. It was too much for Irina. With a muffled cry, she fled down the path they had come on. Panting, she ran along the narrow trail, dived through the spruce barrier and only stopped running when she arrived at her tent in the scouting camp, out of breath and crying. Irina did not want to tell the upset scouts what was going on. When she had caught her breath and drunk a cup of tea, she went on to the village, to her mother and to Janos. They might be able to tell her what she had seen and why she had suddenly become so frightened.

## Chapter 6

### A hint...

Lucy looked at the fleeing figure in amazement. Wendy, who was standing by Diana, had the same thought. Lucy ran up to them and took her twin sister by the hand. When she was worried the first person she wanted with her was her sister.

‘She must be sad, or jealous of Dia, right, Wen?’

‘I think so. Miche is all over Dia now. But was she in love with him? I thought she was in love with Janos.’

‘No, or maybe yes, that too, but it seemed more like she was scared.’

Lucy had a sharp look. ‘I’ll try asking Dia, who was standing behind her. Dia?’

The elf woman, who was walking hand in hand with Michael towards the deer, looked up. Because she could not speak with sound, she sent her answer in spirit, but the twins could not receive it.

‘Dia,’ Lucy repeated when they were closer. She phrased her question so that Dia could answer with either nodding or shaking her head. ‘Did Irina get scared or something?’

Dia nodded yes saddened.

Michael explained: ‘When I walked up to her to teach her to talk in spirit, as Dia and Diana and I do, Dia wanted to reassure her, for she sensed that Irina was not at ease. But then she got scared...’ He couldn’t go on. The mask of Irina’s distorted face, just before she turned and ran, loomed large in his mind’s eye.

*Pan, what was that? What did I see? That wasn’t Irina, was it?* he signalled sadly to the deity.

*Yes, Michael, it was her. When she got scared, something took possession of her. You saw that happen in a flash.*

Michael felt a chill creeping up his spine. *What did I see?*

The stag shook impatiently its head with its huge antlers.

*A creature of the **Others**,* Pan replied reluctantly.

*What are they?* Michael insisted. Here was a hint of something he should know more about, although it frightened him to no end.

Pan sent the equivalent of a deep sigh to him. *It is dangerous to tell everything, I have to do it in bits and pieces. But it is the main reason why Bran, the angel and I appeared to you. We will meet again later and then it will be explained to you. But first a few conditions must be fulfilled.*

‘What are you doing, Miche?’ Lucy wanted to know.

‘I’m talking to the deer, to Pan I mean,’ he replied. ‘Pan is explaining to me what happened. I will tell you later what he passed on to me.’

Pan waited patiently for Michael to return his full attention to their conversation before continuing.

*Remember, Michael, that in addition to the edifying and nurturing spirit beings such as Dia, Diana, the wood spirits, the tree spirits, the earth spirits, the great and small water spirits, the great and small air spirits, the great and small fire spirits, there are also other spirit beings. Those of decay, destruction, loss, sickness, death. They are just as necessary as we are, but we have an eternal competition with them. That is the natural course of things and there has always been more or less balance.*

‘But not any more,’ sighed Michael. No, when he looked at the world of today he saw little harmony.

*Indeed, Pan agreed. For a long time now the balance has been disturbed. Wherever people defile, destroy or disrespect, wherever people are unhappy, **Others** arise, who worm their way into the ethereal world and try to enter the material world by doing so. They are also called demons.*

A sense of loss, of failure, of being hurt accompanied Pan’s words. Michael realised with dismay that the power of natural gods was very fragile.

*Here in the valley, a breach has appeared in the protective field that we have been weaving for thousands of years. It started many winters ago at the factory. It was empty and had fallen into disrepair. Because it had always been a building without character, it had no strong house spirit to protect it. The creatures of decay took possession of it and unwittingly attracted evil in the form of people who began to burn poison there and throw poison into the stream. Thus, the breach grew larger and larger. As a result, **Others** can enter in large numbers. They kill trees and plants and small spirit beings, make everything sick and create a field of fear and hatred.*

‘Oh, I thought the poison was killing the trees,’ said Michael with frightened eyes.

*That is the material side of dying, but not the cause.*

*Are these others all around us?* he asked, looking around him anxiously.

*Not yet. But the protective field is getting weaker, while the **Others** are increasing in strength. I was surprised by the demon that travelled with the girl Irina. This is a serious matter, that they can deceive even me.*

*How can that be?*

*The human girl was weakened by being torn apart by two impossible loves... I see you want to know for whom. Do I have to answer?*

*Janos?*

*That is the one.* Michael found it hard to admit it, but finally managed to say: *Am I the other one?*

An assent without words confirmed it.

*But how?*

*Irina has great gifts, but she is still young. They got to her because she is so sensitive and her protection is weakened by her torn feelings. That’s what you saw.*

*To be caught? Is... Is she going to stay like that?* Michael could not hide his horror.

*No, don’t worry. Her mother will heal her. She is on her way there now.*

Michael was so relieved that he had to sit down.

With his head between his hands, he let the startling words of the forest god sink in.

‘But...’

The explanation of Irina’s sudden fear raised more questions than it answered. On the rebound, he started speaking aloud.

‘But then how could it happen here? I mean, those Others are at the factory, aren’t they? Why didn’t you see them?’

*They can find a focus in a weakened aura and thus travel with a person. Just like Dia did with you. This demon had been with her for some time. He took his chance when the girl got very scared. They grow from the energy of strong negative emotions of people. By instilling fear, they try to amplify that energy.*

With wide eyes, Michael looked at the impassive snout of the deer. He would have preferred to dismiss this dry statement, but he knew that it was the truth. A truth that belonged in horror stories; not in this lovely forest. Stories of battles with horrific creatures from another dimension, demons that everyone laughed off as fantasy. So it was no fantasy at all.

He swallowed and accepted Pan’s explanation so he could think again.

‘How can we best protect against such robberies? By the way, are there many people... like this?’

You mean possessed?

Yes.

*Fear is a widespread breeding ground. But you and your sisters protect yourselves very well by your love for each other. At least lately, there has been a disturbing distance between you before. Dia and Diana have been protecting you all your lives, and this has sometimes been very difficult for them. But from now on, this will only become easier, because they have been able to consciously manifest themselves in the human world, and your love for each other has grown.*

With a sigh of relief, Michael let his mischievous thoughts wander. It was good what they were doing, it was good as they were.

The big stag manoeuvred its snout closer, carefully holding up its antlers, and pressed its moist nose into Michael’s neck. *I am going now, save your sisters!*

‘Will I see you again soon?’ Michael begged. ‘You were going to tell us something, right?’

*Later.* The stag raised his head and roared: a deep, dark sound that sounded very melodious. It also sounded like a defiant cry of battle against enemies who were still far away, but would not be for long.

‘Come, let us go back,’ suggested Michael to his sisters. ‘It is getting dark and I am hungry for forest soup. Shall we look for some more of those plants?’ Something in his tone of voice prevented Lucy from asking what had been discussed. They trusted that Michael would tell them later. They walked back in the dying light of day.

## Chapter 7

### Fairy dance and fairy song

Near the tent, girls from the scouting camp were preparing an evening meal. A fire was burning under a soup kettle, from which delicious smells were rising.

The cook-girl immediately went to wash the vegetables that Diana and Michael had collected, but her eyes were constantly on the elf-woman. Lucy and Wendy sat down next to Dia. They wanted to know everything: what it was like to fly, what she was like before Michael was born, how she could be in his aura in the Netherlands and still take care of all the willows and not be near her own tree and where it was...

‘I’m going to make a paper of it for school,’ Lucy confided. ‘I think that all people should know how to deal with nature and nature’s creatures. I’ll ask Miche later what you want to tell me.’ Dia hugged her in response.

‘And I’m going to sing all the songs you can teach me,’ Wendy dreamed aloud; she didn’t want to be left behind by her clever sister.

‘Do you know any fairy dances?’

Immediately, Dia stood up and showed how she used to dance. Now that she had a solid body, however light it was, it became mainly steps and figures in the flat plane. She improvised movements in height and depth by bending forward, stretching her arms and bending her knees, not using her wings to make things easy for the children.

Wendy watched every movement carefully and imitated them to the best of her ability. Her natural aptitude for dancing made her move almost in step with Dia. Lucy followed in the background, with more difficulty. She looked in admiration at Wendy, who despite her voluptuous stature looked like a fairy, so gracefully did she perform the fairy dance. Wendy was humming vague melodies. Lucy realised they must be fairy songs, which Dia managed to convey without making a sound. Or did she?

‘Dia, did you sing?’ she asked as they went to eat. ‘I thought I heard someone besides Wendy’s humming.’

Dia smiled shyly.

‘See! You did, you sang!’

‘I didn’t hear anything,’ Wendy said in surprise.

‘Yes, dude, if you hum along yourself you can’t hear someone if they are humming very softly.’

They weren’t sure, but for Lucy there was no doubt that Dia had made sound.

After dinner, the scouts left and the five of them played a game in the tent.

Lucy could not take her eyes off Dia, who was lying dreamily against Michael, her wings spread over the two of them.

She felt something of jealousy when she saw them. It was different from what she and Wendy had, although they had been together all their lives and slept often in the same bed. She wished she were in love too, with an elfin boy.

As Michael and Dia left the tent, fantasies of kissing and making love in the forest ran through her mind. Restless, she pulled Diana close to her and stroked the sleepy child, who had been absent all evening.

She did not know what to do with her desires. It sometimes felt like homesickness for... she did not know what. The feeling was so deep that she silently shed a few tears as she covered Diana and crawled into her own bed. She wanted to fly away, to spread her arms and jump off mountains, she wanted to dance and scream, she wanted a boyfriend like her sister. Restless, she wriggled in her sleeping bag, heatedly unzipping it. Her nipples were rubbing against the fabric of her nightshirt, her legs were electrically charged. Her arms ached, as if she had lifted something far too heavy.

Sobbing with restraint, she crawled outside and took a pee. It was cool; the soft breeze was blowing around her bare bottom and hot head. She stood still for a long time, looking up at the clear starry sky. The path of the Milky Way lit up like a distant cloud.

She did not know how long she had been standing like this, when she became aware of slight whirls at the edge of her field of vision. The wood elves! Her burning desire, however, overcame her sensitivity; she could no longer see them. But they were there!

A little less restless, she crawled back into her sleeping bag.

She woke up to a rattling outside. It was light already. Diana and Wendy were still asleep. Gasping, she sat up straight. From a few whispered words, she deduced that two Slovakian girls were busy at the cooking fire. She came out of the tent barefoot, greeted them shyly and ran to the edge of the forest to pee.

She sat down by the fire, folded up in the nightgown that she had pulled tight around herself. It began to smell like oatmeal. Her stomach rumbled.

‘Shall I call your sisters?’ one of the girls suggested.

Lucy nodded, then she wouldn’t have to get up. She longed for a shower.

‘Can you make some hot water? I want to wash myself.’

But before that they were eating the porridge.

As there were no boys around, Lucy dared to bathe after breakfast under their improvised shower.

Wendy sat quietly humming along, occasionally weaving words and sounds of her own into the melody. She had a good memory for music and movements. It helped if she danced to it. She pulled Diana upright, which soon got the hang of it. The fairy dances were not strange to her. The two Slovakian girls followed Wendy in the movements she had learned from Dia the previous evening. She gave them whispered directions, while she herself listened to her own body, her own memory.

## Chapter 8

### New threats

Michael had set off for the village at dawn. He had walked with Dia across fields and wild slopes. He had made love to Dia while walking, her legs around him, her ravishing bum in his hands and his face between her breasts, which was only possible because she was holding herself in the air. They had laughed at the curiosity of the elementals that had been watching uninhibitedly. When he eventually had his orgasm and his legs became rubbery, she slowly flew up with him.

By the time it dawned, Dia had indicated she wanted to wander around on her own for a while and had flown away into the still dark sky.

He needed time to process it all, too. The images of the three great ones in the valley high up in the mountains kept tumbling over each other in his overloaded brain. He could remember exactly every word that had been said; it was engraved in his memory. But what to do with it was completely unclear to him. The conversation with Pan afterwards had not been very reassuring either. He had the feeling they were on a tiny island, surrounded by malevolent people, ghosts and demons that lurked like ravenous sharks. It made him feel inadequate. Pan's brief explanation of Others, creatures of destruction, awakened in him an ancient fear of the dark, of evil monsters that could jump out at you. He had experienced it himself recently, alone in his sleeping bag, when Dia had disappeared. He had recognised the same fear in Irina's troubled face. They were no figments of his imagination.

But come on, he exhorted himself during the long walk to Branočs. He had the support of the nature god Pan and two angels and a lot of elementals and deva's, so what could happen to him? As long as he kept paying attention. And what he had to do would become clear by itself, it had always been like that until now.

At the square in the village, he sat down on the low wall along the deep mill canal. He had been cheering himself up now, but the restlessness still raged within him; a brooding expectation of not much good. There was no one on the street yet. Far away he heard the sound of cowbells; vaguely the sound of a slowly running diesel engine came to him: high up on a slope, a farmer was using a milking machine driven by his tractor.

His gaze wandered further, to the trench that an excavator had cut across the dam to drain the water that would otherwise have flowed through the mill canal. Today the contractor would continue with the repair of the sluice. When it was finished, he and the scouts could finally start cleaning the river.

What would happen next with the action? The factory actually belonged to the Environmental Federation now. They just had to pay for it.

He looked at the church clock. The people from the event organisation would

be arriving on the first train, the village would fill up with tourists again, especially now the President had visited the forest, which had been extensively broadcast on television.

He decided to take a stroll. The field that had been set up as a helicopter landing pad looked deserted, the grass was flattened and car tracks crisscrossed it. It smelt of kerosene.

He followed a cart track to a meadow where the camp of environmentalists had been. It had been cleared by the army during the occupation of the village. The traces of tents and bare paths were the only reminders of the world conference that had been prematurely broken up here.

Michael experienced a sense of loss, a melancholy that he had been familiar with all his life.

I wish Dad were here so we could talk more about what we are going to do, he thought. By the way, I still don't know anything about his adventures, why he was unreachable for so long. Janos is gone, back to his hospital; Irina and her mother have left too. It's getting quiet: almost everyone from the first hour is gone.

Back in the village he smelled coffee and went through the backdoor into the kitchen of the guesthouse. The landlady was busy, helped by a woman from the village. He allowed himself to be embraced with a smile and laughed out loud when the women, startled, put him back on his feet. They were not yet used to his light weight and had lifted him off the ground in their enthusiasm.

Enjoying himself, he sat at the kitchen table a moment later with a large bowl of coffee in his hands.

'The train is late,' apologised the landlady, as she put toast in front of him. 'I don't have any fresh bread for you yet.' Michael understood Slovak as if he had never heard it otherwise.

'Perhaps it is broken, or the engine driver overslept,' Michael suggested in German. Speaking Slovak was much more difficult than understanding it.

'That has never happened before,' the woman grumbled. 'Yes, sometimes a tree falls on the tracks during a storm, but otherwise the first train is always on time.'

The remark gave him a gloomy feeling, as if it were a prediction. It was still too early to go upstairs to see if the general, as he mostly called the chairwoman of the environmental movement, was ready for a meeting.

With a growing tension in his stomach, he sauntered back to the station square. On the platform, women from the village were waiting for the train from Jablun, which would bring their daily shopping. They greeted him respectfully. The day before yesterday, he had blessed their children, but now he felt quite shy under their adoring glances.

A tractor that came driving at great speed drew their attention. It stopped at the steps, the farmer jumped off and walked onto the platform, waving his arms.

'The telephone line is broken,' the farmer announced excitedly. 'I wanted to call to find out where the train was, but the line is dead.'

'Maybe something alike happened to the railway line; an avalanche or a fallen tree,' someone suggested.

'We will ask Mrs. Jellisek to call with her mobile,' Michael decided.

They all thronged to the guesthouse, where the farmer and Michael went upstairs, while the women gathered in the kitchen.

Surprised, the people looked up from their breakfast.

'Hello Miche,' Olga greeted happily.

'Good morning, Olga,' Michael greeted back with a serious expression on his face. 'Eh, this gentleman from the village just told me that the telephone connection with Jablun has been cut. The train has not arrived yet either. Can you try to reach someone with your mobile phone?'

On her question what was wrong the farmer shrugged and showed a phone number she could call. She soon got connected and inquired why the train was delayed; she listened for a long time. Her face darkened and she said thanks.

'There was a shunt out of order,' she reported. Her eyebrows were furrowed, her eyes were angry. 'The machinist who drove the train up to the platform this morning saw it too late, because the signal was green. The train went off the rails and tore the shunt loose. As a result, no spare train can be used, as it is on the other track. There was probably a loose rod that prevented the shunt from moving. They think someone did it on purpose. We'll have to wait for our bread until the first train from Zilina arrives in Jablun, which will take it on its way back.'

'Why would anyone do that?' the farmer asked in amazement. Olga said nothing, pacing back and forth in the room. As there was nothing else he could do, the farmer left. They heard him through the open door telling the story downstairs to the gathered women.

'What do you think is the matter?' asked Michael, worried.

'I don't know, Miche.' Olga looked angry and unhappy. 'I hope that the people from the events agency are sensible enough to come by car. If the train from Zilina arrives with a load of tourists and there's no one to welcome them, you'll be in for a real treat.'

'Can't you call Zilina and ask to hold the train?'

'It's half past seven, it's on its way already.'

'Shall I wait at the station and tell a story?' he offered. She thought for a moment and rubbed her face. 'Yes, that's a good idea, my boy, the train will be here soon. I'm going to call a lot of people in the meantime, because I don't like this. The train sabotaged and the telephone line broken. That smells like concerted action. I think we should prepare ourselves for more trouble.'

'Shall I call my father? He must be on his way with the contractor by now.'

She gave him her mobile. Michael typed the number he had been given and got the contractor on the line. On hearing Michael's request, he handed his phone to Herman, who was sitting next to him in the car.

'Hi Miche,' his father called. 'What's the matter? We are on the road, but we

can't go any further. A lorry has broken down in the tunnel and not a mouse can pass.'

Michael turned pale. He told the news to Olga, who cursed loudly.

'Dad? The train has been sabotaged and the telephone has been cut off. I give you Olga, we are afraid that something bad is going on. Can't you tow that truck out of the way?'

'The train...? Herman proved that he could act quickly in an emergency. Michael heard him shout something. 'I've told Bertold, the contractor, to send for a shovel immediately so tow the lorry away. Give me Olga for a second, then I can give the phone back to Bertold.'

Michael hastily gave the mobile phone back to Olga. 'Herman?' There was silence for a moment as she listened to Michael's father's announcements, then she said in Slovakian: 'Olga Jellisek here, Bertold. Come as soon as you can. I want to ask you if you can arouse the commander of the troops. He is probably still in the barracks. Ask him to set up an inspection patrol with a couple of armoured cars to Branočs. Maybe even the station should be guarded and the repair team who will fix the telephone line. Something is very wrong. Ask him to call me.' She gave her number, listened for a moment, saluted and clapped her phone shut.

'What do you think is going on?' insisted Michael.

'We are isolated from the outside world, Michael. I don't know if we are completely unreachable yet, but I think so. I wonder if the train from Zilina will get through. I'm surprised we can still make mobile calls.'

'But... Who could do such a thing? And why?'

'Who? I don't know.' She apparently did not like to put her thoughts into words any further.

'What is going to happen?' Michael needed to hear something that would help.

'I think we have to count on a visit from certain people who want something from us and prevent us from getting help from outside,' was all Olga wanted to say. She paced back and forth like a caged lioness.

Cars stopped in front of the boarding house and doors slammed. It frightened them both.

'There they are, Miche,' Olga said urgently. 'No, don't look at the window! Get into the forest. Quick, go through the bathroom window, don't let yourself be seen!'

'Who? But...'

'Now, Miche!' she insisted in a superimposed voice. 'They can burst in the door any minute. Maybe I'm wrong, but they should not get hold of you. Go on, hurry up!' She pushed him into the corridor. The bathroom door was locked, splashing sounded inside. Downstairs, the front door slammed open and loud voices could be heard.

Olga didn't wait a second, put her foot down, turned the handle and pushed the bathroom door open. The hook on the inside was easily pulled out of the frame. A loud protest sounded from the bathroom, where a steamy heat hung in

the air. 'Quickly!' Whispering, she put a finger to her lips to silence the indignant man in the bathtub.

Without thinking, Michael opened the window and leapt down, sailing far over the firewood shelter. Olga quickly closed the window and watched Michael; despite the danger she admired his phenomenal jump.

He crossed the lawn in great leaps and disappeared behind the same hedge where she had found shelter two days ago, when she had escaped from house arrest.

'Thank God,' Olga muttered and crossed herself.

Michael had run to the scouting camp like an arrow. Olga's open fear of those who entered the boarding house had made him almost panic. Something threatened to overwhelm their little world, something from which not even off-duty general Olga Jellisek could protect them.

In spite of his new lightness, he arrived at the distressed scouts panting like a steam locomotive. At first, he could not utter a word in response to their pressing questions.

The kitchen-princess helped out with a cup of tea. He burned his lips, but it worked, it brought him back to himself a bit.

'Thank you,' he panted. 'Listen...?' He swallowed and pulled himself together. 'I was in the village just now.' He shook his head to dispel all frightening images. His voice dropped an octave. 'The train didn't come and the phone was dead. It turned out to have been sabotaged.' He took a quick sip. 'The train, I mean. The telephone line too, we think. There was a lorry in the tunnel to Jablun, supposedly with a breakdown. Nobody could get through. We called my father and the contractor, using Olga's mobile. They were right there, but they couldn't get through.' Trembling with emotion, he drank the whole mug. 'Then we heard cars stop outside the boarding house. Olga, I think, knew who they were...'

'Who then?'

'Yes, who were they?' they shouted.

'I don't know. She suddenly made me run away. She was all... all...'

'Scared?'

'No, more like fighting. She was afraid they would take me hostage.'

'Who then? Didn't you see anything?'

'No...?' He laughed nervously, 'I escaped at the backside. She pushed open the bathroom door, right through the hook. There was a man in the tub; she didn't want him to make any noise. I jumped out of the window and ran away.'

'They could be here any minute.' Maria said aloud what came to many minds at once. 'Let's all go to the forest, now, right away. Emergency equipment with you.' At such a moment her word was law.

## Chapter 9

# Extortionists

Olga turned away from the window when Michael was out of sight.

‘There are unwelcome visitors,’ she said to the bewildered man in the bathtub. ‘I’d get dressed quickly if I were you.’

She was about to enter the headquarters when two men came up the stairs two steps at a time. She recognised their type at once: hard underworld guys, dressed like gentlemen in suits. Her heart was pounding in her throat. She saw how they moved, how they assessed the situation and how they covered for each other. Ex commandos, no doubt. She had been among them long enough, first as a field officer, later as a general, to know that these men could break any resistance.

‘Mrs. Jellisek?’ one of them asked. She nodded sullenly.

‘Would you please come down to the drawing room? Someone wants to see you urgently.’ She nodded again.

‘Would you mind giving me your mobile phone for safekeeping?’

The veiled threat in his tone made her hand him the device without hesitation.

‘You will get it back later. Please tell your staff to leave their mobile phones with me for safekeeping and to assemble in the dining room.’

She nodded and preceded the man into the headquarters. Her two assistants stood at the window looking out. She gave the orders without showing any emotion. Unmoved, the man took the mobile phones of the startled women and put them in his inside pockets. ‘Are there any more of your people upstairs?’

Olga shook her head. ‘Just some guests and journalists.’

‘I’ll take you to my superior now, your assistants will walk ahead of me.’

Downstairs, the drawing room was filled with more heavy boys. A fat man in a fur-trimmed, open-fronted coat sat on the sofa smoking a cigar.

My goodness, thought Olga, just like Al Capone and his gangsters.

‘Here is Mrs. Jellisek,’ her guard announced. He walked on to take her staff to the dining room. She remained standing in the middle of the room. Now that she was facing the source of the danger, she was cool again. Her heart beat faster and the adrenaline rushed up her breath, but the fear had gone as suddenly as it had appeared. She was ready for battle.

‘Please sit down,’ the gang leader invited her in an anointed tone. She grabbed a chair and sat down as close to the stairs as possible.

‘You have set up a fine organisation here,’ the man smiled.

Olga said nothing. That was not expected, this was a one-man show.

‘I imagine it will be difficult to continue like this without licences. That would be a pity concerning all the income the show brings you.’

‘We have a permit from Jablun municipality,’ Olga objected.

‘Oh, no doubt they promised you one, especially after our president’s visit. But, you know, there can always be hiccups, officials who don’t want to cooperate...’ The man’s voice died away as he continued to look at her with narrowed eyes.

Olga thought furiously. She understood very well that this gang would be able to turn any cooperation from the municipality into opposition with a few bribes here and there and a threat in the right place. Oh, nothing remarkable, but nothing would work anymore, files would get lost, mistakes would creep in. Appeals to the province or the state would be futile, for there, too, everyone was corruptible and susceptible to influence.

‘I see that you understand. Not to mention the trade unions, the railways, the telephone...’. So the sabotage of the train and the telephone line were demonstrations of what could happen if they did not cooperate, she understood. That’s how vulnerable they were. One broken switch, cutting down a tree to break the telephone lines... and they were down. She was suddenly extremely annoyed by the arrogant fellow, by the terror of organised crime in this country, which was already so weak socially after the secession.

‘I see you don’t like this reality,’ the man continued, still in an unctuous tone.

Olga realised that she should not make the mistake of underestimating her opponent. This was no ordinary gangster; this was a man with brains.

‘You can always ask for protection to people and organisations who are sympathetic to you,’ he continued in a cheerful tone. ‘I mean, of course it’s nice when the President pays you a visit and makes all kinds of promises at the state level, but he can’t take care of the day-to-day business for you. You have to do that yourself.’

‘You represent such a benevolent organisation?’ Olga asked. She could pretend that she was not interested, but the man was astute enough to notice if she was bluffing or deliberately pretending to be stupid. It would only weaken her bargaining position further.

‘Oh, nothing official,’ the man laughed. His eyes, however, were not laughing. ‘As an entrepreneur, I obviously have a wide network, connecting organisations and other entrepreneurs. As businessmen, you and I know that you have to arrange as much as possible yourself, but that sometimes you come across things for which you have to hire a specialist.’

‘If the costs are deductible for the tax authorities, such expenses are justifiable from a business point of view,’ she couldn’t help throwing a spanner in the works.

‘Ah, madam, the tax...’ The man threw his arms in the air. ‘Well, why make it difficult for those good people? They’re not in your box office, are they? Any statement of the receipts will be acceptable, as long as you don’t connect the cash register to a computer. If a percentage of the receipts will be used to hire, say, security, no one will care, right?’

Here comes the cat’s paw, Olga realised, and she adjusted to the new situation at lightning speed. The old gangster method: threaten with violence, show them that they are capable of ruining your business, or worse, that you will lose your

life and that of your wife and children, and then tell them that the threat of violence can be bought off with a weekly fee.

‘If I understand correctly,’ she began, counting on her fingers, ‘can you guarantee that we’ll get the necessary permits without a hitch, that communication with the outside world will continue to run smoothly and that neither unions, nor the tax authorities, nor other, eh, organisations will put any obstacle in our way?’

‘Lady,’ the man chuckled, ‘I couldn’t have said it better myself. And... Ma’am, you have a very profitable business here. Some organisations, including the tax authorities,’ he waved his finger at this, ‘would say that it is too profitable. That only attracts trouble, people and organisations that think they are entitled to a share of the profit. If you were to reduce your profits to an acceptable level, by increasing the expenses a little, you would be free of all those beggars.’

‘That is undoubtedly true,’ Olga replied, beginning to take a macabre sort of pleasure in negotiating, ‘were it not for the fact that we are a charity. We do not, in principle, make a profit.’ So, she thought, let him chew on this.

‘Oh, no way.’ The man grinned broadly. Have I made a mistake now? she asked herself, alarmed.

‘But then you have nothing to do with taxes, do you? You can donate to charities tax-free, isn’t that how it works? What a nice way to make money circulate.’ He clapped his hands for joy. ‘And what are you going to spend all this profit on?’

‘Environmental projects, youth education, information and...’

‘Environmental projects, huh?’ he interrupted, rubbing his hands. ‘Yes, yes, like buying endangered forests and nature reserves?’

She nodded stiffly. There was no point in denying it.

‘Look, look, Mrs. Jellisek. What a coincidence that we are interested in that too. What beautiful houses you could build in such areas. Yes, very interested, I might add... Yes?’ With a displeased movement of his hand he interrupted himself.

The man who had brought Olga downstairs stood in the doorway holding a mobile phone in his hand, which he offered to the man on the sofa. The latter took it with an angry look and listened with a heavy frown above his nose. Without a word, he handed it back.

‘We must go now, Mrs. Jellisek, our presence here has already lasted too long. We will continue to speak to you by telephone. You have understood the meaning, I presume.’ While talking he got up, gathered his bodyguards and walked to the door. More men joined him from the boarding house. They held them down with their eyes. Olga suspected that the hands in their pockets held pistols.

The last man handed over a handful of mobile phones to her in passing.

Nice, she thought. Street gangsters are not so polite. They would have threatened, probably beaten, just for fun, and kept the phones. They all thronged out to watch the queue of expensive cars drive away.

## Chapter 10

### Again the army

'I think they got a call that the tunnel to Jablun is open again,' Olga said to the people around her. 'We can expect the first trucks in a few minutes.'

It took longer than a few minutes, however, and it were not the contractor's trucks that came into view, but two armoured cars and a military off-road vehicle. The armoured cars immediately took up strategic positions at the two entrances to the village, while the all-terrain vehicle stopped in front of the guesthouse.

The commander got out and saluted Olga.

'Ma'am, we received your call and came immediately. Fortunately, there were some units on standby. The blockade of the tunnel has been lifted, by towing away the stranded truck. What's the matter, what do you need the army's help for?'

Olga saluted back, habitually.

'Come in, Colonel. I will tell you. We just had a visit from an organisation that came to offer us its "protection". They left suddenly after a phone call. Probably from an accomplice who was monitoring the tunnel.'

The commander whistled thoughtfully. 'That's serious, very serious. Especially considering how easily they were able to break the connections with the outside world. If you will be patient, I will instruct my men.'

'I don't think they will be back, Colonel,' Olga said. She walked with him to his car and listened as he gave some orders over the radio to the armoured cars.

'By the way, my thanks for your quick response.'

'You're welcome,' the commander smiled.

'Since I saw the elfin woman fly, nothing will surprise me anymore. Although, that we came back today to protect your organisation is the last thing I would have thought of.'

Engine roars announced the contractor's column of trucks.

Bertold's dusty 4x4 pulled up behind the commander's. Herman and Bertold got out and, at a signal from Olga, followed her into the boarding house.

The place was crowded, everyone chatted, a few servants passed around with coffee and freshly baked biscuits.

Olga was overwhelmed with questions. With her hands in the air, she climbed halfway up the stairs. At her soothing gestures, every one slowly fell silent.

'Dear people, the men who were just here want to make us pay for protection against eh, certain opposition. You probably know what I mean. Thanks to the quick action of contractor Bertold from Jablun, Michael's father and the commander of the army unit who was here a few days ago,' she pointed out one by one, 'they had to leave before they had their way.'

She looked around the room to gauge people's reactions. She liked what she saw: nobody seemed to be really afraid.

'We may be able to count on protection from the army for a few more days, but it is not an official action. You must see it as a patrol that lasts a few days. After that we are on our own. And I probably don't need to tell you that these so-called protectors will be back.'

She raised her hands to muffle the indignant murmur among the villagers.

'Please don't underestimate them!' she shouted. Immediately there was silence again. 'It is an extremely well organised organisation, people! The men you have just seen are almost all ex-commandos, I could tell from their behaviour. They don't shy away from violence, that's what they are trained for. They are no street hooligans to be beaten by a fight.'

'Let them come,' cried a man belligerently. 'I have been a commando too!'

'Thank you for your courage, sir. But I have another proposal.'

The muttering subsided. In the ensuing silence they heard a train thundering over the shunts and screeching to a halt.

'The train from Zilina!' Immediately the people thronged outside.

Olga stood on the stairs looking at them, bewildered.

'Well, all right then,' she said to the three men standing behind her, 'we'll have more time now to work out a good strategy. Are you coming?' At her inviting gesture, the contractor, the commander and Herman preceded her to the headquarters. She beckoned a servant for more coffee and closed the door.

The men had gone to stand by the window. At that moment there was little more to see outside than the delayed train from Zilina, from which rows of tourists were getting off.

'What is all this?' asked Herman, when they had sat down around the table, each with a cup of coffee.

'An example of how business is done in a weakly governed country,' the contractor remarked grimly.

'How do you mean?' Herman didn't understand the remark.

Bertold looked at Olga and the commander to gauge how much he could say. 'Ah, it must be a relic of the old regime,' he explained apologetically. 'You could say that the official administration does not succeed to maintain proper order in everything. There are quite a few obscure eh... former state organs that work for themselves these days. They used to have overt power, now they are more money-hungry. As long as you pay them, you can at least keep your business going.'

'How... do you have anything to do with it yourself?' asked Herman, puzzled.

Bertold nodded. 'Not with small projects, like building a house or repairing a road. But for publicly tendered projects we often have to deal with an item called "advice" or "mediation". That's what we are usually told by phone in the evening when we are competing for a project.'

'What?'

‘Well, how much we have to transfer to a certain account if we want to get the contract. It’s very legal and tax deductible. In reality, they are offices, you know. The only thing you get in return is no harassment, no hassle with no-shows from subcontractors or suddenly sick staff or minor accidents, disappearing deliveries, stolen goods, defective machines, that sort of thing.’

Herman didn’t know what to say, could only look indignant.

‘What did they suggest to you, madam?’ the commander wanted to know. ‘By the way, do you have an inkling who they are?’

‘No, I don’t know them. Their leader didn’t reveal anything about whom he works for either. Still, I think he is some kind of subcontractor.’

‘Subcontractor?!’ exploded Herman. ‘What on earth are you talking about?’

‘The gang that was here this morning probably works for even bigger, internationally operating crime syndicates,’ Olga explained.

‘With interests in drugs and arms trafficking, people smuggling, women trafficking, insurance frauds, dumping of chemical waste, real estate, gambling, holiday resorts in poor countries, you name it. Everything that involves an uncontrollable amount of money,’ the commander added gloomily. ‘Defence is riddled with it. I think it makes all big purchases twice as expensive. And when equipment is obsolete, they make another profit by selling the stuff to terrorists for a lot of money.’

‘What did they propose to you, Mrs. Jellisek?’ the contractor quickly repeated the commander’s question before the increasingly angry Herman could respond.

‘We should hand over a portion of the event organiser’s receipts in exchange for a smooth completion of permit applications, indemnity from train crashes, telephone breakdowns, blocked roads, or worse.’

‘Hm, yes, that’s where they hit the real vulnerable spots. The railway and telephone lines can be paralysed by one man with a chainsaw in the forest. How strong the resistance of the civil servants at the town hall is to bribes or threats, we can count off without a trace: nil.’

‘So I’m assuming we’re going to pay,’ Olga said. ‘I want no trouble here, no violence, no threats.’ She slapped the table with her hand. ‘This valley is worth too much. What is happening here is of vital importance to humanity.’ Emotionally she looked at the men.

Herman banged his fist on the table, cups rolled over. He shouted uncontrollably, ‘NO WAY! My children are NOT going to be the centre of a gangster situation. I demand that we do things differently!’

They looked at him, startled.

‘Um, yes, of course, Herman,’ Olga said soothingly. She industriously put the toppled cups back on their saucers. Her hand was shaking and she couldn’t do it straight away. ‘What do you have in mind, Herman?’

He, however, was staring at her with a jaundiced expression, because he didn’t know either.

‘Perhaps we could ask Michael?’ she suggested.

‘And the elfin woman,’ the commander remarked, with a clear awe in his otherwise resolute voice. He had been to the clearing in the forest, where the President and his wife had met Michael and his elf; he had even shaken her hand and experienced the manifestation of the wood elves.

‘All right, all right,’ Herman muttered, ‘let’s do it. I don’t know what else to do.’

Olga stood up. ‘All right then. I suggest we go straight to the forest. Michael was here early this morning, I managed to get him out the bathroom window just in time, the gangsters were already coming in the front door.’

Herman turned around startled. Had Michael been here?

‘With your permission,’ said the contractor hurriedly before Herman would explode for a third time, ‘I want to give my men at the mill instructions, but I need Herman for that. And I’d like to come along. Could we perhaps leave in an hour?’

Olga looked at the commander. ‘As long as I can keep my armoured cars here, it’s safe enough,’ the commander estimated. ‘We might as well have a look at the mill and leave in an hour.’

‘All right,’ Olga concluded the meeting, ‘then I’ll order some lunches.’

However, she noticed a problem in the kitchen a little later. She would have to wait for the train from Jablun to return, with the bread.

## Taking matters into own hands

Maria had sent Michael ahead to take his sisters to the cave in the cirque. There, two days ago, they had been safely hidden from infrared scanning jets and searching commandos. The scouts would follow them as soon as possible with sleeping stuff and cooking equipment.

Once he was in the forest, a piece of excitement drained out of Michael with each step, like air out of a balloon. His pace became more and more slowly. Finally, he stood completely still, exactly where before low-hanging branches had closed off the path during their first exploration.

What am I doing? he asked himself. Running away again? From what exactly? He called out for Dia.

But the disturbance in his mind was too much: he couldn't make contact. He would have to calm down first, make sure he found his strength again.

'All this fuss from adults,' he grumbled to himself. 'I'm letting myself caught up in their complicated power games again. I don't want that, I refuse to follow them any longer in their schemes.' Of course, such a remark alone was of little use.

He decided to go back to the scouts, to tell them to stay alert, but that his sisters and he would not flee to the cirque again.

He did not have to go far: he had hardly taken a few steps when he met their vanguard. Astonished, the scouts stopped. Michael looked as if he had no intention of moving aside. Hesitantly they put the luggage on the ground.

'I think we should do things differently,' Michael said. 'I mean, don't flee, but fight.'

'Fight? Against what?' a boy wanted to know.

'Well...' What should he say? 'Well, primarily our own fear, I guess.'

'What do you mean? What are we afraid of?'

'That's what I mean!' exclaimed Michael in frustration. 'What on earth are we afraid of? Ghosts? The army? Or... I don't know what. I don't want to run like a frightened hare anymore, damn it. The day before yesterday we won convincingly, the government even resigned because of us, the president came to visit us, we bought the factory and are going to demolish it, we are going to clean the river ourselves, the army has left... What on earth do we have to be afraid of? We're on television, the whole of Europe knows us by now, the forest protects us, nature beings are on our hands...' His voice blocked. Caught between conflicting impulses, he sat down in the middle of the path.

He could not utter a word about his encounter the previous day. Two angels and a nature god, that was a bit too much to be credible. *Not yet, not yet*, repeatedly in his head; *later, later*, sang another voice, *later, when you're ready...*

At that moment more scouts came down the path, laden with bivouac gear; from the other side his three sisters came running.

‘Diana told us to meet you,’ said Wendy, ‘but she didn’t mention that you were sitting on the path, chatting away.’

Diana said nothing, she laughed a little and waved her sisters’ arms high in an overconfident gesture of: who’s doing us what.

‘I’m deliberating,’ Michael said stiffly. Glad to see them, despite the turmoil in his core, he stood up and kissed his sisters one by one on the cheeks.

Wendy and Lucy were amazed: he had not done that for years. Diana was used to it: she put her arms around his neck and wanted to be lifted. He swung her round and set her down on her own feet again; he didn’t want to be distracted.

‘Here’s the fork in the path where we got lost the first time, remember?’ remarked Lucy. ‘Too bad those branches were cut off by the soldiers, otherwise we could close the path again.’

‘Well, it didn’t offer much protection against armed men,’ grumbled Michael. He was unreasonable, the forest could only protect them so much. It could not withstand human violence. Only other people could withstand it.

‘But what is going on, Miche?’ Wendy wanted to know. She looked questioningly at the scouts, who had also joined in.

‘Oh, we’re having a pow wow,’ said Michael baldly.

‘Here?’

‘If you just sit down and listen, you’ll find out. I hadn’t even started yet.’

‘Oh, sorry, I didn’t know you were getting mad.’

‘Sorry,’ he said, embarrassed, and stroked her. ‘I’m so nervous, I don’t know what I’m saying.’

‘Shall I make some tea?’ the kitchen princess asked. ‘We have all the gear with us anyway.’

‘Do you have any bread?’ asked Lucy.

‘No, no bread has come today.’

‘That’s why we’re here,’ Michael interrupted in voice. ‘The train from Jablun didn’t come because it was derailed. By sabotage.’

For the second time he told the whole story.

‘I don’t feel like going into that cold cave again,’ Wendy pouted, as he explained what the scouts were doing here with all the camp stuff. Meanwhile, tea had been made on butane stove and the kitchen princess, lacking bread, had begun to cook a pan of oatmeal.

‘But who would want to sabotage the train and the telephone and block the tunnel to Jablun?’ wondered Lucy. ‘And why?’

‘That’s nonsense, isn’t it?’

‘The why is obvious,’ thought the boy who had managed to get them out of range of the jets with their infrared cameras two days ago. ‘To cut Branočs off from the outside world. Count on the fact that the road to the other side is also

sealed off and the train from Zilina won't come for a while.'

'Yes, I understand that,' said Lucy, dismayed that her intelligence was underestimated. 'I was wondering why Branočs had to be cut off from the outside world. Then you'll know right away who did it.'

'Yes, you do,' the boy said admiringly. 'That's good thinking. I'll tell you what I suspect. Look, they are illegal actions. But it's also a complicated operation. It can only be done by a good organisation. Illegal plus organisation, there you have the answer: the mafia.'

'The mafia?!' The Dutch children couldn't imagine that. 'You only have them in Sicily.' 'And in America.' 'Do you mean gangsters like in the Godfather film?'

'Yes, also. But we call organised crime in our country the mafia.'

'And they are worse than the army, I can assure you,' Maria remarked gloomily. 'The army is sacred compared with that. The mafia extorts and if you don't pay, they kidnap the wives and children of businessmen and so on. Very bad. They torture and kill for nothing.'

'Oh, then I understand why Olga was so afraid that they would take me hostage,' said Michael. He shuddered, this was a much more serious danger than the occupation by the army. His intense fear and flight through the bathroom window had not been unfounded. Poor Olga, he thought. She's all alone.

'What is the mafia doing here, anyway?' asked Lucy, wanting to know all the ins and outs.

'Money,' was the short answer.

'Money? Oh, of course!' Indignantly she stood up. 'From the visitors of the fair! They want the money we bring in.'

'Now I've had enough!' shouted Michael suddenly, jumping up. They looked at him, startled. What was wrong with him?

'It is always the adults who ruin things. First they destroy the river and the forest with poison, then the secret service is here to chase us away, then the army and now those crazy thugs. I've had enough!' He stomped on the ground and struck out with his fists at invisible opponents.

'Me too!' screamed Diana and stood next to him stamping her feet too.

'They have to get lost!' shouted Wendy, infected by her brother's anger.

Furious, she kicked up sand from the path.

The scouts looked on in shock. For them, injustice and mafia were things of daily life. These Dutch children, who apparently were more at home in this forest than any Slovakian inhabitant, showed that these things were not so normal, that they were in fact unacceptable.

Shaking with exertion, Michael held back and pulled Wendy and Diana to him with an arm around their shoulders. 'I, we have had enough of it,' he repeated softly what he had just shouted. His voice was low and hoarse, as if whole regions of tone had disappeared from it. Lucy also came standing beside him. So they stood, united to an immovable block, in front of the scouts.

Michael felt inspired by something that was bigger than him. Ideas and insights flowed naturally to his lips.

‘I assume that we, you as well, are safe in the forest.’ Diana nodded affirmatively, not as a child of seven, but as the Deva of the Forest.

‘From now on, you must keep a constant watch. If unwanted visitors come, go into the forest as quickly as possible, spread out so that they cannot follow you. Above all, do not let them catch you. If they chase you, run into the forest. The forest will hide you. I do not know what further countermeasures we can take. Perhaps we should lead small groups of visitors through the forest ourselves. We know enough paths and clearings.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Maria. She, like her fellow scouts, was impressed by the strength that Michael and his sisters radiated. However, she could not immediately follow his quick thoughts. ‘If the mafia want a share of the money that the rides bring in, they will surely be able to enforce that.’

‘I mean,’ Michael said with a dangerous light in his eyes, ‘that we don’t make the visitors pay anymore. Then there is no money to extort. If there isn’t any.’

It was silent for a moment while the scouts took it in.

Lucy was the first to realise what her brother was getting at. ‘We’ll just shut down the whole fair,’ she sighed.

‘You really want the tourist attractions in the village to go away?’ asked Maria incredulously.

‘But... But how will you do that?’ asked a boy. ‘Hundreds of people come here every day, don’t they?’

‘You know what?’ suggested Wendy excitedly. ‘We’ll have everyone who comes here to see the forest help out with our projects.’

‘Gee, what a great idea, Wen!’ whispered Michael. ‘We’ll tell the journalists that anyone who wants to come here should bring boots and a rain suit. Then they can lend a hand with the cleaning.’

‘Exactly! Then they will pay with work instead of money. Then those blackmailers won’t be able to get anything of it. Then those ugly tents in the village can go too!’

‘Who wants porridge?’ the girls called at the cooker.

As usual, the scouts formed a line, talking, to be scooped up. Lucy, Wendy and Diana were pushed to the front of the queue as honorary members.

The meeting was over; a decision had been made, now it was time to eat. Excitedly they chatted with each other, their plates of porridge on their laps, laughing and making fun.

## Herman's support

Relieved, Michael was aware how the atmosphere had changed in a short time. Just trust your own feelings, he thought. Paul and Maria joined him.

'How do you think you would manage it?'

'I think we should make a newsletter about our plan that we can give to the press. We have to make it clear that people can't come and look now unless contributing something to the work themselves. We can also spread messages by the Elfswood website.'

'But how do you convince the Environmental Federation to dismantle the attractions? They have the organisation in their hands. And what about the money needed for the purchase of the factory and all the other plans?'

'We have enough money for the purchase. I heard from Yvette that she has set up a foundation in France where all the money from her photographs goes. There must be a lot in it by now. I don't think we need any more at all, and if we do, we can earn it in some other way than with a show in the village.'

'Do you think you can convince Mrs. Jellisek that there is no need anymore for a show?' asked Paul sceptically.

'I don't know. It has to be. The whole circus is really about Diana and me. If we don't want to cooperate anymore, after a while there will be nothing left to show. No show, no money; no money, no extortion.'

'Miche, here comes daddy!' cried Diana running up the path. Surprised, he got up and sprinted after Diana. Lucy and Wendy followed, shouting loudly 'Daddy!' so Herman could take all his children in his arms at once.

Shouting at each other, they pulled him along. In the commotion he was offered cups of tea and plates of porridge, which he accepted to be rid of them.

It took some time before he could make himself understood in all the babble to report what had happened in the village after Michael's flight. But then he had all the attention.

He told how they had towed the abandoned lorry out of the tunnel between Jablun and Branočs, that the army commander had preceded them to the village with two armoured cars and what Olga had experienced in the negotiations with the mafia boss.

'I don't think, at least for the moment, they were really interested in you, or the other children,' he said in response to Michael's question about whether it had really been dangerous for him. 'But I think we have to take into account that they will try to kidnap you in order to enforce their demands. That is their style, Olga said.'

He looked seriously around the circle of young people.

‘So, what did you two get up to?’

That they were up to something was plain to see on their faces.

Without interrupting them, he listened to Michael explaining why he had become so angry and how they had planned to involve the visitors in the cleaning work in the future. When everyone had their say, they looked at him expectantly.

‘I think it’s a wonderful idea to begin with,’ he said, weighing everything up in his mind. ‘It would take the wind out of the sails of those gangsters, I suppose.’

A cheer interrupted him. Laughing, he gestured for silence.

‘Hey, guys, you act as if it depends on my approval. It’s your plan, you know, if you support it you can do it, even without adult help if you have to. The press loves to listen to Michael, so the PR is okay.’

‘But we need your advice,’ Paul interjected. ‘For cleaning the riverbed.’

‘Yes, you’re right about that. But for shutting down the village fair, all you have to do is put your foot down and talk to Olga and the other activists.’

‘You think so?’ Michael was not so convinced.

‘Yes Miche,’ Herman said in a persuasive tone. ‘Listen, she intends to give in to the extortion and pay some of the income to those thugs. She sees no other way to keep the situation safe. But in a fortnight’ time, when the new lock is ready, the clean-up operation can begin. Then the events in the village can also stop. I think there will be far fewer visitors by then. Presumably, Olga will have a few more days to negotiate. If... No?’

Michael had started shaking his head more and more violently.

‘No, Dad; no one should say another word to that scum. We are going to stop the amusement park in the village immediately. It attracts too many crooks. I’ll go to the station later and explain it to all those people. Then they’ll buy some chips and take the next train back. I want it to stop right now.’

‘Hm,’ Herman muttered. It was clear to him that his son was adamant on this point. Michael had acquired an authority in recent days greater than that of anyone else involved in the Elfswood.

‘All right, I can go along with that,’ he said finally. ‘But the clean-up operation will have to wait until the lock is ready. We need to be able to regulate the flow of water.’

‘Can’t you think of a makeshift sluice, or a high dam, or a pump and pipeline so we can start tomorrow? There’s a lot less water in the river now, isn’t there?’

Herman looked at Michael. He meant what he said.

‘That’s true, it does change things. I’ll think about it,’ he promised after some hesitation. ‘I can’t commit that one two three, I have to work on it. Perhaps there is indeed an alternative to consider.’

‘Thank you, Dad,’ Michael said with relief. ‘I knew you would come up with something.’

‘Yes, but it still needs to be done, you know. What are you planning now? Are you going to go through with it?’

‘Yes. Will you come with me when I tell Olga about our plan?’

‘Of course; bring your friends along too. Maria and Paul are their names, aren’t they?’

‘Yes...’ Michael relaxed.

There was a moment of respite. Nothing urgent that should be done immediately.

Suddenly he became sleepy. Herman noticed this; he put an arm around Michael and let him lean against him.

## Chapter 13

### Herman's story

'Dad?'

Michael's brain kept going.

'Dad, what actually happened to you? We couldn't reach you; we didn't get any word from you and poof! there you were again.'

'Oh, yes.' Herman didn't really feel like telling it. It had been a rotten time, he had been afraid for his own life and he had been deadily worried about his four children in the boarding house.

'To sum it up, I was, along with some colleagues from the project, held hostage by activists for a while.'

'What are you saying?' In sheer surprise, Michael sat up straight. 'By activists? What kind of action?'

'Well...'

Herman had to think of the similarity with the situation around the Elfswood. 'You may know that the dam project in the Danube is being fought by environmentalists. They do not agree with the sacrifice of natural areas, which will be flooded and other marshes will dry up. Especially the Hungarians are against it, because they don't gain anything from the project, but it only will harm them.'

'Yes, I know that, you told us before. What does that have to do with you?'

'Personally not much, I guess. But I am part of the engineering team and for that reason alone I am a target.'

'Target to what?'

'Protests.' Herman pointed to the village. 'Just the same kind of action as here.'

'But we're not taking people hostage, are we?'

'No, that's true. But the Environmental Federation did occupy and close the factory.'

'Yes, but they polluted the whole place, they are criminals!'

'That's what the activists against the dam project think too. That is why they are trying with all their might to stop it. With legal proceedings, international attention, getting in the way, standing or sailing where work has to be done, you name it. Just like Greenpeace does with whalers.'

'But what happened to you?' Michael's persistent questions forced Herman's mind back to those anxious hours.

'Well,' he coughed, 'on arrival I was taken immediately to an inspection boat to assess the flooding. There were already a few colleagues on it. It was stormy, but we still went on the river. Our boat wasn't really designed for such bad weather: it is – or was, I should say, it sank – a fast aluminium patrol boat with a shallow draught, perfectly fine for a shallow bog, but hell on a raging river.'

‘Gee, did you sink?’

‘Not on the river. Let me finish the story. When we arrived in the swamps, the crew turned out to be activists. The skipper announced that he would take us to a hidden camp, where we would have to stay until the work was stopped.’

‘Were you captured?’

‘More or less. A colleague of mine tried to force him to sail back, but a crew member knocked him down. We were all tied up.’ Sweat broke out on him.

‘What is it, Dad? Were you very scared?’

Herman swallowed with difficulty.

‘Yes,’ he said hoarsely, ‘I was almost dying of fear. If the boat should capsize, we would drown. It did capsize, not much later. But thank God it was shallow so we could struggle to get up. There we stood, sinking into the muck, our heads barely above the waves, our hands tied. The boat was a total loss, ripped open by a tree trunk under water.’

Michael pressed himself against Herman with compassion.

‘And then? Did somebody drown?’

‘Fortunately not,’ sighed Herman. ‘But it was bad enough as it was. We had to struggle for hours to keep our heads above water. At last we were picked up by a boat of the activists. We were locked up in a secret camp in the swamps, in a hidden dwelling with a camouflaged roof. We were not allowed to have any contact with the outside world. God, boy, it was bad.’

Herman shook his head. He rubbed his eyes with his hands when that didn’t help.

‘I mean,’ he continued in a choked voice, ‘I had left you in that boarding house and I was not allowed to contact you. Nothing! They wouldn’t even pass on a message. Even our company was not allowed to communicate anything to third parties while the ultimatum was running.’

‘That’s why they hung up on me when I called them,’ Michael grumbled. ‘How did you actually get out?’

Herman stared ahead for a moment, trying to remember everything. ‘Not all the activists agreed with the hostage-taking. After a few days we were picked up by another group. They apologised and took us to a small port on the river. From there, we were picked up by the company and taken to our hotel. I tried to call you, but the line was constantly busy.’

‘Yes, they use the boarding house’s phone mostly for internet.’

‘It was very awkward. I showered, put on clean clothes and went on my way to see you. Then I saw you on the TV in the hotel lounge.’ He rubbed Michael’s hair. ‘You did that handsomely, kid. I could understand most of it, although there was a Slovak translator croaking through it. Well, you can probably believe that I was a bit bewildered.’

‘Yes...’ mused Michael, ‘so many things happened in such a short time, things you wouldn’t believe if someone told you.’

Maria interrupted their conversation with the question of when they wanted to go to the village.

‘Let’s go right now and get this over with.’

Michael stood up and stretched.

In the end all the scouts wanted to go to the village, there were still groceries to be collected and the girls wanted to go with Michael and Herman.

A noisy gang of young people gathered around the guesthouse, which added to the chaos in the village. The staff of the event organisation had just arrived and was busy starting up the daily show. It smelled of frying fat, exhaust fumes from the diesel generators and mowed grass.

Tourists, who had come on the first train from Zilina, were strolling around. Reporters who had come on the returning train from Jablun, at the same time as the delayed groceries, tried to find out what had happened that morning.

The arrival of the young people had a magnetic effect on the aimless crowd.

## Michael performs

For the second time that day, Michael was seized with a fiery rage. He was fed up with all those sensationalists, with all the uncontrolled behaviour.

He forced himself furiously up the stairs, pushed people aside if they did not move. Without greeting anyone, he ran into the headquarters. With a jump he stood on the sill of the open window, his head outside, both hands on the frame.

‘QUIET!’ he shouted, beside himself, in English.

People around the boarding house looked up, startled. They pointed, nudged each other and shouted at others to shut up. Slowly a silence spread over the restless crowd, until finally everyone was staring up.

Michael felt the worried looks of Olga and some others burning into his back. He could not see who they were, but he suspected that the contractor and the military commander were among them.

The crowd looked at him expectantly, but he had lost what he had wanted to say.

He turned around and saw indeed the people he thought he had seen. At that moment Herman and his three sisters entered the room. At the sight of his family he knew again what he had to say.

‘People!’ he cried, this time in German. ‘Your bustle is not good for the fairies. It frightens them. Please go home, the train’s delays have confused everything.’

It was not enough. The audience stayed motionless, apparently expecting more from him. He cast another quick glance over his shoulder at Olga. For what he was about to say, he had not discussed with her.

‘You can keep your ticket for later.’ That too was not what was required.

He took a deep breath. If he wanted bending things to his will, now was the best opportunity. His heart was beating in his chest.

*Dia*, he groaned in his mind. *Help me. Am I doing it right?* Without words, a supportive feeling flowed in. It gave him the assurance that it was right to initiate the things he had decided.

He took a deep breath and let his voice ring out across the square.

‘People, from tomorrow, access to Branočs will be free again. No one will have to pay any more. There will be nothing left to see either, because all the attractions are going away. I will tell you why. This morning the mafia came here to force us to give up a percentage. We don’t want that, the elves of the forest don’t want that.’

A loud murmur arose at his feet. He could recognise indignant looks, fists were clenched.

‘Michael!’ he heard Olga’s urgent voice behind him. ‘Michael, wait a minute, what are you doing?’

He said over his shoulder: 'Trust me, this is what the beings of the Elfswood want.' Again to the crowd: 'Please go home. You can register for a working visit by phone or e-mail from tomorrow. Because we can only welcome guests who help with all the work that needs to be done here.'

Just at that moment, a long train from Zilina came around the bend, with as many as three train sets. The crowd began to turn around, the rear people already walking towards the station.

'Oh no,' he groaned, 'more tourists.'

'If all goes well, this train is empty, Miche,' Olga said behind him. He turned around in surprise.

She said gruffly: 'Yes, we too have seen that there should not be more tourists. We immediately called the Zilina station that no more tickets to Branočs should be sold, and if they would send a long, empty train to take all the people away.'

When he looked outside again, he sensed that people were dropping off a bit catty. To make matters worse, it was starting to rain softly. He wanted to make them feel good, after all they had come to experience something of the fairy tale. To have to go home like this was very disappointing.

'I'll take them to the train,' he said, jumping down from the window sill.

'Here's an umbrella,' was all Olga had to say to it.

The stairs and the lounge were packed with people, he couldn't get through. He stood a moment at the top of the stairs, looking undecided. Then he turned, went back into the room, to the window and jumped out. It was no higher than the jump from the bathroom window that morning. He landed smoothly among the surprised tourists. One journalist was lucky; he was just making video recordings. The graceful glide would prove conclusively to television viewers that evening that the elfin boy really was as light as a feather.

In the midst of the excited people, who treated him with a kind of reverent jollity, he walked to the station, where the empty train was waiting. He answered questions, shook hands, signed autographs, even let himself be kissed. It was as if he was bringing his family to the train.

The people were happy that he was walking with them, without airs and graces, without being protected by bodyguards or officials.

Only the scouts tried to stay close to him.

Without a murmur, people streamed into the train doors, shouting words of farewell and blowing kisses of hands in his direction.

So, he thought contentedly when the train had left, that's gone all right. Everyone goes home happy and the mafia is left in the cold.

## Utter confusion

‘How can you say that our attractions are going to leave here,’ Olga sneered, as Michael re-entered the boarding house. ‘Come upstairs with me, I want to talk to you, and I don’t want anyone else present.’

He meekly followed her up the stairs. The scouts and journalists looked at him curiously, a few winked.

At the headquarters, his father came up to him and shook hands with him very formally. ‘You’ve done a great job, son,’ he complimented him. He thus anticipated Olga’s protest.

‘If your intention was to put organised crime out of action, you couldn’t have done better,’ the commander agreed with Herman. ‘This way there is nothing for them to get.’

‘Well, forget it!’ objected Olga angrily. ‘Let’s get round the table and get to the bottom of things, because things can’t go on like this!’

‘Where are the girls?’ Michael wanted to know first.

‘In the kitchen of course,’ Herman said. ‘Letting them be spoilt by the landlady with freshly-baked cake and lemonade.’

As they sat down around the adjoining tables, there was a knock at the door. A servant came to ask if they wanted lunch and how many of them there were. She had scarcely disappeared – Olga was already clearing her throat for a warning – when two journalists knocked on the door and asked if they could interview Michael.

‘Later, later,’ she waved them away. ‘After this meeting there is a press conference. Please pass that on to your colleagues.’

‘By the way, what about the environmental conference that was going on here? Are they coming back or has it been cancelled completely? Where have all those people gone?’ Herman wanted to know.

‘Yes, we have to talk about that too,’ Olga grumbled. ‘They’ve asked if they can come back. Most of them are camping out in Jablun at the moment. But first I want to talk about... Yes, what now?’

It was the contractor who poked his head around the door apologetically. ‘Herman, can you come for a minute? I need your advice on...’

‘Can’t you do it later? I’m trying to arrange a meeting. Come and sit with me, but don’t interrupt.’

Bertold came into the room and sat down with the others.

‘Have you had lunch yet?’ whispered Herman. Bertold shook his head, looking even more guilty than before at Olga. Herman wanted to get up, but at Olga’s angry look he sat down again.

Before she could say anything, however, there was another knock at the door. Two servants entered, laden with bread, bowls of soup, coffee pots and crockery.

‘Oh, can you bring another plate for this gentleman here?’ shouted Herman through the clanking of cutlery and crockery.

‘Sure’ replied one of the girls. ‘Is everything else to your satisfaction?’

‘No!’ exclaimed Olga. She gave up. Apparently she was not supposed to criticise Michael’s unilateral action.

‘Oh,’ the girl was startled; ‘eh, what then? Do you want to eat something else, or...’ She became completely confused.

‘Oh no, dear child, I don’t mean that at all,’ Olga tried to explain. ‘I mean, I’m not satisfied with anything at all, not the food, that’s fine...’ She became more and more entangled in denials and reassurances.

The girl no longer understood. ‘If it’s not fine, I’ll bring you something else, madam. What would you like then?’ she rattled nervously. At that moment, an employee of the Environmental Federation came to Olga with a mobile phone in her hand. She took it, mumbled something and listened for a long time.

‘It’s all right,’ Herman said to the girl, who was still standing next to Olga with a red head. ‘Mrs. Jellisek wasn’t talking about the lunch you brought, it’s fine. She has a completely different problem.’

‘Oh, thank you, sir. Can I go then?’ stammered the poor wretch.

‘Yes, of course; will you fetch us another plate?’

‘Oh yes, I haven’t forgotten,’ she said bravely.

Before she lost her nerve, she looked around nervously and disappeared from the room as fast as she could.

They started their meal, a little uncertainly, looking at Olga, who was listening intently with a frown above her nose. Apparently she did not like what she heard. She ended the conversation and looked at the men around the table.

‘That was a very polite gentleman,’ she began hoarsely. They could see she was struggling to control herself, her fist opening and closing. ‘He said that tomorrow we will receive an offer by courier for assistance and support. He expects a signed copy to be returned immediately, with a on-line transfer of the initial deposit.’

‘How much?’

‘He didn’t say.’

‘And if you don’t sign?’

‘He didn’t say anything about that either.’

‘We can guess about that,’ the contractor remarked gloomily.

‘If we were all to leave, what would happen?’ Michael was asking himself loudly. They looked at him as if he were rambling.

‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘what are we still doing here? We have bought the factory, haven’t we? All we have to do is to have it demolished. We’ll clean up the river ourselves.’

‘Yes, that’s what I wanted to talk about,’ Olga replied. ‘I must confess I was furious at your action earlier, but that phone call made me think. I don’t know what to do tomorrow when the courier comes.’

‘As long as my men are present you are reasonably protected,’ the commander remarked.

‘Yes, but that will stop them thugs one day,’ said the contractor.

‘Even with armoured cars and armed guards you can do little against sabotage actions, which can take place anywhere. A single terrorist in the mountains can evoke enormous damage and paralyse the whole valley,’ Olga pointed out. ‘No, I will think about Michael’s suggestion to just shut down the circus. I don’t dare to blow the whistle on that courier. Probably those gangsters will be ready with terrorist action if I don’t sign tomorrow.’

‘But if you stop the attractions, you will lose a lot of income. How will you pay for the work?’ the contractor asked. He saw a lot of work here, but if there was no money for it...

‘There is, there is,’ assured Olga, ‘even more than we need.’

They ate their lunch in silence, each with own thoughts.

‘Eh, I have to go and see my men now,’ said the contractor when he had finished eating. He stood up. ‘They are all waiting. If there’s nothing else I need to be here for...’ He looked from Olga to Herman. ‘Herman, can you come with me? I need your advice. Is that okay with you, ma’am?’

‘Yes, go ahead. I need to think about it. We’ll talk more tomorrow,’ she said, suddenly tired of everything, of all the complications, of the rapid changes between success and defeat.

‘Michael,’ she sighed, ‘do you know what you have caused with your speech? How much work it is to give back the money to all the people who have come for nothing today?’

‘I’m sorry if it causes trouble, Olga,’ he replied contritely. ‘But I don’t want any villains to interfere with us. Rather nothing at all.’

‘I understand, I can even agree with you, but I’m reluctant to tear down everything we’ve built up. No, don’t worry, I’ll fix it,’ she reassured Michael, when he wanted to say something. ‘You go along with your father now. He sees so little of you anyway.’

‘I really think it’s better if I explain to the people at the events company why we’re quitting,’ he objected. ‘I mean, it’s my idea, then I should tell them myself.’

‘Well, please do. I find it hard enough as it is. Do you want to do it right away? They’ve also heard your speech, of course, and noticed that there are no more tourists coming.’

‘Okay, I’ll go right away. Dad, I’ll come to the mill later. I’d like to see what you’re doing there.’

‘That’s fine, Miche. We’ll be busy for a few hours. I’ll take your sisters with me.’

## Abduction

Outside, Paul and Maria, who had been walking around, joined him. They put their arms around him, matched the size of their steps and walked as a trio to the giant camper where the management of the attractions had its office.

It turned out a difficult conversation with the German management. Despite the presence of Paul and Maria, Michael felt increasingly insecure in the face of the business-like, almost acrimonious manner in which the young managers let it be known that they would not deviate from their contract.

Michael knew nothing about any contract and felt increasingly inadequate.

As a result, the managers told him in a condescending tone that they would continue with the attractions and that the extortion by the mafia was not their problem.

Heated, unhappy and angry, Michael and his two friends left the costly mobile office without any further ado.

‘Well,’ Paul said laconically as they sat down on the wall along the mill canal to evaluate, ‘if there are no more tourists, you should see how quickly they’ll be gone.’

‘Of course! That whole fair costs thousands of euros a day. If their turnover is too low to cover the costs, they’ll pack up and go.’

‘What about that contract they were talking about?’

‘Ask Olga about it, she’ll know what it says. We want to go back to the camp,’ Maria said. ‘What are you going to do, Miche?’

He hesitated. He had not yet told them that the mafia had demanded a signature and money which they would collect tomorrow. It seemed better to him to say nothing about it for now.

‘I am going to look in the mill first, I think. That’s where my sisters are too. After that...’ He looked depressed. ‘I don’t feel like fighting with Olga about the contract.’

‘Just see how it goes, my dear,’ Maria said, ruffling his hair teasingly. ‘You’ve caused enough trouble today. People need to get used to all your ideas, too, don’t forget.’

‘You think so?’

‘Yes of course,’ she laughed, ‘you live so fast, you live at the pace of an elf. Ordinary people can’t keep up with that.’

‘Really?’ It sounded half like nonsense to Michael, half like a revelation.

‘Yes.’ She gave him a kiss and stood up.

‘Come along you wizard,’ she said to Paul. ‘I’ve got you figured out, you want to go to the mill and watch the machines. You do that some other time; we have our own responsibilities. All our scouts are running wild out here.’

Michael looked with admiration when they left. What good friends they had become in those few weeks. He felt a bit alone and was about to get up to go to the mill, when a couple of reporters approached him. They wanted to know everything about the visit that morning, the sabotage of the train and what the activists wanted to do about it.

Michael did not trust the pushy couple. They stood right in front of him, so he could not move. When a car slowly approached and stopped right behind the two men, all his intuitive alarm bells went off. He unexpectedly swung his legs over the wall, pushed himself forward with his hands and feet and jumped to the other side of the mill canal. Thanks to his light weight, he just made it; a normal person would have fallen in. When he got to his feet, he could just see the car doors slam shut and the car drive off.

He took a run and jumped back, ran to the boarding house, up the stairs and into the headquarters. 'Where is the commander?' he panted furtively.

'Making the rounds,' replied a staff member, startled. 'What is it, shall I call him?'

'Yes, please. Is Olga not here?' The woman shook her head, dialled a number she had on a list and handed him a mobile phone. Nervously Michael told the commander about the two reporters. 'I suddenly got scared, you know,' he confided to the same man who was leading the occupation force just a few days ago. 'I mean, I've learned to know a lot of reporters over the weeks and it made me feel that they weren't, that they had other intentions. Fortunately, I was able to get away. I don't want to be kidnapped by gangsters,' he finished in a shrill tone.

'All right, Michael, stay where you are. I'll come to you as soon as I can,' was the short answer.

He returned the phone. 'Is Olga, I mean, is Mrs. Jellisek anywhere around?'

The woman smiled. 'We also say Olga to her, you know. My name is Valerie, by the way. Yes, she was called by the management of the event company and went to see them.'

Oh dear, Michael thought, that's obviously because of me. Hopping nervously from one leg to the other, he stood at the window.

The commander's vehicle came speeding up, a moment later followed by one of the armoured cars. Both stopped in front of the door, thus sealing off the entrance. Two soldiers went to stand guard in front of the boarding house; their AK-47 over their arm, a third went to the back.

When he reached the second floor, the commander shook hands with Michael.

'So, for the time being, we keep watch at the guesthouse and at the bridge. Any attempt to kidnap you will now be out of their minds. I haven't even introduced myself yet,' he said in a formal tone. Then, with a quick grin on his straight face: 'We haven't had much opportunity to do so. Two days ago we were facing each other, in a confrontation where you don't easily shake hands.'

'No, not really,' Michael replied, a little overwhelmed.

'I apologise for the fear we caused you,' the commander apologised. 'We got instructions based on a completely false representation of the facts. My apologies again.'

'Thank you,' Michael said excitedly. 'But we all have Dia to thank for making things come all right. If she hadn't saved me from that cave, I would have died and she wouldn't have become who she is now either. Really, it's because of her that things turned out well.'

'Yes, what a wonderful creature she is,' the man sighed. He had forgotten that he had been holding Michael's hand all this time. 'Oh, now I haven't mentioned my name. Andrei Pushtnikov'

'Eh, don't you want to sit down?' suggested Valerie. 'Can I offer someone a cup of coffee or tea?'

While they waited for the coffee, Michael gave a description of the two pseudo-journalists. They had looked like very normal men, so they had to conclude regretfully that it was not possible to track them down among the countless other men. He even doubted whether he would recognise them if they met.

He was about to get up and go to his father and sisters in the mill, when they came up the stairs, chattering excitedly, Herman with an angry face in their wake.

'What is it, Dad?'

'I'll tell you in a minute. I want the girls to be safe first. Is there another room here where they can wait a while?'

Valerie shook her head. 'All the rooms are occupied, sir.'

'Safe? What happened?' urged Michael.

'Yes, what's going on?' wanted to know Olga, who had come up the stairs behind them, but could not get inside because of the congestion in the corridor. 'What are those army vehicles doing here?'

'I asked for that, Olga,' shouted Michael, rising above the din and at the same time lifting up Diana, who wanted to be comforted.

'If you all come in now, you'll be able to understand each other better,' Valerie shouted.

It had some result: the twins rushed into the room, straight to the cake.

Herman followed Michael, who wriggled through the door with Diana in his arms. Olga and two more women, who had been waiting behind her on the stairs, came in last.

'What is all this?' Olga's eyes shot lightnings.

## Defence

The commander, who had been standing at the window calmly in all the noise, turned and saluted.

‘A suspected kidnapping attempt, ma’am.’

‘Kidnapping! What the hell, Colonel? Whom?’ began Olga, agitated.

Michael answered from behind Diana: ‘Me, Olga.’

‘What are you saying? Put that child down, I can’t hear you,’ she grumbled.

Patently he placed Diana on a sofa and sat down next to her. Lucy and Wendy immediately sat down on either side.

‘You too,’ whispered Lucy.

‘Yes,’ he whispered back, ‘wait a minute.’

To Olga: ‘I was approached by two so-called reporters outside, when I was sitting on the wall by the water. There was no one else around. I didn’t trust it and jumped over the canal to get rid of them. There was also a car coming that was waiting for them. I saw them driving away. I immediately ran here and called the commander, Mr. Puss... eh...’ ‘Andrei Pushtnikov,’ the commander added calmly.

‘Yes, thank you, he came at once, with an armoured car and set up sentries.’

‘What’s going on here?’ exploded Herman, who had been bottling up his anxiety too long. ‘My children are no longer safe because of those gangsters. They...’

‘Dad, what happened?’

‘We were almost kidnapped,’ cried Lucy. ‘I was about to tell you...’

‘Let me finish, will you?’ Herman had to struggle to control himself. ‘I was at the mill with Bertold, discussing the situation, and the girls were playing in the sawmill. At one point I heard men’s voices and a child screaming...’

‘That was me,’ said Wendy, ‘I shouted very loudly: go away!’

‘Yes, that was Wendy. Thank goodness for that. We ran inside, I thought they had fallen or something, but I just saw Wendy pulling Diana’s arm and an unknown man holding her down. I gave a yell, he ran off. I went straight to Diana, Bertold ran after the guy, but he stumbled and fell.’

Olga hammered the table with her hand. ‘This is serious, people!’ She suddenly looked calm and determined, very different from the consternation and disorder of before. That was how they liked her: as a rock in the surf.

‘I gather there are more hijackers on the coast than that imitation of Al Capone who visited us this morning. I am sure this kidnappers were not his men; maybe from another crime syndicate. There are several in this country.’

‘That means we’re nowhere safe anymore,’ Herman said angrily and worriedly.

‘Sure, in the forest.’

They all looked at Michael. Diana sat up straight and nodded.

‘In the forest they can do nothing against us,’ she agreed. ‘There we are the boss, and all the animals and all the fairies.’

‘I know all about that,’ the commander agreed unexpectedly. ‘Even my commandos couldn’t get close, even with infrared reconnaissance we couldn’t track the children down.’

The adults around the table looked at each other.

‘I feel quite powerless in this,’ Olga had to confess. ‘Even with your support, Colonel, we would not be able to adequately protect the children from kidnaping actions by determined gangster organisations.’

‘No, we are soldiers, ma’am. We can defend ourselves against armed actions, but I do not expect them here. The only way to adequately protect the children would be to lock them up in a hermetically guarded environment.’

‘Like the Elfswood?’

Surprised, the man looked at her. ‘Yes, now you mention it. Yes, I think we can guard the forest against armed attacks. But...’ he looked a bit unhappy, ‘I don’t know if we could catch every intruder. It is a large area. Even infrared motion detectors have their blind spots, especially in hilly terrain.’

Michael and Diana consulted each other softly.

‘What do you think?’ the commander asked.

After everything that had happened and what he had seen in the forest, he did not even think it strange that he seriously asked children for their opinions. That would not have occurred to him a few days ago.

‘You don’t need to guard us in the forest, sir,’ Michael said politely. ‘There, all the trees have eyes and we can hide from any villain. We can let anyone get lost. But outside the forest, surveillance would be good.’

‘There you have your answer.’ The commander looked around triumphantly, as if he had thought it up himself.

Olga drummed her fingers on the table impatiently. ‘All well and good, but the situation here in the village remains unsafe. I don’t see how you and your men can stay here to protect the attractions and the work around the factory. If we don’t pay tomorrow, we can expect very nasty action.’

‘But the rides were going to stop, weren’t they?’ asked Herman.

‘Yes, no,’ Olga grumbled, ‘Michael has announced that, but according to the management of the events company there is a contract with a two-week notice period, so we wouldn’t even be able to stop.’

‘Who signed it with you?’ Herman asked the two women of the event company who had come with Olga. They had kept out of the conversation until now.

One of the women took out a paper. ‘Doctor Janos Melzedek signed it, on behalf of the Environmental Federation, in his capacity as undersecretary,’ she said.

‘Madam,’ the commander asked, ‘is there anything in the contract about providing protection or surveillance?’

She looked intently at the paper, but finally had to shake her head in denial.

‘So you are responsible for security yourself?’

‘Eh, yes, I guess it does come down to that, yes.’

‘Do you intend to carry on as before, now that you know of the threats on the part of various crime syndicates?’

‘I suppose we can ask for police protection.’

‘That is so,’ the commander conceded. ‘But I would like to impress upon you that it does not mean that the Slovakian army will be able to protect your operation. We are only here on patrol and will have to leave the day after tomorrow at the latest.’

‘Yes, I suppose...’ She looked around a little confused.

‘It all comes across to me as Indian stories,’ she burst out. ‘Excuse me for saying so. First, that boy sends away all the visitors who came this morning, then he comes into our office with two friends and tells us to pack our bags tomorrow...’

‘I think it would be better if you took the young people very seriously, madam,’ the commander said stiffly. ‘I hope you don’t consider the patrol by the Slovakian army, at the request of the management here, as an Indian game. We take the threats of organised crime very seriously. Or did you really think that the train had accidentally gone off the rails this morning?’

‘Yes, if you say so...’ She had turned pale. Her companion had been so before.

‘Madam,’ Olga said soothingly, ‘today has been a complicated day. Let’s take some time to get to grips with it. I suggest we keep the embargo on ticket sales in place at least for tomorrow, so we have time to see things through and make the right decisions.’

‘Aren’t you going to call in the police?’ asked Herman, piqued that the Slovaks were far too passive.

Olga shrugged. ‘What can we tell them? That a businessman and his staff visited us this morning? That journalists wanted to interview the children?’

‘Yes, but that’s too crazy! If everyone knows that they are gangsters and kidnapers and that the train has been sabotaged...’

‘Sir, I understand what’s bothering you,’ the commander joined the conversation. He revealed more and more to be a man of integrity and intelligence who was very concerned about the Elfswood. ‘We know precisely that those men are gangsters. But not a single word has been spoken, not a weapon has been seen, not a threat made. The men who molested your children were just pushy reporters, like so many others. That broken shunt? Oh, a carelessness, overdue maintenance. A tree on the telephone wires? That happens a few times a year. There’s really nothing you can go to the police about.’

There was silence after his words.

## Chapter 18

### Safe in the forest

Herman got on his feet and leaned heavily on the table. 'If you're right about that,' he said hoarsely with emotion, 'I'm taking my children to Holland. Tonight. I won't let them walk around here unprotected for another minute. Who knows what those gangsters are up to tomorrow?'

'No!' cried Michael in dismay. Diana also stood up, startled. 'Dad, we can't get out of here, we can't! Really, in the forest no-one can hurt us.'

Lucy and Wendy looked at each other hesitantly. They understood from each other they wouldn't mind going back to Holland, but without Miche and Diana there would be nothing to it.

'Dad, why don't you come and live with us in the woods?'

Herman looked at his children. He doubted whether they should leave at all, but the feeling of insecurity was getting to him. He couldn't think tomorrow one of his children would be kidnapped for ransom, or maybe even worse.

'Sir, I'll have patrols running tonight,' the commander offered. He hesitated, looked enquiringly at Olga and continued: 'I can call another platoon from my unit here and have them guard the roads and patrol the forest. That will give you a few days' respite, as long as my superiors do not call me back.'

'That seems like an excellent guarantee. In the meantime, we can decide how to proceed,' Olga picked up the proposal.

'Yes, Dad, come with us to the forest,' Michael pleaded.

He went to stand beside his father. The latter put an arm around his shoulders and looked at him questioningly.

'I have a plan to increase our safety even further, but you will have to camp with us for a while, because you're in danger too, Dad.' With sudden tears in his eyes he looked at his father. 'I don't want to lose you again now,' he said hoarsely.

'Well, all right then,' Herman admitted, softened by his son's affection. 'As long as the colonel has his men patrolling, we are indeed safer in the forest than anywhere else. I would like to hear your plan.'

Relieved, Michael let himself be huddled by his father.

The girls jumped up from the sofa and clasped each other and their brother and father, with Diana in their midst.

Olga knocked on the table with an empty coffee mug.

'All right folks!' she called to drown out her emotion. 'That's agreed then. You go with the colonel and I'll inform the press. Ladies, shall we reconvene tomorrow morning to talk about the rides and security?'

Not much later, the astonished reporters were treated to a retreat of the entire 'elfin family', accompanied by commandos who looked around menacingly and

had their hands on their weapons. The four children and their father got into the commander's SUV and drove off, accompanied by an armoured car.

It took Olga a long time to calm down enough to give her press conference. Her announcements were received in deadly silence. She meticulously recounted what had happened and discussed, without using words like extortion, mafia or organised crime. But any journalist who knew the situation in the country could draw his or her conclusions. In this way, the sly chairwoman prevented the press from quoting her later in a way that could be considered slander.

Meanwhile, a number of commandos brought Herman and his children to the edge of the forest, and from there they formed a cordon around it. The men made jokes with the girls, but treated Michael with awe, as if he were a movie star. Most of these hardy men, trained for battle, had seen him and Dia face them and watched them fly away together. The fact that they were now walking with this miracle, even though he was only half of them, made them jolly, without their attention diminishing for a moment.

The scouts ran from their camp to the fence they had built to stop wandering tourists. Worried, they saw the column approaching. At first they did not understand: the same soldiers who had gone into the forest two days ago to arrest the Dutch children were now walking like bodyguards around the same, cheerfully chatting, group. Michael waved to the scouts that all was well.

When he got closer, he reported the latest events. He told them that the commandos would put a cordon around the forest to protect them. This reassured the scouts. Curious, they walked along to the edge of the forest, where Herman and his children went on alone.

Once under the trees, the calming influence of the forest soon asserted itself. Even Herman relaxed noticeably.

In their camp they made it cosy: they made a fire and cooked dinner.

Only when they had eaten, sitting together in the circle of light around the fire did Michael want to tell them what his plan was.

'This camp is easy to find,' he began. 'You just follow the path and you will be here in ten minutes, counting from the edge of the forest. It used to be hidden by the low-hanging branches of a yew tree, but these have recently been cut down. My plan is very simple. We make a second camp at the clearing where we get our food, the Forest Meadow. We will put up our own tents and leave this group tent under Diana's tree. The new place can only be reached by game trails. Now a real path is beginning to develop, but we have to camouflage it and from now on we'll have to take a different route every time.'

'That sure isn't a bad idea,' Herman thought. 'This camp is indeed open and exposed. Do you really think that nobody can find your clearing?'

Michael looked at Diana.

Her gaze turned inwards. In the quiet of the forest, outside the astral noise of the village, their innerspeech was working again. The dryad in her showed him

in pictures how fauns and gnomes, when working together under the guidance of woodland elves, are able to juggle low-hanging branches, how they persuade sylphs to move branches where there is no normal wind, how trees, especially the young ones, can weave tough obstacles with their roots in a short time, how brambles wind themselves around ankles, arms and faces.

‘Yes Dad, if the nature beings work together with the trees and the plants, not a person will come through that we don’t want here. Diana showed me.’

Full of a love, which he had for his little sister since she was born, he caressed her. Now that they had innerspeech and could communicate feelings and images to each other, the intimacy had grown further. His love spread naturally and, to his great joy, was reciprocated by Dia from a distance.

The flames of the fire were reflected in his wide-open eyes, but what he saw were mountain slopes, lit by the setting sun, slipping away beneath him. He felt Dia’s sensation of tepid air currents beneath her wings, of winds that rose and fell as the sun-warmed slopes cooled. She had been flying all day, making her way through narrow gorges, along steep rocky slopes, seen only by some mountain goats balancing on spots unreachable by humans.

‘Where are you, Miche?’ whispered Wendy. ‘Are you with Dia?’

He nodded, unable to utter a word, not wanting to break contact with his lover.

*She floats high above the mountains.*

Astonished, Wendy listened to his words, which she could not remember actually hearing. ‘Is she coming?’

After a long time the answer came: ‘Yes, tonight, when the air has cooled, she will come to us.’

Satisfied, they prepared for the night. Herman, who was sleeping with his children for the first time, found it an extraordinary experience to see Wendy and Lucy moving about the tent smoothly and preparing their beds and that of Diana.

Michael sat motionless by the glowing fire. A single, low-burning lantern illuminated the scene, grotesque shadows moved across the canvas.

Herman went outside, took a pee and brushed his teeth. He looked around in the darkness, but could not see a light anywhere. The forest was silent around him. Nevertheless, he shivered. The events of the day had shaken his self-confidence. He knew with his brain that trained soldiers kept watch around the forest and he had heard how his son had described the protection of the forest, but still he was afraid. Afraid of the ruthless, money-grubbing violence of unscrupulous men who would kidnap his children, or worse. Wouldn’t it be better if Olga signed the imposed contract and transferred the first payment? Actually, he preferred that. He did not feel up to the threat of so much violence.

Back in the tent he drew a mattress across the entrance and crawled into his sleeping bag. The twins lay with shining eyes, just above the edge of their sleeping bags, looking at his fumbling. Diana, who lay between them, could only be

seen by a tuft of blonde hair.

‘Good night, Dad,’ they whispered simultaneously.

‘Good night, Wendy, good night, Lucy,’ he whispered back.

Michael was still dreaming by the fire, which consisted now only of ashes and a few glowing coals. Herman got out of his bed and put a sleeping bag around the shoulders of his silent son. Although he did not perceive any reaction, he knew that Michael thanked him, without coming out of his trance.

Only then did Herman begin to feel safe. It was not he who would guard the sleeping ones, but Michael, who was now an elf.

In the middle of the night, a vaguely glittering figure descended in front of the tent, encircled a dark figure and flew away with him, leaving an empty sleeping bag near the extinct fire.

The forest took over the watch over the sleeping people.

## Chapter 19

# Deeper into the forest

The next morning Herman woke up startled when a sleepy Wendy lost her balance and stepped on his leg.

‘Sorry, Dad, did I hurt you?’ she stammered, scrambling to her feet.

‘Yeah, well, it’s not a nice way to wake up,’ he grumbled. He looked around. ‘Where’s Miche?’

‘Flying with Dia,’ he heard from outside the tent. Diana had just returned from a stroll through the forest. She had stepped over her father without waking him.

‘Oh, and...’

‘Luus is here,’ came a sleepy voice from a pile of bedding. ‘If you guys don’t make such a noise I can get some sleep, yeah?’ The mountain began to move, a head of tangled black curls popped out. ‘Now I’m awake anyway and of course I have to go to the bathroom,’ the head grumbled.

Mist hung between the trees, here and there slanted rays of sunlight reached the ground, conjuring up luminous spots in the dark vegetation.

They washed at the pipe that still spouted water. After breakfast Herman wanted to go and check things out.

‘I want to see how the soldiers are protecting you and I have to go to the mill,’ he announced. ‘I would find it very reassuring if you would move your camp as soon as possible to the Forest Meadow.’

Before that courier from the mafia arrives, he thought afterward.

‘If you’ll help with the lugging, we’ll start right away,’ said Lucy. ‘Then you’ll also know how to find us.’ Their tents lay neatly packed in a corner of the big tent, ready to be taken away. They rolled up their mattresses and sleeping bags and put all clothes and loose things in their rucksacks.

Diana guided them, who had chosen a new game trail to give the old one a chance to recover.

‘It’s very easy to walk,’ Herman marvelled.

‘Oh, it’s only easy for us,’ Diana explained. ‘The branches and brambles move aside when we approach. Look behind you, it’s all closing up.’

Herman looked back as he walked.

Amazed, he stopped. Almost imperceptibly, with small jerks, branches moved back along their track, intertwined with each other and with the bramble tendrils, which seemed to lead a life of their own. They shifted so gradually that, every time you thought you detected movement in the corner of your eye and looked at it with lightning speed, everything seemed to be dead still.

‘Come on,’ cried Diana, who had just kept walking. ‘Otherwise you’ll get lost.’

She laughed, invisible, tinkling like an elf.

Indeed, Herman noticed that he could no longer see the children and that their trail was already fading. He hurriedly caught up, occasionally tripping over brambles that seemed to want to stop him. Relieved, he caught up with the girls just as they entered the clearing leaving the protection of the dense foliage.

Herman looked around admiringly. It looked like an enclosed garden; it was so beautiful. A flat track meandered through a meadow with flowers. Forest Meadow was a good name for this place. Here and there were small trees, there was a patch of grey rocks sticking up between dark green moss, patches of fragrant herbs and a wealth of yellow, purple and blue flowers. The field sloped slightly; at the bottom was a marshy spot where water glistened.

‘What a little paradise,’ he said, looking around with satisfaction. ‘I can hardly imagine a more beautiful place to camp.’

Diana came dancing and skipping closer and took him by the hand. ‘Come, let me show you our vegetable garden.’

Around the wet spot, where crystal-clear water gushed from the ground, grew a crowd of large and small plants. Diana showed them which leaves they picked, from which plants they ate the roots. ‘The cherries are sadly out,’ she said, looking at the cherry tree, of which she had eaten nearly all the fruit if the birds had not beaten her. ‘But lower down in the forest there are lots of mushrooms, and we eat them every day.’

The twins, meanwhile, had chosen a level spot to pitch their own and Michael’s tent. It was not far from the spring; in a kind of arbour bordered by dense young spruce, some slender birch and a single young oak. Herman helped put up the tents. When they were set for the girls to set up camp, he began to look around.

‘I’ll take you back to my tree,’ said Diana, who realised that he could not find his way back.

‘Bye Dad,’ cried Wendy and Lucy from their tent. ‘When will you be back?’

‘This afternoon or tomorrow,’ he promised.

‘Now you have to watch how we walk,’ Diana explained. ‘This is a different path from the way we came. It’s easier for you to recognise, but we have to cross a few tree trunks. That would have been too difficult with all the baggage.’

Herman imprinted as many landmarks as possible in his mind and kept turning around to recognise them from the other direction. To his surprise, it was not far to the river. A few rotten, fallen trees made the going less easy, but they also formed a good barrier. If Diana had not pointed out the passages, he would never have been able to find his way back.

‘This is a fox trail,’ she explained. ‘That’s why you have to duck so much, and actually go under the stumps we climbed.’

At her tree, they said goodbye. With a stab in his heart he saw the elfin child disappear in an instant among the vegetation. She was as at home here as... as a wood elf. Was she really his child? Not quite, he realised.

Shaking his head, he continued on his way to the village.

‘Hi Miche, hi Dia!’ the girls called out when they came flying in and landed close to the tents. They crowded around the two and gently stroked Dia’s wings.

‘What do you think of our new camp? We set it up this morning, together with Dad.’

Michael laughed. He was still so full of their air travels, the secret places where Dia had landed, the distant heights where they had made love, that he had no words. He wrapped his arms around the twins and silently admired the efficient way they had made their bivouac: perfectly hidden and close to clear water.

Thoughts that were not meant for him tingled in his mind.

He turned around and saw with his eyes what he had noticed in other ways: Diana and Dia disappeared among the trees, engaged in an elemental conversation he could not understand.

‘Dad may be back from the village this afternoon,’ said Lucy. ‘He’s busy with the plans for the river.’

‘I hope he brings food, we’re running low,’ Wendy added.

‘We don’t have much to do here,’ Lucy continued, glancing sadly at her sister. ‘We’re so well hidden here that even the scouts can’t find us.’

‘No fun,’ thought Wendy. ‘Dad won’t let us go to the scouts. Not even to our old camp.’

‘Well, I think that’s better for now.’ Michael had finally found his voice again. ‘Those gangsters won’t back off from anything. Today their courier arrives. It’ll be very exciting if Olga doesn’t pay.’

‘Okay, it will be good for something,’ grumbled Wendy. ‘But it’s boring as hell.’

‘Are the soldiers still guarding us?’

‘I think so,’ mused Michael, ‘but I’m not sure. We flew very low over the mountains and through the trees to hide from people with binoculars and radar and stuff. We haven’t seen any people, hopefully no people have seen us.’

They sat down outside in the sun. Wendy made a cup of coffee for him and tea for Lucy and herself. There was no bread, but a few crackers were enough for Michael. He rarely felt like eating now; the previous night and morning he had only drunk water from ice-cold springs and licked aromatic dew from the needles of pines.

He stretched after lunch and listened to a murmur of vague messages increasing in intensity over the last hour. His face grew pale. As the messages became clearer, a feeling of revulsion crept up on him. He resisted the feeling, which did not seem right to him. The central message was serious, and so was the situation around the Elfswood. The short break was over. Alas.

‘Are you coming with me?’ he asked. ‘We are expected.’

His sisters had long since ceased to marvel at such announcements. Without protest they cleared the camp and walked towards Michael, who was looking at the closed passage between the firs.

‘Maybe you should ask politely,’ joked Lucy.

‘Yes,’ laughed Wendy, ‘that’s how to do it: dear branch, will you let us through? We’re expected.’

They giggled as the branch was bent aside by a local gust of wind.

‘See, that’s how you do it,’ yelled Lucy. ‘Gee, that’s cool, Wen!’

Chuckling, they went into the passage. The branch immediately snapped back behind them so that they were in a sort of vestibule, before pushing aside the branches in front of them to follow the trail. It worked like a lock. The forest was keen to keep all the places they visited secret as much as possible.

## Chapter 20

# Innerspeech with Lucy and Wendy

The mighty stag was waiting for them in the secret clearing.

The three human children felt, as they had done before, small and vulnerable in his presence.

‘Good morning Pan,’ Michael greeted him respectfully.

Bowing his head, he underlined his message. ‘Did you call us?’

*Hello Michael, greeted the deity back. Yes. Your beloved and your little sister are also on their way here.*

The stag inclined his head in a courtly salute to Wendy and Lucy.

They just stared at him, forgetting all their small talk. They were hardly aware of the telepathic messages to Michael, only that something was exchanged between them.

‘Why are we...?’ asked Michael.

*It goes on and on. You have now witnessed for yourselves what can happen in the material world when a tear in the fabric of the ethereal world is created... Yes, ask your question.*

‘What do you mean? Those gangsters who want money and want to kidnap us and want to see the first payment today?’

*Yes. However, it are only transient external effects that prevent contact between humans and nature beings. That is much more serious. As long as there is chaos in the village, the opposing powers effortlessly manage to frustrate the necessary emergence of understanding.*

‘But isn’t the fissure getting smaller? Nothing has been discharged for weeks, there is much less water flowing in the stream and recently a downpour washed most of the poisonous sludge away into very deep caves where it settled.’

*No, Michael. Even if there were no more poison in the bed, the crack would remain. It has to be healed on another level.*

‘How can I do that?’ Michael began to feel despondent. If cleaning didn’t help...

*First, the physical causes must be removed; you are already doing that. When the riverbed is clean on the material plane, the stream must be reinstalled, I would say in human words. Established, placed in the ethereal world.*

*How is that done?* Michael had switched to innerspeech without noticing.

*You will get instructions for that in due course. The angels used to do it. Whenever there was a need for a new governing spirit being, they would appoint an advanced nature being for the new task. In the future, it will be the humans who will have to do it. You will get help. There are humans on their way here who know the rites and invocations necessary to communicate with spirit beings. You, with Dia, will be their forerunner.*

‘So much to be done,’ Michael sighed aloud, ‘and all at once it seems. The river! That...’ Excitedly he jumped up. ‘We have to go to my father, we have to clean the river as soon as possible, close it before...’

*Calm down, Michael, Pan soothed him. We have already started to do what needs to be done.*

*What have we started?* Michael sat down with a bump.

*Repairing what has been damaged. But first you would teach the girl Irina and your sisters to speak in the spirit. By opening them up. You can do that, with our help.*

‘Things went badly wrong with Irina. What should I do to at least not scare my sisters?’ grumbled Michael aloud.

*Maybe your sisters would come if you call them and explain what is meant. Do you remember what you did with Diana?*

He nodded that he understood what was required of him. He did not look forward to it. With Diana, it had been different. The first time, when she suffocated, there was an emergency. And she had her dryad in her; that made it different too. The awakening of her telepathic gift had been almost automatic. To do the same to his sisters... He decided to seek help. *Diana*, he signalled, *can you come to me?*

*I am coming. I'm almost there,* she said.

She appeared a little later in the forest and hopped up to him. ‘What is it?’ she asked. In his mind, he explained to her what was required of him and that he was a bit shy about it. Before he could finish his thoughts, she giggled and rubbed her nose against his.

*It's very nice when you get into my head,* she told him. *Really, you are very careful and very sweet and at the same time very strict. It's good that Wen and Luus learn to talk to us in their heads. Then they can also hear what Dia and Pan and the fairies are saying.*

She jumped up, all energy, and grabbed her sisters by the hand.

‘Come, Miche is going to teach you to talk in your head, just like he does with Dia. I learned that way too. Really, it's not scary at all.’

They approached shyly, a little slower than their little sister, who was almost lifted off the ground as a result. She was so light that she could not make her heavier sisters walk any faster than they wanted to.

Speechless because of the unusual events, the appearance of the huge stag and Diana's announcement, they dropped to their crouches suspiciously when they reached Michael.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Wendy dismissively.

‘Do to us?’ added Lucy.

‘Just ask Diana, she can explain it better than me.’

‘Well, little worm, what's he going to do to us?’ Lucy sounded almost hostile.

Michael suddenly realised that Others probably were trying to pull the same trick as with Irina. But they wouldn't succeed this time, he imagined grimly.

*Dia, Pan, will you help me? They're scared and...*

*We're doing all we can, Miche,* Dia reassured him. *However, it is up to you to gain their trust. Only you can do that.*

‘Little worm!’ protested Diana loudly. ‘Then, in the cave, when those soldiers came, you said something quite different. I was very big and powerful then and

you looked up to me.’

‘Sorry,’ Lucy apologised. ‘I only say these silly things because I almost wet my pants, that’s how tense I am, like I’m in the dentist’s waiting room and I have to go to that chair..’

Wendy chuckled and gave her a poke. ‘And you never have anything on your teeth, you shitbum.’

‘No, but it still scares the shit out of me. Just hearing that drill makes me to go to the toilet.’

Michael could imagine it very well.

‘I’m not going to do anything scary,’ he said. ‘Come and do as I did with Diana: we keep our heads together, that is better for the contact. And close your eyes.’

The foursome embraced and, amidst suppressed giggles and awkward snuffles, put their heads together in the shape of a four-leaf clover. ‘Stop giggling.’

Gradually all excitement subsided and the girls slipped into another consciousness, carried away by the waves emitted by Michael and Diana. By now they were so familiar with an other consciousness in their minds, that they automatically moved into that sphere. Perhaps it was so easy because they were family.

In the resonance that occurred between the four heads, it was almost natural that they could perceive each other. In the next step, it did not surprise any of them that they could communicate words and feelings to each other.

*Oh Miche, how wonderful!* Wendy thought. *Luus, why didn't we have this before?*

*We almost had it together, and with Di too, right?* Lucy came through.

*Yes, it was there, almost, just not with Miche.*

With a reverent curiosity, the two girls probed their brother’s mind; they experienced for the first time something of how boys, men think. Diana’s duality was also examined. Her dryad was involved in the conclave. Via Michael, Dia entered the circle as the sixth consciousness. Tears streamed down the cheeks of the four human children, in their joy at being so strongly united with each other and at the same time in their sorrow for all those years that they had been alone. When they looked up, the deer had disappeared.

*What he appeared for has been done,* Dia orated.

Overcome with emotion, they sat in the grass and dried their wet faces on their sleeves. The sun had disappeared behind the tall trees; it was getting chilly.

‘I’m hungry, Lucy said aloud. Then, with a nervous laugh, she repeated in her mind: *Who’s coming with me to the camp, to make dinner?*

## Deliberation in the forest

They got up and walked the trail back to their first camp under the beech tree, to see if any new supplies had been brought.

That had obviously happened; some scouts rummaged around and the cooking fire was burning.

With a silent greeting, Dia had stayed behind in the forest.

Michael kept some distance from the crowd. With a suspicious look, he stood looking into the almost empty riverbed. Since the watershed to the valley of the Iboe had been restored by Johan's explosion, only pure water flowed through it. Yet he could still feel the poisoning. The heavily polluted silt upstream corrupted the clean water, especially energetically. Could Others still enter through it?

A thought in his mind, coming from Dia, confirmed this.

Then we should start cleaning as soon as possible, he thought. But first let's eat.

During the meal, the scouts talked seriously with each other. They had experienced things that they had not thought possible. A flying elfin woman, elemental beings who showed themselves, the president and his wife visited the Elfswood, soldiers, who were conquering the forest a few days ago, were now guarding it against mafia gangsters...

'It looks like a movie,' said one of the boys.

'Yes, a fantasy movie, with elves and monsters and secret weapons.'

'Michael, have we won now or is it just a truce? Will it start again soon? I mean, with that mafia?' one asked anxiously.

'Not again, I mean, not the same thing,' Michael replied oppressively. 'We have won a battle, several in fact, but the struggle seems to be shifting. Do you perhaps know what Olga has done?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, today a courier from the mafia was supposed to arrive with a contract for her to sign...'

None of the scouts present knew what had happened in the village that day. They did not even know that a courier was coming.

'What else can we expect?' asked a girl. She stoked the fire a bit, as if to chase away an unmentionable threat with light in the falling dusk.

'I don't know,' Michael confessed. 'I don't even know whether Olga has paid the mafia or not. If she has refused, anything can happen.'

Diana crept up to him and nestled herself on his lap.

'In any case, I do know what we have to do. Tomorrow we must start cleaning the river immediately. I'll ask my father to bring us the things.'

He did not mention that it sent shivers down his spine when he imagined all

sorts of muddy monsters and creeps from other worlds, emerging from the riverbed.

'I think we just have to be on guard. Our opponents will probably try something new, something we're not prepared for.'

'What might that be?'

'Elections!' cried a boy who had been dreaming. 'They will probably try something with the elections.'

'Who? Not the mafia, surely?'

'No, silly, the people behind the scenes.'

'Yes, they might. But what can we do in return?'

'Publicity!' Excitedly, a girl stood up, waving the glowing branch she had been poking into the fire with. 'We have enormous publicity, we have our own organisation, websites, e-mail, schools, you name it. We can even found a political party! I'm eighteen, so I can vote.'

'Jo!' shouted a few others. 'A political party of our own.'

'The Party of the Elfswood.'

'And Michael is to be Prime Minister.'

'I'm only sixteen!'

'Dia is going to be Prime Minister. She's old enough'

'Yes, but she's not human, is that possible?'

'Dia, Dia!' some were chanting.

Maria stood up. She had said nothing so far. It immediately became silent.

'I think we should make good use of the publicity,' she began, summarising what had been discussed as a good chairman. 'But a political party of our own? We can try. But first let's think about what we would like to do with it. What will this party stand for? You have to be twenty-one to be elected. Then we will have to find people who believe in natural beings and in whom we have faith.'

'Janos!'

'Demiros!'

'Johan!'

'Doctor Wenceslas?'

'Stefan for sure, and Mrs. Jellisek.'

'Yes, General Olga, she should be Prime Minister!' a couple shouted.

Maria gestured for silence.

'Listen, we'll work it out over the next few days. We have the wind in our sails at the moment, but establishing a political party requires more than that. First we have the job of cleaning up. We have to exploit that as much as possible in terms of publicity. People all over the country need to see that young people are rolling up their sleeves to make things liveable again here.'

Soon, the group was excitedly thinking up plans. Although they could understand Slovak well by now, the Dutch children soon lost track of the deliberations.

When it was suggested that they all go to the scout camp to have a broad discussion with all the scouts, they thanked the invitation to come along.

‘Now it’s just the four of us again,’ Wendy shared her feelings with the others when the noisy group of scouts had disappeared into the darkness.

‘Miche, are we able we hear others now?’ Lucy wanted to know, as she held up her plate to be scooped up.

‘I did hear a lot of static, like the TV when there’s no station,’ Wendy added as she lifted a full spoon high. Quack, did the stew. ‘Ouch!’ cried Lucy when a hot splash landed on her hand.

‘Sorry, Luus, does it hurt badly?’ Guiltily, Wendy put down the ladle. *Shall I put something on it?*

*No, never mind.* ‘Watch out next time,’ grumbled Lucy, sucking on the sore spot. It made talking a lot easier when not only the words spoken aloud were heard, but also thoughts that made the words clearer.

‘Miche, you were thinking of something else weren’t you?’ Diana was still sitting on his lap, while he was thinking about everything that had been said and not said.

‘Yes, I’m expecting some very strong counter-moves, let’s put it that way. From which side I don’t know, but you can bet it will be from a side of which you have no idea. Sabotage, intimidation, kidnapping. Maybe even bombings.’

One of the advantages of intimate conversation is that you can eat and talk at the same time. Lucy sat spooning the stew while she asked Michael in spirit:

*But what can the mafia do to stop us? Everything has been arranged, hasn’t it?*

*In principle, yes, enough arrangements have been made, but the question is whether people keep to them. You know that the adults can think of something else the next day. For your own good, they say.* He had experience of this; his suspicion was not unfounded.

‘Yes,’ Wendy interjected aloud, with a seriousness unusual for her, into the exchange. ‘I think you are right, Miche. I think we have to stay on our toes. I mean, the President has gone home and soon we’ll be dealing with the same men as before. We can start again.’

‘Weren’t you thinking of some other thing?’ insisted Diana. She had probably overheard something..

Michael shrugged his shoulders. Apparently he wasn’t supposed to keep it to himself.

‘I was reminded of what the landscape angel said, that the poisoned stream is a crack in the protective field, through which all sorts of nasty creatures come in.’

‘Here too?’ shuddered Wendy.

‘Not here,’ Diana assured. ‘Because of everything Miche and the scouts have done, with that flushing of the ground, and by making that mountain collapse, they can’t get through here anymore.’ She laughed. ‘My dryad is very strong and has lots of subjects.’

‘Do they keep watch?’ wanted to know Wendy, who had gotten the jitters at

Michael's words.

'Yes. No tree has been sick for days.'

'Thank goodness.' Great relief was expressed in both Lucy's and Wendy's sighs.

At that moment they received the image of Dia, who thus announced her approach. With a rustle of her wings, she entered through the loose doorways of the tent and sat down behind Michael, her arms around him and Diana.

Immediately the atmosphere became different, more fairy-like. The fairy woman represented a world of wonders, feeling, growth, clear air, sunshine and the rustling of leaves in the wind.

*The forest is safe from **Others** for now, she agreed with Diana. But the stretch of river between the mill and the forest is unprotected and wide open.*

*The scouts! They're right next to it!* Lucy thought. She had gone into innerspeech automatically.

*They are also protected, by the source nymph of the stream and by Bran himself. Besides, they are very strong themselves, because they are pure, Dia reassured her. Mische, you have to make sure that the factory is demolished as soon as possible. It is a hotbed of **Others**.*

*I am going to consult my father and Olga directly tomorrow, announced Michael. But which should come first, the river or the factory?*

*I don't know, said Dia, but I think the source of the evil is in the factory.*

*Would Janos be able to help us?*

*Not for the time being. He's on duty at the hospital all week.*

*How do you know that?*

*He told me.*

*Can you talk to each other?*

*Not directly, it was through Irina's mother. She can transmit, but she can't receive properly. You'll have to teach her that, Mische.*

*Yes, I'll do that as soon as they come again.*

*That will have to wait; they went back to Zilina with Janos and won't be coming here for a while.*

*Oh, what a pity.* He didn't have to hide from Dia why he was particularly sorry that Irina had left. She had been a great companion in the crises they had faced together, like in the nightly adventure with the mountain tramp Johan, who had blown up a whole mountain slope... But she was more than a comrade: the feeling of love he had conceived for the beautiful Irina had not gone away. Dia and he were love partners for life, so strongly did he feel their connection. Yet at a time like this, he longed for Irina. Maybe it was precisely because things with Dia were so wonderful... he was overflowing with love... It confused him.

Apparently, Dia had picked up his feelings, because she was rubbing up against him. Somewhere in his busy head, he heard very faint giggling, from girls... fairies he couldn't see...

Lucy and Wendy, meanwhile, were discovering each other's personalities

In their back-and-forth exchanges, they confirmed much of what they already

knew about each other, they corrected false assumptions and told each other the truth bluntly. Sometimes the anger of a bruised ego would flare up. However, such outbursts were almost immediately assuaged by apologies and, above all, by their humour. Occasionally, they would burst out laughing in each other's arms. Wendy knew that Lucy was very knowledgeable and retentive, but that there was so much of it filled her with awe, now that she had an unobstructed view of it.

Conversely, Lucy came to respect Wendy's understanding of emotional matters. She had often made fun of her, but now she could see that Wendy's romantic expressions stemmed from a love of love itself.

When they dared to show their unfulfilled and indistinct lustful feelings, they understood better why they were so into boys, while at the same time it frightened them. For their intimate talk went far beyond words. They were so into each other that they not only sensed each other's feelings, but even each other's bodies. Of course, they were used to sleeping together and they were not squeamish about each other.

*What if we fall in love with the same boy?* Lucy wanted to know.

*Well, we can share him perhaps?*

*But would he want to?*

*Well, we can just suggest it to him, can't we? Besides, what boy wouldn't want to go with two of those gorgeous girls at the same time?*

*But would you?*

*Well, Wendy hesitated, maybe not before, but now I would like. I mean, then we stay together anyway. If we both would have another boyfriend, we'll be with him, and not with each other.*

*No, at least a lot less.* Lucy didn't like being separated from her sister by having separate boyfriends. *Well, let's go and find us a boy tomorrow.* With a lot of giggling they fell into all kinds of fantasies about their ideal boyfriend.

## Chapter 22

# Emergency responses

Diana had fallen asleep on his lap. Michael tucked her carefully in her sleeping bag and crept out of the tent with Dia. The twins hardly noticed, they were completely absorbed in each other.

Michael and Dia wandered hand in hand in the nightly forest. To Michael the wood showed in white, grey and black patches.

At her invitation, he looked through Dia's eyes.

He could switch effortlessly and saw the trees and plants in moving colours, slowly swaying cones of northern light-like auras. Earthlings were busy everywhere. He had never before seen them so clearly engaged in their tasks. He could see they were supplying the trees and plants with earth energy by weaving moon-coloured threads from underground veins into the trees.

*The trees are currently making wood of photosynthesis production stored in the leaves. The earth beings are responsible for this, together with the fauns. Look, they are working in the trunks,* Dia explained.

He could indeed distinguish, vaguely, slow movements in the nearest trunks. But he could not make out exactly what was happening.

*The fauns weave earth energy and stored solar energy in the tree, directing chemical reactions in the cambium, the membrane of growing cells under the bark, which causes substances from the leaves to change and be fixed in wood fibres around the trunk, branches and twigs.*

Michael realised that Dia, as Deva of the Willow, knew from within what goes on in trees; she herself had once started her long evolution as a simple forest elf, and before that as an elemental air being. Her origins lay in the distant past.

Just before they reached the secret forest clearing, Dia took both his hands in hers and looked at him seriously. *We have been summoned again, my dear,* she gently brought to his attention. *Your question was not answered last time. That will happen now.*

Despite her tact, Michael stiffened. That was the last thing he wanted.

Dia sent him a sense of urgency, of tasks that had to be done and responsibilities that could not be avoided. In her eyes, he thought he saw a plea not to be childish.

He swallowed and let his resistance sink through his feet into the earth.

Yes, the battle was not yet over, a good ending still depended on the two of them, especially him, as far as human affairs were concerned. In fact, what was happening was quite extraordinary, he realised, and he decided to pay close attention.

Seen through Dia's eyes, the secret clearing was a feast of light: the two An-

gels were almost too bright to look at directly; in the stag Pan's presence glowed like a spherical aura, the trees along the edge flamed like violet and lilac torches, elementals and nature beings of all colours swarmed in a wide circle around the trio in the middle.

Dia and he spread a multicoloured glow, like bunches of Bengal fire, as they walked across the grass, which was glowing in many blues, against which blueberries, heather and other plants in lighter and darker shades of blue, violet and turquoise stood out.

*Welcome*, greeted the messenger angel. *Welcome*, repeated the landscape angel, Bran. Pan greeted them in his usual manner.

Michael politely returned their greeting by bowing deeply.

*Greetings to you*, Dia replied formally and bowed her head, spreading her wings. *We have come in response to your call.*

Michael hadn't noticed a thing of it. He had just followed Dia, thinking that she wanted to make love to him as much as he.

*That was indeed so*, she confessed in his spirit, *but I received the call to come here when we just entered the forest.*

*Dia, Michael*, the messenger angel began. *Something has happened that we did not take into account, so we have had to change our plans. The girl Irina suddenly became afraid, allowing an **Other** to frighten her. It had been living for some time, very cleverly camouflaged, in her aura - which is why we did not notice the being.*

Bran continued: *As a result of this interference, Irina has returned to the city with her mother and Janos. This is serious, because the three of them were the main pillars of our protection of the village.*

The stag had lowered itself on the grass; Pan sounded contrite when he confessed: *A misjudging of mine with immense repercussions.*

The messenger angel continued: *That protection has now become too weak and for some time now **Others** have been coming in, powerful ones, through the factory. You must dismantle the factory as soon as possible. Otherwise, the counter powers will become too strong in the village and even more wrong-headed people will come in and cause a lot of damage.*

Michael turned pale at these words. It turned out to be much worse than his premonition had led him to believe.

*I will tell my father, who knows how to clean and demolish the factory safely*, he replied, trembling internally, but as dignified as he could. *The preparations will take at least a month*, he added.

*That is too long. Then the battle will probably not be won.*

*I don't dare set fire to it either. Stefan once told me that all the poison then goes up into the air as smoke and ash.*

*Digestion by fire is still the best remedy.*

'But what about all the poison?' groaned Michael, racking his brains to find a solution. 'The factory is stuffed with drums of waste, they are far too heavy. We

should get them out first. What's in them doesn't burn, Stefan said.'

*What is worse, an unguarded gate to Others or pollution transformed by fire?* the messenger angel wondered.

*No, not more poison in my valley,* Bran protested. *That would weaken the whole valley. It would be impossible to remove.*

They looked questioning at Michael.

He was thinking out loud: 'What if we load all the barrels and bags into train wagons and drive them away? That would get rid of most of the rubbish. Then I'll burn the factory and get Johan to blow the whole thing up with dynamite,' Michael suggested boldly, pretending to be tougher than he felt. He just let his thoughts run free. Since he had experienced how a violent thunderstorm and an expertly placed load of dynamite could cause half a mountain to collapse, nothing was too crazy for him.

*With the scouts, we can empty the factory in no time,* he thought. That was boasting, but he felt it somehow. He had never been in the factory, he had no idea what was there, how big it was or how heavy it was or how dangerous.

*These young people will be a great help,* the messenger angel agreed.

Michael had already moved on with his thoughts. *The biggest problem is: how can we convince Olga and all the other adults that this is the way to go? I can't see them agreeing to that, not in a hundred years.* He lifted his eyes and noticed that the three big ones were looking at him expectantly. He cast a quick glance at Dia, but she too was waiting for him. He felt the eyes of other beings on him, elementals and animals that had emerged from the forest. He began to sweat. Did it depend on him alone? A boy of sixteen? Yes, he realised, on him and on the other young people, his sisters, the scouts. They were the only ones who could save the Elfswood. With a stab of sadness, he realised how much he missed Irina, just when bold deeds were required of him.

*Dia, get my sisters, please, and bring them here. I need their help,* he signalled urgently. Even before his thought had been expressed, she had already taken to the air.

*What help do you want from us, Michael?* Bran asked.

'Fog,' he blurted out. Ideas immediately began to bubble up. 'Dense fog... and noise. Wind rustling the trees. Can it go together with fog? Then we could get into the factory unseen and they wouldn't see our torches or hear us when we drag barrels. I saw empty wagons next to the factory, we can load them. But how do we get them out? There is no locomotive. Oh, I know: we'll pull them out of the way with a tractor!'

The lying stag reacted first by bowing its mighty head reverently.

*At a time like this I envy the resourcefulness of you humans,* Pan sighed. *Tell me how I can help you. Yes,* Bran agreed, *what can we do? Except make sure there is fog.*

Michael hesitated, a thought flashed through his mind... *Just a thought. But can you make things less heavy? I mean real things, like full barrels and train wagons?*

*We can ask...* Pan said hesitantly.

*It is dangerous in the factory. The simple elementals are no match for the forces prevailing there.*

*The train wagons can be made lighter. They are made up of hundreds of independent iron creatures, the messenger angel suggested.*

*I am thinking of something else, Bran thought. When the building burns, the stone creatures can make the ground expand and crack open the concrete floor, so that the fire creatures can transform that too into sand and gravel.*

*Yes, replied Michael in awe. The roof is made of wood and asphalt, which burns like hell.*

*We create so much wind that the blaze consumes everything in the factory, Bran added. We also make sure that the fire does not spread to other buildings. The mill has to be saved, we have struggled to keep it clean all this time.*

‘All right,’ said Michael bravely. He stood up straight, like a soldier going into battle. ‘That’s how we’re going to do it. I’m going in.’

In his mind he sensed a kind of applause.

Shyly he realised that the crowd of nature beings and forest animals around them had put their trust in him. He bowed, with fear in his heart as to whether he could live up to all the expectations.

## Chapter 23

### Attack on the factory

Just when he was pondering what to do next, Dia appeared with his sisters. After some gentle prompting by the elfin woman, they walked into the clearing and, deeply impressed, sat down in a semi-circle around the three big ones.

At an inviting gesture from the messenger angel, Michael explained what was expected of them. In the congregational speech, he explained why there was such a rush to make the factory disappear, and how he had planned to go about it.

It seemed as if he was talking to them as usual. Soon the girls began to feel more at ease. If Michael was so ordinary, perhaps it was normal to talk about setting fire to an old factory building in the presence of light-emitting creatures.

‘I wouldn’t dare go in there,’ Lucy shuddered at one point. ‘All those Others coming into our world. How are we supposed to protect ourselves from those creeps?’

In response to the human children’s unspoken question, the messenger angel said that neither the angels nor the elemental beings could help them.

*Humans have laid the causes. That is a very powerful magic in the ethereal world. We cannot change that.*

*Can you give us any clues as to what we can do to protect ourselves?* Michael asked anxiously.

*Yes, go in love and light.*

*How do you... what do you mean?*

*The beings of decay are struggling to transform the structure and the old energies into clean matter and cleansed energy. That is their task, but they are being thwarted. If you come in love and offer them help to return the buildings and what is in them to dust, including the floor, they will help you.*

*Yes, but what about the **Others**?*

The angel hesitated with his answer.

*With bright light and fire you can keep them at a distance.*

That did not help Michael much. *How can we do that at night?*

Their silence was a clear answer.

*Okay, if fire will do, we’ll make fire torches. Everything has to be lit anyway. But first we have to get everything out of the factory. We need good light anyway, but where are we going to get it?*

*Perhaps we can borrow the floodlights that the contractor has hung near the mill?*

*Yes, that’s a good idea, Lmus!*

*When would be a good time to do it?* he asked the angel.

*Now. The sylphs have already begun, along with the nixes and creatures of the groundwater, to make fog,* said Bran calmly.

Michael felt far from being ready to act, but there seemed to be no other way. If they were already making fog, they had to hurry. He walked up to his sisters and extended his hand to them. 'Come along,' he said gravely, 'we must get going.'

In his stress, he forgot to greet the three great ones, who watched the retreat of the human children with a certain awe, realising how brave they were. And how scared.

In the darkness of the forest, they shuffled along behind Dia, who pointed the way. Michael closed the row. He was frantically working his brain to get some good ideas, because he was getting the most horrible visions of those Others, whatever they were. He had always had a feeling of horror whenever he got close to the factory.

Silently updating each other with brief thoughts and directions, they packed up everything that could shed light and continued on their way to the scouting camp.

When they got outside the forest, they noticed how busy the elemental beings had been in the meantime: a dense ground fog climbed up through the valley.

Music sounded from the scouts' camp. The roaring flames of a large fire illuminated the mist from within. As they approached, they heard that it was folk music, played on a violin, a guitar and an accordion. High pitched girls' voices sang rousing melodies, rows of shadows danced in front of the fire.

*It is good that they make music, Dia said. **Others** hate music. The more evil they are, the less they can stand it. I am going to help you from the other sphere. I am calling as many muses as I can. Keep singing as you go to the factory.* A swirl in the mist indicated where she had taken off.

The last stretch along the riverbed was difficult. An eerie chill crept up from the deep black trough, where the fire's faint glow could not reach. The pure water that rippled through the ditch beside the path kept the threat at bay, but the children shivered with unearthly fear.

With cries of joy, they were welcomed into the swirling circle.

With a pale smile, Michael allowed himself to be carried away by the joy of the scouts. When he came face to face with Maria, she asked softly what was the matter. He just managed to say that they were on an important mission and needed their help, before she turned away and he found himself facing another girl.

Maria interrupted the music when the dance had finished by announcing that a meeting was about to start. The scouts gathered in a circle. As the heat of the dance subsided, they noticed that there was a leaden heaviness in the air. The fog began to feel chilly. New wood was put on the fire, tea was distributed and some took out their sleeping bags to protect themselves from the creeping cold.

Michael began by telling of their meetings with the three great ones and what they had said about the crack in the protective field of consciousness, the pernicious role of the factory in it and the need to close that doorway to another world as soon as possible.

The scouts listened in deadly silence; things were said here that they would not have believed before that they could really happen. They had to accept it, because they had experienced the miracle of Dia. But for most, Michael's speech aroused a disbelieving resistance. Surely such things as he now talked about were fantasy? Such could only exist in books and games?

When Michael explained his plan, they were really shocked. Entering a polluted factory at ungodly hours to clear it, setting fire to a building... no, that was going too far for them. Michael felt the resistance growing and, increasingly desperate, looked around to see if there was a sign somewhere in the circle of faces that he could count on receiving help.

'Michael,' Maria spoke up when he remained silent, 'you have just told us that evil creatures are "coming through" the factory. How do you expect us to work there tonight? I'm already dying of fear just thinking about it.'

'We must bring plenty of light,' pleaded Michael, 'Lucy had the idea of borrowing the floodlights the contractor has set up at the mill to-night. We must also bring fire, torches and all. And sing and play music, like you were doing just now.'

'But then everyone will know what we are doing, won't they?'

'That's why there's such a thick fog now,' cried Lucy bravely. Her high-pitched voice, trembling slightly because of the tension, surprised the circle of scouts.

One girl wanted to know whether she would dare to go with Michael, disbelieving that these young girls would do so.

'Yes, you have to,' Wendy interjected fanatically. 'The factory has to get set on fire tonight!' She stood up, pulled Diana and Lucy with her, and went to stand beside her brother. In the silence that fell Diana said in her thin voice: 'You are still safe here. But the village is no longer protected. That's why we have to burn down the factory tonight. That's what the great ones told us.'

Her words were met with a deathly silence.

Out of the darkness came a figure. It was Paul, laden with sticks.

'So,' he said calmly, 'we can make torches out of these. We'll wrap strips of this old blanket around them and dip them in diesel oil. We'll find it at the factory.'

The simple gesture was so meaningful that it made Michael cringe. Now that was a friend.

A boy got up, crossed over to Paul and, without saying a word, began cutting strips from the blanket.

'I'll get the emergency lights,' a girl announced. 'Have we got any petrol?'

'Over there, in cans,' said Paul. He carefully wrapped a strip of cloth around the end of the stick and tied iron wire around it.

A third boy joined the pair.

'I'll make tea and bread to take with us,' the kitchen princess announced. 'Will you help me?' she said to a girl next to her, who hesitated for a moment and then got up.

'Keep on playing music,' Michael admonished the musicians. 'Music and light

are our best protection. Those creatures cannot stand music and light. They will flee.'

'Wen!' hissed Lucy. 'You learned fairy dances and fairy songs from Dia, didn't you? Show them.'

*I don't dare,* Wendy confessed in her mind.

*Yes, Diana and I will join you. Come, we'll go to the musicians, you have to learn them Dia's songs.* Lucy pulled her sister along.

'My sister knows some fairy songs,' she announced.

'Really, they are magic songs,' said Diana with a serious face.

'Now go on,' urged Lucy.

Wendy took a deep breath and began to hum. Soon the boy with the accordion picked up the melody. The guitarist joined in by playing the rhythm. Only the violinist stood listening without recognising her part. Wendy started to dance. She did not think about it, her body just started moving. Then the violinist proved what she was capable of, for she began to play the melody Wendy was dancing to hesitantly, but gradually became more powerful. Lucy and Diana danced along, and the musicians moved to their music. The boys and girls who were still sitting indecisively in the circle could no longer keep quiet. They stood up, formed a line and imitated Wendy's movements.

Michael saw a colourful fabric growing around the playing and dancing young people. The sounds seemed to trace slow, illuminated paths through the glowing air; whirling, twisting, braiding themselves like wisps of mist.

Around the musicians small figures became visible, who were completely absorbed in directing and weaving the melodies.

Michael observed that music is visible in the ethereal sphere as living staves. The notes slid rhythmically upwards like points of light along the swaying sound tracks. High above the camp he knew Dia to be present, accompanied by vague entities, which he suspected to be the muses she had been talking about.

*If you down there and we up here keep the music going, you are fully protected. Singing along helps,* Dia's clue came through in his mind. He knew that it was also in his sisters' minds.

At that moment, he realised that everyone was dancing, including him.

## Chapter 24

# Fighting demons

Paul signed that they had finished their preparations, Michael set off.

They walked in a long line along the river. Powerful electric torches and sizzling petrol lamps illuminated the path in front of them and the mist all around. The light fell fully into the almost empty bed and dispelled any fears that might have arisen from the dark.

They passed the bridge, a single misty streetlight reflected in the wet asphalt. Humming softly, the column snaked into the village, past the fence of the factory site, through the construction gates that closed off the makeshift entrance and onto the forecourt. They encountered no one.

The fog was so dense that they could only see a few yards. There was not a heart that did not beat faster, not a hand that did not tremble, but their voices kept singing the elfin song, in endless repetition, like a protective mantra.

Paul, almost carelessly, dismantled the padlock from the factory door with a crowbar he had brought along. The group of humming and moving scouts gathered nervously around him as he pushed open the huge door.

The light from the bright petrol lamps cast an ever-widening beam of light on the cement floor behind it. Sneaking in like cats into a strange warehouse, the group moved inside.

Paul looked around and triumphantly raised his thumb: there was a large forklift truck. The shed contained pallets, big bags, stacks of barrels and drums of all sizes and colours. Paul climbed onto the forklift, found the key, glowed and started. Without a hitch, the diesel engine started. He switched on the headlights.

Opposite the entrance was a second factory door. The scouts formed a semi-circle and the musicians began to play. Now that they were inside, they dared to make more noise.

One boy had found switches for the light. Large bulbs, which hung from the ceiling, flashed on and lit up the shed. Two singing boys pushed the inner door open with a scraping sound. The light illuminated an empty floor with rows of beams on which the sawn timber had once been stacked. At the end two black figures were visible. Startled, they stood still. It took a moment for Michael to recognise the shadows as large band saws. The room was empty. Here too, the lamps were switched on.

Preceded by the softly rumbling forklift truck with Paul at the wheel, the group crossed over to the next door. Michael felt Diana trembling at his hand.

‘What is it, little mouse?’

‘Behind that, there..?’

‘Come, we will wait here for Paul to lead us.’

‘No, no!’ She pulled him forward with her.

‘What is it? Should we go first?’

‘Yes, you. I don’t dare, Miche, I’m too small.’ She was trembling on her legs.

Michael wanted to shout that the boys should wait before opening the door, but he realised in time that it would be better to sing. ‘Oh brave warriors,’ he sang aloud, ‘wait here for your comrades in arms and close the ranks!’

Astonished, the boys who had run ahead looked back. They had forgotten to sing.

‘Brave girls, help your friends, sing them to safety,’ he sang.

Singing the melody the musicians kept playing helped him to control the growing fear clot in his stomach.

A few girls understood and ran hand in hand, singing loudly, past the forklift truck and surrounded the confused boys at the door. They grabbed them by the hand and brought the boys back into the singing circle.

‘Keep singing, brave ones, close ranks in the face of the enemy,’ Michael sang loudly. He handed Diana over to the twins and forced himself forward. There, behind the door, was evil, and he was the right person to face it.

He suddenly became enraged at all the ugliness that indifferent people cause; he began to growl, deep in his throat, like a cat. He stepped onto the pallet that was on the fork of the truck. He held on to the lifting mast and beckoned Paul to pull up. ‘Light, brave, light and music!’ His voice filled the whole room. He knew he was being helped by air beings around him, who carried his voice through the air and even seemed to amplify it. Two petrol lamps were placed on the pallet. The accordionist sat on them, playing as if his life depended on it.

‘Fire!’ roared Michael. The first torches were dipped into a drum of oil and set alight. More and more smoky red flames moved towards the door.

‘Open!’

At first, the door would not move from its place. Singing, the crowbar was put under it. With a bang something broke. The sliding door was pushed aside with a loud noise. The forklift’s headlights shone on a black shape, from which something seemed to be dripping. Black shapes, like giant spiders’ legs, gleamed in the darkness, glittering eyes reflecting the bright light.

Paul accelerated, the engine roared and the scouts shouted their song to rise above the roar. Following the slowly moving forklift truck, the scouts marched into the room, each with a burning torch. They sang, stomped into step, and the shrill voices of the girls almost screamed. Again light switches were found and flipped, balloon-like light bulbs flashed on.

Under a high roof of heavy trusses was a massive masonry bastion, the foundation of a steam boiler of black riveted iron plates with tubes painted black, hand-wheels of valves and copper manometers. Where there had once been a furnace door, an inky black hole gaped.

Michael shivered; his teeth chattered. This was the opening to another world, of demons and evil Others. He knew that in the material world there had been a

plate with oil burners in front of it, which had been dismantled by the environmentalists, but with his new senses he saw a terrible gateway to a darkness that does not exist on Earth.

On impulse, he threw his torch into it, but it immediately went out. In his horror, he snatched a sizzling petrol lamp from the pallet and swung it into the open maw. With a bang and a rattle, the lamp disintegrated. With a dull thud, the petrol exploded in a ball of fire. The firestorm scorched his face.

‘Light!’ he roared, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain. ‘Sing!’

Swept up by the violinist playing like mad, the scouts sang like madmen.

The accordionist put down his instrument, blinded and singed by the flames. More torches flew into the mouth of the fire. Paul drove the forklift back a bit, anxious girls took care of the wailing musician. Michael was still standing on the pallet, singing and roaring; he was so enraptured that he would have jumped into the flames if the fire in his face had not brought him to himself.

‘Here!’ was the cry. ‘Here’s the old oven door!’

‘We have to put it back!’

‘Paul, come here with the forklift, that thing is too heavy to lift!’

Paul lowered the fork to the ground. Michael jumped off and stood in front of the fire with all his might, his hands spread wide, his eyes closed. He had no need of them here: he saw with his mind’s eye how indefinable dark shapes recoiled from the fire in the boiler.

‘Fire!’ he roared. ‘More fire! They can’t get through if we make fire!’ A panting boy approached, bolting a wheelbarrow. ‘Coal!’ he shouted, emptied his load on the floor, turned and went for a next. The boys at the boiler started to shovel the coal into the oven. Sparks sprayed around, for a moment the flames threatened to be smothered, until new burning torches were thrown into the furnace. Shouting, far behind them: ‘Michael! Your father!’ Roaring, resounding thuds of a heavy metal object. A cry: ‘Be careful!’ Amidst smoke and dancing teenagers, the forklift truck pulled up, carrying a heavy, black object; its headlights blazed brightly through the smoke. A new cry: ‘Shall I open the chimney flap?’ Scraping of metal along metal. Suddenly the flames pointed the other way, into the oven, instead of leaking out. A powerful pull sucked the smoke away. Paul manoeuvred the forklift right in front of the furnace mouth. Sweaty, black-skinned boys danced around it singing and shouting. Peering intently through the red and yellow-lit fumes, Paul lowered the heavy oven door. One boy stood ready with the hinge pin, a thick iron rod. Another pried the colossus into place with a long crowbar.

To Michael it was a breathtaking sight. Behind the flames of torches and coals crouched astral monsters, temporarily pushed back by the fury of fire, light and music that the young people had unleashed. On this side of the fire appeared arm’s-length humped and bony figures, rusty brown and iron-coloured, tugging at the furnace door, while other iron creatures were guiding the hinge pin into the hole provided for it. The singing made the fire spirits in the furnace dance.

Dozens of little sylphs came tumbling through the room like children, swirling around each other to fan the flames until they flew laden with black smoke up the factory chimney, where they deposited the smoke and, like children on the slide, rushed back for the next round.

With cheers, Paul pushed the oven door shut with one end of the fork. Fortunately, there was someone standing by Michael to catch him when he fainted.

A cacophony of impressions tried to force on him as he came to. Dia won it and banished all other impressions for the moment: *The void is shut!*

Her admiration was half incredulous, half filled with pride at her lover's courage and vigour. The next thing his senses transmitted to his brain was that he was sitting upright against something hard, his hair was dripping with water and there were a lot of people standing around him, urgently saying all sorts of things to him. His face was still glowing, but the repair mechanisms that Dia had applied, in the cave where he had been dying only a few days ago, had already replaced much of the tarnished skin.

'How is the musician?' he lisped.

'He's in a lot of pain. How are you?'

He recognised the voice. 'Bye Dad. Glad you're here. No pain. I'll explain everything in a minute. I'll call Dia first.'

He tried to persuade Dia to come down and help the poor accordionist. She let it be known that she could not abandon her task, high above the factory and for that matter was unable to get into the factory, but that Diana could also do a lot.

'Ask Diana to help that boy,' he whispered. 'Bring them out. She can heal too.'

A hand reached a mug of tea. He drank greedily. When he looked up he saw almost all eyes on him.

'Help me stand up,' he whispered to his father. Leaning against the wall, Herman's arm supporting him, he looked around. 'Guys, we haven't won yet,' he said in a hoarse voice. 'Why don't you sing anymore? Wen, sing for them, will you?'

'Miche, what on earth are you doing here?' Herman could finally express his dismay. 'I was in the mill. I saw lights; there was noise and music ... What's going on here, kid?'

'I'll tell you in a minute, Dad, but what happened today? I mean, with the mafia and all?' Michael straightened up. 'Hey, you're staying with Mr. Bertold? How...?'

'Not tonight,' Herman said grimly. 'We're keeping watch. Olga sent the mafia's courier back empty-handed. There are a lot of activists on the beat, because we expect counter-actions and the soldiers had to go back to the barracks. I volunteered as a guard to be able to do something.' He pointed to a walkie-talkie.

'Funny, we came into the village like this, we didn't see a single person!' marvelled Michael.

'The guards are hidden. But for the second time, what is going on here, Miche?'

## Chapter 25

# Attacked

Michael groaned. Now he had to explain everything to his father and there was really no time for that.

He took his hands and said, almost pleading: 'Dad, what we are doing here in the factory is necessary. It had to be done immediately, and this night is the best time. Dad, will you trust me? This is not a whim or anything.'

After some hesitation Herman said: 'Okay, I trust you. But explain everything to me when it's done, yes?'

'Thank you, Dad. Will you help me now? We have to load all the barrels and junk on a train car and...'

'What are you telling me!?'

'Please, Dad, trust me,' Michael begged. Noticing the silence, he shouted furiously: 'Sing! The danger is not over yet. Sing! Wendy, sing all you can!'

Wendy's voice was trembling slightly because of her brother's unexpected outburst but the violinist came to her rescue. Her powerful strokes brought line and tone to her song. Soon all the scouts were singing again.

'Singing, light and fire protect us against the evil creatures that come in here,' declared Michael, becoming calm again and a bit ashamed of his outburst. 'Now we have to get all the chemical waste out of the factory and...'

It seemed wise to him not to say anything about their plan to set the building on fire for the time being.

'Okay, I'll take that as a given. But what on earth are you firing in the furnace?'

'Coal and a couple of torches. We just hung the oven door back in so we could close it.'

'Yes, I remember seeing that, but...'

'Dad! Please, no more buts. I'm exhausted. Are you going to help me or not?'

'Okay, okay,' Herman grumbled. 'What can I help you with?'

'Will you divide the scouts into two groups? The strongest should help put the barrels on pallets in the first shed, so Paul can use the forklift to put them onto a train wagon.' He looked back in disarray.

'Yes, don't worry,' Herman soothed. 'From the front shed you can get to the loading platform through a side door. There are indeed three empty wagons, the flat ones. Behind them are three tank wagons and two box wagons with coal. You can see all this from the mill.'

'That's fine. Would you like to lead the way a little? Then I'll go with a second group to explore the factory further, to see if there isn't any more rubbish somewhere.'

'All right.' He looked at his son. 'You're sure you know what you're doing?'

‘Yes, Dad, really. We have orders from on high.’

Before his father could ask what he meant by that, he glared at Maria, who had just come in running. ‘How is the accordionist?’

‘Diana is with him.’ She made no secret of her admiration. ‘I don’t know what she has done to him, but his face and hands no longer glow and he sleeps peacefully.’

‘That’s fine. Can you help gathering everyone who is not needed in moving the load here with me? With as many lamps and torches as possible. They won’t need those in the front shed, there’s light enough.’

*Dia, is everything all right? Are we still safe?* he signalled.

*You have to hurry. The fire in the oven is going out, the barrier for the Others will be down soon.*

*I will have coals thrown on the fire.*

*That’s dangerous, you have to open the iron door. Don’t do it. They’re trying to use the chimney now. Maybe you can close it?*

‘Shut the chimney off!’ he roared without hesitation. A boy rushed to a lever in the masonry connection to the chimney pipe and tore it down. He shrieked and fell.

‘Diana!’ roared Michael, sensing what had happened and knowing immediately that only one person was adequately protected. ‘To that boy! They’ve got him! Maria, sing! Light, fire!’ Distraught, he called for every means he could think of. At the same time he had to keep an eye on the oven door. If there were to be a break-out attempt, it would be now... ‘Fire!’ he roared again. There it came! A wave of fierce, senseless destruction swelled up in the closed furnace.

Michael snatched a burning torch from the hands of a frightened girl and ran to the oven door, where he wrote flaming circles in the air with his waving torch. He sang, hoarse at first, but gradually increasing in power and purity. A second torch joined his, a third. ‘Back!’ he sang in command. ‘Back!’ repeated shrill girls’ voices behind him, though they hardly knew why. Two girls came round the corner with the wounded boy stumbling between them. ‘Take him out!’ he shouted through the noise. *Dia, help that boy!* he begged. Roaring: ‘Where is Diana?’

*Later, I’m busy now, the singing is losing its power,* sounded gruffly in his mind. *Watch Diana, she’s target now.*

He handed his torch to someone and ran to the back. Diana was on her knees on the dirty floor, not responding to his calls. It was a dimly lit corner, where the furnace flue joined the chimney. A large iron shutter did not close properly. There was a disgusting stench. Without stopping, he scooped her up from the floor and ran with high jumps to the door. In his mind he called for a safe place for his sister.

*To the train cars,* he heard, a little disturbed by vague astral chatter.

*Pan?*

*The same.* The image of a grinning satyr’s head appeared before his mind’s eye.

*Are you there?* He sounded strange, as if from a great distance.

Michael took a sharp turn as he ran and flew up the stairs to the loading platform that ran alongside the whole factory.

*Here. Hand her over.* Vaguely visible in the mist, a figure shimmered on one of the flat train wagons. Michael wanted to lift Diana onto the wagon, but she clung to him in a reflex. Impatiently he pressed her face against his. *Here is Pan. He'll look after you,* he reassured her.

*NO!!!* The dryad struggled to gain control of the body, but it remained unconscious. *That is not Pan! That's an other!*

Terrified, he clasped the tense body of Diana, who was still unconscious. He had forgotten to sing! And it was dark as night here!

'Go away!' he panted. 'Go away! Go away!' Waves of horror ran up his spine. All his hairs stood on end. To his astral eye, black-grey shapes loomed up around them, materialising on the spot. Smokey shapes with an unpleasant aura floated closer. Hatred radiated towards the two human children; thirst for violence, for pain, for death and destruction plagued his unprotected heart and soul. Shrinking under the blows of rottenness dealt to him, he tried to protect his sister by projecting a blue haze around the two of them. It did not help, they were already inside. The child in his arms squirmed and squeaked. At last Michael called for help, from their guardian angels, from the messenger, from Bran, from Pan, from Dia. *Stop being afraid!* came through. *Your fear is their entrance. There we are powerless. Fill yourself with light and love, then there is no room for them.*

Huddled together, in a futile attempt to protect Diana with his body, Michael reached within himself for the core of his love for his sister. Crying, because he found it again amidst the orgy of violence and damnation in his being, he cherished the light ball. It began to grow and beat to the rhythm of his heart. Totally withdrawn into himself, he began to hum. He got some air, the pressure on his mind eased. Relieved, he wanted to take a deep breath, when a destructive attack came from all sides. He screamed, stitches in his head blinding him.

At that moment, amid the screeching of rusty wheels, a large sliding door slid open and a broad band of bright light fell on the platform. Roaring and moving beams of headlights announced the forklift truck.

Accompanied by four boys singing cheerfully, the truck came onto the loading platform, a pallet of strapped drums on its fork. Michael almost fainted. Under the pressure of the chanting and the bright light, the dark entities withdrew hatefully into black shadows, under the platform, under and behind wagons. Disappeared for the moment, but not gone.

It was only when the forklift made a turn, sweeping its headlights across the platform, that they were discovered.

'Michael!' Cries, running footsteps. 'Michael is here'

'Something has happened.'

'What's happened?'

‘Oh God, Diana’s here too, she’s unconscious!’

‘Sing!’ called a girl’s voice from the open door. ‘Keep singing!’ She set the example, the startled boys fell in.

Herman, closely followed by the twins, came running out of the door, knelt and took their heads on his lap, Lucy and Wendy sat on their knees around them.

‘What happened?’

‘Michael and Diana have fallen or something.’

‘I forgot to sing,’ mumbled Michael. With tearful eyes he looked at his father. ‘Stupid, isn’t it?’

‘What happened? What about Diana?’

‘They got me. The monsters of ill will.’ He straightened up on one elbow and looked into Diana’s still face.

‘Hey little mouse, you can wake up,’ he tried to reassure her airily. ‘The danger has passed.’

He wondered how badly she had been damaged, but she was still unconscious. *I shut her down*, came a message from the dryad in her.

*Didn’t they get a hold of you?*

*No. Something of shame came over.*

*Please explain.*

*I have been hiding. So they only attacked Diana, but she immediately became unconscious.*

*What if I had not taken her away, there?*

*Then...* a feeling of horror clouded over him. Startled, he tried to comfort the dryad. *No, don’t say anything, it’s all right.*

*We were saved her in time. You are so strong.* Admiration mixed with a feeling of being small.

*It almost killed me too.*

*Almost is not quite.*

‘Are you exhausted?’ he heard his father’s voice above him. He opened his eyes. Almost all the scouts were standing around them.

‘Hey, why aren’t you singing? Wen, show them again,’ he insisted. He gagged, swallowed until his stomach settled.

Spurred on by Wendy’s clear voice, the scouts began to sing, some even dancing with each other.

Michael struggled to his feet, his muscles aching. Apparently he had had some kind of spasm. With furrowed brows he looked around the partly lit platform. His eye caught a few rusty poles that might have lights on them.

‘See if you can switch on the outside lights, we need more light,’ he said to a couple of boys. Although he still felt weak and shaky, a sense of utter urgency energised him. ‘Paul, carry on loading with your boys. And keep singing, there are some very evil types here.’

A few of the outside lights flashed on, one flashed and went out.

The dense fog became visible, swirling in uncertain gusts of wind. They could not even see the end of the row of wagons. All sounds were muffled, even the roar of the returning forklift truck. Bran had kept his word: they were completely cut off from the outside world.

In the hour that followed, they worked like horses. One load of barrels, bags and crates after another found their way onto the wagons. Paul was a master with the forklift.

Michael, despite his nausea and headache, led a search through the complex, accompanied by loudly singing girls with bright petrol lamps. But apart from the barrels in the first shed, all the rooms were hollow and empty. There was more to be found in the office. Countless willing hands packed the administration into boxes and carried it outside. This could come in handy when they started sending the loads of chemical waste back to the senders.

The last problem was the old-fashioned telephone exchange. It was housed in a separate building, next to the transformer house.

'That is where the high voltage supply for the entire village comes in and is transformed to a lower voltage,' explained a boy.

Many wires ran into the village.

*Bran? signalled Michael. If we let the whole thing burn, can you keep these little buildings clear? After a short pause the answer came: The sylphs will do their best, but when the fire spirits are dancing, there is nothing that can stop them.*

Yes, he could imagine: once a fire had spread to a blaze, there was no stopping it.

'Okay, we're almost done here. We're going to burn the place down as soon as we get the train wagons out of the danger zone.'

As if in answer, a light breeze blew shards of fog around the two buildings. They could hear the electrical voltage crackling across the porcelain insulators, which were dripping with the condensing moisture of the air.

Stumbling with fatigue, he preceded the incessantly singing girls.

## Overwhelmed

When they returned to the loading dock, the chemical waste had all been loaded onto the wagons.

The scouts stood tired around the forklift truck; some talked, others sang softly. They relieved each other.

'Your father is outside with your sisters. Diana is a bit tired, but there's nothing wrong with her,' Maria said. Gratefully he looked at her, he just wanted to ask.

He stroked his wet hair out of his face; now it was going to matter.

'Okay, Paul, do you know how to use the forklift to push the wagons away?'

'I've already looked at the best way to do it, Miche.'

'The wind will come from the mill building and from the storage area, where the telephone exchange and the electricity house are. Those will also be spared.'

'Then we must push the wagons in that direction.'

'Is there enough room there? Or will they end up on the main track?'

They immediately went to have a look. The fog hid the rails; they could follow them for no more than about ten yards. 'I think we have enough track.'

'How many wagons do we really need to get out of the way?' asked Michael.

'What's in those last wagons behind the tankers?'

Nobody knew. It was dark over there: the lights didn't reach very far. He had forgotten what Herman had told him about it.

'Let's start. These three are separate from the tank wagons. That makes a difference. We'll push them away first,' suggested Paul.

'How do you want to do it?'

'From the platform. If we can attach something to the fork that will allow me to hook behind a wagon, I can drive them away in no time.'

In the next half hour, the boys lashed an iron beam across the fork of the forklift truck with wire from the fence. Meanwhile, the girls, still humming, singing and dancing, handed out tea and sandwiches.

Michael was just about to see how his sisters were doing when they came in dancing. Lucy called out: 'Hungry!' and grabbed a sandwich from the pile that was being held out to her by a sooted girl.

Under the excited gaze of the whole group, Paul manoeuvred the forklift until it was parallel to the platform, and hooked the iron beam behind the rear carriage end plate. Meanwhile, on each wagon, a boy released the brakes. He accelerated. With cheers, the three fully loaded wagons started moving inch by inch. Now he gave it full throttle. The improvised locomotive slowly picked up speed, emitting plumes of black smoke. At the end of the loading ramp, he stopped; the wagons continued to roll under their own kinetic energy. With grinding of iron on

iron, they entered the bend. With bated breath, they listened to what the wagons would do now they had disappeared into the mist. The resistance of the bend took a lot of energy; they heard the wagons come to a halt.

‘Far enough,’ one boy thought.

Paul was apparently of the same opinion. He came driving backwards. They made way for him as he drove further back, towards the three tank wagons. It was now easy to do the same thing. The tankers were probably full, as they would not move from their seats. The engine of the forklift stalled.

‘Are the brakes off?’

‘Yes, we’ve unscrewed them all,’ shouted voices from the fog.

‘See if the blocks have come off the wheels.’

Dark shapes jumped onto the rails. A boy called out from behind. Two girls with lamps lowered themselves onto the rails and ran to where the boy was hammering with a crowbar. ‘It won’t come off,’ he shouted. ‘Are the others loose?’

‘Eh... no, not on this side.’

‘Did you unscrew the brakes? Didn’t you tighten them right?’

‘No... Try again.’ Michael stood watching, until he remembered something.

*Bran, can you ask the iron creatures of this wagons to help?* After waiting for a long time, there was an answer, but it was interrupted by noise: *No... Others... beware...*

‘Light!’ he roared. ‘Sing! Here are some...’ His cry was drowned out by a shout. ‘Beware!’ A bang, rattle, light fell out.

‘Luckily it didn’t explode,’ gasped a startled girl, placing a petrol lamp without glass on the platform. Hands helped her up.

‘What happened?’

‘I shot out with the crowbar,’ shouted the boy from behind the carriage. You could hear that he was still in shock.

‘What do we do now?’ Paul had climbed down from the forklift and was standing next to Michael. ‘What is in these wagons, does anyone know?’

Michael, however, had an urgent feeling that they should stick together.

‘No, just stay here. Sing, brave ones, sing louder!’ Above them a lamp flashed out. It was becoming more and more uncomfortable on the wet platform, where water began to drip from the eaves. Time was running out, they were starting to lose ground.

‘Paul, you push the wagons the other way first!’ cried the boy behind the wagon. ‘Maybe the brake pads will come off. They’re under tension or something.’

Paul turned and carefully reversed.

‘Everyone pay attention,’ Michael roared. Paul turned in order to get the protruding beam on the right side.

‘Watch out!’

Too late, the moving piece of iron hit a boy in the side. He screamed and went down. Paul slammed on the brakes, startled, and the engine stalled.

‘Ouch,’ moaned the injured boy as he was carried out of the way. A bloodstain

spread through his clothes. ‘Guys, keep going!’ he cried, gasping in pain as examining hands pushed his clothes up. He had a nasty cut and was bleeding like a pig. Two girls approached with a first-aid kit.

‘Paul, start!’ ordered Michael with clenched teeth. Another one of those monsters’ nasty tricks!

Fortunately, this time too the truck started immediately. It must have been a friendly spirit creature. In response a feeling of comradeship came to him.

Well, at least something in this mess is in our good graces, he thought grumpily.

Paul finished his turn and pressed the iron bar against the tank wagon. He gave a huge thrust; the wheels screeched on the wet cement, the forklift turned askew to the edge of the platform. A resonant bang sounded just as Paul stepped on the brakes in alarm.

‘The brake pads are loose,’ the boy called from behind the carriages. Triumphant, he emerged, illuminated by the girl who had stayed with him with the only remaining petrol lamp.

At that moment the remaining lights above the loading bay began to flicker. Sparks crackled from an open iron distribution box and with a soft poof, all the lights went out.

‘Hurry up,’ Michael roared. ‘Sing, all of you, now! Everyone who is not needed come here to the fence. Paul, get those wagons out of the way!’

Agitated, he ran to the last of the three tank wagons. But there was no light left. ‘Paul!’ he shouted, ‘have someone keep the searchlight on me and come this way.’ The girl with the petrol lamp helped the others, who now only had torches. Fortunately, they did not have to go through the factory: they went around a small brick staircase. The forklift truck’s headlights were now the only illumination.

Paul turned again and reversed towards Michael, the reversing light spreading white light between the red of the rear lights. The beam of the searchlight jerked up and down, but remained focused on Michael.

Paul pressed the iron bar against the rear tank wagon. Michael had to shield himself from the screeching and moaning of invisible entities that were trying their best to stop them.

*Push, boy, Michael mentally encouraged the forklift’s spirit. Call on your colleagues from the wagons to help you. It’s also about their own lives.*

Heavy as lead, but irresistible, the wagons began to move. The engine growled louder, and now and then a wheel slipped. Foul-smelling exhaust fumes wafted around. The forklift had insufficient power to give the wagons any speed, but at least they kept rolling. Michael was mentally pushing along, and in his furious effort of will was for the moment unassailable to the opposing Others.

Paul began to sing, rhythmically. Not an elfin song, but a song that used to be sung by chain-prisoners in America, a song to make it possible to do work that is actually too heavy. The boy at the searchlight joined the singing. Michael sang along without words as he caught the simple melody.

At the end of the platform, Paul braked.

In the beams of the headlights, the tank wagons slowly disappeared into the mist. Invisible to them, they entered the curve and got stuck there. But the wagons were far enough away to be safe.

Relieved, Michael said: 'All right, Paul, they're gone. Now let's ignite the place.'

His throat hurt and he could hardly make himself understood.

He stepped onto the running board and they drove backwards, into the open door of the dark empty shed. There stood, last of all, a barrel of diesel oil with a hand pump mounted on it, the fuel for the truck. Next to it were torches.

Michael hissed when the boy wanted to jump to the ground. 'Light me up, I'll get the lot.' He pumped oil on the torches and gave them one by one to the boy by the searchlight. They lit the torches.

'Can you lift the barrel?' he wanted to ask, but his throat was screwed up. He therefore pointed to the barrel and the fork. Paul nodded, the barrel was on a pallet, so that would not be a problem. He pointed to the iron bar, which would have to be removed first.

'Oh dear!' moaned Michael and hit himself on the head. 'There are still a few wagons. Maybe we should push them up first.'

'No, we're here anyway. Let's get that barrel to the next shed first.'

Paul lowered the fork to the ground and slid the free ends under the pallet. It was not enough to lift the barrel, but it slid very well. The pallet with the barrel slid in front of the forklift truck towards the dividing door, behind which a black void opened up.

Michael walked in front of the forklift truck with a smoking torch in each hand in the searchlight that the boy was pointing at him. At the dividing door, the pallet hooked into the slot in the floor that guided the sliding door. With a crackling sound of splintering wood, the forklift stopped, the engine stalled, the boy at the searchlight fell to the ground, the barrel tipped off the suddenly stopped pallet, on top of the hand pump, which broke off, and rolled into the darkness. With a bell-like sound, a jet of diesel oil spread across the floor.

The barrel almost rolled over Michael's feet, with a jerk he burned himself and with a shout he let the torches fall into the puddle of oil, which ignited with a dark red, sooty flame.

Paul restarted the engine and shot into the safety of the shed, followed by the boy who had fallen to the ground. The fire followed the trail of oil to the barrel, which rolled up against a wall and was lying there empty. In no time, the sawmill was ablaze. Michael could not take his eyes off the spectacle. This was the ultimate act, this was to bring about the destruction of this whole evil place.

When it got too hot, he flinched, mesmerised by the dancing game of the unleashed fire creatures. In the roaring tails of fire reaching upwards and passing into black smoke, he thought he saw shapeless forms of astral monsters being sucked along.

A loud honking behind him made him look back.

Blinded by the forklift's headlights, he could see nothing, but realised he had to get out of there: flames were racing along a trail of leaked diesel oil and would envelop him in minutes.

He lifted a foot, but put it down again.

He could hardly move, everything about him was heavy as wet blankets.

The sea of fire behind him sucked in a roaring torrent of outside air, in which he struggled to stay upright. He sank to the ground into a black dejection. In the last moment of the battle he had briefly neglected his defence, fascinated as he was by the fire.

That was what they had been waiting for. They always did.

In that brief, unguarded moment, the demons caught him.

## Chapter 27

# Fire and ashes

The scouts had gone to safety outside.

They stood shivering in the fog, nervously shining electric torches around so as not to lose each other. They no longer had the energy to sing. A drizzling gloom took hold of them. What was all this about? Why did they have to work in that old factory in the middle of the night and the fog? They longed for their beds, for sunshine, for warm water to wash off the filth.

They were aware that Michael did not want to burn down the factory for nothing, and that his orders to sing and dance were to protect against... yes, against what? They had not been able to see the dark shapes behind the fire in the cauldron, they had only caught a faint shadow of the horror that Michael was fighting, a feeling that the factory was not a nice place. But that story about Others... They did realise though that there were entities around them that they could not see. Like all those forest creatures Michael spoke of. Dia, the elf woman, had also been invisible at first, just like the elves who had shown themselves once, when the president was there. But what others were...?

The forklift had entered the shed, after which it remained silent for a while. The fog was too dense to see any lights inside and it muffled all sounds.

They were startled when the truck tore out of the wide doors with the engine roaring and the reverse signal beeping shrilly. Panicking they waved their torches to show where they stood. Bright red lights flashed as the truck braked.

‘Paul! Maria ran up to him.

‘The factory’s on fire,’ he shouted, ‘the oil drum fell over.’

‘Where is Michael?’

‘Inside, or outside, on the platform. I couldn’t see a thing.’

Herman handed Diana over to the twins’ care and trotted closer.

‘Michael! Where is he?’

‘Maybe still inside, I didn’t see him again.’

‘Inside? And it burns, you say!’

They looked, for a moment paralysed by uncertainty, at the dark spot where the factory must be in the mist. There! A red glow spread through the fog, their faces became vaguely visible in the glow.

‘We must get him out!’ cried Herman and rushed inside.

‘Wait!’ cried Paul. ‘I’m coming with you! With the forklift truck, it has lights!’ But Herman could no longer hear him.

Paul climbed into the driver’s seat, accelerated and drove into the shed, careful not to cause any accidents – there was hardly any visibility inside because of the fog, with dark clouds of smoke mingling with it.

Someone next to him operated the searchlight; a quick glance to the side: Maria!

At the end of the shed, a red rectangle of blazing, sooty flames shimmered like an entrance to hell. Thick, acrid smoke made them cough. Where could Michael be? Had he gone outside, to the platform?

A dark shadow passed in front of them: Herman. Paul shifted gears and reversed, it was getting too hot. He made a turn. The flashing headlights illuminated a black heap on the ground.

‘Michael!’ roared Paul at the same time as Maria. She jumped off and rushed towards the bundle. At the same moment Herman appeared in the beam.

Together they lifted him up and disappeared through the door to the platform, coughing.

Relieved, Paul sped out of the shed. Outside, he parked the forklift far enough away from the factory to be safe. Above the sound of the engine idling – he left it on just to be sure – they could hear an increasing roar and bang. The mist blew around them in the direction of the blazing fire, the surroundings becoming visible in shades of red and orange. Paul could see two figures coming down the ramp; the one in front was Herman, carrying Michael, behind him was Maria. The thinning mist hid still the fire from the people in the village. The flames were spreading; a loud crackling sound and a rash of sparks indicated that a roof had collapsed somewhere. Shortly afterwards, the front shed was also ablaze. They staggered on, the heat was enormous. The mist had already completely evaporated around the factory, and they had a better and better view of the tongues of fire, dozens of yards high, twisting upwards out of the wooden roofs like giant dancing djinns, driven and stirred up by gusts of wind that seemed to come from all sides.

Another roof collapsed, its sparks carried high above the fire, where they were obscured in a plume of black smoke. Behind them a few lights appeared, voices shouted. The fire sucked up more and more fog; the village became visible gradually. From where they stood, they saw houses and slopes slowly come into view, illuminated in red. In a short time, the entire population ran out and stood silently at the fence, staring at the fire. More and more parts of the factory collapsed, rains of sparks shot upwards. The burning skeleton of the beams stood out black against the blazing fire.

After a while fire engines came from Jablun.

The firefighters were wise enough to let the factory burn; keeping only the surroundings wet, so that the fire would not spread.

More and more beam structures collapsed under showers of sparks and flaming fire. The firefighters sprayed the two wagons that were still standing against the buffer block, but this was not really necessary.

Only after hours did the fire diminish. When Paul and Maria returned from the boarding-house, where Diana and Michael were being cared for by the landlady,

of the factory remained only red-hot coals, smoking piles of ashes and, in the middle, a leaning, blackened hulk: the iron boiler, distorted by the heat, on its pulverised foundation. Together with a few other curious people, they witnessed how the factory chimney slowly split open vertically and collapsed with a thunderous roar, throwing up enormous clouds of ash, dust and sparks. It was the last convulsion of the ruined factory. All that was left were burnt beams, with a few flames here and there and columns of grey smoke everywhere.

Tired, sooty and smelly, the scouts retreated to their camp, where a line formed for the shower. They made soup, talked about it, cried. They had accomplished something that the previous day they could not have dreamed of ever doing.

It was already getting light when the first ones tried to sleep. The images of the gaping maw of the boiler, the lights going out one after the other, the unmentionable threat that they had barely managed to keep at bay by singing, all this kept them from sleeping or woke them up. Girls and boys howled at the top of their lungs, bellowing out their pent-up fears and seeking comfort and protection from each other.

Some decided not to go to sleep at all and started to make a big breakfast when the soup was finished. But there was no bread, it was still too early for the first train from Jablun. Not wanting to be caught out, they decided to make pancakes.

When Herman and his four children passed by on their way to their own camp, they were irresistibly attracted by the smells of coffee, pancakes and fried eggs.

The scouts watched with concern as Michael, supported by his father, came stumbling along. He hardly knew where he was and looked for a place near the fire. Like a cold old man, he stretched out his hands. Someone had washed him, but there were still black circles around his bloodshot eyes.

‘What is the matter with Michael?’ was questioned. It was not clear to anyone what had happened in the last few minutes before the fire broke out.

‘I don’t know,’ Herman said. ‘When we found him, he was lying unconscious on the ground. He didn’t seem to be injured, but he couldn’t say anything yet.’

Only after being nudged a few times did Michael regain his senses enough to accept the cup of tea that was offered to him. With small sips he began to drink.

The spicy liquid awakened his spirits; gradually, the suffocating smoke in his mind cleared. He became aware of the warmth emanating from the people next to him. He looked up; his father had his arm around him and looked at him. On his other side, Wendy was snuggled up to him.

‘Are you here again?’ Herman asked softly. ‘Tell me how you feel. Are you in pain? Is there anything else we can do for you? When you came to, you had no appetite for the boarding house food. Perhaps you would like something now, a pancake or something?’

Michael’s head looked like a reverberating, empty building, his throat hurt, his eyes burned.

‘No, no food, thirsty,’ he whispered, barely audible.

‘Are you alright?’ Someone handed him more tea, which he drank greedily.

‘I feel like a house that has been ransacked by thieves,’ Michael croaked hoarsely. ‘It’s as if I have nothing left of myself.’

‘Is Diana like that too?’ asked Lucy, who was watching everything with observant eyes. She pointed wordlessly to the sleeping child in her arms.

‘The same as me,’ replied Michael. ‘Robbed empty.’

‘What do you mean by that anyway?’

He shrugged dejectedly. ‘I can’t explain. They have been in my mind and taken away all the beautiful things.’

‘Who them?’

With a pained look, he turned to his father and to Diana’s pale little face.

‘Ugly... lumps, gore thoughts...’ He shivered uncontrollably. ‘Dirty snails crawl into your brain, everything is dust and ashes...’

A painful silence fell. The scouts did not want to hear this; they just wanted to be cheered up from their own nightmarish thoughts. What Michael said evoked too much fear and revulsion in them.

‘Where is Dia? Can’t she help you?’

He pointed to the smouldering remains of the factory.

‘She’s cleaning up.’

Maria looked at him questioningly.

‘We have reduced the place to rubble,’ he explained, in a slightly more forceful voice, ‘and the void has been plugged for the time being, but a lot has been destroyed, there are many innocent victims, many rogue elementals have gone astray.’ As he spoke, his power increased. ‘I know very little about it yet, but Dia told me that the wooden trusses still had the original fauns in them. Their trees remained in one piece and were not cut into planks. These wood creatures are released when the wood burns, but sometimes they are still trapped in the unburned remains. That is why air beings and fire spirits keep the fire going until all the wood is consumed.’

The scouts looked at each other. They had not thought that there was so much involved.

‘There is hot water again,’ Paul reported. ‘If you like you can take a shower.’

Michael stripped off his soiled clothes without saying and walked to the shower, followed by Lucy and Diana, who was still half asleep. Wendy stayed with her father, she hadn’t got that dirty.

While they had their bath together, towels and spare clothing were brought.

Clean and dressed in the borrowed clothes, they sat together again.

‘What’s going to happen now?’ asked Maria.

Herman pointed at his tired children. ‘They are going to sleep. I want to ask you to take good care of them, because I have to go back to the village. We will clear the remains as soon as possible. I have to take samples first and have them analysed. Whether the ashes and rubble still contain toxins,’ he explained when

he saw the questioning faces around him.

‘Oh, those have all been burnt or changed,’ Michael said. ‘The fire has been very effective. Even the cement floors are pulverised by the heat.’

‘Is there anything else we can do? For you, perhaps?’ asked someone.

Michael shrugged his shoulders, but Herman knew something.

‘Do keep watch. The commander has been called back with his men and now there is no one left to guard the forest. Can you make sure that at least along the path no one enters the forest that doesn’t belong there?’

‘But what should we do if we encounter someone? We can’t forbid anyone to enter the forest.’

‘Hm, no, we can’t.’ Herman scratched his hair, which was all tangled and full of ash.

‘But nobody can forbid you to walk up with someone, can they? They probably wouldn’t dare do anything if a whole group of singing scouts were following them,’ Lucy proposed.

‘Yes,’ her father chuckled, ruffling her still wet curls caressingly. He could see it all. ‘That’s a good idea. But please be careful, they could be ruthless gangsters. Better send a quick messenger to the village.’

After thanking them for their breakfast, they walked on to the little camp on the Forest Meadow. Herman put his children to bed. He was rewarded for this with fierce embraces, tears and an immense feeling of satisfaction. Although he could not see them and still could not quite believe in them, he asked the nature spirits to take good care of his children. Feeling this was the safest place on earth, he made his way back to the village.

Michael did not go to sleep; he would be defenceless against new invasions of demons, even against his memories. Shuddering, he crawled out of his tent. Diana apparently had the same thought: she was already outside her tent.

‘May I come with you?’ she begged.

‘Yes, little mouse, it’s all right if we go together.’

They kept the unpleasant experiences of their astral occupation to themselves, knowing that the other had gone through the same thing.

Hand in hand, they walked towards the secret passage, the branch of which moved aside without having to ask.

In the forest square the stag was waiting for them. It saluted and went ahead, up a wide game trail. As in a dream, they walked and walked, until they realised they were alone. Soon the forest thinned out and the heavy deciduous trees gave way to scattered pines, firs, spindly birches and ancient, ramified rowan bushes. The open canopy allowed the early sun to reach the forest floor almost unobstructed.

At a little spring they quenched their thirst.

When they emerged above the last trees, they turned to look at the view over

the wide valley, which was filled to the edges with mist. A dark column of smoke betrayed where the remains of the factory still smouldered.

They climbed on. Thanks to their light weight, it took them little effort. The narrow mountain goat track they were following became stony; they made their way carefully so as not to hurt their bare feet. The trail dissolved between the rocks and they climbed up the steeper slope at their own pace, to where the blue sky beckoned above the sharp edge of the ridge.

As they approached the top, an even higher ridge loomed further on.

At the highest point, they sat down.

Their goal lay in the inaccessible valley between the two ridges.

Diana saw the hidden valley for the first time.

Michael pointed to the small stream with Dia's willow towering over the other trees. They basked in the hot rays of the sun and let cool breaths of wind play around their bare bodies. The contrast sent shivers down their spines.

In the Bran valley behind them, meanwhile all the mist had dissolved. Above the burnt down factory next to the railway, there was a vertical, grey column of smoke, which only dispersed high into the sky. People could not be seen from this distance, but the pushed-out wagons were clearly visible at the same place where they had stopped of their own accord. Two red blocks were presumably fire engines.

Now that they looked down on the result of their daredevilry, a kind of satisfaction settled in their empty minds. They knew from each other what the other felt: there was no need for any verbal intercourse. For a long time they sat there, far above the din of the people, in the bright, warming light and the clear, cool air. Dreaming, they allowed their stained minds to be healed by the purity on the mountaintop.

The sun had already passed its zenith when they rose to descend into the hidden valley. Michael had regained so much of his life force that he would have liked to descend in great leaps, but Diana could not. She was not yet as thinned as her brother. He helped her over the steepest parts of the descent. Lower down the slope they could go faster over the thin sod of mountain pastures without hurting their feet. The scattered mountain goats probably regarded them as some kind of awkward fellow. The animals just continued eating after looking up for a moment.

At a spring they drank a few gulps of ice-cold water and continued on their way to the long strip of trees that grew along the stream at the bottom of the valley. They were expected there.

## Chapter 28

# Elemental deliberation

Dia's huge willow tree towered above the other willows, the alders, birches and ash trees.

She was already there. Like a fairy in a fairy tale, she sat with her wings folded on a thick root of the willow, which had been washed free by the flowing water.

Rejoicing, Michael sent a compact stream of love towards her, which she received with joy, mixed with a touch of seriousness.

She thanked him with an astral embrace. There was no time for more: simultaneously the dazzling image of the messenger angel became visible.

Diana hid her face against Michael's belly; he felt her tense muscles and rapid heartbeat. The apparition saluted and waited.

Just when Diana dared to look, a point of light descended from the light sky at great speed towards them, revealing to be the landscape angel Bran. Diana knew him from the images she had received via her dryad, although his actual appearance was overwhelming.

*Welcome to my home*, he greeted them. *You got there before me. We are waiting for Pan. May I introduce you to Water, the spring nymph who governs this stream. She is called... murmuring sounds, sparkles of light and the taste of cool water, ...but we call her Water now, because she represents that as an element here.*

It was no surprise for them that a mountain goat came up, nibbled on some twigs here and there and moved its head up and down a few times as a greeting.

*Hello everyone*, Pan said, *here we are again. I had something to do earlier on.*

A breath of cool wind. *Goodbye, all.* A fresh feeling came over Michael and Diana, which they knew to translate as: *You cannot see me, but I am the sky spirit who helped you last night with fog and a well-aimed wind. It was a good job for us, spectacular, and a truly brave act by you, children of men.*

*Greetings ...* Michael suspected that Bran mentioned a name, but a name that his brain expressed not in words, but in something musical. A slight vibration under their feet. He understood that it had to be an earth creature.

*Yes, human child, you have felt it well. I am Stone.* It was a concept projected into his mind with great self-awareness, with the sound and hardness of rocks touching while moving.

*Now only Fire*, said Bran. Just before Michael's amazed eyes, Dia picked up a glass sample jar from the ground and opened the metal lid. A thin wisp of smoke came out.

*I have brought Fire in this little coal from the big fire. Handy, such a pot, I got it from your father when I was at the fire place with him*, she smiled at Michael.

*Fire, welcome, you have done your duty well*, greeted Bran.

*Hello everyone, it's good to be together.*

The voice of fire was more visible than audible in their minds.

*Howi, did Wind, how we danced together!*

*Michael, Diana, we have called you here, not least to honour the courage you have shown,* the messenger angel began in a serious tone. *Especially you, Diana, thanks to your quick intervention no human child was lost, there behind the steam boiler.*

Michael was startled. While the others remained silent, Diana gave him a detailed account of how she and her dryad were able to prevent that the boy who had closed the chimney valve was killed by the demons of fear and hate gathered there.

*His heart had already stopped,* she said. *He had already died of fright when we arrived. That made it easier for us to save him, because the creatures rushed out of him to attack me. The other Diana could shoot into the boy's mind, as you did to her when I was choking, remember, and restart his heart. It happened so fast that the boy doesn't even know he's been dead.*

*So you and your dryad are working together now,* was Michael's admiring reaction.

*Yes, we are a fine team.*

*I didn't know it was so dangerous in that corner,* he continued contritely. *Otherwise I wouldn't have let that boy go.*

*I would like to add that the fire has meant a lot to me,* Stone interrupted their conversation with a certain impatience. *It was a pleasure to be able to undermine that whole human construction together with Fire. The collapse of the chimney was the crowning glory of our work. We will have fun with it for a long time. It's also a relief to have been able to let this contaminated crust burst from me. Concrete is a worthless human product; it has now been thoroughly pulverised.*

*I could not get hot enough to free the iron spirit of the cauldron,* Fire announced, with a flickering that indicated regret.

*That is a pity, but at least he has been purified by your heat.* Stone sounded like big boulders crunching together, his way of expressing disgust for the Others.

*I've heard from Dia that we should cut the kettle into pieces and have it melted down,* Michael modestly suggested.

*That would be best, yes,* grumbled Stone.

*Yes, in blast furnaces we are hot enough,* waved Fire.

*Is there more to be done?* asked Michael. He suspected that this meeting was actually called for that purpose. *I mean, by humans?*

*Yes,* said Bran, *but first let's talk about what you were going to do anyway, like cleaning the bed. The factory area is now added to that. It needs to be cleared and planted.*

*The river needs to be cleaned very quickly,* murmured the spring nymph. *Or am I speaking out of turn here?* If water could blush with embarrassment, it would feel like steam; Michael marvelled at the feeling the source nymph was giving off. She was a very small creature compared to the two Angels and the Nature God, and very timid by nature.

No, speak up, that's why we invited you to this meeting, Bran reassured her.

Thank you. Yes, I speak now for Water, not only for my own source. In caves deep under these mountains, my water and that from the valley meet in large underground lakes. There we have been able to let all the toxins settle, so that it can be embedded in crystals by earth beings.

But we have been setting up the cleansing operation for some time, so what has changed? Michael knew by now how elemental beings and spirit beings continue to beat around the bush when they are not allowed to give unsolicited information or predict the future.

The valley is not yet secure, began the messenger angel.

No, Bran agreed. The riverbed will remain a weak spot as long as pollution disturbs the field. We do our best to reduce the permeability, but **others** keep slipping through.

There is another problem with it, said the spring nymph with concern. There is no longer a governor for the stretch from the mill to the underground lakes. The old one has been annihilated.

Can't the nixe from the upper reaches take this on? suggested the messenger.

No, it has been terribly confused by the change in the water since our friend Michael and our friend Johan dammed the inflow of the Iboc, said Bran. The nixe has been in retreat for some time, the water is now only managed by its subordinates.

Will there have to be appointed a new governor for the lower river then? asked Michael. How does that work?

Relieved that the human boy had asked the right question, the messenger angel explained. Elemental beings can grow towards more important tasks. When they have reached a certain maturity, they are appointed, you might say, as guardian spirits by higher spirit beings or angels. Clothed with responsibility. But for some time now we angels have been withdrawing from supervision. That appointing is now becoming the task of mankind.

But... how? Which people?

Humans like you and Diana. Or like Janos and Johan, Pan added. Humans who are aware of us and who understand the responsibility.

But I don't know anything about it! Michael did not feel capable at all for such things as management and spirit beings appointing..

No, that's the problem, sighed the messenger angel. The contact between the elemental world and humans and between angels and humans has never been so dramatically bad.

In regions with a western culture then, Pan brought in the middle. There are many people around the world who work with us, who are not yet affected by the disbelief that the Others spread. I am still honoured all over the world, under different names, it is true, but the rites are focused on my task.

I understand that, said Michael, who was becoming a little impatient because of all the digressions, but what can Diana and I do about it? Should we ask the spring nymph of the brook at the scouting camp to manage the lower course? If it is really clean, of course, because she is very particular with cleanliness. But at least we know her.

*That thought occurred to us,* said the messenger angel; he seemed to take pleasure in Michael's insight.

Michael sat down and put his head in his hands. It became all very complicated, especially since he had so little knowledge. The powerlessness of the angels shocked him. In his imagination, such lofty beings should be almost omnipotent. But time and again, it turned out that they were not, did not want to be, or could not be. He felt rather abandoned. When he realised this, the weight he had to carry became unbearable.

'Oh no,' he groaned. All the misery inflicted by mankind, all the pain and destruction presented daily on the TV news and in the newspapers to the numb world's population, paraded before his eyes. This was far too much, far too heavy, for a boy of sixteen; for a hundred boys, or girls of sixteen, for a thousand young people...

Even for a million? Could a million young people liberate the world?

'What should I do?' he asked himself aloud. *What can I do? I don't know anything!*

*Oh yes, Dia's dry message came to him. You know a lot already, I know quite a lot too, and what we don't know, we can always ask the great ones here, who will help us.*

*Was it you?*

*What?*

*Did you say something about a million youths?*

*No? What do you mean?*

*No, never mind. I thought someone said something to me in innerspeech. But what you said, yes, that's true, I sometimes forget: what I don't know, I can ask.*

Michael found it strange that he had not thought of it himself, even though he had mentioned it to someone else not long ago. It must have been because of that unfamiliar voice.

With some difficulty he brought his thoughts back to the problem of the polluted river. A question immediately sprang to mind. *Can Wind and Bran together arrange for a few more such downpours as we had a while ago? It would save us a lot of work.*

Excitedly, he stood up and began to show what he had in mind with gestures: 'Look, if it starts raining, we'll all go and sweep at the same time. You know, then we don't have to wait for the adults with all their procedures, or for the new lock to be ready.'

*We can handle a downpour,* Wind brought in. *You can get the first one tomorrow. A lot of heat is building up. It has to be distributed.*

*Can you direct those showers too? I mean, make it rain only in a certain place?*

*A heavy shower does not, it has very strong wind beings, often fire beings as well, that seek their own way.*

*Where do you want this shower?* Bran asked.

*Especially on the lower reaches. If it only rains there, we won't have a strong current*

*from above. Then the loosened silt can quietly wash into the middle of the bed and from there into the caves.*

*Yes, that's a good plan, said Bran.*

*May I perhaps introduce something?* the spring nymph asked timidly. *Last time it rained so much water, the nixes in the caves had to work hard to calm it so that the silt could settle. If too much water comes at once, I'm afraid that won't work. All those new undine's that are created with the rain are far too excited.*

*No, we must not have too much water,* Michael agreed, *for then more harm than good will be done. Can you arrange for a downpour that is not too heavy and does not last too long?*

*You only have to ask,* Pan mused.

When he saw Michael's horrified face, he laughed and the mountain goat let out a loud yelp. *You are right, boy. Ask for everything you can.*

*We burden you with a responsibility that we cannot take ourselves. But yes, there is no other way; only a human being can unmake what other human beings have made.*

*We can agree on that,* Michael heard from all sides. His gaze wandered and he took in each of the visible creatures around him. Imperceptibly, the circle had expanded to include countless grey and brown stone creatures, brightly coloured woodland elves, fauns of the trees along the brook and there was a coming and going of floral fairies, who divided their attention between their task at the budding flowers in the alpine meadows and the gathering around the old willow tree. Michael felt that he was being stared at when the willow caught his eye.

*I go to him when I want to rest,* Dia said, *caressing the bark with a loving look in her eyes. Here I can be Willow for a while. He is an old friend of mine and the father/mother of the willows around here. This is where I hid when that picture was taken of me.*

He felt that the tree and Dia were close relatives in a way that he would never know, even with Diana. A human being was, by his free will, an individual, connected, it is true, by ties of love with his family and loved ones, but autonomous, sovereign. As far he was concerned that love could also be for animals, or objects, or for a garden, or even for an entire region, he realised, a home, his own village or a sunset.

The space he discovered within himself dizzied him.

He held Diana, she was his sister, his comrade in saving the Elfswood and Dia's best friend. And the only other human in the midst of this illustrious company in the hidden valley, perched high between two mountains.

*Tomorrow rain,* Pan said goodbye and strolled away. The mountain goat joined his flock and was a goat again.

The gathering dissolved, until only Dia, Diana and Michael were left. Tired by the many impressions, they took a nap in the sun, beside the babbling and jangling brook, which splashed them now and then.

## Intruders

‘Come on, let’s go back,’ Michael yawned, got up and pulled Diana to her feet.  
*Dia?*

*I’m staying, dear, I’ll join you tonight.*

A vague disappointment mingled with a rush of expectation.

Dia chuckled in his head and Diana joined her. Apparently he hadn’t tuned his ‘transmission frequency’ to Dia properly. He laughed along with them like a peasant with a toothache. He was reluctant to do all the things he had been told to do.

*I would only distract you, Dia laughed. When I’m around, all you think about is you know what.*

‘Well,’ he growled, ‘there’s nothing wrong with that, is there?’

With a graceful leap and a few flaps of her wings, she was with him, embracing him with her arms and wings. Gladly he squeezed her.

*Go now, you don’t have much time left.*

It took some self-control to lower his surging excitement, but the leaden task he had just been given drew him back down to earth. Hand in hand with Diana, he set off. They climbed up to the ridge, where they stopped for a moment. The Valley of Bran lay silent and peaceful in the clear afternoon light.

‘If only we could fly like Dia,’ said Diana. ‘Now we have to walk the whole way back. She can’t lift me can she?’

‘No, I think she would have offered to do so if it were.’

It was easier than she had thought. Guided by Michael’s steady hand and brief instructions, she dared to jump with him from stone to stone, from flat spot to flat spot. In this way they bounced down the long slope like jumping mountain goats.

In the forest they simply walked; it was too dense for them to jump far and she had become quite tired. Hand in hand, they wandered from one game trail to the next. While Michael walked beside her in deep thought, Diana, in perfect union with her dryad, extended her attention until the whole forest was embraced by their combined consciousness. She was informed of every change by earth beings, wood elves and fauns. However, she could not keep her attention for long on the constant flow of information. Her thoughts whirled in all directions.

*I am not very good at paying attention, she apologised.*

*Yes, I notice that. It’s really bothering me. I’m becoming too much like you,* was the dryad’s surly response. *I am infected by your free will.*

*Free will? I am only seven, you know. Little children don’t have much to want.*

*Yes, you were always very docile, so I could just keep on working like I had always done, but it is becoming increasingly difficult.*

*You become, we become I should say, increasingly independent. That is because of you.*

*Yes, I think so too, but I have no idea how it can be done. I have no free will?* The dryad was genuinely disturbed by things happening that she did not understand. That alone was disturbing: before she merged with Diana, she had never faced uncertainty or doubt. She fully understood what she had to do. In fact, she personified that knowledge.

What was beyond simply did not exist for her. She received instructions from beings that did have larger overview and she gave instructions to her subordinates.

But now she doubted; she had learned to be afraid, she suspected vast areas of knowledge outside her limited world and she had come to love the human being she lived in.

*You make me strong because you know so much about the forest, Diana replied in response to the dryad's thoughts. And you often help me when I don't understand what is happening; because you are much older you know more. I am beginning to understand more and more.*

The dryad breathed something like a sigh of resignation. *Because I am in you, you can understand much more than a human child would otherwise, and because you become so wise, I get into trouble since your human wisdom also comes to me.*

All the same time during this back and forth conversation the dryad kept an eye on her forest and detected intruders.

Diana immediately signalled it to Michael, who got a picture of where and how many.

*Are there any scouts around?*

He knew that the forest creatures could tell who was walking in their realm.

*Not in my forest,* was the short answer.

*Shall we go and see who they are?*

Diana found it a little scary, but had full confidence in her brother and in the power of the forest, over which her companion held sway.

They followed the instructions of the forest and set a course that should cross the route of the intruders. They gave in completely and became almost invisible and inaudible. Mists grew between the trunks and bushes; slashes of sunlight still illuminated a branch here and there. It became dark; leaves began to drip with moisture. The two were shrouded in veils of mist and deceptive patches of light.

At a warning they stopped, hidden in the dense foliage. They heard creaking in the distance, which was fast approaching. It were four men, creeping one after the other along a game trail. Nervously the fellows peered around from under dark balaclava's. The one in front had an axe in one hand and a pistol in the other; the three behind them carried bags and ropes. They did not come here with good intentions, Michael signalled in alarm.

*Where would they go?*

The dryad, who apparently could also act independently of her human com-

panion, immediately answered him. *They are on their way to the camp by the beech.*

*How would they know the way?* he wondered.

*They are making a huge detour through the forest. They have a device that shows the way,* was the answer. It seemed that he was in direct contact with all the fauns, dryads, goblins and woodland elves that moved around the intruders in the forest. A GPS navigator of course! Michael understood.

They let the four men pass. At a fork in the road they stopped and consulted their device. *Can we disturb that thing?*

*We can make the man who carries it stumble,* the dryad said. *Maybe it will fall apart.*

*Yeah, you better hurry, they know the way too well. They must have the coordinates, they'll be at the camp in no time.*

The dryad had already reacted at the first sign of approval and issued a stream of instructions.

Diana and Michael crept up behind the men, but kept enough distance not to be visible or audible. Although they could not be seen or heard by normal people even from a yard away, their fear of discovery kept them at a greater distance.

Before them they heard suppressed cursing. A man's voice hissed for silence, another grumbled in Slovak: 'I'm stuck in these damn brambles. Where has the path gone?'

'We have to go that way,' another insisted. 'But where has the path gone?'

'Make a new path. We're nearly there. And shut up!'

'As if chopping doesn't make any noise.'

A sound of blows, rustling of leaves and crackling. More cursing. 'I'm stuck!'

Diana and Michael retreated. The voices sounded like they were right in front of them. More hacking noises. Clanging. 'Hey, I lost my axe. Stupid brambles!'

A ferocious rustling, a heavy crackling, choked wailing. 'Look out!' More crackling. It looked like a herd of fighting elephants.

*Give them room to flee,* Michael ordered the woodland creatures. He did not realise that he was doing that, but it worked immediately. *They must be able to find a way out, back out of the forest; otherwise we will be stuck here with them.*

*Then we have to get out of here,* Diana said. They went round the noise with a large curve. They had succeeded in dropping the man with the device, but they did not know whether it had broken. At Michael's request, the woodland creatures opened a way for the four intruders in the direction from which they had come. Whether they wanted to or not, the men had no choice but to take the path of least resistance. They had forgotten their goal: they knew only one urge: to get out of that damned forest!

Messages from woodland elves and fauns kept coming incessantly. The dryad translated everything for her human companions, who were thus kept informed of the retreat of the men, who seemed to have lost each other.

Only when it was clear that the threat had been averted and the intruders were led out of the forest, Michael and Diana dared to go further.

‘What are we going to do now?’ wanted Diana to know.

‘I don’t know.’ Michael sat down with his head in his hands.

‘I’m getting so tired of it,’ he complained. ‘Every day something terrible happens. It’s as if all the evil in the world is coming at us.’

‘Like those men?’

‘Yes. We just managed to save ourselves from those monsters in the factory and now it’s a bunch of gangsters who want to kidnap us. I am so tired of it.’

‘Yes.’

‘Didn’t you see? Tourists don’t sneak through a forest with guns and bags.’

Diana put a hand on his arm. ‘Don’t get angry, Miche,’ she begged.

‘No,’ he sighed, ‘that doesn’t help either. You’re right, sweet sister.’

She preferred to hear that. ‘What are we going to do now?’

‘Are those guys all out of the woods?’

She shook her head. ‘No, three of them are, but one has walked the wrong way and is wandering around somewhere near where we just passed.’

‘If he gets lost there, we’ll never get rid of him. I don’t like the idea of such a rogue wandering freely in the forest.’

‘Shall I have him caught?’

‘Yes, go ahead. Then we’ll have the police pick him up tomorrow. A night in the woods will do him good. Let the fauns and gnomes take care of him,’ he said with malicious delight.

‘No, that’s mean,’ Diana protested. ‘You mustn’t frighten him; you must make him nice. Then he’ll stop being a crook.’

‘How do you make a gangster lovable?’

Michael regretted his unfriendly thoughts a little.

‘Well, by showing him fairies and beautiful elves. He’ll dream about them and then want to have sex with them...’ she chuckled, more lustfully than you’d expect from a seven-year-old girl.

‘And then?’

‘Well, then the fairies tell him that he has to become very nice and be good to plants and trees and animals...’

‘And not to mention other people.’

‘Other people, and then of course he’ll get a lovely wife who will set him on the right path and marry him,’ she romanticised.

‘Well, I suppose so,’ he chuckled. ‘Fantast. Come on, let’s go and see the twins.’

Without further ado they reached the tent under the beech.

To their amazement, a whole bunch of scouts were searching around. Wendy and Lucy were also searching the ground.

‘Have you lost something?’ cried Michael.

‘Miche, Di,’ the girls shouted in unison. ‘Where have you been? Where is Dia?’

‘We had an appointment up in the mountains, with a water nymph and stone and sky creatures and Pan and...’

They sat down together and told each other their story.

When they had recovered from their surprise, Lucy told them that the scouts had come to warn them that strangers had been spotted and seemed to be heading for the forest. And that they were currently looking for a necklace that Wendy had lost.

‘Oh, it was found by an earthling! He’s hidden it under a tree root. He hopes that you’ll forget it. They are fond of gold and silver and precious stones.’

‘Well, I’d like to have it back,’ said Wendy, bemused.

‘Perhaps we could give him something else?’ suggested Lucy. ‘We’ve got some chocolate-covered biscuits, would he like them?’

Diana clapped her hands happily. ‘Just put it in front of the tree, and tomorrow your necklace will be next to it.’

‘Won’t he eat the biscuit then?’

Diana didn’t know how to explain it and looked to her brother for help.

‘They only take in the essence of food,’ Michael remembered Dia’s explanation. ‘The taste and the smell and the... eh, the life force so to speak.’

‘So the biscuit just stays there?’

‘Yes, the rest of it, you could say. The matter of the biscuit remains unchanged on the face of it, but still all the valuable stuff is gone.’

‘Then can we still eat the biscuit?’

‘I wouldn’t do it,’ Michael laughed. ‘Because they don’t digest matter, they don’t need to defecate and urinate. But for them the biscuit that remains is something like what is poo for us. Only animals that eat poo can have it.’

‘Like mice and squirrels?’

‘They don’t eat poo, I’m thinking more like woodlice and worms and stuff...’

‘Oh dear!’

## Chapter 30

# Aftermath

At that moment Herman arrived, followed by Maria and Paul, both laden with food and drink. They were received with cheers.

After the sumptuous meal, Herman took Michael for a walk together.

'Listen, Miche, there's been a lot of trouble, and not just because of the fire,' he said. 'Luckily, nobody can quite put a finger on what happened last night. At first, people thought the mafia had set the factory on fire, but no one can make sense of it. Especially since the wagons with chemical waste had been driven out of the way. Fortunately, I haven't heard anyone make a connection between your presence on the factory premises and the whole situation.'

'That doesn't sound wrong, Dad. Then why do you look so worried?'

'I...ll tell you in a minute. Everything and everyone is in turmoil. But first I'll tell you what happened after we left the factory. When the fire brigade had ascertained that the telephone exchange, the transformer house and the railway with the wagons were not at risk, they just kept the area wet.'

'How...?'

'I told them not to extinguish the fire; they understood that. The better everything burns, the less we have to clean up. The police from Jablun came together with the fire brigade, but as Olga didn't want to report arson, they left.'

'Then everything went well, didn't it? Or have you saved the bad news for last?'

'Bad, bad,' Herman sputtered. 'No bad things have happened yet because it's too early for that. But you can count on it that there will be trouble. We don't know what the owners will do, nor the municipality of Jablun. We don't know what the mafia will do at all. It is usually quite unpleasant I am assured. That's why there's been such a massive standoff. Olga and I expect that they will try something next night, because there will be no one left to stand guard. We have decided not to inform the police; Olga does not trust them. We have to keep our wits about us. As long as you're in the forest, you're safe enough, I've seen. But the rest of the village and the scout camp are unprotected.'

'Listen, Dad, we did have some visitors in the forest.' He hadn't wanted to tell Herman so as not to make him more anxious, but he thought it was important for him to hear it now.

'Visit? Who from?' asked Herman in surprise.

Michael elaborately told about the four gangsters in the forest.

'So it's true!' shouted Herman. 'I had thought about it,' he confessed, 'but I did not really expect that they would actually try to kidnap you. It scares me, you know. They could apparently use their GPS navigator to track right through the field and the forest.'

‘But it also proved that the forest can adequately protect us,’ Michael said with a certain pride.

‘Yes, it has. That Diana can do all that,’ said Herman. ‘But we can’t go on like this, can we? One day an action of these gangsters will claim victims.’

‘That’s why I’m so insistent that we shut down everything that has to do with money,’ Michael said in a decided tone. ‘That way you take away any reason for those crooks to interfere.’

‘I know you’re right,’ Herman said a bit depressed. ‘I hope that the other activists are convinced now as well. And that they will listen to you better in the future.’

‘That would make a lot of difference,’ Michael agreed laconically. ‘Especially with all the things we still have to do.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well...’ At this Michael told at length about the consultation that Diana and he had with the angels, Pan and some elementals. ‘You see,’ he concluded his argument, which was heard by Herman with a rising astonishment, ‘that I have quite a lot to do and that I have been made responsible for the whole course of events.’

‘But... That’s too crazy, isn’t it?’ burst out Herman. ‘This... this, you can’t... A boy of sixteen...’

‘Dad, it’s the way it is. I seem to be the most appropriate person. Don’t forget Dia, thanks to her I can be who I am. And there is Diana with her dryad. We’ll work it out. But I need your help with that.’

‘Okay, Miche, you’ll get it. What do you want me to do?’

‘I’ll explain later. I’d like to hear first what you wanted to tell me but didn’t.’

‘Yes, I did want to say something. Olga and I have been inquiring, because we want to rent some of those empty houses, but the owner says he has sold them.’

‘Who is that, then?’

‘You’ll never believe it: the owner of the van you’ve eh... borrowed.’

‘Him? Then who did he sell them to?’

‘He won’t say. It seems to have happened recently.’

‘That’s strange. But aren’t there more empty houses? The workers’ dwellings at the factory?’

‘Yes, I thought so too. But it turns out that they are not part of the transaction. We seem to have bought only the factory site with the mill, the dam and the mill canal. All the other sites, and there are quite a few, have been sold to someone else.’

‘To whom then?’

‘Miche, don’t forget the factory people are probably part of organised crime. I think they were very keen to sell us contaminated parts of their property. It all went so smoothly, Olga told us. Miche, think about it: the Elfswood is becoming world famous. What do you think will happen to property prices when rich people come and want to buy a second home here?’

'The stinkers!'

'Well, I would like to turn it around. How naive we've been.'

'Naive?'

'Yes. If there had been anyone among us with a modicum of understanding of economics, of trade, we could have guessed that the Elfswood circus would also attract moneyed people. Not just environmentalists and tourists, but also people who are quick to see a business in anything. Not just chip shops and extortionists, but people who are dealing in real estate. They immediately see opportunities when a forgotten area suddenly attracts attention.'

'Yes, when you put it that way I can understand it. But what do we do about it?'

'Well, there is not much we can do actually. These are things that just happen. The village and the land do not belong to us!'

Michael began to realise that there are many more influences over which you have no control. 'So other people are getting rich, because of us!' He was still thinking about it when Herman looked at his watch and said, 'Shall we go back to camp?'

'Yes, that's fine.'

Still a little bewildered, he walked along with his father. On the way, it occurred to him that he had to arrange for cleaning supplies.

'Dad, we need forty brooms and brushes, forty pairs of gloves, forty pairs of high rubber boots and forty plastic overalls.'

'Yes, and forty masks; that's all in the plan. Why are you mentioning that now?'

'Can you arrange it that we get them tomorrow? Or at least as many as possible? It's going to rain tomorrow and we want to take the opportunity to brush the riverbed in the forest.'

'Hm. I'd rather you wait until the headwaters are clean.'

'That could take weeks,' Michael protested.

'Yes, but a lot happens in that time. We are not sitting around doing nothing. We'd better wait until the new lock is ready. In the meantime, the Environmental Federation can deal with the procedures.'

'Dad!' Michael stopped him. 'Dad, it is just as urgent to clean the bed as it was to burn the factory. I have orders to do it as soon as possible...' He wasn't being entirely honest. 'Sorry, I'm not saying it right. It is very important that it is done as soon as possible and I have been given the responsibility for it. I am the only one who can make it happen. The great ones don't give orders. They can only give directions, make suggestions, offer insight. I can only give commands because I am a human being.'

Shaking his head, Herman looked him in the eye during this serious statement. That boy was turning all his learned certainties and beliefs upside down.

'I don't know, Miche,' he sighed. 'It goes against everything I've learned about performing tasks efficiently and safely. You may have to do everything twice.'

'That's all right, Dad,' Michael pleaded. 'Better twice than too late. We don't

cost anything, so that can't be an objection either.'

'All right then.' For the umpteenth time during his stay here, Herman decided to rely on his son's judgement, even if it went against his own convictions.

It was hard for him, but each time his trust increased a little. After all, Michael had direct access to a world he had never known.

'I'll go to Jablun tonight and come back with Bertold tomorrow, with brooms and whatever else we need.'

'Thank you, Dad, nice of you to help me.'

'I'm helping everything and everyone with it, young man.'

## Chapter 31

# Suspicion

Meanwhile, they had returned to the camp under the beech.

There was no one left. There was only a biscuit lying by a tree root. A feeling sent to him told Michael that Olga was coming with two more people, strangers. The message came from earth beings and fauns, for whom it was no problem to keep watch. They were generally tied to a tree or a place and used to watching without interruption for minute changes in their immediate surroundings.

He went to the tent and set up folding chairs for the visit. There was no time to make a fire, so he used the gas stove to boil water for tea. He was nervous, wary and actually suspicious. 'Dad, will you pay attention?'

'Don't you trust things?'

He shook his head; there was no time for a more detailed answer, for the announced visit was already close at hand.

Olga greeted Michael and his father formally, which set off alarm bells at both of them. She introduced the two gentlemen. They had Slovakian names, which Michael immediately forgot. One turned out to be a detective of the Jablun police and the other an insurance claim adjuster.

'We apparently have taken over the factory including the fire insurance,' Olga explained. 'These two gentlemen are leading the investigation into the cause of the fire.'

It turned out to be a mystery why the entire stock of chemical waste had been found on train wagons, accompanied by the complete administration. How the wagons had been shunted out of the way was a second riddle.

That the two wagons with coal and the transformer house with the telephone exchange had survived the fierce fire without damage could be explained by the favourable angle from which the wind had come.

Michael was asked in a friendly tone of voice whether he had an explanation, for witnesses had spotted him in the midst of a whole troop of scouts.

During their introduction Michael had frantically tried to get in touch with Dia, and when it remained silent on her frequency, with Pan, Bran and the messenger-angel. In vain. What should he answer them? Of course, he had thought about the fact that questions would be asked about the fire, but the events that followed had not left him time to think about it thoroughly or to consult with others.

Herman was ahead of him.

In an apologetic tone of voice, he explained that he had received a call from his son the previous evening that something was wrong in the factory. Because they had already had several visits from shady characters that, as some claimed, worked for crime syndicates, he had gone to have a look. Because of the fog,

there was almost nothing to see and all the lights were off, including those on the outside. In order to protect his son and daughters, all the scouts had been called in and gone with him to the factory premises, where they had only seen a forklift truck outside. At that time, they had seen fire inside the building. No, they had not seen anyone, but all the doors were wide open. Whether Michael had anything to add.

With a face of steel, he said that it had happened exactly as his father had said. And why had he left the forest that night? Had that been wise?

Oh, he had not been alone. The scouts had kept watch and warned him that there was a noise coming from the factory.

Had they not better warn Mrs. Jellisek? Or called the police?

Well, at first there seemed to be nothing wrong. They were just wondering if it had been a false alarm when they saw the first flames. Because they thought that the fire would be visible everywhere and that there was bound to be someone who would call the fire brigade, they had not done so themselves.

The policeman could confirm that: the fire brigade in Jablun was called from the guesthouse.

The two men asked some more questions, to which neither Herman nor Michael knew the answers.

They politely said goodbye and walked back to the village with Olga, who had said nothing all this time.

‘Gee, you’re such a good liar, Dad!’ said Michael in admiration when the three visitors had disappeared from sight. Herman looked at his son with a frown.

‘I’m surprised myself,’ he said, after having tried to say something and having swallowed it. ‘It was as if it wasn’t me, Miche. Really.’

‘Was there a voice in your head?’

‘Well, not a voice, it was more like someone was speaking with my mouth.’

‘Yes, that’s possible, it happens to me sometimes too. Usually it’s Dia.’

He got a suspicion. *Was that you, dear?* he sent out his question, to which he actually already knew the answer.

*I could do it, because he loves you so much,* came her statement, in which a sense of pride was mixed with much affection and a restrained giggle. *Through that bond, I could reach him. I thought it would sound better if he said it, instead of you. That’s why I didn’t let you know I was there; otherwise you might have betrayed me.*

*How clever! Do you think they believe it?*

*Half and half, but as they have no idea what exactly happened, they have no real suspicions. But to be completely sure, you have to do a few more things. On the forklift truck there are Paul’s and some others’ fingerprints. Yours too. You have to get rid of them before the police find them. Oh, and on those barrels! And on the wagons, on the brake cranks!*

*By the way, how do you know all that?*

She laughed. *You’ve been watching a lot of TV, you know.*

Michael repeated aloud to his father what Dia had just told him.

‘The forklift thing is serious,’ Herman said. ‘But we can do something about that soon. There are no fingerprints on those barrels and train cars, I think. The boys have all worn work gloves.’

‘There are also remains of two petrol lamps in the ashes, I think.’

‘That’s right. We should definitely look for those.’

‘Doesn’t that raise suspicion?’

Herman thought for a moment and then his face brightened. ‘No, not if I do it. To prevent further environmental damage it is necessary to know how contaminated the ashes are. Nobody is allowed on the site if there is any suspicion that it is contaminated. I am the only one, I have protective clothing and I am authorised to take samples. I’ll make sure those fingerprints disappear.’

‘Gee, how clever you are, Dad,’ sighed Michael.

‘Yeah.’ Herman grinned. ‘I’ll go right now. The sooner we get those traces gone the better.’

Bound together in a secret they shared only with Dia, they embraced and set off: Herman towards the village, Michael towards the heart of the forest.

He rushed into the Forest Meadow where he encountered Paul and Maria. He explained in short what had been said to the two investigators and what had to be done.

‘Remember to tell everyone this story,’ he warned. ‘We heard a noise, went to have a look and saw the fire. That’s all we know. Don’t say anything about mafia or anything like that, we’re not supposed to know anything about that. You tell all the scouts, so that no one will say anything. Don’t talk to each other either; someone else can always catch that.’

Paul and Maria went straight back to the scouting camp.

‘So,’ puffed Michael as he sat down with his sisters. ‘A little breather.’

The tension drained from him and when he had eaten, he crawled into his tent before it was completely dark and fell asleep like a log.

## Prelude to the big clean-up

By daybreak, Michael was awakened by a sultry voice in his head: *The promised rain shower is due. I'll come and get you.*

By the time the girls woke up, he had been gone for hours. They didn't care. They were busy telling each other all sorts of things in innerspeech. To an outsider, had there been one, it would have been a strange spectacle, for they said nothing to each other, but laughed out loud at the most unexpected moments when something funny occurred in their communication. When they had eaten breakfast and had run after each other like three crazy naked nymphs, screaming with joy, they put on their clothes under mysterious gestures and walked into the forest. Diana was going to initiate her sisters into forest secrets.

On the other side of the mountains, in Jablun, Herman was busy fulfilling his promise. He had spent the night at Bertold's family, with whom he had become friends. Immediately after breakfast, he went to buy boots in different sizes, waterproof work gloves, rain suits, brushes, brooms, dust masks, safety goggles and whatever else he thought he might need. It took him all morning, because not every shop could supply enough of everything. He had borrowed a van, which gradually got fuller. He couldn't find the investigation team's handy hand pumps, with which they could rinse off mud, anywhere. The scouts would have to do without them: Michael had alluded to a heavy rainfall, which would loosen the mud.

Singing along with the car radio, he headed for Branočs. Just before the road descended to the village, he stopped as a precaution in a bend, from where he had a good view. Since the arrival of the gangsters, he had become extra careful.

The remains of the factory were crowded. Bystanders were watching men in white overalls and compressed air masks searching through the ashes. The area had been cordoned off with red and white ribbons and a police car was parked outside the fence. It looked like an official action.

Several cars were parked in front of the guesthouse, far too many for his liking. Everything was suspicious now; with these mafia practices he no longer trusted anything that looked too slick.

He drove on to the village and parked next to the café. With his newly bought mobile phone he called Bertold, who was supposed to be at the mill.

He never heard him speak so bluntly before. When he asked what was going on, the suspicious tone of the contractor's voice disappeared immediately.

'Herman! Glad to hear you. I hear you were able to buy a mobile phone. Where are you? The whole area has been closed down for a major investigation. The insurance company is trying to find out the cause of the fire.'

‘Are you at the mill?’

‘Yes, I was there when they arrived.’

‘Can I join you?’

Bertold hesitated. ‘No, don’t. Don’t show yourself. I don’t trust those people. Where are you now?’

‘I am standing next to the café. I wanted to go to the guesthouse, to Olga, but there are too many cars in front of it for my liking.’

‘No, don’t go there. That doesn’t seem right to me either.’

‘Damn, I’m stuck.’ Herman grumbled. ‘And I’m in the mood for coffee and something to eat.’

‘You could go to the scouting camp. I’ll keep you posted if anything happens. In the meantime, we just keep on working. We’ll get the grouting done today and the lock is progressing well too.’

‘Okay, thank you, I’ll take your advice.’ He stared at his telephone with concern. Would he call Olga? No, she was probably in a meeting.

He flipped through his diary, in which he had noted down all the names and numbers over the past few days. There, the number of the guesthouse. The line appeared to be busy. I’ll try again later. The next number was Maria, from the scouts. She answered immediately: ‘Maria.’

‘Hello, this is Herman, the father..’

‘I recognise your voice, Herman.’ He could hear the smile on her face.

‘Listen,’ he said in an urgent tone, ‘we’ve been just in time to remove our tracks. There’s an investigation going on at the factory site, by the insurance company, under police escort. And there are cars in front of the guesthouse. Do you know what’s going on?’

‘No?’ she said in surprise. ‘Wait a minute, I’ll put it on speaker, so Paul can listen in... Like this. No, this morning when the breakfast crew picked up the bread there was nobody in the village. Good thing we were just in time to find those lamps and such. I hope we didn’t forget anything. By the way, where are you?’

‘I’m standing next to the café with a van full of cleaning materials. I don’t dare show up.’

‘Just sit there. We’ll come and get the stuff.’

‘Yes, but it’s a lot. It will attract attention. I don’t want anyone to see what we’re up to.’ He heard her arguing with Paul, but couldn’t understand. She suddenly gurgled and giggled. ‘Don’t!’ he heard her whisper. A loud laugh. ‘Come on, Paul, I’m on the phone!’ A few moments later, Paul’s voice came: ‘We’ll pick you up with the farmer’s cart. We’ll borrow a coat and cap for you, so you can disguise yourself. Stay where you are. It’ll take half an hour, can you manage that?’

‘I suppose so,’ Herman grumbled. ‘As long as I can get a cup of coffee and something to eat.’

‘We’ll bring it for you, Herman!’

It took a long time. Herman was constantly looking at his watch; at any mo-

ment he expected someone to order him out of the car. A nonsensical thought perhaps, but he had been through so much in the past time that he considered the situation quite critical. A sense of enmity dominated the village. There was a threat of violence, not least caused by the unannounced occupation, for that was how he saw the investigation team, of the factory site.

A tractor and cart with four youngsters stopped behind the van. Paul jumped from the cart and opened the rear doors.

‘Hello, Herman, here we are,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Here’s an overall and a cap, coffee and bread.’

‘Thanks for coming!’

‘Has anything happened?’

‘No, nothing at all. Give it to me and I’ll get changed. Load the stuff and I’ll call Bertold.’

While the scouts were rapidly overloading the stuff, Herman called the contractor and told him he was going with the scouts; what about the van?

‘You can leave it there,’ Bertold said. ‘Just take the keys with you.’

‘Thanks. I’ll hear from you if anything happens.’

He put on the overalls, the cap and saw in the little mirror a man very different from the well-known engineer. He chuckled; how a different outfit could change a person.

He got out the back, closed the doors and climbed onto the cart seat next to Paul. The farmer on the tractor, an old, slightly fat man with a moustache and a hunter’s hat, grinned, uncovering brown teeth, and drove off smoothly.

Olga, standing at the window of the headquarters, had been able to follow the operation. She had not recognised Herman when he came out of the van, thinking he was an employee of the contractor. She had understood that the load was destined for the cleaning operation of the river. She found it strange: it was still a long way off, wasn’t it? She decided to contact Herman later. Surely he wouldn’t take up his son’s idiotic idea?

She turned to the men who were sitting around the table going through papers. Every now and then they would make some excuse to each other and compare texts. She waited quietly. It would be wonderful if the insurance would pay the claim. The amount could well be higher than the purchase price, which still had to be paid. But that was the nub of it: she expected the insurance company to raise all sorts of objections and try to delay the case for years. She was no stranger to such tricks. In fact, they did not need the money. Therefore, she could now stand by and watch.

After a long time, the leader of the delegation stood up and said in a soothing tone: ‘Pending the results of the investigation, Mrs. Jellisek, we will continue to study the case in detail.’ She nodded. ‘When did you want to have the deed of sale executed? And which notary? Is that known as well?’

‘The same one where the preliminary sales agreement was signed, in Jablun. An appointment has been made for two days from now,’ she replied gruffly, although she could assume that the men already knew.

The man drew a spiteful laugh. ‘Then the results of the investigation won’t be known yet, I’m afraid.’

‘No, but we don’t want to wait for it. The purchase is separate from the claim.’

For a moment a calculating expression flashed across his face. It did not escape Olga’s notice. Cunning as she was, she had long since figured out that the seller could cancel the transaction, laughingly pay their 10% fine from the already low purchase price and collect the much higher insurance payment. She did not begrudge these criminals that.

‘According to the law, 100% of the cleaning costs are to be borne by the owner of the premises. In the preliminary contract of sale, we had a clause inserted that the seller is indemnified against all possible environmental claims after the transfer,’ she added. ‘That’s why our offer was accepted.’

‘Oh, yes, we read that in the preliminary contract of sale. And how high do you estimate the cost?’ he asked point-blank.

‘Thanks to our good international reputation and our commitment to donate the cleaned-up factory site to the protected area, we were able to apply to Unesco for a grant of approximately 1.6 million US dollars as the future owner,’ Olga replied.

‘That’s disproportionate to the value of the property,’ the man ventured.

‘No,’ Olga replied bitterly. She was beginning to get fed up with it. ‘No, as you can see, the positive economic value of property can be turned into a very negative one because of environmental damage.’

She was pleased to see that notes were being taken of the conversation.

The delegation seemed to have finished. Papers were filed away, laptops closed and packed into bags. With innocent politeness, the men said goodbye to Olga, who watched them from the window get into their cars with a smile on her face.

Now she had to hope that the investigators would not find anything suspicious at the site of the fire.

In the evening, the men of the investigation team packed everything into their vans and drove off. The police took down the barriers and a little later the village was quiet again. The contractor left with his team for Jablun, the train came and went again. Dark clouds were gathering above the valley.

‘It’s going to rain,’ Paul said worriedly to the group sitting around the cooking fire, waiting for the food to be ready. ‘We have to get everything ready for a downpour. Herman, are you staying here or do you want to go to your children?’

Herman looked at the sky and let out a nervous laugh. ‘I want to go to the village first, see what’s going on there. By the way, I think the girls will be better off at their new camp site than here, if it really starts raining.’

He was reminded of Michael's words. Was this threatening thunderstorm really in his intentions? And wasn't it arriving a little too early? They couldn't be ready for the clean-up operation until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest, and this shower looked as if it would erupt within a few hours. Full of doubts, with a headache from the uncertainty of the situation and the oppressive atmosphere, Herman walked to the village.

'What was going on this afternoon, Olga?'

'I'll tell you in a minute,' she growled out of her temper. 'Are you coming for dinner? Then I'll order an extra plate.' They went downstairs for a beer.

There were more guests having drinks, waiting for dinner. She shook her head when a couple of journalists approached her, despite her defensive attitude.

'Can't you at least tell us whether the investigation is being conducted by the police or by the insurance company?'

She sighed, the man was right, she had to say something.

'The investigation is done on behalf of the insurance company,' she admitted.

'Do they have a reason for that?'

'I don't know.' A whole group had gathered around her.

'When will the results be known?'

'In two weeks.'

'What are you going to do in the meantime?'

'Well, the contractor will continue with the repair of the lock, that's unrelated. In the meantime, this gentleman...' she pointed at Herman, standing diagonally behind her, '...will continue to draw up the cleaning plan.'

'I thought you had already submitted a grant application to Unesco?' one asked smartly.

'That is indeed the case,' Herman took the floor. 'Pending a grant, we'll continue to work on the plans until they're complete.' What am I saying? he thought, perplexed, I've just brought brooms and brushes to the scouts!

At that moment a servant arrived with their meal. Olga's two assistants were already sitting in front of their plates, waiting for them to start. Olga ended the conversation with a resolute hand gesture. 'Tomorrow there will be another press conference.'

While eating, Herman racked his brains how he should tell Olga that Michael wanted to start tomorrow when it started raining.

'What are you brooding about?' she asked, seeing how he was struggling with something. 'You haven't changed the plans have you?'

'Ahem, eh, yeah,' he confessed, 'the boys actually want to do a stretch tomorrow. It's going to rain and...'

She banged her hand angrily on the table, cutlery clinking. Ignoring the curious glances, she hissed furiously: 'You can't do that, Herman! You'll ruin all our plans with your son's ideas!' She curtailed. 'We'll eat our plates and then we'll sit upstairs with the coffee. I want to know what's going on, we're on the edge of

the precipice anyway.’

With a cup of coffee in front of each of them, Herman and Olga sat down at the window a little later.

‘What did you mean, we’re walking along the edge?’ asked Herman.

‘I don’t know,’ Olga sighed. ‘It goes on and on: mafiosi who come to extort money, then other gangs of thugs who try to kidnap the children, unreliable insurance, permits that don’t come through, angry German partners of the event organisation...’

‘Well, it seems to me,’ said Herman, ‘Michael has given a fine solution for that: shut down the whole fair? Then there is nothing more to extort, so no more mafia, no more permits needed, and no more angry German partners.’

‘Hm, that may be so, but there’s much more at play.’

‘What then, for heaven’s sake?’

She sighed. ‘We are running the risk the sale of the factory will not go through. If the site is not too badly contaminated, I can still see the owners reversing the purchase to claim the insurance pay out. That is much higher than the purchase price.’

‘Well, you can bet that a clean-up costs a lot of money,’ Herman assured her. ‘Don’t forget that cleaning up the river is part of it. We’ve applied to Unesco for \$1.6 million, right?’

‘And that’s my only asset.’ Olga stared out the window.

‘That’s why I don’t want you to mess around on your own,’ she added after a while. ‘You know,’ she turned to Herman and looked at him sternly, ‘if you clean up the river yourselves, at no cost, you are beating out my last asset. When the pollution is cleaned up, say in two days’ time, you can bet your boots the old owners won’t let the sale go through. Then we will have lost the factory, we will have lost the subsidy... we will have lost everything. We’ll have nothing.’

‘Then we’ll have to postpone it,’ Herman said decidedly.

From a mountaintop, glowing reddish in the last rays of the sun, Dia and Michael watched as towering mountains of clouds piled up, with the familiar anvil-shaped top at very high altitude, the hallmark of thunderstorms.

*There’s your rain,* Dia signalled languidly.

Michael yawned, still all rosy from their lovemaking.

*Isn’t it a bit early?*

*It’s there, what’s wrong with it?*

*When it starts raining, it will be dark and the scouts can’t see anything, you know.*

*Yes, I get it. I keep forgetting that people can only see when light is reflected. They can’t perceive the own light from creatures and things.*

*I don’t think Bran thought of it either.*

*You can’t expect sylphs to do that at all, they don’t know that.*

*Than we have to let God’s water run over God’s field,* was Michael’s sober conclu-

sion. *There is nothing we can do about it now.*

The last ray of sun disappeared behind a mountain ridge far away and it became cold.

He snuggled up to the warm skin of Dia, who folded her wings tightly around them both. Against the darkening sky, the slopes on the other side, lit by lightning, became visible. It would soon be raining heavily.

A little worriedly, they looked across the many miles of clear sky to the tower of clouds glowing from within. It was a terrifying sight, a single, billowing column of water, fire and wind, right over the Valley of Bran.

Within it, unstoppable forces developed. All the solar energy of the past few days had been harnessed in it, there were no other clouds for miles around. The roar of persistent thunder reached them on the mountaintop, as if a war were in progress, in which the incessant lightning could be the muzzle fire of gigantic cannons. Michael found it reassuring that this violence did not come from men: this was pure primal force of nature, terrifying but necessary to restore disturbed balances.

End of Book IV





## Book V The elements intervene

## Chapter 1

# Angry weather

The site of the burnt down factory seemed to be haunted. One lightning bolt after another struck the sagging remains of the boiler, as if the electrical elementals were determined to extricate the spirit from the wreckage.

Curtains of rain pounded the soil into thin porridge.

The village street had turned into a flood of muddy water. At the bridge it united with a stream from the road at the other side and plunged down in a spraying waterfall. The rumble of boulders being dragged along the river bottom could be heard above the rush of rain. Clumps of grass and bushes from collapsing banks, branches torn off, even whole trees floated by. The old bridge was not as high as the railway bridge. Trunks and stems piled up against the bridge. Soon, the water was flowing over the bridge instead of under it. The adjoining factory site was flooded to a seething mudflat.

In the guesthouse, the guests stood at the windows. There was not much to see: the heavy rain limited the view to a few yards. The panes rattled in the rebates because of the strong gusts of wind and the whole building shook with every thunderclap. The rain thundered on the wooden roof and made any conversation impossible. It took not long before happened what everyone had been waiting for: the power went out. Oil lamps and candles had been burning in all the houses for some time: the inhabitants of the village were used to long lasting power failures.

In their camp by the river, the scouts had gathered in the group tent. The light from the few petrol lamps they had left since the night's expedition to the factory did not reach far in the dense rain. Talking was impossible due to the drumming of the water jets on the violently shaking tent and the thunder of the incessant lightning strikes. Paul, their technical leader, went restlessly to look outside. Dripping wet he came back.

'Guys!' he shouted between the thunderbolts. 'The river can't get all the water away anymore. Our camp is flooding. We have to get out of here!'

'Get out? In this weather?' girls screamed.

They huddled together in fear. 'Where to?' Paul didn't know either. He looked uncertainly at his friend Maria, whom he trusted better as a guide than himself.

She had been thinking for some time. She would have preferred to escape to the forest, but it was lower down and might get completely flooded.

'To the village,' she decided. 'Backpacks to go, ponchos on.'

The luggage was already complete. Maria and Paul had seen the thunderstorm coming. As a precaution, they had ordered everyone to pack their personal belongings and put them in the large tent.

Grumbling and screaming as lightning struck nearby, the shivering scouts slung rucksacks on their shoulders and helped each other fasten ponchos over them.

‘Paul, what do we do to protect ourselves from the lightning?’

‘I don’t know,’ he confessed. ‘We have to go a long way through open country to get to the village. There is no shelter there. But we are at the bottom of the valley, the slopes are higher than we are.’

At that moment, a wave of water came through under the tent walls.

‘Well, there you have it,’ was his laconic response. To the circle of frightened faces he shouted: ‘Stay close together! Keep your predecessor in sight, stay close behind!’

One after the other, unrecognizable hunchbacked figures marched off into the darkness. They mudded through the flooded encampment. Each held a torch to his predecessor. Paul led the way; Maria counted. Even in the torrential rain, the hissing petrol lamps served their purpose, though the steam was coming off. The rain was so dense that Maria could only see one torch in front of her; the rest of the long column was invisible. In the flickering light of the lightning, she could only make out a few shining figures ahead of her.

With a deafening crash lightning struck nearby.

She screamed, slipped, scrambled to her feet and fell again. The torch clattered and went out. She had hurt herself and it took some time before she could stand again. She grabbed a second torch and shone ahead in panic. There was no one left in sight. No one had apparently noticed that she was no longer closing the queue.

Step by step she began to follow the muddy trail. The rain ran down her neck and made cold tracks across her bare skin.

At the front of the queue, Paul was not much better. They had been climbing steadily up the side valley for some time. The once gentle brook had swollen to a raging torrent. Nevertheless, they had to get to the other side, each step uphill meant they were getting further and further away from the village.

He decided to descend to the bottom of the valley. By the light of the lightning, he could see that they would be able to cross here. He decided to risk it.

He shuffled step by step into the troubled water. It barely reached the top of his boots. He signalled with his lamp that the next one could come.

One by one he guided the scouts through the stream. Two big boys stood next to him, so that they could pass the little ones and the girls to each other. Counting incoherently, he passed on the shining shapes. Two were missing! Including Maria!

Paul searched the bank with his torch in disarray. No one else appeared in the beam.

‘I’ve got to go back; there are two missing! Just go up, you’ll get to the village or the road.’ He tried to keep track of everyone, but he lost count.

He shrugged his shoulders, they would have to manage; first find Maria and

the other one.

He slid down the track, slipped a few times and landed on his backside in the mud. He was exhausted, but the adrenaline kept him going: his sweetheart had stayed behind somewhere, fallen, perhaps lost...

There: a small figure, crawling on hands and knees.

He squinted, was Maria there too? But the beam of his torch revealed nothing but mud and rain. He pulled the girl up. She was crying and clinging to him. She had twisted her foot and lost her lantern. Paul wanted to continue looking for Maria, because if she had stayed any further back she would certainly have been injured or lost.

He stood undecided in the pouring rain. Fortunately, lightning did not strike so close to them. He decided to take the girl with him. Foot for foot, they shuffled back through the mud. Until it went wrong. They went down together and landed on their rucksacks. The girl screamed, Paul cursed: he had dropped his torch! He had lost it! The girl whimpered anxiously as he slipped to his knees. She grabbed him by his poncho. He gave up searching. Gritting their teeth, they slid down the slope. The girl groaned in pain with every step.

During a long flicker of successive lightning bolts, the rain veils were silvery lit. Something black loomed up, right beside the raging stream.

'Maria! Maria!' he shouted. He coughed, almost choked, he must have breathed in water that ran down his face. Half gliding, they came to a stop right at the water. There, Maria! She was kneeling beside a reclining figure.

She looked at him as if he were an angel from heaven, coming to save her. With one hand he pulled her up and let himself be embraced.

'Paul, Paul,' she sobbed.

'I suddenly missed you,' he sighed in her ear. The relief was so great that for a moment he couldn't hold on any longer. For a few heartbeats they could merge.

The wailing of the wounded girl brought them back to grim reality. From her muddied face two terrified eyes stared up at Paul and Maria.

'It's Minica, she has sprained her ankle, maybe broken it. Who is this?'

'I don't know. I slipped down and saw him lying there.'

'Is he dead?'

'No, but all dishevelled, clothes torn, three-day beard, unconscious and cold.'

'I am going to get help from the village. Are you cold?'

'A little; the rain has seeped in everywhere.'

'Keep moving, and you'll keep yourself warm. Try to go up with Minica. We can't transport that man, we'll find him later.'

The girl nodded as Paul explained to her that he was going to get help and she and Maria had to go on their way. Every step closer would bring her sooner into the warmth.

Again he had to do the entire climb in the icy rain and sticky mud. His hands and feet had gone numb, his head throbbed, his breath rasped.

Step by step, sliding backwards now and then, he followed the trail, illuminated by ever more distant lights.

At the ford, he stood defeated, staring at the murky stream, which had grown wider and deeper in the meantime. He felt too exhausted to cross it. In the dark and without help: if he went down, he was lost.

Then a miracle happened.

A last dense veil of rain passed over him and behind it the sky was clear.

Astonished, he stood dripping in a moonlit world of wind and water. The last silver-lit clouds drifted away. Where was the village?

He searched for the familiar lights. When he had wiped the wet hair from his eyes, he saw lit windows and... flashing torches coming his direction!

## Chapter 2

# Back together again

From a cave deep in the forest, Lucy held out a hand and shouted cheerfully: 'It's dry. We can go back to the tents!'

*Dry? You're blathering, I can hear dripping everywhere,* came Wendy's innerspeech, as she sent along the sensation of her shudder.

'It's not raining anymore, then,' Lucy admitted tidily. Her good mood remained unaffected. She had enjoyed the extremely heavy storm. She had stood watching the lightning strike closer and closer and had only fled into the cave when a massive curtain of water and hailstones closed in on the world. The floor of the cave was full of blown leaves. They had been lying here nicely protected.

Diana crawled out of her leafy bed and stood beside her.

*Are you tired, Di?*

Yes, she yawned. *It was hard work for my dryad. A lot of trees are blown down and washed away. I helped her. Now she sleeps.*

She yawned again and almost fell over.

*You could use some sleep too.*

'Wen!' cried Lucy.

'Yes, I'm coming,' she grumbled aloud.

'Come on, let's go back to our camp. Diana needs to sleep and I'm hungry.'

They moved through the soaking forest, illuminated by dancing moonbeams, splashed wet by collapsing branches.

New streams were gurgling and chiming all around. They had to wade through pools and swamps, wrestle along broken branches, climb over fallen trees. Once she was soaked, Wendy finally stopped grumbling and silently trudged after Lucy, who was holding Diana by the hand.

On the Forest Meadow, the first thing they noticed was a tall oak tree, half of which had split off and was lying on the ground. The swamp was now a pond, but the tents were still in order.

*That oak tree has protected our camp,* Diana remarked with regret in her voice. *Now it is broken itself.* Nevertheless, happy that their home was still intact, they unzipped their tent for dry clothes. Soon the gas burner was humming and the smells of fried eggs and soup were drifting across the clearing. Diana stuck to the forest soup; the twins treated themselves to huge bouncers.

*Were you scared?* Wendy asked, when Diana was in her sleeping bag.

Innerspeech with her sister had become so common in the short time they had mastered it that they often didn't even think about using their mouths anymore.

*No, not at all, I actually enjoyed it,* Lucy confessed.

*Enjoyed? All that lightning and thunder and rain? Well, I've been in a lot of trouble.*

*Yes, wonderful, those bright rays and enormous noise. Pure force of nature, no human can match that.*

*No, you are right.* Wendy thought to herself, I think it's because we're different, Lucy tried to explain. *I'm into physics and stuff, I get what's going on. You're more of a feeler.*

*Yes,* said Wendy, relieved that her sister had come up with a logical explanation. *It sure was impressive, but all that electricity in the air makes me terribly uneasy and I always foresee all kinds of disasters.*

Engrossed in their own thoughts, they sat side by side, their hands intertwined without realizing it.

The next day they saw their father coming out of the wet forest in his rain suit, a high backpack towered over his head.

They ran up to him and kissed him. Carefully, because they were dry and he was wet.

'Everything's all right? Where's Diana?' he laughed, relieved to find the camp with his daughters intact.

'Inside, sleeping. Did you bring goodies?'

'Yes, new supplies, fresh bread, soda, beers for me, a newspaper and news from your mother.' He looked so happy that the news would be good too. Subconsciously, they took into account that something had happened to their mother. Usually that was the case when she went on a trip.

'Miche and Dia are out and about since yesterday, but tell, how is Mum?'

'She's at home, she's doing well and she'll come in a week, when she's recovered.'

'What happened?' Lucy didn't give up.

'Basically, she got caught in an avalanche in Peru and spent five weeks in hospital with a concussion.'

'That's Mum to a tee,' murmured Lucy. 'An avalanche, sure.'

Wendy felt more sorry for her. 'Was she in a lot of pain?' she asked softly. She didn't mention it, but five weeks flat is saying something.

'Yes, she was; she asked how you were doing and why you weren't home yet. I told her briefly what had happened. She was shocked, but she also said that she was proud of you.'

'But she was able to see everything on TV, and the newspapers...?'

'Ah, you know, Elfswood doesn't get as much attention in Holland as it does here. She said she still gets a headache when she watches TV or reads. She usually listens to music.'

'That's ridiculous!' cried Lucy indignantly. 'We're the most famous children in this country, Dia is a wonder of the world and Diana is half a goddess...' With tears in her eyes, she pulled Wendy closer. 'You say something.' She was crying anyway. 'Miracles happen here and the President comes to shake our hand,' she

sobbed angrily, 'and Mum... She doesn't even know where we are!' When she had finished crying, she sat up straight. 'You'll see,' she grumbled, 'she'll come and pretend she thought it all up as her idea.'

'Yes,' said Herman, 'she has a way of drawing attention to herself, even though she has nothing to do with it.'

So everyone had their own thoughts about the woman with whom they had a kind of love-hate relationship.

While they were making breakfast, Herman wanted to know how they had got through the storm. He nodded at their story, which contained nothing spectacular. He in turn confessed that he had a confident feeling all the time, the previous evening, that his daughters were safe in the forest and that Michael was safe with Dia. He had therefore not worried too much.

'But I don't know how I would have felt if I had known how bad the storm really was. We didn't notice much of it in Jablun. We only saw the lightnings over the mountains,' he said. 'I was shocked when I came to the village this morning. Landslides everywhere, the bridge has collapsed, the factory site has been virtually washed away...'

'The bridge collapsed?'

'What bridge?'

'The stone bridge from the road. The middle piece is gone.'

'Gee, how will people get to us then?'

'Just by train. The railway bridge is undamaged; it's a lot higher. And I am here, am I? The road to Jablun is open.'

Diana crawled out of the tent at that moment, her sleeping bag still around her, and nestled on her father's lap.

'Miche and Dia are coming,' she yawned.

## Chapter 3

### About mother

It did not surprise them that Dia indeed appeared a few minutes later.

She made a graceful turn over the clearing and gently landed Michael. She flew up from his back, a new stunt that was admired.

Herman repeated what he had said about their mother and about the feeling he had during the storm, that his children were safe.

*Did you do that?* Michael signalled to Diana.

*I can feel him sometimes and I can send him my feelings,* she agreed. *But no words. How clever! How long have you been doing that?*

*Oh, for a few days now. Since the fire, I think.*

‘What do you think about Mum coming?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Michael mumbled. ‘Luus, Wen, what do you think of Dad’s story?’

The girls shrugged. Herman watched in amazement as his children communicated telepathically with each other. He did not feel completely left out, because emotionally he remained involved. He suspected that he owed this to his youngest daughter. Having reached that point with his thoughts, she turned around and gave him a kiss in acknowledgement.

Meanwhile, the children were still struggling with their feelings for their mother.

*Did you miss her?* dared Wendy to ask Michael. She was well aware of the trouble he had with their mother.

He scratched his hair, where it began to itch.

*Well, actually I haven’t thought about her in a long time,* he confessed. *Since I am with Dia, my life has become so different. I don’t think of Dad as my father anymore either, but more as... well, as my friend.*

Wendy looked glum.

Lucy: *Do you miss her, Wen?*

*I do, sometimes, but not as much as in our new home.* She bowed her head. Tears dripped down her lap.

‘No, at home she was never really there for us,’ Michael said softly. ‘That’s why I was so sad when we left the commune. We were alone with Mum and she was busy all day and all night with her workshops and sessions.’

‘What do you know about that! You were just glued to your computer!’ scolded Lucy.

‘We had each other, Luus,’ said Wendy. ‘We were always together.’

‘She didn’t even help or congratulate us when we had our first period,’ complained Lucy. ‘We had to buy tampons and pads ourselves.’

‘But it was cool buying bras together, remember?’ laughed Wendy. ‘And ass lac-

ing briefs.' *And crazy socks. And steal earrings.*

'I didn't dare.'

'Did you miss her, Di?' asked Wendy.

'Yes, sometimes,' Diana replied. 'But I was never really alone. I always had the other in me, the dryad, and I had you and Miche. I often felt sorry for Mum, because she tried so hard and so much went wrong. She was alone though.'

'She did that herself!'

'Yes,' Michael rejoined the conversation, 'but even then she might have been very lonely.'

'She had us,' said Lucy angrily, 'and if she had paid more attention to us nobody would have been lonely.'

'No, we wouldn't.'

'You didn't have anyone, did you?' said Wendy.

'Well, I had Diana,' Michael hummed. 'She was often with me. Dia didn't talk to me then.' *Couldn't or wouldn't you?*

*I could, Dia replied, in the end, sure, but I was working most of the time. Then I was scattered. I did help Miche a few times. But that great sadness of his frightened me. I didn't know what to do with that. It was something I did not know and did not want to know.*

'Come on, let's talk out loud again. Dad is sitting there like a lost sheep.'

'Dad, can you tell us what it's like in the village? We saw the lights go out from a mountain top.'

'From a mountain top, eh?' Herman said. 'Well, when Bertold and I arrived this morning we didn't know what we saw. The road bridge has been washed away, everything is covered in a thick layer of mud and the milldam is full of stranded trees and bushes. The factory site is completely bare, all soil, ash and concrete residue washed into the river. The old steam boiler lies in pieces; it looks as if it has been smashed with large hammers. The water has started to subside. There are erosion gully's everywhere, even in the meadows.'

'Oh dear, how awful. And the train?'

'It's still running.'

'How are the scouts? We had the impression they were in distress. After the storm had passed, their camp was empty. It was completely flooded.'

'Oh, they are in the village for now. They have been given shelter in various people's homes.' Herman told the story of Paul and Maria and the girl Minica. The children sympathized with the poor scouts, slogging through the rain and mud, with lightning all around them. He told of the man they had found, starving and hypothermic. The man had been picked up by an ambulance later that night to be taken to Zilina.

Diana and Michael looked at each other, startled. 'Could it be that fourth man who got lost?' he suggested. 'I had forgotten all about him.' To the questioning looks of Herman and the twins, they told of their adventure with the four gangsters in the forest.

‘You never told me that,’ Herman said angrily. ‘Do you know how dangerous those people are?’

‘So what,’ Diana said piteously. ‘We were with the whole forest. They couldn’t catch us. They couldn’t even see us.’

Herman hesitated with his reaction. He understood that Diana was not boasting, that she and the forest were one.

‘All right,’ he sighed. ‘You must be right. Hopefully, from now on, they’ll forget about going into the forest. Especially if this last man can relate his experiences.’

‘But Dad,’ Michael replied, ‘the fact that all those gangsters are coming after us and that all the empty houses have been sold off to developers does detract from the good nature of the Elfswood. Everyone wants to make money from it, or steal it from others. I think we should bring a different message to the world, but I don’t know how.’ He raised his head with a jerk and listened.

‘Dia is asking about the bed of the river. She says that great water spirits and air spirits have teamed up with earth spirits to turn the bed deep and wash it out.’

Herman looked as if he didn’t understand a thing.

‘By the severe weather, she means,’ Michael added. ‘That was specially gathered from the surrounding area to do in one go what we wanted to do by hand.’

Herman looked questioningly at the elf woman. ‘Is... does Dia mean that last night’s thunderstorm was specially drawn to flush the bed?’

‘She says that even higher hierarchies than the messenger angel and the landscape angel have commanded it.’

Sentence by sentence he translated Dia’s messages into Dutch for his father. ‘The Elfswood was in too much danger and the recovery planned by us would take too long.’ ‘...The Elfswood is of much greater importance than we realize. That is why they have intervened and repaired the damage.’ ‘...That many other things have been destroyed or disturbed for a long time, they take for granted. Sometimes the only way to make something destructive stop is to destroy it with even greater destruction.’ ‘It will be a few days before the water is all gone, won’t it?’ said Michael.

‘Yes, the mountain slopes are soaked, a lot of water will continue to come out for the time being.’

Dia suggests that we go and look at the waterfall. The cirque is completely full, she says. All the mud and stones have got into it and clogged the drain. The earth beings did it to close that hole for the Others too.’

It was a lot of information all at once. Herman found Michael’s stories about evil beings coming through voids or gates to this world hard to accept. But he wanted to see for himself that the drain of the cirque was blocked.

They prepared for a tough trek, with mountain boots, rain gear, food and drink and a compass. Dia did not go with them. She was going to help clean up, she said.

The passage through the forest was difficult.

Whole stretches were still flooded.

Many branches and whole trees had come down. They had to take a route up the slope, because along the river the terrain was impassable.

'What does your dryad think about it now?' asked Michael to Diana. For Herman's sake, he spoke aloud.

She shook her head. 'She is busy,' was all she said.

Without much delay they found their way to the edge of the cirque.

They looked down bewildered.

Where they had descended and climbed down the waterfall many times before, now a brown wave of water was thundering down, laden with debris and branches. The valley was half filled with muddy water, in which tens, nay hundreds of dead and living trees were sticking up. It was a graveyard.

They could no longer bear it and turned away. This mysterious and lovely bowl in the mountains had been sacrificed by the guardian spirits of the valley to contain the widespread damage that humans had caused.

Diana walked weeping at her father's hand. The twins were not much better off. Michael walked dejectedly behind.

## Chapter 4

# Clearance

The days after the storm were not pleasant.

Although the weather had become reasonable, the large amount of water in the soil made things damp and clammy. It took hours each morning for the fog that evaporated from the wet soil to clear. The little camp on the Forest Meadow was not very comfortable under these conditions, but they did not dare to go to the village. The still existing threat of kidnapping effectively kept them imprisoned in the forest, the only place where they were safe.

The tent under Diana's beech tree had been swept away by the flood. The daily meetings with the Environmental Federation were held at the edge of the forest. The scouts moved their camp to the World Conference grounds behind the village. As the water level dropped, Herman and Michael were able to map out the consequences of the flood. Along the river, only the mill and the railway bridge were undamaged. The flood had undermined part of a siding in the railway yard, but that was the only damage. In the riverbed lay heavy pieces of stone masonry from the road bridge. Fortunately, the train was kept on schedule: the tilted siding was not used.

The contractor came with equipment to patch up the main street. Washed-out trenches and potholes were filled with rubble, pending more thorough repairs. Few people knew Yvette's foundation was paying for the repairs. Bertold had not been very optimistic about possible financial support from the Jablun municipality. Between a row of empty workers' houses that formerly belonged to the factory, a trench had washed out, right through the access road. Due to the danger of collapse, the whole area was fenced off.

The factory site had been completely erased, down to the clay and rock underneath. Black pieces of iron from the destroyed boiler stood out amid fragments of masonry.

A few days later an expedition was undertaken to survey the condition of the riverbed. Herman, in cooperation with the Water Board, had done a preliminary sampling: he wanted to be sure that all the pollutants had been washed away.

In some places, the bed had become twice as wide as it had originally been. The path along it had been swallowed up. Washed-out stakes were hanging from the fence wire, as a clear sign of how far the banks had receded. Nothing was left of the original bed of boulders and mud: the raging current had carried it all away. Even the ditch that they had dug with so much effort from the former scouting camp to Diana's tree had disappeared without trace.

Scouts took over the sampling from the edge of the forest, led by Herman, the only adult tolerated in the forest. The research team of the Water Manage-

ment Service returned to the village with Stefan to send the collected soil and silt samples to the laboratory.

The trail that the flood had left through the forest was wide and littered with fallen and leaning trees. But the sad belt of dead scrub, bare trunks and dying trees had disappeared. The flood had cleaned up thoroughly.

Just before the waterfall, the forest opened up. All the surrounding trees had been washed away. The churned-up ground lay bare like an open wound under the blue sky. Exposed limestone protruded from the brown mass of clay soil like bleached bones. Only a few frayed ends of deep-seated roots were a reminder of the trees that had stood here only a few days ago.

In the meantime, the cirque had flooded almost to the brim, with a tangle of trunks and branches from bank to bank. Herman silently took samples of the water. The scouts, too, knew nothing to say. The effects of the natural disaster robbed them of all words.

Michael was the only one left behind, motionless looking out over the havoc.

Olga Jellisek's staff had gotten busy.

The dramatically changed situation in the village and the Elfswood necessitated the revision of all kinds of agreements. One of the immediate consequences was the cancellation of all attractions. The German event organizers tore down the tents and after two days, the festival grounds were as deserted as they had been for years before the arrival of the Dutch children.

Olga personally travelled to the capital for talks with the government. She returned the next day with the announcement that the Jablun town council would be paying a working visit to the affected area.

The same evening, the village was hermetically sealed off by the police, checking every car coming from Jablun. The road to Zilina was closed because of the collapsed bridge.

Under the protection of the police guard, it was considered safe enough for the children to get out of the forest. Relieved, the girls let themselves be pampered in the guesthouse with hot baths, washed clothes and plenty of goodies.

Michael had not come along. He wandered around the valley, looking, listening and learning. Dia was his guide in the sphere of the elemental beings, whom he got to know one by one. Few had remained the same. The landslides, uprooted trees and changes in the water regime had turned everything upside down. He now saw with his own eyes how nature prepares itself after a violent event to repair the damage or, if that is not possible, to make the best of the new situation.

He spent a long time with the spring nymphs and nixes, all of whom had been affected by relocated beds, destroyed banks and altered water quality.

Enthusiastic scouts and volunteers from the World Conference camp put hundreds of leaning saplings upright. They tied them up, grounded them and neatly

cut off stumps of branches that had been torn off. For larger trees, they called in the farmer with his tractor. With the help of the contractor's excavator and steel wire, they even managed to give mature trees new support, so that the barren banks of the river became lined with new riparian trees.

In the quiet nights, Dia and Michael talked to the disturbed fauns, reassured them and showed them their new tasks.

The wood elves were better off. They saw in the new clearings opportunities for rejuvenation of the forest. After only a few days, bare patches of ground turned green with germinating seed and new shoots sprouted from broken stumps.

Every day, Michael went to see the havoc in the cirque. He had no idea what to do with it. It had become a dump of debris, dead and dying trees. The water had apparently found new exits, because the level was slowly dropping.

His father came up with a useful proposal. Michael himself had thought up all sorts of wild plans to fish the hundreds of stumps out of the cirque using helicopters. Herman laconically observed that the water level was dropping and suggested to wait until the wood had dried and then set it on fire.

'Isn't that a shame?' asked Michael, looking sadly at the huge amount of wood. 'We'll be putting even more CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere.'

'We can't get here with heavy transport, Miche,' Herman told him. 'Helicopters would burn more fuel than they could save in timber. That's definitely not environmentally responsible.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right,' Michael sighed. 'And if we let it rot, it all turns to CO<sub>2</sub> anyway.' A shadow slipped over them. In a circling flight, Dia descended towards them.

'Oh,' Michael translated, 'Dia totally agrees with you. She says we have to burn all the wood to free the fauns. They are still trapped in it.'

'Then that is settled,' Herman said contentedly. He smiled at the circling elf woman, whom he had gradually come to regard as his daughter-in-law.

'We'll come now and then to see how much the water has subsided, and on a nice dry day we'll light the wood.'

They chose a high route for the return journey to take a look at the situation on the slopes, but the damage there was limited to a few erosion gullies.

## Chapter 5

### Municipal visit

By noon, they were back in the village. The city council was expected after lunch.

When they entered the salon, they were surprised to find Janos and Dinja there.

'I was able to take a day off,' Janos chuckled, hugging Michael. 'That's getting harder with all those doctors' assistants. But when I heard that this completely unreliable...' he was pulled by his coat by Dinja and remained silent in surprise.

'Of course he's right,' she explained, smiling, 'but you shouldn't always say that out loud.' She kissed Michael.

'Is Irina there too?' he asked tense. He would actually have liked to hear what Janos was referring to, because he was uneasy about the announced visit, but his longing for Irina drowned out that sense of alarm.

Dinja shook her head. 'She is too busy studying,' Michael sensed with his clogs that there was much more going on, but had no time to ask further. His father pulled him away. 'Come on kid, we have to change.'

They took a shower and put on their neatest clothes.

Dia, fearful of all the fuss, had promised to show up when the visit arrived.

Olga, Herman and his four children lined up in front of the boarding house. Policemen kept bystanders and reporters at a distance.

The wait was long.

The announced time of arrival passed. Fifteen minutes passed.

Olga asked a police officer in a car something, the reporters frolicked around. The twins scurried inside, with an excuse that they had to go to the bathroom. Diana stood cross-legged against Herman, Michael wobbled from one foot to the other.

'They've had some delay,' Olga whispered. 'I had the police contact their colleagues in Jablun. They are on their way now.'

'Why don't they come by train,' grumbled Michael. 'Trains are always on time.'

Another quarter of an hour later a line of cars showed up, preceded by two motorbike cops.

'What an attitude! The mayor must think he's the president,' a reporter behind Michael remarked.

*Dia, here they come. Where are you?*

*I can't come, Miche. Evil travels with them.*

Michael's excitement turned to gloom. He did not doubt the judgment of the elfin woman for a moment, but he had so counted on her to steal the show... A bit angry he thought that the Elfswood might attract more ill intentional people than well intentional ones.

A fashionably dressed couple got out of a shiny Mercedes that stopped right

in front of the door. A man in a dark pinstripe suit, with a dark mackintosh over his arm and a hat on, gallantly helped a woman out. High stiletto heels appeared under her fur coat.

‘Is that the mayor?’ asked Michael an officer standing next to him. The man nodded sullenly.

Michael stepped forward.

‘Welcome, Madam and Sir, we are glad you could come,’ he greeted politely.

‘Hello Michael.’ The mayor gave him a hand and pointed around. ‘Will you be my guide? I want to see as much as possible in person.’

His wife, meanwhile, gave Michael a hand and smiled. ‘Please.’

Michael had not counted on so much kindness. He had prepared himself for unpleasant remarks.

‘It is not easy to walk everywhere,’ Michael warned. ‘Most of the paths have been washed away.’

‘Oh, that will do. I think my wife would prefer to stay in the village,’ the mayor waved aside his objections carelessly. ‘Look, there’s Mrs. Jellisek, and that man will be your father?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘And these are your sisters, of course.’ He greeted them one by one, although in the case of the twins he did not quite succeed: they moved in their nerves in exactly the same way.

The rest of the town council followed.

They all introduced themselves, but Michael could not remember any of the Slovak names. Olga took on the role of hostess from there on. Michael sighed with relief when he got out of the focus of attention.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ her voice rang out across the square, ‘I propose that we first take a stroll around the village and subsequently offer you refreshment in the guesthouse.’ She looked around to see if everyone agreed. Satisfied, she continued: ‘After that, there will be plenty of time to discuss the consequences of the flooding. Would you please follow me?’

The tour first went to the bare grounds where the factory had been. The previous day, Bertold had removed all the debris and this morning a hired farmer had levelled the ruts left by the machines, so that it looked like a field ready for sowing.

‘What are you going to do with it?’ the mayor wanted to know, walking between Michael and his father.

‘We want to sow the land first with grass and plant trees to restore the soil,’ Michael said. ‘Maybe we’ll turn it into a campsite, if we can get permission.’ He had discussed this with Olga beforehand.

The Mayor nodded, but said nothing further.

The next point on the route was the collapsed bridge. There was a lot of photographing and hushed voices.

‘We will submit an application to the province to build a new bridge,’ said the mayor, after listening to his secretary and an alderman.

The journey continued along the river. They stopped at the first rapid.

‘Hm,’ the mayor sighed, turning to Herman. ‘Do you think all the polluted mud has been washed away?’

‘Yes sir, you can see that the bed has widened and deepened along its entire length,’ Herman replied. ‘We have taken samples just to be sure, but the analyses will take a few more days.’

‘But where has the contaminated sludge gone?’

At these words, the Mayor beckoned someone from the entourage, who introduced himself as an environmental officer.

‘We don’t exactly know,’ Herman confessed. ‘As far as we have been able to determine, there was no destruction during the first hour of the downpour. We assume that in the first hour the heavy rain loosened the contaminated silt and carried it away to caves under the mountain.’ He pointed out on the map, which the official held in his hand, where the stream went underground. A crowd of interested people formed, also wanting to know what was indicated.

‘Only after an hour or so did so much water pour down the slopes that the stream overflowed its banks. But by then, the contaminated silt had already been washed away. Not until the last two hours of the storm did all the devastation occur. The soil was so sodden that it washed down the slopes and trees, spilling mud and stones into the stream.’ He pointed downstream, where his words were illustrated by debris and uprooted trees.

It soon became clear that they would not even make it to the edge of the forest. As the footpath had been swept away by the raging waters, the delegation had to walk through the marshy meadows. The Mayor, visibly out of sorts, looked at his watch and suggested to go back. Michael, amid the bustle of the turning caravan, pulled his father by the sleeve and whispered in Dutch: ‘We’d better not say anything about the mess in the cirque, eh?’

‘No,’ Herman whispered back, ‘we’ll sort that out ourselves. When the water’s gone and we’ve burned the trees, we’ll take samples of the mud at the bottom.’

‘Yes,’ Michael sighed with relief, ‘I’m glad you think so too. I don’t trust these people one bit. They look at us as if we had made the mess.’

Herman laughed, ‘Isn’t that so? You and Dia and the nature beings?’

Michael, in spite of his concern, laughed like a peasant with a toothache.

They had to break off their conversation when Olga called from the front of the queue for Michael to join them.

## Chapter 6

# Impasse

'We'll be having a meeting with the municipality later, at the headquarters, to see what the best course of action is for the village and the interests we represent.'

There was a large table in the guesthouse's lounge, set with a cold buffet. The visitors crowded around the goodies as a hungry flock of chickens. Soon the lounge and the cleared dining room were filled with chatting, drinking and eating people.

After a while Olga announced a meeting in the headquarters. Slowly, chatting and refilling their plates and glasses, attendees climbed the stairs. Olga welcomed the delegation and briefly introduced the position of the Environmental Federation.

When the delegation members learned that the attractions, which to their surprise had disappeared, would not return, they thawed a little. But they remained aloof. When an employee of the Environmental Federation explained how the Bran Valley could obtain a protected status, they politely kept silent. The most thorny issue turned out to be the factory site. The municipality wanted to know what the Environmental Federation, only two days before the notarized owner, intended to do with the site.

At an inviting gesture from Olga, Michael stood up and explained again that the Environmental Federation wanted to turn it into a campsite. The delegation reacted skeptically. It seemed as if they were unpleasantly surprised. Would they have other plans? It was not the first time that Michael thought so.

There was a pause, during which the specialists could work out a few things further; in particular, the question of what to do with the sagging row of uninhabited workers' dwellings. Olga proposed to the council that they should be expropriated, arguing that the slope should be strengthened, and that the land should be added to the campsite.

When this proposal came to table, Michael could see by the reactions of the delegation members who had other interests. They were strongly opposed to it, while the mayor and some councillors, seemingly unsuspecting, went on about it. Olga had noticed it too, but she was a dyed-in-the-wool politician. She whispered to him that the proposal would probably not make it to the Jablun Council.

When the specialists were presenting their findings, the discussion threatened to become technical. Michael lost interest and slipped into the lounge, where the Mayor's wife was playing a game with the girls.

'I would so love to take a walk with your elf friend,' she confided. Because Dia was listening, he had her answer before the woman had finished speaking.

'Dia suggests that you come to the conference site. There she will be able to meet you. She can only be under the bare sky, you know.'

Accompanied by several other women, the Mayor's wife followed him to the

nomadic camp that had been resurrected on the old site. There were tents from all cultures: tepees, yurts, gers, army tents, Bedouin tents and fantasy tents of all kinds, between orderly tent houses of scouts from many countries and a circus tent where the conference participants gathered. In a clearing in the middle, a fire was burning around which dozens of people were sitting, talking, drinking, making music.

‘Oh,’ Michael said apologetically, ‘Dia tells me that a helicopter is coming. They are very dangerous for her. She waits until he is gone or has landed.’

However, the helicopter kept circling above the village. It flew so low that they could see the word police on the side.

‘Perhaps you could ask one of the policemen to land it,’ Michael shouted above the din. Impatiently she gave an order to one of the officers in her escort. The man was talking into his walkie-talkie, apparently not satisfied with the answer, and barked some kind of order. Michael watched mesmerized as someone replied to the man. He visibly crawled into his shell and whispered something in the mayor’s wife’s ear. The message seemed to be unpleasant. In any case, the helicopter made no attempt to land or disappear.

The woman could not hide that she was quite out of sorts. On her way to the meeting with the elfin woman, her high heels kept sinking through the bare turf and now all her efforts had been for nothing. Angered, she turned and stumbled back.

‘Stupid thing!’ Michael shouted at the machine in the air. He felt they had lost an opportunity to make friends for their cause. Back at the guesthouse, he noted, defeated, that the mood was hostile. The delegation members looked disapprovingly at the many journalists and conference participants, who distinguished themselves from the Jablun elite in everything from clothes and humour to conversation and even smell.

The farewell was much more gruff than the welcome. The mayor tried to take the edge off with his professional smile. His wife, who seemed so nice at first, could hardly hide her disappointment about the missed encounter with the elfin woman. In the meantime, it had started to rain and the delegation got into their cars, wet and grumbling, heading back to Jablun.

Olga beckoned them to holding a debriefing. Despondent, Michael climbed the stairs. He noticed that this kind of visit drained his energy. Would he be too open again? He tried to remember Janos’ instructions on how to shut himself off.

To his happy surprise Janos was upstairs, busy talking to the Indian, Roaring Bear. Michael did not want to disturb them and, after a greeting nod, sat down at the table. A little later Herman came to sit beside him.

‘Maria and Dinja are taking the girls back to the camp,’ he said. ‘Paul will be here soon.’ As if he heard his name being called, Paul entered, grinned at Michael and sat down next to him on the other side. Olga came up behind him, balancing

a tray of coffee and tea and placing it in the middle of the table.

‘If you want something stronger, you’ll have to get it yourself,’ she grumbled. Despite her angry look, she handed out cups of tea and coffee.

‘So,’ burst out Janos unexpectedly.

‘Well,’ Paul mused, ‘there was just about nothing that was right in their eyes.’ Olga banged her hand on the table a few times.

‘I’d like to hear your opinions from each of you,’ she said. For the sake of their American guest, she spoke English.

‘Shall I begin?’ asked Janos. He did not wait for the answer. ‘Apart from the mayor, his wife and some officials, we actually had here a delegation of our opponents. I strongly suspect that the property developer who bought up all the empty buildings ‘bribed’, so to speak, several people in the municipality.’

‘How can you be so sure? I mean, I have my suspicions too, but could you... see it?’

Michael could not utter a word, it seemed as if he had even lost control of his muscles. Janos saw it.

‘Yes; I say it plainly. We have had the henchmen of our opponents visit us, to check up on us, to make cold-blooded plans to achieve their goals. We must do the same: coolly realize our plans.’

‘That sounds nice, but I still see many obstacles,’ Olga replied bitterly. ‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but nobody dared to say anything about the world conference. Even though no permission was given. Neither has it been requested. It doesn’t matter. The conference is the window to the world for the Bran Valley. The press keeps that window open and that is more powerful than petty interests of moneyed people. An opponent is only powerful if you fear him. They haven’t got that far here. In any case, we can’t count on the municipality’s cooperation in the preservation of the authentic buildings,’ was Olga’s wry conclusion.

‘Wait a little longer, don’t give up yet,’ said Roaring Bear calmly. ‘The conference hasn’t even started yet.’

‘It can’t do much formally against these thugs,’ Olga growled.

‘That may be so, but with the world press snooping around and a report from Unesco soon... we can still do a lot.’

‘I hope so,’ Olga sighed

Michael stood up shakily. ‘I’m going to see Dia now,’ he said hoarsely. ‘See you tomorrow.’ Surprised, the others looked at him as he fled the room.

He trotted off to the forest. It was a long way, but he had no trouble running. Gradually, he lost his anger and his anxiety and was able to tune in to the nature around him. When he ran into the forest, he was like a forest spirit, on his way to a meeting with his beloved.

## Chapter 7

### Michael resurfaces

The landlady opened the kitchen door to feed the chickens and almost tripped over the boy sitting there.

She screamed indignantly, but when she saw it was Michael, her motherliness won out over her fright. He was covered in mud and litter from the forest and looked at her apologetically.

‘I fell asleep,’ he said sheepishly.

‘Wait, I’ll feed the chickens first,’ the landlady replied and opened the dun. The loudly clucking animals dashed around her to the grain she had spilled. She emptied the rest of the tray and, with her other hand, dragged Michael up.

‘Oh my boy, how you look. You are all wet. Come in quickly.’

She was about to tell him that he could warm himself at the stove, but Michael felt very warm. It must be because he was an elfin boy now, she decided. She remembered well her surprise when she had felt with her own hands that he really only weighed a few kilos.

‘Would you like some coffee? While I’ll make it, you’ll have time to get dressed first,’ she said, bustling about the kitchen.

‘I don’t have dry clothes with me,’ Michael yawned. ‘I do want to take a bath.’

‘You do that; I’ll send one of the girls to pick up some clothes from her brother. If you are quick, no one else will need the bathroom yet.’

Michael knew that the guesthouse was full and had only one bathroom.

He rushed upstairs. To his surprise the old bathtub was replaced by a new one. A thick jet of hot water began to fill it. Satisfied, he stretched out on the bottom of the tub and watched as the water slowly rose around his body. Surprised, he felt himself start to float when the water had only risen a few inches.

‘I don’t weigh anything any more,’ he muttered. ‘Now I can’t even take a normal bath.’

He sat up straight, aggrieved. It was the first time he experienced his thinned-out state as a disadvantage. Grumbling to himself, he stood up and turned the tap to the shower position.

It felt wonderful and he forgot his earlier discomfort. There was a cupboard with towels, of which he used one to dry and tied a second one around his hips. He was hungry and longed for coffee and did not want to wait any longer for someone to come with dry clothes. With his wet clothes under his arm, he entered the kitchen and let himself be pampered by the landlady.

A couple of village girls came in, carrying the daily bread and groceries from Jablun. They cast curious, even yearning glances at the famous boy at the table, clad only in a towel.

A girl was sent by the landlady to fetch clothes for Michael. The others started to prepare breakfast for the guests with quick movements.

A little later, with a sigh of relief, Michael was able to get dressed on the toilet. The trousers were a bit loose, but it was a lot better than a towel, especially between all those blushing girls.

He wanted to surprise Olga and took the overflowing tray with her breakfast and that of her assistants upstairs. There were two men, unknown to him, sleeping in the wide bed; there was no one else there. Without making a sound, he set the table. It was a quarter past seven; normally Olga would have been awake long before then. Maybe she wasn't there?

He raced downstairs and asked the landlady if Olga had gone out.

'No,' she replied, brushing wisps of hair from her sweating face. 'Go and listen at the bathroom, and you may hear her singing.'

Indeed, he could already hear her alto as he walked up the landing. His heart was beating uneasily; he was reluctant to have to ask her the things he thought necessary.

What should he do now? Those strange men were sleeping in the room; he didn't want to go in there.

He decided to go back downstairs and sat down in the deserted drawing room. It was only when the buzzing on the upper floor indicated that the men had got up that he went back upstairs. To his relief, Olga was sitting at the breakfast table fully dressed and with wet hair. The bed was empty.

'Miche!' cried Olga, standing up and hugging him. 'Where have you been all this time? Were you wandering around with your elf wife?'

'Yes,' he said a little embarrassed with her emotion.

'Come and see how we do it here?' she joked. Beneath her mirth, he felt concern.

'That too,' he said quickly, 'but I've actually come because I need help from Janos and if possible from Dinja and Irina. And of Johan perhaps. Could you call them and tell them to come over soon?'

'Of course, I...,' she looked at him inquiringly. 'Will you please tell me what's going on? It makes me damned... pardon me, very insecure when I'm surprised by such an action from you every time.'

He looked at her apologetically, but didn't know what to say.

'Yes, excuse me,' Olga sputtered, 'but you've been quite busy. One moment you blow up half a mountain to dam up the river, the next you send a whole army home, mobilize the scouting movement to clean up the river, the next you set fire to the factory... Was that thunderstorm yours as well?' Her tone showed that she hoped he would deny it, but that she feared the worst.

With a red head, he lowered his eyes.

'I knew it!' cried Olga, pounding the table helplessly.

'Yes, but I didn't know it would be so big either,' Michael said timidly. 'I had

only ordered a rain shower.’

‘Oh no,’ Olga sighed, laying her head on her folded hands. ‘He only orders a rain shower and it just gets a bit out of hand.’ She looked at him broodingly. With a deep sigh, she sat up straight. ‘Well, all right then, I’ll call them. Would you like some coffee?’

He nodded, though he had already drunk two cups in the kitchen.

She poured him a drink and grinned at him unexpectedly.

‘You know, I’ve never lived so excitingly since I was asked by Wenceslas to occupy a factory somewhere in a mountain village that threatened to kill a child.’

‘You were a soldier, a general?’

‘Yes, I was a general, but it was very boring. It sometimes became fun for a while during big exercises, because then everything went wrong. I was promoted to general because I can improvise well.’

‘Were you the only female general?’

‘Yes,’ she sighed, ‘the first and maybe the last.’ Her face brightened again. ‘But don’t worry, I like it here. What do you need all those clairvoyants for?’

‘Oh, I have to appoint new guardian spirits.’

Olga shook her head. ‘Say that again?’

‘Because of the factory and the severe weather, a lot of guardian spirits have disappeared. I need to appoint new ones, and I could use some help with that.’

‘Michael, please,’ Olga groaned, ‘I’ve seen your fairy, but what you’re telling me now is beyond me.’

‘I’ll explain,’ he tried to reassure Olga. ‘Trees and forests and mountains and streams are all governed by spirit beings. Dia was in charge of the willows, for example. The governor of the stream was a nixe. There was one up to the water mill and one up to the caves in the cirque, where the stream disappears. Those two nixes are no longer there. The one on the last stretch has been dissolved, so to speak, by the factory’s discharges. The nixe from the upper reaches is in retreat, I’m told. It was just getting used to the Iboc’s water. When we dammed it up it got all upset.’

Olga nodded. ‘I can follow that. And you want to tell me that you have to appoint new administrators?’

‘Yes, angels used to do that, but they are retreating. Humans have to do it from now on.’

Olga had some difficulty in coming to terms with this. ‘You’ll have to explain that to me later,’ she sighed. ‘From the first time I saw you, I have been prepared to accept everything you tell me, but that doesn’t mean I understand it.’

‘Thank you, Olga,’ Michael said with shining eyes. At such times, when Olga softened and listened to him, he naturally began to address her as you and Olga. Then she was a comrade and no longer the dominant chairwoman of the Environmental Federation.

‘I’ll call them later. It’s Saturday tomorrow, so hopefully they can all come.’

She looked at him inquiringly. 'Was that all you wanted to talk to me about?' Michael shook his head. 'No, I'd like to know a few things, but I also just wanted to see you again.'

She smiled happily and ruffled his hair. 'What do you want to know, Miche?' He looked at her in a way that brought back seriousness in her.

'What about security?' he asked softly.

'You mean the mafia?' she asked after some hesitation.

Michael nodded. 'And the property developers, because they're crooks too.'

'How did you get to be so wise?'

He shrugged. 'From the scouts. From my father. From you. From some journalists. Yvette also knows the world very well. When I add things up ... Don't forget that my brain is connected to Dia's.'

Olga looked at him. 'No, I forget that sometimes. Not only are you a boy of sixteen, you also possess the knowledge of a creature that is eons old.'

He laughed for a moment. 'She still doesn't understand a lot of human things, you know. But when we put our knowledge and thinking skills together, it's very big. We come a long way.'

She sighed and drummed her fingers on the table. 'Yes, that property developer. It appears from information we have obtained from the land registry that the newly sold properties are registered in the name of one company. We think it's part of a crime syndicate, possibly the same one that the company that owned the factory belongs to.'

'That's no news,' Michael replied. 'What are they going to do, have they done anything yet? That's what I want to know.'

'No...' Olga hesitated. 'No, we don't know anything yet.'

Michael looked at her questioningly.

'Can we get one of us, who they don't know, to inquire whether there are any houses for sale yet? That sort of thing.'

'Maybe the Jablun Housing Authority knows something, or building permits have been applied for. We've already asked for the latter,' Olga said. 'The municipality doesn't know anything yet. We do have the address and telephone number of the new owner, but there's a secretary who answers the phone and will pass on the message, and so on. You know the drill, after that you never hear anything.'

'Hm, we'll have to do something about it then,' mused Michael.

'You're not going to start a fire again, are you?'

'No, I'm not, but we can squat in those empty houses, can't we? Just like you did with the factory.'

Olga looked at him for a long time.

'More coffee?' she asked dryly, then she couldn't hold back her laughter.

## Chapter 8

### Friends

When Michael came outside, the weather had changed. A cold wind was blowing and one rain shower followed another.

He went to see how things were in the camp of the world conference.

The once grassy meadow had turned into a network of muddy paths.

New conference participants were still arriving from all over the world. A small core of Slovakian scouts had stayed with Paul and Maria and was managing the conference camp, which had been partly built with their equipment.

‘Michel’ called Maria from a tent where she was cooking.

Blushing, with an apron on and a ladle in her hand, she stormed out of the tent and hugged Michael fervently. ‘Where were you? People keep asking about you.’

She grabbed him by the shoulder and held him an arm’s length away. ‘What are you wearing?’

Michael grinned and grabbed her swinging ladle to avoid getting splashes of beetroot soup on him.

‘Borrowed. I got wet this morning. I showered at the guesthouse.’

Maria looked at him, shaking her head. ‘You can’t appear like that in front of all these people here. Don’t you have any other clothes?’

He looked disdainfully at his trousers, which clearly belonged to a more solidly built person. ‘Not here. In my tent, but that’s more than an hour’s walk.’

Maria pulled out her mobile phone, tapped a preselected number and, after a few seconds, pressed it again. ‘I called Paul. He’s busy somewhere, and it doesn’t cost anything that way,’ she explained laconically. ‘I’ll ask him to get you some better clothes.’

‘What do the people want from me?’

‘You were going to speak to them, remember. The storm has turned everything upside down, but I think it’s about time you show your face.’

Paul came out from behind a large tent.

‘Paul!’ cried Michael happily. The boys embraced each other and did an Indian dance while uttering all kinds of primal cries. Maria, who could not get a word in edgewise out of the boys, retreated into the cooking tent, laughing.

‘Maria says I don’t look good in these trousers,’ Michael panted, when they had dropped to the ground, ‘and that you should find me better ones.’

‘You’re right,’ laughed Paul, ‘you look like the little brother in his big brother’s trousers. Come with me, I know someone of your stature.’

Later, Michael could barely get a pair of tight jeans closed. They belonged to the kitchen princess, who gave him a kiss and a pat on his bottom and went back to the cooking tent.

‘So, I will introduce you to the leadership of the conference,’ Paul announced. Michael walked behind him, curious what was going to happen.

‘Why are they already cooking now?’ he asked. ‘It’s just coffee time.’

‘There is a meeting this afternoon and tonight,’ said Paul. ‘The cooking team wants to be in. That’s why they’re getting everything ready now.’

‘Meeting?’

‘Yes...’ Paul turned around. ‘Where have you been? Don’t you know?’

‘What do I need to know?’

‘Well,’ Paul said in amazement. ‘Here we have a half elf being flown around the mountains by a world-famous elf woman, and he doesn’t even know what’s going on right next to his forest.’ He laughed at Michael’s unhappy face. ‘Where is Dia, anyway?’

Michael shrugged his shoulders. ‘She needed some time to herself,’ he replied sternly.

Paul grabbed him by both shoulders and looked at him seriously. ‘Miche, we have become friends recently and as a friend I want to tell you something. There are hundreds of people here and thousands, I would say tens of thousands all over the world, who want to hear from you how they can connect with nature beings. You have a great responsibility in this.’

Michael bowed his head and sighed.

‘And what are you going to do about it?’ asked Paul urgently, misinterpreting Michael’s sigh.

‘I will be there, Paul, tonight. This afternoon. Tell me later what the program is.’ He looked up at his much taller friend. ‘I really haven’t been idle, you know,’ he whispered. He looked around and pointed to the winding snake of trees and bushes at the bottom of the valley. ‘That brook, it hasn’t had a water ghost in it for weeks. Since we blew up the mountain, it’s gone.’ He pointed in the direction of the Elfswood. ‘Not there either. The nixe of the lower river has been dead for years. I have to fix that, you know.’ With sudden tears in his eyes he looked at Paul. ‘I just don’t know how...’

‘Oh, how awful,’ whispered Paul. ‘But... Why do you have to do that? How...?’

‘Angels used to do it,’ Michael sighed. ‘Now humans are responsible for it. Because nowadays humans have complete control over the Earth and the water and the plants and animals. That is what the messenger angel and Bran said to me. But there is no human being left who knows how to act in the ethereal world.’

‘But, they can’t just sneak out, can they?’ burst out Paul indignantly.

‘They don’t quite do that either.’ Michael laughed almost hysterically. ‘Where do you suppose all those hurricanes and tsunamis and earthquakes come from? With them, the higher spirit beings try to restore balances that are disturbed by man.’ Michael saw Paul looking at something behind him and turned around.

‘I heard,’ Roaring Bear said and held out his hand. ‘That is exactly the subject of why we are all here together, Michael.’

‘How do you know? I mean, how can people know what I have to do?’

The Indian’s calm gaze helped him to regain control of himself.

‘Good morning, Roaring Bear,’ he greeted, ‘excuse me for acting so childish. I am glad to see you.’

‘That is mutual,’ smiled the Indian. ‘But to return to your apparent surprise, you are really not alone in the tasks that the spirit world hands to us. That is why it is so important that we have come together. Thousands of people around the world feel they are the only ones who can save the world, whereas we must work together. That is the lesson we are learning in the Elfswood.’

Meanwhile, the path had become busier. A stream of people had started towards the large tent from which Paul had come. Men and women from all parts of the world, often dressed in traditional costumes, gathered in front of the entrance, where they were handed folders with papers and bottles of water of the little brook high up, where the Bran had its sources.

‘We scouts take care of the logistics and the catering,’ Paul explained when he saw Michael watching. ‘Yvette’s foundation pays the costs.’

There were many young people with prints of well-known environmental organizations and universities on their sweaters.

‘Here you see activists, scientists and nature people united,’ said Roaring Bear. ‘For the first time in history, nature people are coming together and meet with science and the press. For the first time in modern history, Western science is no longer sceptical about the invisible world.’

Michael suspected that the Indian was a well-known person, for several people gathered around him with the obvious desire to say something or ask something.

‘Will you wait a moment?’ asked Roaring Bear when he was urgently pulled by his sleeve. He disappeared into the crowd. The bystanders, however, turned out not to have come for the Indian, but for him. For a moment he could feel regret that his initial anonymity had been broken, but then the events took hold of him completely. He tried to answer all the questions, but the barrage was too intense and he became completely distraught.

Paul, who saw it happening, intervened.

‘He will be back later, but for now we have to go to the dressing rooms,’ he made up on the spot. He almost lifted Michael off the ground when he took him by the arm and carried him through the stream of people to the stage.

Behind it was an extension to the tent, full of equipment and supplies, where the speakers could prepare themselves.

The two boys were warmly greeted. Paul turned out to be well-known; soon he was engrossed by boys and girls to whom he gave a stream of instructions. Michael found it an exciting atmosphere. He sat down next to a smiling, gnome-like man with a wreath of white hair around a shiny brown skull and a long white beard.

‘Hello Michael,’ the man said softly.

‘Hey, are you Dutch?’ he responded in surprise.

‘Just like you.’ He sighed. ‘I wish I could talk as well as you.’

‘Are you going to give a lecture?’

The man showed a paper folded many times. ‘I hope I can manage, it had to be in English too.’

‘O.’ Michael hesitated. ‘What... what are you going to lecture about?’

‘About gardens, how I learned to listen to the garden elves and the plant ladies. You can see them, can’t you?’

‘Sometimes, if they want to. By the way, what’s your name?’

‘Oh, excuse me. The man chuckled.

‘My name is Roderic Tuinman.’

He laughed out loud. Michael didn’t get the joke, his attention was too much distracted by the motley collection of people talking to each other. A few moments later Roaring Bear squeezed himself in between the people, greeted the goblin man and asked directly:

‘Michael, would you be willing to open the meeting?’

He had seen the question coming and nodded.

‘We start in ten minutes,’ Roaring Bear said with relief, ‘would you like another drink?’ Michael shook his head. ‘No thanks.’ He grinned: ‘Then I’ll have to pee too often, it’s awkward to talk in public with a full bladder.’

## Chapter 9

# Unexpected help

‘It is time. Are you coming?’

Michael stood up, saluted the goblin man and followed Roaring Bear through a cloth door to the stage. He was tense, but not very nervous. He had enough confidence in his spontaneous speaking ability. From the moment he entered the venue he had been mentally preparing himself to address the conference.

Roaring Bear walked to the podium, tapped the microphone to see if he was on and spoke a word of welcome.

Michael did not listen; he only looked and tried to catch the expectations of the audience. When he was announced, he walked forward with his heart pounding. He opened his mouth for a welcome when the audience started applauding. Surprised, he looked at the rows of eager faces in front of him. What was the point of that? He hadn’t said anything yet!

‘Thank you,’ he said as soon as he could make himself understood. ‘You’d prefer to see Dia here, of course, but she can’t stand enclosed spaces. She’s there...’ he waved his arm up, ‘and she’s listening in through my ears. She might want to say something too, with my mouth...’ He listened with his head tilted. He looked at the audience and laughed. ‘She says she wants to meet you all. Near the forest in a meadow... this afternoon.’

He turned to Roaring Bear, who was apparently in charge.

‘Is that possible?’ The Indian nodded and smiled. The audience reacted with a short applause. It excited Michael, it made him dare to say more than he had initially intended.

‘You have all seen here in the Valley of Bran what elemental forces can unleash when humans disturb the balance too much,’ he continued seriously. ‘The point is however that the havoc the thunderstorm has wreaked is indirect result of previous human actions. When nature intervenes, it does so with unbridled force. We call them disasters, but to the eternal stewards of the Earth they are corrections.’

His seriousness had spilled over to the audience. The faces he could distinguish no longer looked so cheerful.

‘We, I mean the Slovak Environmental Federation, the scouts, my father, sisters and I, we had made a plan to brush the stream clean by hand.’ At that moment he saw his father sitting at the end of a row and gave him a quick smile. ‘It would take too long, I was told...’ He hesitated. Should he tell by whom? Should he... yes, he decided to put his cards on the table. There were probably enough people in the room who could accept it.

‘Dia and I were summoned by three Great Ones: a messenger angel, the land-

scape angel of this valley, his name is Bran, and Pan, the nature god to whom most elementals are subordinate.’

Tense, he went over the faces in front of him to see how this announcement had arrived. At first glance, his fear of being ridiculed was unfounded: the people waited breathlessly for what he would say next.

‘I was told that the polluted river and the factory site were cracks in the protective fabric that the guardian spirits have maintained around the valley for thousands of years. Through that crack...’ Again he hesitated. Could he say it? Again, he decided not to mince his words. He had seen them and fought them, hadn’t he? He took a deep breath; it was scarier than he thought.

‘Through those cracks demons could enter our reality. The factory was occupied by demons, by evil creatures brought into existence by greedy thoughts and intentions of men. That crack has now been closed, first by the fire...’ at the last moment he thought it best not to say anything about his role in the fire at the factory, ‘and subsequently the flood washed away all the remaining contamination.’

He saw hands going up and shook his head; he wasn’t finished yet.

‘The elements fire and water, with the help of the element air, have cleaned the earth of the valley. But there is much destroyed as collateral damage. I see a lot of acquaintances here...’ he smiled briefly at the room, ‘who have helped to repair as much of the damage as possible. But there has also been a lot of – invisible – destruction in the realm of the nature beings and guardian spirits.’

His gaze darkened. ‘A lot of them have... disappeared; another word for dead.’ The room sat frozen.

Michael took a shaky breath. ‘I have been instructed by the messenger angel to reshape the elemental world.’ He now almost whispered. ‘I should appoint new guardian spirits for the river, upstream and downstream, for the land where the factory used to be and for...’ He swallowed, ‘for the cirque which is full of debris and dead trees. But I don’t know how.’

He didn’t dare look into the public.

He just stood there sweating and didn’t know what to say.

Shuffling sound in the hall; a high-pitched voice whispering an apology, a rumbling. Michael looked up. A frail woman with white hair in a bun was coming down the aisle towards him. Apparently her calm initiative stirred something in others, for another person stood up: a young Oriental woman came towards the stage, carrying a little girl. From the back, a tall and scrawny African in traditional costume stood up and walked forward with dignity. Two men with black straight hair, apparently South American Indians, followed him.

Michael looked on in surprise.

‘Maybe I can help you,’ the old woman said in juicy Irish-English as she faced him. She turned around and pointed to the others coming to the stage.

‘They too, I think.’ She smiled at the little girl. With a shock, Michael recognized the expression in the dark eyes of the child, who was about Diana’s age.

The child's gaze expressed the same laconic wisdom as his sister's eyes! Could it also be a fairy child?

Attracted as by a magnet, Michael came from behind the lectern and stepped off the stage. Someone from the crew quickly took the microphone out of its stand and handed it to him. He extended his hand to the old lady and asked: 'Can you really help me to restore the spirit world?'

The lady pointed to the child, to the smiling black man and to the two Indians. 'Otherwise they will,' she said gingerly. 'There are more in the room who can help you, but most are too shy to come forward.'

Michael wanted to know how.

'We'll talk about that later,' the old lady smiled. 'First you have to finish your speech. We will sit here close to you.'

A few folding chairs were hastily fetched and the six of them took their places.

Michael climbed onto the stage, pushed the microphone into its stand and said with a relieved face: 'You know, this has happened a few times before. When we really did not know how to proceed, we explained the problem in front of a TV camera or, as here, in front of an audience, and then there was always a good answer.'

His face became serious again.

'The Valley of Bran has been protected for centuries as a meeting place between man and the elemental world. I have been told that since the advent of machines, man has rushed headlong across the world in a denial of the elemental world. This is so serious because the angels are withdrawing from as stewards of the Earth in order to allow man to take his place. But no human seemed to be able to do that.'

He looked briefly at the row next to the old lady. 'But there are. They are even here,' he continued softly. 'I understand that many of you have always thought you were the only ones, just as I thought just now.' He nodded. 'Yes, we can do it. We'll get started right away! Thank you.'

With a bow, he stepped aside and sat down next to the old woman who had invitingly knocked on the empty chair next to her. A short applause sounded.

Roaring Bear went to the microphone to announce the next speaker, but Michael had more attention for the people next to him.

When the speaker came forward, the old woman signalled to the small group to go outside.

'They mean well, but we have work to do,' she said as they stood outside. 'My name is Sarah and I am from Ireland.' She laughed. 'There we are used in dealing with the "little folks"' She pointed to the river. 'Will you show us the problem?'

Michael felt strange. It seemed that he no longer had a will of his own. One event followed another at breakneck speed, everywhere he played the part he was assigned, as well as he could, but... What would he want for himself? He had to admit that he had not got much further than flying and making love.

The people looked at him, expecting him to lead them. He decided to check out the upper reaches first, as they were close by.

He followed a track that ran through some hedgerows and secluded meadows. It was not a human trail, but it was easily passable.

Along the broadly washed-out bed most undermined trees had already been put upright, some of them were braced with steel wire. A single lopsided alder was left standing; it would survive on its own. In the middle of the muddy bed ran a small stream. It was still murky.

Michael pointed, but said nothing. The image spoke for itself.

They sat down in silence on the riverbank.

Sarah spoke first.

‘As I see it, we humans, with the help of garden elves and wood elves, will first have to work the bed until along the banks nature is back in balance. By the way, I see that the elves are already working on it.’

The moment she said that, Michael saw some coloured elves working in the bed.

‘They are asking for guidance,’ he agreed. ‘But I don’t know how to do that.’

‘There are enough people at the conference for whom it is their daily work,’ Sarah said. ‘You don’t have to do all that yourself. There are gardeners, tree workers, water charmers, geomancers, magicians, shamans and many more among us.’ She turned to the Oriental woman with the little girl. ‘Would you like to mention your speciality?’

The woman smiled modestly. ‘I only translate what she says,’ she whispered. ‘She doesn’t speak human language. Amrita creates order. She sings very softly and then harmony is created.’

‘How... why did you come?’ asked Michael awkwardly.

The woman smiled. ‘She has commanded me. I guide her in the world. I have received money from her followers to make this journey.’

‘And you?’ The skinny African smiled. ‘I was sent here by my god. In my country, I help to restore the rivers when they are polluted by mining and gold extraction,’ he said in slow, careful French. Michael understood him well. ‘My God is probably the same as your Pan.’

Michael nodded; he felt the same. He looked at the two South American Indians.

‘We protect the rainforest,’ one said. He pointed at his mate, who grinned shyly. ‘My brother understands the forest, I understand the people. I am chairman of a cooperative that has leased a large piece of rainforest and sells its products. It makes more money every year than if you cut it down.’

Sarah looked at Michael seriously. ‘We are already busy doing what should be done, my dear boy. Working groups have been formed for the various tasks. You are not alone. Actually...’ she hesitated for a moment, ‘it is a sign of pride to think that you are the only one, Michael.’

He turned blood red. In his embarrassment, he saw the little girl smile.

Sarah followed his gaze.

‘Yes, it was necessary for you to meet Amrita. You have amazing abilities, Michael. Your elf wife has even greater ones. Amrita will help you and Dia to use your powers effectively and come into harmony with the rest of the world. For the world is bigger than this valley, my boy. Much, much bigger.’

The African saw that Michael was quite upset, stood up and pulled him to his feet.

‘The plan Sarah mentioned is the right one, Michel,’ he said firmly. ‘Only when the riverbanks are in harmony can we restore the water and appoint new guardian spirits.’

‘We are in the working group that is making a management plan for the forests and woods in the valley,’ said one Indian. ‘My brother is making sure that the forest awareness grows and starts trusting us.’

He pointed in the direction of the cirque. ‘There is your task, Miguel, to bring life there again.’

The little girl pulled her companion along and stood right in front of Michael. She looked him in the eyes. He dropped to his knees until he was kneeling in front of her. She drew a sign on his forehead with her index finger. He did not notice that the others were leaving and he remained seated on the riverbank in silence.

## Chapter 10

# Unexpected visit

*Miche? Where are you?*

*Oh, far away.*

*Can you come? Daddy has a surprise for you.*

Michael could hear Lucy was not saying something she mightily enjoyed, but she knew how to hide it well. No matter how he tried to get into her mind to unlock her secret, she just giggled and didn't let on.

*Is it really important?*

*Yes, otherwise I wouldn't call you. I know how nice it is for you to wander around with Dia.*

*All right, we are coming. But it will take some time.*

*Are you that far away?*

*Hm hm*

Dia had obviously been listening in, because she came flying in shortly after the innerspeech contact with his sister.

*Are we going back?* was her question. He agreed with a nod of his head.

She took him in front of her, as they always did, and sailed down the slope into the clear void. Below, Michael saw the earth fall away, cold wind whipped along his skin, the warm skin of the elfin woman protected his back. Floating like an eagle, Dia descended circling through gorges where perhaps no human had ever been, through valleys where only mountain goats and chamois saw the two of them whizzing past, silent as a bird of prey.

They landed on a narrow alpine meadow to pick some flowers and sailed down again. Above their own Valley of Bran, the light seemed to be made of gold. The air tasted different, the sounds sounded clear as glass and yet far away.

*I can smell that the train has just come.* His sense of smell was so acute that he even noticed traces of diesel exhaust at this altitude.

*Someone has come on that train who knows you,* Dia replied. *Diana's dryad just told me, but I don't seem to be allowed to tell anything.*

The last stretch was dizzyingly fast, the wind, ever warmer as they approached the earth, whipping past them; Dia had half retracted her wings and was holding them out like a diving bird of prey in V-shape. Just over the little meadow next to the boarding house, she pulled up sharply, which suddenly slowed her speed, and set Michael down on his feet.

*Wow, that was stunting!*

*Your complete family has been watching,* she said enigmatically. *Call me when you're ready.* Surprised, he looked at her, but she avoided his eyes and took off again with a few wing beats. *See you later,* was all he heard from her.

Curious, he looked up, but there was no one behind the boarding house windows watching him. When he entered the drawing room, he was startled. In the midst of his radiant sisters stood his mother; on crutches and very emaciated. Behind her stood Herman.

*Be kind to her. She has had a very hard time. She is afraid of your ordeal,* his sisters simultaneously signalled to him.

But that was not really necessary: the fear of being rejected was clearly visible on her face.

In that one moment Michael realized that his resistance to her, all these years, was based on his own feeling of rejection. Now that he had connected on a very deep level with his sisters and father, he understood what his mother was missing.

His puzzled face broke into a happy smile, because he understood, because he understood her and understood himself.

'Hello, Mum,' he said softly and kissed her on both cheeks.

She sighed shakily and let tears flow.

Michael was moved: this little woman, who had given him life, now asked for the cherishing she had given him as a baby.

'Come, let's sit down,' he said, taking her by the arm to the sofa.

'Yes,' she whispered. He put his arm around her, her crutches clattering on the plank floor. Wendy sat down on her other side and took her hand; Lucy sat down at her feet. Diana snuggled up to Herman, her eyes shining.

Herman smiled with relief: he had been looking up to the confrontation between his headstrong son, who had come into his adult strength in such a short time, and his weakened ex-wife.

Marjorie told of the journey to the Andes, the avalanche she had been caught in and nearly died under, the recovery in a strange land, her headaches. When she wanted to tell how sorry she was that she had missed all the adventures of her children, she sank deeper and deeper into her grief.

Michael came to realize that his mother's pursuit of happiness and unification stemmed from a karmic connection with nature beings. Astonished, he realized that Marjorie was as much an elfin child as her four children. Only she had experienced it a much harder way: in her youth she had been completely alone in her longing for the connection with nature, which she had managed to convey to her children.

He was ashamed that he had been so contrary, blind to her needs. The whole mother-child relation faded into the background; his pent-up anger melted away. Marjorie, as he thought of her, was also one of them.

*Funny that we didn't know, eh?* entered Wendy his mind. She had been able to follow the change in his feeling, the growth of his insight.

*Mum couldn't explain it to us then,* Lucy added. *She could not just learning how to deal with nature.*

*Diana, did you know?* Michael wanted to know.

She hesitated for a moment before answering.

*I was too small to know. I always had my dryad in me, I thought Wen and Luus had them too. I did think that Mum didn't have some one. She was always so... so hungry when she hugged me.*

Yes, she often said she could eat us, laughed Wendy and Lucy.

Their quick exchange of ideas seemed to have a calming effect on Marjorie. She stopped crying and looked inquiringly at their faces.

'We've are using innerspeech to talk to each other,' Wendy explained.

'You know, telepathically,' added Lucy.

Diana, seeing that Marjorie was becoming a bit herself again, let go of Herman and crept carefully between Michael and her mother.

'Miche taught us,' she said and kissed Marjorie on the cheek. She gave him a quick look, like: dare to say no, and then looked at their father.

'Dad should learn it too, but he can't yet,' she added decisively.

'Do you talk to each other telepathically?' She blew her nose in a paper tissue and sniffed some more. 'It has always been my dearest wish,' she said, looking a little sadly ahead, 'but I couldn't do it, no matter what I tried. Perhaps you were too little then.'

'Did you try it with us then?' asked Michael in surprise.

She stroked the heads of her daughters and smiled pityingly. 'Yes, with all of you.'

Herman dragged in a chair and sat down opposite them. 'I'm glad you're here, Mar,' he said softly. 'The kids do such wonderful things here, they'll tell you all about it as the days go by. But you haven't met a very important person yet.'

'Who then...?' Her eyes got big, she slapped her hand in front of her mouth. 'Oh!' She cast a guilty look at Michael. 'Now I'm doing it again.' She started crying. 'I'm so stuck in myself that I didn't think about it at all...' she tried to control herself, grabbed Michael's hand and squeezed it hard. That helped.

'Miche, will you introduce me to your wife?'

## Chapter 11

### Family life

*Dear, my mother would like to meet you.*

*I have understood that, you have relayed me everything well.*

*Where are you?*

She showed him: she was sitting at the stream in the hidden valley, near her old friend the willow tree.

*Shall I come?* she asked happily.

*Yes, come to the meadow where you dropped me off. My mother can't walk very well yet.*

'Mum, Dia is coming in fifteen minutes. Shall we have breakfast first, or have you already eaten?'

'Yes, but we still want some,' Herman laughed. The twins nodded with shining eyes. Only Diana didn't show any sign, she hardly ate anything that came from the guesthouse kitchen. *Aren't you eating too little, little mouse?*

*I'll catch up when we get to the forest. I want to be just as diluted as you, then Dia can fly with me too,* Diana replied with a longing she couldn't hide. He ruffled her hair.

*Perhaps you will be able to fly yourself with the wings of your dryad. Then you won't need anyone.*

*Would it?* she asked happily.

They went into the dining room, where a table had been set.

*Did you take care of that?* signalled Michael with a quick look of understanding to his father. Herman nodded affirmative. *Can you hear me?* asked Michael in surprise. Herman did not react. So it had been something else, body language or something similar, to which Herman had replied. Patience, patience, Michael said to himself, we will teach him.

They sat down. The twins immediately attacked the fresh rolls and homemade jam of the landlady. Diana only took some home-made apple juice.

Michael spread a sandwich, not because he was hungry, but because it smelled so good.

An image of the boarding house from a great height reached him. That was Dia's way of announcing that she was going to land.

'Mum, Dia is about to land. Are you coming outside?'

'Yes!' Like a child so happy, she scrambled to her feet, her crutches toppling over of course, and she almost pulled the tablecloth off the table.

At a moment like this you can see that she is actually still a child, thought Michael with a new affection for his clumsy mother. He took her by the arm and led her through the drawing room, out the front door and into the meadow, where luckily no washing was hanging out to dry today.

'Look, there she comes,' he pointed out.

Marjorie drank in the image of the woman of the fairies, who descended in circles with her wings sparking in the sunlight, flapped for a moment and touched the earth with her legs stretched next to Michael. In a pleading gesture Marjorie stretched out her hands.

Michael could hardly hold back when he understood that here an age-old longing was being fulfilled. *Mummy is a lost elf*, Wendy said in awe.

*From way back*, Lucy added.

Diana stood there looking unperturbed, her hand in her father's. Herman was surprised by the reaction of the mother of his children. He had never seen the extent of Marjorie's profound desire, so he could not gauge completely her incredulous surprise.

*Daddy sees mummy for the first time as she really is*, Diana told her brother and sisters.

*Crazy huh? He has been in love with her after all; they got us together.*

*That's because Dad has just opened up here*, Michael said. *Just like us, eh Luus?*

Lucy agreed with Wendy's thought without words.

*Your mother was an elemental being a long time ago*, Dia said seriously. *I didn't know this. I'm going to take your mother for a walk.*

With a gentle hand Dia led Marjorie away from her family. With her one wing she embraced the human woman, who was a lot smaller than the elf woman. It did not surprise those who stayed behind that Marjorie could walk on Dia's arm without crutches.

The twins went hand in hand towards Herman, while Diana let go of his hand and came towards Michael. *Let's go to the Forest Meadow*, she suggested. *It is dry and quite nice weather. Dia will take Mum with her.*

*Can she walk all that way, little mouse?* asked Michael, worried.

*Yes, Dia gives her strength.*

*All right, then.* 'Dad, Wen, Luus: Diana suggests that we go to our little camp on the Forest Meadow.'

'That's all right, but I can't stay all day,' Herman replied.

'Bring some goodies?' was Wendy's response.

'You're getting fat,' giggled Diana.

'Not at all!' protested Wendy. 'No way, eh Luus? Say something, too!'

'Well...?' Lucy looked at her with a tilted head and one eye squeezed shut adorably. 'Well... eh...?' She ran off, laughing, when Wendy tried to poke her.

She looked imploringly at her brother. 'Can't I thin it a bit like you?'

'Yes, you can,' said Michael, with a smile.

'Oh yes?' asked Wendy eagerly. 'Tell me, how does that work? What do I have to do?'

'Well... there are two ways. The first is not easy: you have to find an elf who wants to have sex with you.'

Herman started to chuckle.

'Well, that's not nice,' Wendy pouted. 'How do I find an elf? I'm only thirteen.'

'There is another way, though....'

'But what? Say it!'

'Yes... That one looks very simple, but it's the hardest.'

'Ah yuck, I don't feel like it at all. What should I do then?'

'Eat less sweets.' Michael ran off before her foot could touch him. 'Bastard!' she scolded. Then she laughed too. 'Well, I'd rather do it the first way. Come on, I'm going into the woods to look for an elfin boy.' She pulled up her bra, pushed her breasts up a bit and walked hip-swaying in the direction of the forest. Her filled figure moved with grace and extraordinary sensuality.

Herman stared at his daughter, suddenly revealing to be a voluptuous woman. Lucy also looked at her with admiration. *Wow, she thought, that you dare to do that. Sexy, man. Is it because of the dancing?*

Wendy turned round, cast a few lascivious glances at Michael and her father, beckoned Lucy impatiently and rocked on.

Lucy ran after her. Just like a little foal, Michael thought endearingly. Not as sexy as Wen, but that will come.

Diana followed the twins, hopping. Because she was so light, it seemed as if her movements were slowed down like in a movie. She almost floated.

*Try your wings,* thought Michael.

*Later. My dryad is too busy in the forest.*

'Come Dad, let's go too,' he said aloud.

'Yes, yes. Did you see that?'

'What?'

'Wendy?'

'What about her?'

Michael didn't want to rush into his father's confusion. He thought the latter should speak up.

'Well... didn't you see?'

'What, Dad?'

Michael tried to look as innocent as possible, but inside he laughed.

Herman took a deep breath. 'Did you see how Wendy... walked. Did you see how she walked?'

'Yes, I did. Very sexy. She walks so beautifully because she's a dancer.'

'Is she?' Herman started to sweat.

'Dad, just admit it. You love her and still thought of her as a child. You suddenly saw her as a beckoning female.'

Herman continued walking with a red head.

'Dad, sometimes they still behave like little girls and other times they are sexy little women. At first I found it difficult too, but since I've been having love with Dia I can look at them when they behave like this. By the way, do you have a girlfriend?'

Herman mumbled something unintelligible. 'How did you get to be so wise? You talk like my psychologist,' he growled.

'Do you have a psychologist? Why?'

'Oh well. Maybe because I can't get a girlfriend.'

'Have you tried then?'

'Yes, I did. But the women among my colleagues are either married or so obsessed with their careers that they only want to go to bed with their bosses.'

He kicked pebbles in front of him. 'I have tried, but the women I like have such high standards. I'm not very good at communication or feeling.'

'Hm. What does your psychologist say?'

'That I should do courses to open up and that kind of stuff. I don't have time for that.'

'That's also why Mum wanted to divorce you, right?'

Herman looked so unhappy that Michael was afraid he was going to cry. He pulled him by the sleeve to make him stop.

'Dad, you just need to be yourself here.' He chuckled. 'Maybe Dia has a sister for you.'

Herman started laughing and gave him a shove. 'Cheeky monkey.'

'No really Dad, it really helps when you make love again.'

'We'll see, we'll see,' Herman muttered, embarrassed to talk to his teenage son about his love life, or rather lack thereof.

There was an exuberant bustle in the forest.

Michael forgot about his father and stared his eyes out at the dozens of busy nature creatures that presented themselves to him. Although the flood had destroyed many trees and other vegetation, it had created openings for rejuvenation of the forest. Seedlings sprouted up everywhere, herded and helped by colourful forest elves. Fauns in large trees were busy replacing broken branches with new and closing fresh wounds with bark. Goblins and gnarled earth creatures wove healing energy over eroded places where the bare earth had been exposed. At the edges, wood elves were busy germinating seeds to close the wounds in the earth as quickly as possible.

But the riverbed that had been eroded by the flood still ran through the forest like a gaping wound. Water ran down the middle, but it seemed to Michael to be dead, as if no sunlight had ever shone in it.

They turned onto a path that led to the wood pasture and left the painful cut behind them.

'Everything is damp,' the girls shouted as they climbed into their tent and immediately started hanging out sleeping bags and sleeping mats.

Diana sat next to her mother, laying with her head in Dia's lap. Was she asleep?

*Yes, she is sleeping now. The recognition of who she essentially is evoked a great deal of pain and sorrow, Dia reported. From lifetimes ago. I put her to sleep so as not to let it become too much at once.*

Michael looked down on his mother's grief-stricken face with mixed feelings. She was not old, just forty, but her skin hung wrinkled around her. She looked like she was eighty.

*She is ageing fast because she is not in her right body,* Dia explained. *I can heal her skin. Would you like that?*

He nodded and swallowed, unable to form words.

*Come to me. You can help me. You heal her legs. They've been broken and haven't quite healed yet. I did it to you, in the cave, remember?*

He remembered exactly how Dia had acted and followed the memory stored in his cells. He slipped into his mother's body field as easily as he had done with Diana when she was suffocating. The field was familiar to him. Biochemically, of course, his mother and he were closely related. Since his own healing, he understood how the ethereal body forms and restores a body in the material world.

The bones were well set, but the fracture was still weak and the muscles and tendons were overloaded and in stress.

He healed the places where he could reach.

*Just stop. We have done enough for now. We can't go too fast either. Your mother still has a heavy body, not diluted like yours,* Dia warned.

Herman and the girls had respectfully watched Dia and Michael treat Marjorie. For Herman it was the first time he had seen something like that. He watched with open mouth. It was as if he saw Marjorie for the first time. Without her defensive shield and without his blocking cynical view of people who think differently.

Impressed by what was happening, Michael's family said goodbye to Dia and Michael and looked after them as they disappeared into heaven.

## Chapter 12

### By air

Michael was back in the village at daybreak to wait for the first train.

The days were shortening rapidly now. The weather was bleak; a strong wind was blowing thin rain through the valley. The previous day his sisters had moved with all their belongings from the Forest Meadow to the boarding house, where Herman and Marjorie had rented two rooms. He did not want to be indoors; he was so warm that he did not feel the cold at all.

Far away, the two-tone horn of the train from Jablun sounded; the mountains echoed it back so that it became a merry yodel. A little later, the diesel slid along the platform.

Why do brakes of trains always have to screech like that? Michael wondered.

*That is our energy. We have to convert opposing forces. That goes not always solely in warmth,* he was surprised to learn.

*Who are you?*

*We are originally iron beings. Now we govern the bogies of this train.*

*Can't you leave out that horrible noise?*

*No, the wheels and brakes are made by humans in such a way that violent air vibrations occur when we have to dissipate kinetic energy.*

*Can't you give the engineers any clues as to how to do it better?*

*That is what we have done. Nowadays, brakes are made that produce much less noise. They are better designed.*

The conversation with the spirit beings of the train had surprised Michael.

From the rear carriage, the daily shopping for the village was already being unloaded. Michael hurriedly welcomed a group of people who had got out of the first wagon and were piling up luggage on the platform.

'Hello, you must be Michael,' said a white-haired man who was the last to get off the train. 'I am professor Matt.' He pointed to the luggage. 'The balloons and equipment will be arriving by truck later in the day. We do have everything we need for an encampment.'

'Good morning, professor,' Michael said politely, 'be welcome. Did you have a good journey?'

'Yes, a long one, but without delay.' He looked around. 'Where do you want us?'

'I think it is the most convenient for you to go to the World Conference camp. There is plenty room for your tents and there are all the facilities.' Michael looked down the road. 'If all goes well, the farmer will come with his cart to take your things to the camp. We have arranged a meeting in the guesthouse, with breakfast.' He pointed to the groceries, which had been distributed by the villagers in

the meantime. The regular girls of the boarding house carried more than half away.

‘There goes the fresh bread. Are you all coming?’

Professor Matt shook his head. ‘Just me, Georg, Philip and Jasmine. The others will set up camp and unload the equipment when it arrives. They’ll have their own food with them.’

After giving the necessary instructions to the four students who stayed behind, they walked to the guesthouse. In the dining room a table was set, it smelt of coffee and omelette, but no one was there yet. Michael walked through to the kitchen, where it was very busy. He was embraced and kissed by the village girls, who had gradually overcome their shyness.

‘Are the others up yet?’ he asked. ‘The guests are already here.’

‘Yes,’ the landlady replied without looking up from the pan in which she was cooking a fragrant omelette. ‘Everyone’s awake, but they’re queuing for the bathroom.’

A little later, there was a rumble on the stairs. Apparently Olga had managed to be the first one in the bathroom, because she came down with wet hair.

She introduced herself to the four scientists and invited them to the table. A few minutes later Herman came down the stairs, followed by Yvette.

‘Is Johan not here?’ asked Olga. Michael shook his head. ‘No, he wasn’t on the train. Maybe he will come later.’

‘What’s that snob doing?’ muttered Olga. ‘We have... Oh.’

At that moment, a procession of servants came out of the kitchen with trays full of delicious things. When everyone had been provided for, Olga cleared her throat and began: ‘Go and eat quietly, but this is a working breakfast and I would like to take the opportunity to make some introductory remarks.’

She took a bite, had a few sips of coffee and continued: ‘Your email was most welcome, professor Matt. We didn’t want to tell you all about it through the mail, but as the water level in the cirque dropped we got a sense of how staggeringly much lumber is piled up there. Our initial plan to set it on fire as soon as it was dry enough no longer seemed feasible. It’s just too much.’

She cast a quick glance at Michael. He understood the hint and took over: ‘I also thought it was a waste of all that wood. Burning it would put even more CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. Transporting the wood by air with helicopters would have the same result, because of all the kerosene it would cost. We can’t get there by cars or machines.’

He signalled to Herman, who continued: ‘As part of the restoration of the mill dam and the lock, which I am in charge of, it has been decided to make a new water wheel so that the mill can saw lumber again. We were just pondering how to get all those logs to the mill when you offered to use your balloons for a low-energy air transport experiment.’

‘Thank you,’ professor Matt began, nodding at Yvette with a smile. ‘Thanks to

the donation from your foundation, Mrs. Neuchatel, we have been able to tackle the experiment on a grand scale. In particular, the grant has made possible the purchase of a further five balloons, the necessary helium, equipment and wireless directing. We hope that our experiments will help to clean up the Elfswood after the flood. In addition, we hope, I will not deny, to gain wide publicity for this method of transport by air.'

'And for us, it's the next step in our careers,' added Jasmine, a scientist of Turkish origin.

'If all goes well,' Georg added. The man, who had been introduced as professor Matt's direct assistant, had looked sceptical all the time.

'The students who are with us are hoping to graduate in several sections,' Philip, a bearded man with long hair and the weathered appearance of an outdoorsman, added meanwhile.

'Well,' Olga laughed, 'this project seems like a special win-win situation for all participants.'

'If all goes well,' Georg muttered crossly.

'Georg is an experienced balloonist,' explained professor Matt. 'He was a pilot in an experiment in the then Soviet Union with a engine driven hybrid zeppelin.'

'How did that go?' wanted Herman to know.

'Oh well,' Georg shrugged. 'Technically it was all right in the beginning. The Russians can build fantastic things. But as with so many of those tests in those days, things went wrong organisationally. Poor maintenance, late departures or none at all, drunken staff... the project died a gentle death,' he finished a little bitterly.

Jasmine took over with an annoyed look at Georg.

'In this experiment we use balloons without a solid skeleton. A zeppelin consists of a skeleton of light metal, balsa wood and wire covered with impregnated cloth. The earlier zeppelins were filled with hydrogen gas, which is cheaper and lighter than helium, but unfortunately quite flammable. The airship we want to test here is held in shape by a system of channels filled with pressured helium, to obtain a certain degree of rigidity. The extra lifting capacity for a payload is obtained with hot gas, as in conventional balloons.'

'The ship is propelled by a propeller,' Philip added. 'We use an ordinary internal combustion engine, but we are looking for an alternative. We..'

Jasmine was not finished with her hobbyhorse and interrupted him: 'To transport the logs we have converted standard weather balloons. We can let helium into the balloon at will for ascent and pump it back into a storage cylinder for descent.' It could be heard that she had played an important role in the design and would not hide it.

'Well, thank you for your technical explanation,' Olga interrupted the technicians. 'What do you need from us? We have rented the former helipad as a "balloon field", as we can call it from now on. We don't expect helicopters anymore,

they can land elsewhere by the way.’

‘We have all the equipment and personnel for the transport, thank you,’ said professor Matt. ‘However, we depend on others for the processing and preparation of the wood for transport.’

‘We understood that from the email exchange,’ Herman said. ‘There are a few dozen volunteers available to work in the cirque. With tools and materials. The only thing we weren’t clear about was whether you could deposit the logs directly in the mill pond or whether we would need to arrange for transport between the helicopter...’

‘That’s one of the variables in the experiment,’ the professor laughed. ‘Excuse me for interrupting you, but we have thought about that for a long time. Initially, we assumed that we loosen the hoists electrically at the intended site. Whether the technique we’ve figured out for that will work without a ground crew, is one of the issues we hope to resolve.’

‘All right, let’s eat,’ Olga suggested. ‘Then we can get started right away.’

## Chapter 13

# Crashed

Michael was observing every detail while the balloons were prepared for flight on the former helicopter paddock.

Soon, six transport balloons in a row were billowing on their ropes, swaying in the light wind. Meanwhile, the double wall of the tow airship was filled with helium to the point that it protruded above the trees like a giant floating loaf. The pressurized reinforcement ribs bulged out like a net-like skeleton. That was the moment to start the burners.

‘The hot gas is insulated from the cold outside air by the helium in the double wall. The helium also gets hot, expands and therefore gives even more lift,’ Jasmine told us. ‘We have calculated that we can lift about a ton and a half of payload this way.’

‘That much?’ asked a bystander. ‘The helium containers, the compressor and the engine must weigh that much together.’

‘They are part of the equipment,’ Jasmine explained. ‘The payload is added to that.’

Meanwhile, the airship swelled and began jerking at its mooring ropes.

The crew, consisting of professor Matt and Georg, was already on board the aluminium gondola. Everybody was waiting for the most exciting moment: the launch.

While the students talked into their earpieces and checked everything for the last time, the mooring ropes of the ship were all disconnected simultaneously. Exactly at the moment the towline became taut, the moorings of the transport balloons were released one after the other.

The engine was started. Like a colourful mother duck with six pale grey hatchlings, the airship and its balloons sailed into the sky. The bystanders clapped their hands enthusiastically.

Low over the trees, the procession of balloons moved slowly in the direction of the cirque. Michael wished Dia were here, so that they could fly along, but she was busy elsewhere. He had to walk all the way.

Along the deep bed of the river, a new path to the forest was emerging. In the last few days mainly volunteers working in the cirque had used it.

*Dia, will you take me to the cirque?* he signalled when he was in the forest. *I want to be there when the balloons arrive.*

*They are almost there. But I will fetch you,* was the short answer.

Shortly afterwards, she came sailing along the wide riverbed and took him up into the air.

From afar they could see that there was something seriously wrong.

Instead of the neatly arranged balloons they had expected, half deflated balloons were entangled in the mass of branches. The tow airship hung limply over the gondola that was caught in a tree canopy. Two men wrestled with the slings and tried to free them from the branches.

*Drop me off in that tree, I'll give them a hand.*

Dia landed in the top layer of branches. Although they were thin, they hardly budged under Michael's minimal weight. As he descended carefully, she continued to watch.

'What happened? Are you hurt?' he asked when he had reached the crashed airship. The professor was covered in clotted blood.

'Not as bad as it looks, a nosebleed and a cut on my eyebrow,' he replied grimly.

'What happened?'

'We got caught in a fall wind while we were descending,' grumbled the professor. 'Very thoughtless of us, one would expect that with those steep mountainsides. There was no stopping us; in a few seconds, we hit the terrain.'

*Dia, can you ask why the air spirits did that?*

'I asked why it happened,' he said.

*This is a playground and school for sylphs and young air spirits,* replied Dia. *They didn't realize that they were going to cause accidents when they started playing with the balloons. They are terribly sorry, Bran gave them quite a beating.*

'The air spirits are very sorry. They will do everything to help from now on,' Michael explained. He was used to his reports about the nature spirits being received as normal by the people around him. He only realized that it was not so normal for everyone when Georg started to laugh shamefully.

'It was just a stupid fall wind, young man.'

'Yes,' Michael explained patiently, 'but they are controlled by sylphs.' He looked at the havoc. 'What can we do to free the balloon?'

The professor looked thoughtful. 'We'll have to wait for the wind to shift. The balloon is pressed against the tree canopy, we'll never get free that way.'

'Is it leaking?'

'No, I don't think so. It's a strong material. It's just that the air has cooled and so has the helium, which is why it looks so limp.'

Michael realized with a jolt that Dia and he might have been able to prevent the accident.

*Indeed. We should have led the balloons and had the sylphs cooperate. I'm sorry I didn't think of it. I have already asked the sylphs to help. They now understand what is intended.* At that moment the balloon started to move.

'The wind is turning,' Georg warned the professor. 'When the balloon comes loose you can give more helium. It's still too tilted to use the burners.'

'Do you do that? That wind, I mean?' the professor asked with a suspicious look at Michael. Michael shook his head. 'Dia.' For a moment that was too much for the scientist. With his eyes fixed on the balloon, the professor pressed a but-

ton on a transmitter that hung from a strap around his neck. Cylinders on the side of the gondola began to rustle as the precious helium flowed through hoses to the double envelope. Slowly, the balloon regained its firm oval shape.

The supporting cables tightened and the gondola rocked briefly.

‘That’s enough. Now we have to untangle the cables.’

‘I can do that,’ Michael offered. ‘I can walk on the thinnest of branches.’

Georg looked at him as if he felt he had been taken for a ride. That changed when he saw Michael manoeuvring gracefully through the canopy, balancing on branches that a normal person could not carry.

‘Do you have a saw?’ cried Michael from the top of the tree. ‘There’s a cable tangled up in a thick branch here.’

‘He looks like Peter Pan,’ grumbled Georg, who was clearly struggling with the fact that the elf world really existed. ‘The way that boy runs up and down trees, it’s not normal.’

A saw was passed from below and Michael began to saw. A moment later the branch broke off, the cable shot loose and swept him from his branch, screaming. The people in the tree and on the ground watched in horror as Michael sailed down. In the middle of his fall he was caught in a tangle of glitter and flashing limbs. The elf had been too quick to see her diving, but when she had caught Michael she calmly floated down and set him on the ground amidst the volunteers.

‘Pfff, that was a scare,’ Michael puffed. Gratefully he accepted a bottle of water and drank eagerly. Dia had folded her wings around her and was looking at him as if she couldn’t believe her eyes.

*How did you do that so quickly?* he asked while drinking.

*I don’t know exactly.* Dia’s reply was full of surprise. *I was quite high when I heard your cry. I could not even see you from there. I was with you at the same time when you cried out. I did not know that I am still able to do that, now that I have a body and no longer exist as a mere energy form.*

*Thank goodness you can still do it,* Michael shuddered. *I might not have fallen to my death, but I would probably have broken a lot of bones.*

‘You are bleeding,’ one of the volunteers said with concern. Michael looked at his leg and saw, in surprise, blood dripping from a long welt that ran down his side and thigh like a whiplash.

‘Probably from the cable when it slipped,’ he said, wincing. The wound began to throb immediately. *You can heal your wounds yourself,* Dia said. *You don’t need me for that.*

Michael realized that he had involuntarily waited for Dia to do it for him. He was a little ashamed of his dependent attitude and concentrated on the damaged tissue around the welt. It immediately began to sting and pull.

‘The pain is already gone,’ he said to the young man who came with a bandage box. ‘I can heal myself.’

The man looked at Michael’s leg in amazement. He glanced down and saw why

the man was so upset: the open welt had almost closed.

‘Well, that ended well,’ Michael said cheerfully. ‘Thanks for your help.’

He looked up. ‘How is it up there now?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Apparently the two men in the gondola had been looking down the whole time. ‘I think we’re almost loose.’

‘Do you need help?’

‘We’re fine for now, thanks. Can you check which transport balloons are still salvageable?’

*I’m going up, conducting the sylphs,* Dia announced.

Looked at by the group of volunteers, she took off with a few wing beats. Michael saw the young men looking at Dia’s body, which for a moment was on display in all its glory when she spread her wings. He noticed that he did not like it, but tried to hide that from Dia. He didn’t want to burden her with the human shame of nudity. He didn’t want the word jealousy to enter his consciousness at all.

Carefully, a few daredevils scrambled through the drifting mass of trees to the nearest balloon. The filled top wobbled gently in the air currents. In any case, it was a sign that the balloon was not leaking. Only the empty trunk underneath was entangled in the branches. The two men argued with each other for a while, sawing off a few branches and disentangling some cables.

‘We can’t get it loose!’ they shouted to the others, who were watching from the edge of the cirque. ‘We can’t reach it!’

Without thinking, Michael walked lightly through the tangle of floating trees towards the two. ‘Maybe I can loosen it?’

The three of them looked at the situation. While Michael carefully untangled the flexible material of the balloon, the two men sawed off more branches. As the balloon was released, the tractive force increased. In the end, Michael could no longer hold on to the swaying colossus.

‘I cannot get the last piece loose,’ he panted. ‘He is pulling so hard that I cannot make room to unhook this loop.’ One of the men started to climb towards him, but at some point he was afraid to go any further.

*Dia, can you help me? I need the balloon lowered so that I can pull the last stroke around this thick branch,* Michael asked in desperation.

*Coming,* was her short answer.

A sudden fall wind almost flattened the balloon. Michael quickly loosened the wrappings around the branch. Just in time, the balloon swung back as the gust of wind passed. Just before his feet, the helium cylinder with its valve box tore loose with a jerk from the branches it had been tangled between and disappeared into the air. ‘Oh no!’ groaned Michael.

‘Hey, you didn’t tie up the balloon!’ cried the two men, startled. Before their regretful eyes, the freed balloon rose stately. *Dia, can you catch that balloon?* cried Michael in his mind. The balloon began to sway, gusts of wind flattened the bil-

lowing material. It seemed as if invisible children were playing with a giant ball. But it did not come down.

*Its climbing power is too great. We will press it against the mountain wall, you have to come and get it yourself,* came a message from Dia. At once, the balloon sailed into the mountain and stayed there.

‘How are we going to get that thing out of there?’

‘Be glad it didn’t take off any further,’ someone else pointed out to the grump. ‘Then we’d have chalked him up to a total loss.’

‘Let’s see if we can free up one of the other balloons first. That one doesn’t look leaky,’ someone suggested. Michael scrambled over to it and looked at the situation. This time he would make sure that the balloon would not escape him. He tied a free dangling rope to the trunk of the tree where the balloon had become entangled. Without having to ask, the filled part of the balloon was blown to the side, so that the empty trunk underneath could easily be released. After some more lashing, the helium cylinder also hung free.

He pointed to another stranded balloon. ‘If we tie it to this tree,’ he called, ‘we might be able to lift it out.’

‘Wait, we’ll come and help you.’

With much more difficulty than Michael, two men moved through the tangled mass of floating stumps, branches and trees. With combined efforts they managed to free the third balloon and tied it to the tree. At that moment, the engine of the airship was started, which in the meantime had been filled with hot air. *Dia, ask the sylphs to help keep the ship stable,* Michael signalled.

The professor and his assistant manoeuvred the airship above them. They cast a line, the tow rope was attached and they raised the cable. The helium cylinders began to rustle. Slowly, the two balloons ballooned.

‘The tree is already moving,’ one man shouted excitedly.

‘It’s stuck here,’ roared another. ‘Wait a minute, I’ll saw it loose!’

A sound of breaking wood; the tree shot up a few inches with a jolt. For a few minutes, nothing happened; only the helium rushed through the valves. Two taps of the radiographically closed valves were heard and the noises stopped.

‘They are checking upstairs if the pressure is not decreasing,’ reported a man with headphones. ‘If they are not leaking they will be filled further.’

Meanwhile, the two men who had helped Michael were looking at where else the tree was stuck.

‘The professor says the two balloons are not enough. The tree is too heavy,’ reported the one with the headphones.

Michael pointed to the nearest stranded balloon. ‘I think it’s leaking.’

They stood looking at the limp form.

‘Then I’ll just have to pluck that escaped balloon off the mountainside,’ Michael said thoughtfully.

*I thought you would never ask,* Dia mused in his head.

*What, I haven't asked you anything yet.*

*I could see the question in you, she laughed. Of course I'll come and get you. Bring a rope and we'll go get that balloon.*

A moment later, the elfin woman was floating down in circles.

'The rope is not long enough. You will have to tie the balloon to the tow,' said one of the men.

Michael looked up. 'All right, first I'll attach this rope to the towline hanging underneath, then we'll bring it to the tow balloon. It will have to rise a little.' He suddenly thought of something and looked at the man sternly. 'Remember not to use the engine, or Dia won't dare go near it.'

'I'll pass it on. Good luck!'

Dia dived down, wrapped arms and legs around Michael and almost dragged him into the air.

*Gosh, you looked like a buzzard pecking a bunny, he laughed exuberantly.*

*Yes, she chuckled, I'm much more daring now.*

They flew towards the escaped balloon, which stuck on a tree with its helium cylinder. Concentrating on manoeuvring her wings, Dia floated close to the steep mountainside. Michael attached the rope to the free dangling towline. From the gondola the professor and Georg watched tensely.

Dia managed to get so close to the airship that Michael could hand over the rope to the professor. The exhaust valves at the top opened, warm air escaped and the big airship descended stately. The escaped balloon obediently followed on its rope. The men below secured it next to the other two. Helium poured into the three balloons.

Dia and Michael watched from a great height as the three transport balloons slowly increased in size until, oh glory, the heavy tree trunk broke loose and was slowly lifted into the air. The engine was started. Aided by invisible forces, the balloon procession moved over the forest towards the village. It was a strange sight to see a complete tree, root and branch, floating through the air.

Over the millpond, the ingenuity of professor Matt's transport system became apparent. The towline contained electrical cables, which powered small compressors underneath the carrying balloons. The precious helium was pumped out of the balloons back into the cylinders. Slowly, the balloons decreased in size; at the same time, they descended until the tree hit the water and finally floated. A rubber dinghy with ground crew sailed to the tree to untie the support cables.

Dia put Michael on the ground and immediately flew up again.

*It is too crowded here. I'm going back to the cirque, maybe I can help over there, she signalled.*

*Alright dear, I'll come back with the balloons when we go get a new tree, he replied.*

## Chapter 14

# Earth in motion

The mobile phone Michael had got from Olga vibrated in his pocket.

<Where are u? Come to hq o>

With a last regretful glance at the much more interesting work on the balloon field, he walked towards the village.

In front of the guesthouse stood a large lorry and a truck and trailer with a hydraulic excavator. Not Bertolds. Strange.

At the top of the stairs, he stopped for a moment: angry voices were heard in his former room. He pushed the door ajar and slipped inside with his heart pounding. Something was not right at all.

Four men with straight faces sat around the conference table, facing Olga. She saw Michael first and stood up to greet him.

‘This is Michael, the elfin boy,’ she introduced him.

The men looked incredulous and remained seated without introducing.

‘What is this boy doing here?’ was the blunt comment of their foreman when Michael sat down next to Olga.

‘He represents the nature beings of the Valley of Bran.’

‘No way,’ was the rude reply. ‘Send him away.’

‘These gentlemen,’ Olga said to Michael without flinching, ‘have come to demolish two of the empty farms. You know, the ones that have been sold.’

‘Why demolish them?’ Michael was genuinely surprised. ‘They still look good. All you have to do is fix them up, don’t you think? They are beautiful buildings.’

The man’s head turned red. ‘I didn’t come here to discuss our work with a snot nose,’ he snarled. ‘Are you lifting the barricade or not? Otherwise we will.’

‘The entrance is closed off with barbed wire and farm carts,’ Olga explained to Michael.

‘Do you have a permit to demolish them?’ asked Michael.

Before the bully could answer, one of his companions nodded and slid a paper across the table. Olga picked it up and started reading.

‘This is a permit from the municipality of Jablun to prepare for the conversion of these two farms. Issued this morning,’ she said finally. She slid the paper back. ‘It doesn’t say anything about demolition. Besides, we are still negotiating to take over those farms.’

‘We have orders to flatten them, and we will,’ the foreman shouted, banging his fist on the table like a colossal shovel; the cups rolled over. ‘That barricade of yours, we’ll drive right through it!’

Olga looked at the man thoughtfully. She nodded briefly.

‘It’s not mine. And yes, you could do that. But then I can’t be responsible for

what happens to you, your men and your machines.'

'What, threats?!' The man spat out the words as he stood up menacingly.

Olga looked at him flatly. 'You shouldn't get so worked up, it's bad for your heart.'

'I won't be threatened, lady,' he sneered, but sat down anyway.

'It wasn't a threat, by the way,' Olga added carelessly. 'It was more that I was presenting you with a logical consequence of your announced action. That barrier is there for a reason, I think. I have nothing to threaten you with, I can only warn you.'

Michael had listened to the exchange of words with increasing amazement. On the one hand, he thought it was cool that Olga remained so calm while the foreman almost exploded; on the other hand, his rudeness and his threat of violence were rather frightening. He looked at Olga. She knew something; she seemed to be sure that those people wouldn't be able to do anything..

The foreman stood up and, leaning his hands on the table, he put his big head forward. 'For the last time, lady,' he growled, 'you remove the barricade at once or we will push it aside. If anything gets broken, it's your own fault.'

Olga stood up. 'Let's go and have a look,' she said calmly, taking Michael by the arm. Followed by the snorting foreman and his three grumpy companions, Olga walked out of the guesthouse. She looked at the two vehicles with interest. Demonstrative she took a notebook out of her back pocket and wrote down all the names and numbers on the lorry, the truck and the excavator.

'You have come a long way,' was her only comment. The men did not react. They stood undecided beside their cars.

'Come with me,' said Olga decisively, putting her notebook in her back pocket and pointing to the two abandoned farms further on. 'Let's see what the situation is before you do anything stupid.'

Without objection, two of the four men followed her; the other two, apparently the drivers, climbed into the cabs of their vehicles.

They walked along the village street for quite a while. Outside the village, Olga turned onto a little-used cart track. The two tracks had been deeply washed out by the heavy rains, which did not make walking any easier. Nobody spoke a word.

In the meantime, Michael tried to contact Dia if she could tell him anything about the two empty farms. She said that she did not understand his question and that she was busy. He did not press further.

Wondering what Olga had in store for him, he lightly ran up the cart road and went around the two buildings a few times. They were situated on either side of a common yard, which was overgrown with weeds.

'You see: no fences or cart anywhere, so no barricade,' Olga said when they reached the first farm.

'This is not the main entrance,' grumbled the foreman. 'Our trucks can't drive over this cart track.'

‘Your excavator can level the road, can’t it?’

‘We’re not paid to do that.’

‘That’s your problem. All right, we’ll look at the other access.’

Olga led the way this time; Michael closed the row, curious about the two men’s reactions. She unlocked an iron gate with rusty barbed wire that closed off the entrance from a country road.

‘This road belongs to the farmer who lives further down,’ Olga pointed carelessly to a rusty sign. ‘If you want to pass it with heavy equipment, you must ask him for permission.’

The dirt road was cut by deep erosion channels. ‘We’ve had a lot of rain recently,’ Olga remarked, as if she were showing a bunch of tourists around.

After a sharp bend with a high verge, they could go no further. A foot-wide crack in the ground blocked the passage.

‘Here is a dangerous subsidence,’ Olga pointed out. ‘You can see that the whole slope is loose. It hasn’t slipped down just yet, but it could do so at any moment.’

She left it to the imagination of the two men to imagine what would happen to their precious trucks if they broke through the barrier with a lot of noise and vibration.

Pale-faced, the foreman fished a mobile phone out of his inside pocket and began to press it frantically. He started sweating when there was no connection. ‘There’s no signal up here,’ the man shouted.

‘You try,’ he snapped at his subordinate. ‘They must be stopped immediately.’

Olga and Michael looked at each other in alarm: could they be trying to break through? A vague noise of heavy engines in low gear confirmed their suspicion.

‘What are you doing?’ snapped Olga at the foreman. ‘Have you gone mad? Did you order your drivers to drive up here?’

The man didn’t have to answer, it was clear enough. Sweating, he was pressing his mobile phone. ‘We have to stop them,’ the other man shouted shrilly. In frustration, he threw his phone on the ground. ‘Can we give them a signal?’

‘Try it,’ said Olga. She looked up at the steep wall along the road. ‘Then you have to climb up here.’ The man took off his jacket, threw it over a bush and climbed up hastily. He got muddied, brambles tore his skin open, but he climbed on doggedly.

The growling of toiling diesel engines grew louder. The foreman stood staring at the huge lump of earth, pale and drawn. ‘Can’t we do something?’ he asked hoarsely.

Olga shook her head; she was furious that the man had tried to get his way behind her back.

Michael tried very hard to get in touch with Dia or earth beings. He even called the elemental being Stone, but there was no reaction at all. Stones rolled out of the wall of the crack. A lump of grass let go and fell down. The ground shook. With increasing rumbling, the plaiice of earth began to move, cracks appeared.

The ground began to shake; stones and clods fell down from the cliff.

'Get out of here,' hissed Olga, setting an example. She climbed the steep wall along the hollow road in a series of swift movements; Michael jumped after her and got to the top before she did.

'Come over here!' he tried to shout above the tearing rumble, but the man on the road could not hear him.

Again the ground shook, they could hardly stay on their feet. Below them, an ever-increasing chunk of bare rock appeared. The landslide increased in speed, huge dust clouds rolled out in front of the wall of tumbling lumps and stones.

This is the second avalanche since we arrived in this country! flashed through Michael. The shaking of the ground subsided and became a kind of humming.

*We are delighted that we have been able to stop the invasion of these mighty possessors,* was written in his mind.

*Stone!* was Michael's response.

*The same,* was the reply.

*Did you do this on purpose?*

Michael began to suspect something.

*On purpose? What do you mean? Consciously perhaps? Yes, in so far as we have some earth pieces on edge here and there. This place was easy; the soil was already unstable. We keep a close eye on this place with the two houses. But what do you mean by on purpose?*

*Well, what you said, that you set some kind of traps.*

*I still don't understand you.*

*Did you know that these people were coming to demolish the farms?*

No.

*But then... why set traps then?*

*Wherever possible, we maintain unstable balances, which we can topple at will, one way or the other. That is our contribution to the protection of special places.*

*Are these two old farms so special?*

*Yes, the place has strong earth forces. They must not fall into the wrong hands.*

*Like those wreckers?*

*Yes. They are people who are led by **Others**.*

*But if they die...*

*The vibrations of their machines set off the trap, as you call it. We are not the cause of that, the intruders are. The people who live here know that it is dangerous, so they blocked the entrance.*

*Is this going on in other places too?*

*Many places, agreed Stone. Not only in this valley.*

*I have to go after the others, see if the drivers have survived.*

*They are still alive. Hurry, they are covered with mud and don't have much air left.*

## People get scared

Michael hurried across a meadow to the havoc where the landslide had stopped.

He got there before Olga, who had to slog through the mud. Behind her, the defeated foreman and his accomplice were toiling away.

An entire cliff, enclosed by a hairpin bend, had slid over a lower loop of the road. To his horror, he saw the back of the overturned trailer sticking out from among the mountains of clay, stones and earth. The overturned excavator was sticking out with a caterpillar track. There was no trace of the lorry.

Michael heard in his mind several heavy voices that seemed to be exchanging information. But he could not understand them.

*What are they saying, Stone?* he asked. *Can we still save the men?*

It took some time before an answer came into his mind. *Nothing of interest to humans. They are local earth beings discussing the situation that has arisen and looking for new equilibria. Go and dig up those two men. My subordinates are not aware that people are buried. They are still alive. Hurry up.*

Michael climbed up the mound of earth. *Is the lorry lying all the way under there?* he asked in dismay. *How are we supposed to find it?*

*Adjust to hollows, then you will feel them when you are above them. I will help you. Open up.* Michael allowed his attunement to the elemental world to penetrate further into his being. It was as if a kind of radar slowly glowed in him, enabling him to feel right through the earth. It became clear exactly where the angular metal forms of the lorry were located. The image became more detailed: he became aware of the small hollow space of the compressed cabin in which an unconscious person was trapped.

‘Over here!’ he shouted to Olga and the foreman. ‘We have to free them before they suffocate!’ With his bare hands, he started throwing stones and earth aside at the spot where he suspected the lorry was.

‘I called for help, and shovels,’ Olga panted, climbing the mountain. ‘Luckily there is signal down here.’ She went to dig beside Michael.

‘You go to the back truck!’ shouted Michael to the two men who had come up behind them. ‘The driver is buried, but he is alive, they said.’

Without saying a word, the men climbed on all fours to the heap where the cab of the rear trailer was supposed to be and started hurling stones and earth aside. Soon people from the village came running with shovels and wheelbarrows. The news spread quickly: a farmer came driving his tractor with a front loader; men from contractor Bertold abandoned their work to help.

The cab of the truck came into view first. The lorry, however, had received the full load. Only after digging a few yards did they come across a front wheel.

'We're right on top of it,' someone cried out in relief.

'At least we don't have to search,' Olga sighed. She brushed the hair from her sweaty face, which made it even more muddy. 'How did you know that lorry was here?'

'I was guided by earthlings,' Michael panted, rolling stones aside. Behind them, cheers sounded at the truck. The driver, helped by many hands, worked his way out of the side window of his overturned truck. Immediately, some of the diggers continued near the lorry. To get deep enough the pit had to be dug wider; otherwise it would collapse.

*The man has died,* Stone reported impassively. *You don't have to hurry anymore.*

Defeated, Michael sat down with his head in his hands.

'What's the matter Miche? asked Olga.

'He is dead.'

'What, who? The man in the lorry?'

He nodded sadly. 'We are too late.' He felt sorry for the man who had died, but he couldn't hide the fact that he actually thought they deserved it. The wreckers' violent behaviour had been punished by nature itself.

'You don't have to hurry anymore,' he called out to the diggers, who looked back in surprise. Michael pointed to the part of the cabin that had been cleared. 'The driver has just died.'

'How can you know that?' shouted a man, frantically continuing to dig.

'It's the elfin boy,' said the man next to him, standing hesitantly with the shovel in his hands. 'He knows more than we do,' he added.

The men dug further, but clearly in less of a hurry.

A larger part of the cabin became visible. The car had only tipped over on its side; it was not upside down. The windows had been smashed by tons of earth and boulders. Under a tense silence, the earth was dug out of the cabin by hand. A muddied arm became visible; the head was freed. Someone felt the pulse of the man in the cabin and after a few minutes shook his head. In deadly silence, the men climbed out of the pit.

The farmers took their caps off their heads and stood silently praying.

'We need heavier equipment to get him out,' one of the contractor's men told Olga. 'If we go deeper I'm afraid the pit will collapse and cause more casualties.'

Olga nodded.

'There's no hurry now. Can you bring in the necessary equipment?' The man nodded. 'I'll call Bertold later.'

'Good. Let's go to headquarters. We're ready for a cup of coffee. Or something stronger,' she added.

In the backyard of the guesthouse, people were snuggling up at the outdoor tap. The landlady and her girls were handing out coffee, soup and schnapps.

'Where have the wreckers gone?'

'I saw them walking to the village with the driver who had been taken out

of the trailer,' Olga replied. Nobody knew where they had gone. No train had passed.

'Probably there was another car with them.'

'How did you know that the man had died?' asked Olga to Michael, who was sitting quietly in a corner. 'Wait, there are some press people waiting for us to say something. Do you want to explain to them what happened?'

Michael nodded gloomily and walked to the salon. It became quiet.

'The spirit beings who protect the valley do so with the means they have,' he began without any introduction. 'Since the factory burned down, the earth beings have also found ways to actively participate in keeping this valley pure. There is an earth being called Stone, who I can talk to. He...'

A murmur interrupted his speech. He impatiently gestured for silence.

'Stone explained to me that since the thunderstorm the ground has become unstable in many places because of the excess of water. On the slopes in particular, huge chunks of earth are in a state of unstable equilibrium. The slightest vibration can cause the ground to shift. The people who live here have experience with this and can see where it is unsafe. They put up fences to warn people not to go there. The demolishers who came here this morning to flatten the two empty farms thought that we wanted to stop them and drove straight through the fence. At that moment they loaded all the responsibility for the consequences on their own necks. The soil shifted, the trucks were buried and a driver died.'

He looked around the saloon grimly. He was getting angrier. Because of this stupid display of power by the wreckers, a man had died and they blamed nature.

He swallowed and restrained his annoyance. Don't get angry, he told himself. Explain.

'That's how nature works,' he continued hoarsely. 'Nature beings always give warning signals before something happens. People who are familiar with nature see these signals and are not bothered by them. People who feel more powerful than nature do not see the signals and may perish.'

'You mean nature beings are turning against humans?' a reporter asked anxiously. Michael shook his head in disbelief.

'No, of course not; they never do; it's the other way around: humans are turning against nature beings. One of the tasks of elemental beings is to keep equilibria from getting too far out of balance. The greater the imbalance, the more severe their corrections are. Especially since there are machines to dig into the earth, many people do not take this into account enough. They think that machines make them stronger.'

'So this accident could have been prevented?'

'The road was closed by the owner, right?'

'So it's a private road?'

'Yes. There's probably a sign under the mud saying "private road". There's one at the top too.'

‘Did those wreckers have permission to use that road?’

‘Certainly not!’ came an unfamiliar voice. The farmer who had always helped the scouts stood up indignantly. ‘I had not closed the road for nothing! Those people should have taken the other path, I use it myself!’

‘Your position is that the demolishers were trying to gain unlawful access over a private road that was closed because of avalanche risk?’ someone summarized.

‘Exactly.’

‘But what do nature beings have to do with that?’

Michael sighed. Haven’t these people understood yet?

‘Look, when you use the word “nature”, you mean implicitly the totality of the living and nonliving elements on earth, yes? All I am saying is that forces and counter-forces, growth, flowering and decay, are animated processes that are consciously governed. That consciousness some people can perceive as beings with an identity of their own.’

‘For you, perhaps, but I don’t see it that way yet,’ someone sputtered. ‘Hardly anyone can see those beings of yours.’

‘You don’t always have to see them,’ Michael tried to explain. ‘There are plenty examples of cooperation, conscious or unconscious. Take the drilling of a tunnel. There, the builders work with great expertise. Science has learned to recognize signals of instability. Engineers can see and measure them. That’s why not many accidents happen with them.’

‘Do you mean to say that engineers consult with leprechauns?’ asked a reporter half mockingly.

Michael thought for a moment. ‘I will ask my father, who is an engineer himself. I think that engineers and the natural beings of earth and rock, water and wind, have a lot in common.’ He suddenly smiled at the thought that came to his mind: ‘Gnomes and earthlings are actually little engineers. They work with the same forces and formulas.’ His unexpected good-naturedness broke through the anger with which he had begun the press conference.

One reporter asked: ‘Do these earthlings mind if people die?’

Michael shrugged his shoulders. ‘That is not the point. If people ignore warning signals, they can get hurt. Nature beings think it is the responsibility of the people to adjust their behaviour. If a road is in repair, you don’t drive through the barrier, do you?’

The people in the salon let this sink in for a moment. One man raised his hand.

‘You spoke about this demolishers who came to demolish two farms. Why? By order of whom?’

Olga stood up slowly and gestured to Michael that she would answer this question.

‘There are quite a few vacant houses and farms here in the valley. A property developer has recently bought up everything for next to nothing. He probably wants to build expensive villas on the place of the old houses.’

‘You oppose that? I mean the Environmental Federation?’

‘Well,’ Olga frowned, ‘we haven’t even begun to resist. It took us by surprise. You are right in the sense that we are trying to have the entire Bran Valley declared a World Heritage Site. We already have the support of the President and Unesco for that. The historic buildings are an integral part of it.’

‘You were at the scene with the wreckers. What exactly happened?’

Michael gave an account of the conversation with the foreman and his communication with the earth beings. He left out what Stone had said about the ‘possession’ of the wreckers and the role that Others would play in it.

‘Mrs. Jellisek, do you expect any further action on the part of the new owners?’ she was asked. She nodded slowly.

‘Indeed, I expect that they will regard this morning’s accident as a stupidity on the part of the contractor. I am afraid we will have to count on new attempts to demolish those farms.’

‘Michael, what will the nature beings do if demolishers appear again?’ the same reporter wanted to know.

‘I don’t know,’ Michael confessed. ‘I have only been told that in more places unstable layers of earth are ‘on edge’ as the earth beings say. What will happen depends on the stupidity of those who come here to spoil things,’ Michael concluded grimly, suddenly fed up.

Despite several raised hands, Olga closed the press conference.

## Chapter 16

### Reversed roles

The press conference had left Michael with an unsatisfied feeling.

'It's difficult to explain everything properly,' he sighed. 'Everything is connected with everything else. Moreover, for me it is more a feeling than knowledge. I have to search for the words all the time and if someone suddenly asks something else, I lose track.'

'You did well, Miche,' Olga smiled. 'You can't explain all the connections between the visible and the invisible world at once. You will have many more opportunities to tell your story.'

'Yes, but I regret,' Michael continued, 'that because of those stupid demolishers, all attention has been diverted from the project with the balloons. Wasn't that wonderful news? Now all those reporters are going to talk about a landslide that caused one death. That doesn't do the Valley any good!'

Unexpectedly, he heard that voice in his head again which he couldn't place.

*There are several sides to this, Michael. You explained well how nature strives for equilibria. You explained well that unbalanced states cause tensions that make growth and change possible. Out of which sometimes 'violence of nature' can arise, as people call it. That message can never be emphasized enough. Another aspect is that these invasions of evil people in the valley are still a consequence of the opening to the **Others**. But the most important thing is that the project with the balloons must remain out of the publicity for a while. The municipality of Jablun does not know about it and it must stay that way for a while.*

*Who are you?*

*Do you understand me?*

*Yes, I understand you. But who are you? I have heard you before. Are you a spirit being or a human being?*

*Both. How that works and who I am you will find out when the time comes.*

By now Olga knew Michael's facial expressions. When she saw that his conversation was over, she asked: 'Was that Dia?'

'No someone else.' That was all he wanted to say. He got up and went to look outside the window.

'Olga,' he began after a while.

'Yes?' she asked when he remained silent.

He started pacing. 'I don't like it at all! There are still moneyed thugs chasing the valley. It has to stop!' He looked furiously at Olga.

'We are negotiating with the real estate developer about all the empty houses. We've made an offer to buy them all, but they're asking an astronomical amount,' Olga soothed.

‘Do you know which houses?’ A plan bubbled up in his mind.

‘Yes, I do.’ Olga went to a filing cabinet and took out a map of the village. She spread it out on the table and pointed to the buildings.

‘Look, this whole area with eight workers’ houses was sold separately from the factory. Nobody has lived there for a long time. The storm has washed away the road and these two houses have subsided. The municipality has fenced off the area and posted a warning about landslides.’

‘So that’s just as much of a trap as the earthlings had set at those farms,’ Michael muttered.

‘The problem is that the council doesn’t seem to have any intention of declaring the site uninhabitable so that the cottages can be demolished. Because we do want to remove those ugly things. We suspect that the property developer has a hand in this, so that they can build something new instead,’ Olga continued.

Suddenly she was struck by a thought and looked to him.

‘Are you serious about the trap of the earthlings?’

‘Yes, I am. There are more unstable spots, Stone said. Can you point out which houses have been sold?’

Olga pointed to a number of properties in the village. ‘These have been rented out to villagers, generally old people with pensions. That one is empty, that one I would like to buy, and then there are a few empty farms further out in the village.’

Michael drew little circles around the properties in pencil. He stood up.

‘I have a little plan,’ he said and grinned mischievously. ‘It will take time and it will only work if people go and look in the houses.’

‘What are you up to?’ Olga was burning with curiosity. When Michael grinned like that, anything could happen.

He couldn’t keep it to himself and laughed out loud. ‘Oh, we are going to let it haunt. Potential buyers will be gone in no time. If the property developer can’t get rid of his assets, he’ll drop the price.’

Olga looked worried. ‘Miche, they are going to demolish those buildings and put something new in their place. Then your little plan won’t work.’

‘What are you going to do about it?’

Olga scratched her head. ‘I can only think of tackling the property developer through the press. Maybe then he will back down.’

‘Hm,’ Michael thought aloud. ‘Suppose we offered him good publicity in exchange for restoring the old farmhouses? With in mind what happened to the demolishers? I mean, let it be known that the nature spirits in the Bran Valley will make short time of the money wolves?’

Olga began to laugh. ‘You’re becoming as cunning as the mafiosi themselves. You’ll do this and that if you don’t...’

‘Well,’ Michael defended himself, ‘we didn’t start it.’

Olga rubbed her chin in thought. ‘Still, I think you’re right. I think it can work.’

We just need to find a good negotiator.'

'Janos?'

'That's a good idea!' Olga clapped her flat hand on the table. 'I'll call him right away.'

She couldn't get through and sent a text message asking Janos to get in touch.

'Well, there's not much else we can do, is there?' asked Michael hesitantly.

'Not for the time being, I guess.'

'Then I'll go and see my family.' His face was depressed. 'I had hoped that we would soon have our own house. We are finally together again... and all the empty houses have been sold!'

'You would squatting them, weren't you? You said that earlier,' Olga remembered.

His face brightened. 'That's right! I'd forgotten all about it!'

He glanced at the map again. 'Which one shall we take?' he asked, suddenly excited at the prospect of being able to choose a house at will. 'You'll join us, won't you?'

Olga chuckled. 'That's my boy. Yes, I'm in.' She put her finger on the house she had just indicated. 'This one attracts me. It used to be a shop. Downstairs we can set up the Environmental Federation office and upstairs I can live overlooking the Elfswood.'

'Hm, not bad,' said Michael, who had very different wishes.

After hesitating for a while, he pointed to one. 'This one is big, outside the village and close to the forest.'

'You can hardly get there though: the beginning of the path has been washed away.'

'Well, then they can't get to it easily when they want to throw us out.'

Olga's face darkened. 'I don't know, Miche. If what we think is true and that property developer turns out to be part of a crime syndicate, we all are still in danger. Such abandoned properties are ideal for laundering drug money. We are very vulnerable if they want to do harm. The only reason we haven't heard from them since the attractions have been shut down is that no money is being made anymore.'

'Yes, sure. I had almost forgotten about it.' He was getting out of his temper.

'Every time, those thugs lock up the place,' he protested angrily. 'What can we do, Olga, to get mega press coverage so we can expose this internationally?'

'I wouldn't dream of shacking up here all winter because all the empty houses have been bought up by gangsters. Let it haunt,' Olga said laconically.

'That's a good idea. Just don't wait for buyers to come. It won't happen soon.'

'Those people will put up expensive villas instead and then you'll be too late. Call on all your elemental friends to raise hell here. You can bet the press will be all over this place.'

'That's what we're going to do,' whispered Michael. 'What a good idea, Olga!'

Amidst great interest from the local population and the press, excavation of the crashed trucks was started the next day. Contractor Bertold had been commissioned by an insurance company unknown to him to do the job. Payment had been made in advance. Insurance damage experts took everything in hand.

The overturned excavator seemed undamaged and was transported by trailer. Bertold had longer work with the trailer than the machine had been on. A huge pile of earth had to be moved to a dump at the bottom of the valley, where it would no longer pose a danger.

Only after three days did they get to the overturned lorry with the body of the crashed driver still inside. The pit that had been dug to reach the cabin had collapsed. No one had dared to remove the dead man from the cabin.

The Jablun fire brigade had to be called in to saw him out of the crushed cabin when the lorry was dug up a few days later.

## Chapter 17

### Angel show

At the end of the afternoon, the sky became cloudy.

By the time the family was having dinner with Olga in the boarding house, a thunderstorm had arrived over the valley.

'I haven't experienced many of such thunderstorms before I met you, Miche,' Olga growled after a heavy thunderclap. 'Have you been up to something again?'

Michael shuffled his feet. Every time he had an idea, everyone was taken completely by surprise by the way his requests were met. He chuckled nervously.

She looked at him in dismay. 'Oh no! Did you really order rain again?'

'No!' defended Michael. 'I didn't order any rain at all. Just...'

'Just what?'

He bent over the table and beckoned to his companions to come closer. They put their heads together and he whispered, so softly that the other people in the dining room could not hear: 'I have asked if the air beings can make ghost lights.'

'Ghost...?'

'St! Yes, to scare away unwanted guests. I was thinking, if the media were to report that the Bran Valley is haunted, the developer would probably never sell the houses. Then we can take them over for a song.'

'I don't like your actions. It usually turns the whole world upside down,' Olga growled.

'But it was your own idea,' protested Michael.

Olga wanted to react indignantly, but remembered in time that she had indeed suggested it herself. 'But what has this thunderstorm got to do with ghosts?' She looked as if she now regretted her spontaneous idea.

'I think they are starting with electric ghosts tonight because there is thunder in the air after all,' Michael explained. 'I didn't think of that myself. They can also make biological and chemical ghost lights, by the way.'

'Oh no,' groaned Olga. 'Now he's coming up with electric ghosts. What's the next surprise you have in store for us?'

'Yes, Ents!' shouted Wendy and Lucy. 'Just like Fangorn in The Lord of the Rings! And those angry trees, Huorns!'

Michael jumped to his feet. 'What a good idea!'

*Forget it, was written in his mind by the Dryad of the Forest. That is not possible for us.*

*Oh, what a pity. Not even as dryads?*

*You mean hallucinations? Images that exist only in humans' minds?*

*Something like that.*

*That is not within our competence. That is only allowed in emergencies.*

*And light images?*

*For that you need higher spirit beings, those of fire and electricity.*

*Do you want to ask them?*

*Ask them yourself.*

*Fire, can you make a luminous ghost figure?*

The answer came immediately. The message seemed to crackle. *Please excuse the interference, there is a lot of electricity in the air. That is also the reason why we cannot make biological glow or chemical lights now. Only electric images. Those are the brightest.*

This made his brain think even harder.

‘What are you up to now?’ Olga asked grimly. ‘I can see from your snout that you’re using innerspeech.’

‘Oh, I only asked if it was possible to make trees run,’ he said guiltily.

Olga looked at him in bewilderment.

‘And,’ Herman asked grinning, ‘what did they say, can they do it?’

Michael shook his head and looked at Diana. ‘Diana’s dryad said that we need higher fire beings for that. They can’t actually make trees walk, but they might be able to make images of light.’

‘The storm is over,’ Marjorie said softly.

In the midst of her daughters, she looked like an older sister, instead of their mother. The healing that Michael and Dia had applied had considerably rejuvenated her skin.

Herman, Olga and Michael sat down with a cup of coffee in the drawing room by the window, the girls wanted dessert. Suddenly, the front door flew open. A man shouted excitedly: ‘Come and look! All lightning bolts! Not just one, dozens of them!’

He was gone again. The guests looked at each other as if struck by lightning. A few cameramen ran upstairs for their equipment, others crowded at the door to get out. The boarding house emptied. Moving lights could be seen in the sweltering air. The atmosphere was charged.

‘Where?’ they shouted. From a great distance a voice reached them: ‘On the hill, near the farms where the landslide occurred.’

Nervously Herman gathered his daughters and their mother around him.

Olga and Michael ran along with a few others. The sky above the valley was clogged with dark clouds; in the west the setting sun still shone dimly below.

‘There!’ they heard shouting ahead of them. ‘Look!’

They ran as fast as they could, the houses along the street blocking their view of what was beyond. Past the last house they stopped. Panting, they saw a stream of luminous dots whirling up the slope in a slow dance.

Two cars drove past, honking.

‘Run,’ Olga panted. A car stopped, the back door flew open. ‘Quick, get in!’ a man called from the front seat. They rolled into the car, which pulled up before they had even closed the door.

At the landslide, the driver skidded in the gravel. They flew out of the car and looked around.

Along the road stood the dark shapes of Bertold's digger and dumper. The two men from the car were already climbing along the excavation.

'We have to go back, along the cart track,' Olga called to Michael. 'That's a lot faster.' They ran back. The road was too deep to see anything of the two farms. The moving white light at the top of the slope increased in strength. They were sweating like horses, the air seemed liquid with water vapour.

A voice behind them: 'Wait! Give me a hand, I can't go very fast.'

They looked back: behind them stumbled a cameraman, laden with bags and batteries. Michael ran back and took over a heavy bag.

'I want to film it before it disappears,' the cameraman panted.

The three of them climbed further up. After a sharp bend in the deeply worn track, they had a full view of the two farms.

Astonished, they looked at the jumble of lights, which seemed to merge into a huge pillar of light. After a few minutes, the cameraman gasped: 'Come on, it's all in here. Now a closer shot.' Standing out against the unreal light phenomenon, they saw people staring.

'Don't get close!' shouted a man who came stumbling up behind them. 'Ball lightning can explode.'

Ah what! someone shouted disparagingly. 'It's just a laser show by those elf people.' He waved his arm. 'All fake!' To prove he was right he walked forward, apparently intending to get into the middle of the light show.

*Don't let humans come near. There is very high tension.* Immediately Michael cried out with all his might: 'Don't!' He ran forward and waved his arms.

'It's the elfin boy!' was shouted. The faces of the bystanders were hauntingly lit. 'Don't!' he screamed again. 'It's high voltage!'

The stubborn man just walked on. 'I'll prove to you it's just a light show,' he sneered.

'Look out! Stop him!' cried Michael in desperation. He ran forward to stop the man by force...

*STAY!* He stood stock-still. He cried out in despair: 'Yes, but that man...'

Too late. The air around the man began to spark and crackle. He had just a moment to get a frightened expression and then he stiffened up and fell to the ground, spinning.

*STAY!* Michael froze again. 'Don't go there!' he shouted to people who wanted to help the fallen man. 'It is high voltage!'

*Can we do anything for him?*

*No. He is now grounded and no longer at risk.*

The phenomenon was still growing, both in height and intensity. Dozens of spherical lightning bolts appeared before the eyes of the excited people, just in the middle of the air, then slowly, dancing, they were sucked into the light phe-

nomenon where they merged into the whole.

*Is this one of those electric images you were talking about?* asked Michael, who had shuffled backwards until he was standing next to Olga again.

*Yes, but it is getting bigger. There is too much electricity in the air. The tension is getting higher and higher.*

*Is it going to explode?* he asked anxiously.

*Only if we can't control it anymore. We're going up now, so hopefully we can release some of the tension there.*

The light phenomenon began to show a kind of folds. He walked backwards to get a better overview. At the top, the light seemed to fan out left and right.

His mobile rang. He grabbed it from his pocket.

'Miche? Come and see!' shouted Lucy's voice. 'It's an angel!' He looked up, but he was too close.

'Olga! We have to see it from a distance! Lucy says it's an angel!'

'What do you say?'

'An angel!' someone else shouted.

Olga came running up, followed by a few others.

'We have to get further away,' he shouted and started running down the path.

'Luus, are you still there?' he panted into his mobile. Crackling.

'Yes?'

'Where are you?'

'Don't know. Dad? Where are we? Miche wants to come to us.' Creak.

'Miche? We're on that little road that goes through a tunnel under the railway to one of those lumberyards. You have to walk a bit in the direction of Jablun and then turn left.'

'Come with me!' shouted Michael, running down the track.

Olga and a few other people ran after him. Villagers stood on the road, looking undecidedly, but from here only a halo of light was visible.

'Come along, after them, up the other slope!' someone shouted.

A side road appeared in the high verge of the road. Leading a group of runners, Michael swung left and climbed the steep gravel path, panting like a steam horse. On a flat stretch, the high walls fell away and there was a clear view.

'Dad!' he shouted. When he turned around, his mouth fell open.

Towering over the two abandoned farms in white light was the effigy of an angel, gently undulating like aurora borealis, reaching into the low-hanging clouds. Gigantic wings protruded from the left and right. The light seemed to be alive and reminded of a slow-motion recording of exploding fireworks.

Michael stood next to Herman, who held Diana by the hand. The twins stood arm in arm with their mother. Nobody said anything. Newcomers silently joined the growing crowd of spectators. The last to arrive were some cameramen, who filmed continuously.

*How beautiful, how wonderful!* sighed Michael in his mind. *Dia, can you see it?*

*Yes, my love, I can see it.*

*Can you come to me?*

*No, I'm on the mountain behind you, I don't dare come near it. It's too much tension for me.*

*All electricity is now conducted,* Michael heard again the voice that had just spoken to him. There was a hint of relief.

*Did things get out of hand?* Michael asked with a slight undertone of accusation.

*We are doing this for the first time.*

*Was there too much voltage?*

*Almost, that's why we had to make the picture so big. At first, we were planning something much smaller, but we had to stop the normal discharges to get spherical lightning. However, it turned out that we had to interrupt the supply of tension as well. That took a while, the air spirits had to break down a lot of cloud towers.*

It started to rain. Slowly the image faded, like a rainbow fades away.

*So, it sounded satisfied, all the energy is now leaking to the earth, where it was meant to be. Was this image satisfactory?*

*I don't know,* Michael confessed. *I had actually counted on some ghostly lights and floating shapes of people. It always gets so big when I ask something.*

*That's because you are dealing with great powers, man-boy,* was the amused reply.

After this it was silent.

'Was this your idea?' asked Olga, when the rain had soaked them and nothing of the angel could be seen anymore.

'It was very beautiful,' cried Lucy and Wendy defending their brother.

'You have to admit, Olga, his actions always bring about a breakthrough in a deadlocked situation,' said Herman.

'Yes, they do,' she grumbled, 'but the consequences are so unpredictable.' She reached out and stroked Michael's soaking wet hair. 'It was very beautiful, Miche. Impressive,' she said in a kinder tone. 'I wonder what the media reaction will be.'

## Chapter 18

### Calm returns

In the guesthouse, they sat glued to a brand new plasma TV watching the late news.

On the digital recordings, the angel was almost tangible. More clearly than they had experienced it with the naked eye. It had been an electrical image, which the sensitive chips in the cameras could receive better than the human retina.

‘Well,’ Olga said and stretched. ‘Tomorrow the place will be full of reporters and tourists again, I’m afraid.’

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Herman.

Michael shrugged his shoulders. ‘Dia is far away, in the woods it is dark and cold...’ He looked at Herman hopefully.

‘Yes, of course you want to sleep here.’ Herman looked at the girls. ‘Do we have room for this boy?’

‘I’ll sleep with Mum!’ jumped up Diana. ‘Then Miche can sleep in my bed.’

‘Oh?’ said Marjorie. ‘Don’t I have any say in that?’ Diana curled up against her. ‘Really, I won’t snore.’

‘Yes, that would be the top,’ she grumbled. ‘But you always spin around when you dream. Even as a baby. What am I saying, you were doing it in my tummy.’

‘Really? That you remember.’

‘I remember everything about you,’ Marjorie said and hugged the child.

She looked at the twins. ‘I remember everything about you too. You were not at all heavy to carry. No, not at all, but you were always picking each other’s hair.’

She looked melancholy for a moment. ‘No one got in the way of that, including me.’ Another memory brought a smile to her face. ‘You could laugh after only a few weeks. Gosh, how strange that was. Miche never laughed and you were all giggling.’

‘They still do,’ Diana said sleepily.

‘Come on, let’s go upstairs. Brush your teeth and...’

‘Yes Dad.’

The next morning Michael sneaked out of the room and went to the kitchen.

The landlady, still in her dressing gown, was putting the kettle on.

‘I haven’t got any coffee for you yet,’ she said apologetically. ‘Or? I got one of those machines yesterday.’ She searched in a cupboard, took a brand new coffee machine out of a box, filled it with water and put a pad in it. A little later Michael sat quietly enjoying a cup of espresso accompanied by a piece of toast.

She smiled and stroked his hair. ‘The things you bring, one miracle after another. I’ve been very much alive dear boy, since you first came here. The same goes

for the other villagers. They have the house full of guests, all kind of things are happening. We had resigned ourselves to the fact that our village would slowly die out, but now the empty houses will be inhabited again. You know, there was already talk of cancelling the railway connection. There were far too few passengers. That would have been the end of our village. Hardly anyone here has a car. Look at them now: the trains are full again; sometimes they even run in pairs.'

After his breakfast, he ran at an easy trot to the forest.

His mobile phone vibrated. 'Where are you? It's full of reporters here! They want to hear you,' Olga cried cheerfully. A house full of reporters made up for her whole day. He looked at what time it was.

'I've been lying in the sun. Let me call Dia, she'll take me.'

A little later, she came floating up. Somehow, she sometimes managed to present her undressed body in such a sensuous way, at least to him, that it gave him an almost uncontrollable desire to lose himself in her.

*No groping now*, she said sternly. *Stand up, otherwise you'll catch me*. He laughed, stood up and let out a terrifying Tarzan cry as he stretched.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him and took him into the air. 'Hey, my clothes!' he cried. Grinning: 'In this state, I'm sure you don't want to make a fool of me.'

Dia laughed and landed again. Clumsily he put on his clothes. He could only use one hand, because the other was holding Dia to her chest.

*I want a baby*, she mused.

He had nothing to say to that. It confused him that he could feel her wish. It also worried him. It couldn't be done; Dia might get very sad... *Come on, they need me*.

*Fine. But I'm going to make a womb inside me*, she replied rebelliously, gripping him tightly.

They were not alone in the air. A large tree trunk floated under two balloons behind the airship. The professor and his staff were transporting several logs a day, but it was not yet going very smoothly. There were many technical malfunctions. The balloons reminded him of heavily pregnant women.

*Just ask my mother how to have children. She has four*.

Dia didn't answer but just squeezed him with her legs.

They landed next to the guesthouse; Dia immediately took off again.

The drawing room was filled as usual with reporters. Michael went halfway up the stairs and stood next to Olga and his father.

'Can you explain to us what we have seen?' was the overriding question from the reporters.

Olga said thoughtfully: 'We saw hundreds of spherical lightning that seemed to build up an image.'

'Yes,' said Herman. 'They seemed to be feeding it with electrical energy. There was a thunderstorm going on. Suddenly the lightning stopped and the discharges

took the form of spherical lightning.’

‘So it was a natural phenomenon?’ it was asked.

Herman nodded. ‘As far as...’ A reporter raised her hand.

‘Michael, did you have a hand in that?’

He was startled by the direct question. ‘I had asked for ghost lights,’ he let slip.

‘Ghost lights?’ a colleague of hers asked.

‘Yes.’ He coloured because he thought it was rather childish. ‘A property developer has bought all the empty houses in the village to build expensive villas in their place. That...’ a murmur interrupted him. ‘Do you mean that this valley has been taken over by...’ ‘Can you tell us who is behind...?’ ‘The Valley was supposed to be World Heritage...?’ ‘Does this mean that the Environmental Federation is...’ ‘What do the fairies say about that?’

After this last question, there was a silence. He was confused by the reactions.

‘Did you call up that apparition?’

‘No. They made a whole show of it.’

‘Show? Wasn’t it real then?’ someone asked.

‘Was it real?’ He did not know how to answer the question.

‘Who do you mean by “them”?’ another interrupted him.

‘The spirit beings who protect the valley.’ Michael cursed his uncertainty. While he had held previous press conferences in his hand, this time he was becoming more and more distant.

‘Why are they doing such a thing?’

‘The spirit beings have wanted to show us an angel as they perceive it, I think.’

‘But why?’

Michael looked at the questioner in pain. ‘That is what I tried to explain to you just now. They want to prevent money-grubbers from taking possession of the valley.’

‘Do you mean to say that spirit beings, as you call them, actually oppose the actions of humans if they do not like them?’

Michael felt increasingly uncomfortable with this barrage of questions.

The rapid succession sent him in a direction he did not want to go. He wanted to explain properly, not in such a haphazard way. He gestured for silence.

‘Do you remember the landslide a few days ago?’ Many bystanders nodded.

‘The soil near the two abandoned farms was on the verge of collapse since the storm. Earth beings stopped the landslide. The locals saw the omens and had blocked off the road. That was to make access for machinery impossible. There was a fatality though. I am very sorry about that. Olga and I really tried to stop the wreckers. The road was blocked, right? Those guys went behind our backs and knocked down the fence and pushed the carts aside. What happened is their own fault. The nature beings deliberately stopped the landslide to protect those two farms. Last night’s light phenomenon was a second warning to stay away.’

That was crass language.

‘So fairies aren’t always the sweetest of girls’, he continued. ‘Most of them are. But guardian spirits are of a different order. They have a greater responsibility. So I wouldn’t call them fairies. They are much... more developed, more aware, more strict.’

‘Do you mean that they act consciously?’

He thought for a moment. ‘Yes and no. Guardian spirits are very powerful, but they are bound by strict laws.’

‘Then how do guardian spirits work?’

‘They can only work in matter through material eh.... things. Like plants, trees, water, energy. They can give direction to that.’

‘And to people?’

‘Yes.’

‘Also involuntary?’

Michael shook his head. ‘No, guardian spirits only persuade. If a human gets possessed, it is always by demons.’

‘Are demons at play here?’ a voice asked.

Michael shook his head fanatically.

‘No, not any more; demons can’t break through now that the factory is gone and the river has been washed out.’

‘So, if I understand correctly,’ said a reporter thoughtfully, ‘do your spirit beings protect this valley from new attacks?’

Michael hesitated with his answer.

‘I think it is our responsibility, but the spirit beings do not want to rely on it solely.’

## Chapter 19

# Water beings

On the crest Michael lay stretched out in the grass, looking at the sky; the soft wind played with his hair. No sound was heard in the hidden valley high in the mountains. Shadows of clouds moved silently across the slopes.

*I am coming, get ready.*

Dia came in sailing from the sky; he stood up and she picked him up without stopping at all. He was nervous. The hard work of keeping the Valley of Bran pure, repairing the flood damage and appointing new guardian spirits had gone over his head. He had the feeling that he was not doing anything right anymore.

Dia dropped him at the bank of the brook, where he continued brooding. She retreated to the protruding tree root of her willow friend.

*Are you sure we've been called?* he asked after waiting for quite a while.

The place remained empty. Only the water murmured... In the trance that the water sound evoked, he became aware of the little spring nymph who had previously represented the element water. To his surprise, he saw her own form of water-coloured swimming arms and legs on an elongated body with a small head, in which blue dots were the eyes.

*Hello, water nymph. May I know your name?* he asked in admiration.

*You may call me Ellilie. I have a message for you. The nixe of the upper reaches of the Bran has come out of his refuge and is looking for confirmation. You may give it to him. The spring nymph of the brook that has no name in your country is willing to extend her territory. My sister wants to consult with you.*

*Are the angels and Pan still coming?* he wanted to know.

In his mind a wistful smile was placed with the meaning: *No, not anymore.* He did not dare to ask if she meant: never more.

He decided to walk back to the village and made it clear to Dia that he was confused; he needed time to himself.

Involuntarily, his path led him to the cirque, from which, just before his arrival, a procession of balloons had taken off with two trees hanging below.

For a moment he stood at the edge, watching. It was probably a break, for there was no one busy at the moment among the dead trees. What he saw pleased him. There was clearly a reduction in the number of trees. Piles of sawn firewood lay ready to be transported. Between the floating mass of trees, open water could already be seen here and there. The water level was still falling.

Deep in thought, he walked on along the remnant of the river that flowed in the messy wake of the torrent.

How is it ever going to be a beautiful river again, he wondered. To him, the water looked lost and listless and was still murky.

Where their first camp had been, the riverbed had shifted; Diana's beech now stood by the stream. The enormous roots had managed to hold on to the earth; the tree had suffered no damage. But it did look grim.

As he walked, he tried to get a feel for the life in the riverbed. Here and there, young greenery sprouted up between the bare clay and limestone rocks.

He sat down and tuned himself in.

Gradually he could make out moving figures, like a movie projected over the image of the river. They were some gnomes and wood elves helping seeds left in the ground to germinate.

*Who is leading you?* he asked in an apologetic tone.

They looked up from their work and seemed to shake their heads.

*None. We do what we can,* was the message that reached him after a while.

With a sigh, he got up and walked on. It was clear to him that a guiding guardian spirit was needed here. But who? Wasn't it too much for the spring nymph of the brook? Actually, a gardener was more needed now; so much had to be done.

At the edge of the forest, he stopped and frowned, taking in the landscape.

The fences, which had been washed away, had been reattached and there were cows in the meadow again. They approached curiously and looked at him with gritting jaws. He continued along the narrow path that had emerged between the fence and the new bed.

The meadow where the scouting camp had been was unrecognizable.

He thought back to the exciting days in the beginning with a kind of nostalgia. In his mind's eye he still saw the big fire in the mist and Paul arriving with sticks for torches, just when there seemed no chance of getting the scouts to set fire to the factory. That factory, of which not a trace was left now. Just like the scouting camp: in the middle of a messy swamp now babbled a clear stream.

He followed it upstream to a point where the bed looked the same as before the flood. Hadn't he sat here with Irina?

He lay down with his head above the stream. He dipped his face in and drank from the cold water. *Is this the original spring water again?* he asked.

*Yes,* was the answer from the water nymph. *All the rainwater has drained away. The situation is back to normal. It was extremely hard work, harder than when the snow melts.*

*Ellilie sends her greetings. She said you wanted to talk to me. She loves you, but she didn't dare say so.*

Great confusion.

*That is the contamination of your people,* sighed the source nymph. *We elementals have been experiencing all kinds of feelings lately that we don't know how to handle, but there is no way back. What is love?*

*Connectedness, I think,* Michael answered after a while.

*With a person you feel related to. Like between me and Dia.*

*Yes, we all followed her transition,* sighed the source nymph.

*Would that have changed us?*

Michael agreed without words.

*I know that you want to give me control of the stretch between the mill and the caves, but I don't know if I can.*

Michael confessed: *I don't know either. I hoped that you would know.*

The answer was not in words, but in a disapproving tone. It implied a person in charge should not demand such a thing from some lower down in the hierarchy.

*Excuse me, Michael apologized. I am still looking for guidance on how to go about this myself.* There was no reply and he stood up, stunned, to continue.

What was stopping him from just being himself and figuring out how to lead the water creatures? Out of temper he kicked a stone away. That hurt; he had forgotten that he was walking barefoot. He sat down and sucked on his bleeding toe. What had that Sarah said again? As he recalled the conversation at the opening of the conference, the feeling of powerlessness that had plagued him all day disappeared. He had been promised all the help he could get. All he had to do was accept it.

Ashamed of his immature behaviour, he walked back to the stream. He dipped his face in it again.

*Dear spring nymph, work is being done on the restoration. Humans will prepare the new riverbed. Only when we have fulfilled our task can we appoint you as the river's guardian spirit.*

A sense of relief reached him, mixed with gratitude and even a touch of awe. Excitedly, he walked to the camp on the Forest Meadow.

## Risk of collapse

A resonating vibration in the ground woke him. Even before he was fully conscious, he recognized the buzzing sensation as the presence of Stone.

*It is good that you are aware of me right away,* sounded the familiar voice in his head. *Know that measures have been taken to close the valley further.*

*What do you mean, Stone?* he asked sleepily.

*Know that the other entrance to the valley, through the tunnel, is on edge.*

*On edge...? What do you mean?* Michael jumped up, remembering to pull his head in just in time before he hit the canvas, for it was pouring with rain.

*What I am saying is: there is danger of collapse.*

*But how can that happen?* he asked, confused.

*There are some fractures in the rock. On this side, a small section of the tunnel runs through the limestone to which this valley belongs. But most of the tunnel has been excavated through the slate of the neighbouring mountain massif. The fractures at the transition have now become unstable.*

*Unstable? But that tunnel has been there for almost a hundred years!*

*Fifty-four. We have always protected that breach. But now we have allowed water in and the breach is lubricated, as it were. When there is heavy vibration, a large part of the tunnel roof will slide in.*

Startled, Michael crawled out of his sleeping bag and started getting dressed.

*I must warn people immediately that no more cars are to pass through.*

*That was the intention,* sounded satisfied.

*But then we have become completely inaccessible to cars! The bridge to the other side has collapsed!*

*That was the intention.*

*Did you do it on purpose?*

*It was the intention, yes.*

*But why?*

*You may not have noticed, but all the people with wrong intentions come by road and all the people who want to do right by the iron track or, as recently, by air with balloons.*

A light went on in Michael's head. *So you have closed off the valley to cars!*

*We are pleased that you have understood.*

*Well, I just woke up, I can't think that fast yet,* Michael defended himself.

*We know that. We almost had to cause an earthquake under your sleeping body before you woke up. Does love exhaust you?*

Michael blushed. The intense lovemaking last night had indeed been the reason why he had slept so deeply.

*Dia? Did you listen in?*

*I couldn't help it. Stone speaks so loudly that I can even hear it here above the mountains.*

*That was the intention, Stone intervened. Quickly now, more and more water is seeping between the fault lines, you have to get the people shy away from using the tunnel.*

*Dia, are you coming to get me? My mobile has no coverage here, but high up in the sky it might.*

*I'll be with you in a minute. But you can't use your transmitter when we are flying; the energy of it bothers me, that is dangerous.*

*Then you'll have to drop me off next to the guesthouse.*

While he was still finishing his thought, he saw her come hovering over him.

He shot out of the tent into the pouring rain and was immediately soaked.

Dia picked him up and, without touching the ground, flew into the air, through the treetops and towards the village. She had never flown so low so fast.

In a few minute, they arrived at the landing paddock next to the guesthouse, where she put him in full flight. Without stopping, Michael ran to the kitchen door while Dia gained height again.

'I must warn Olga!' he shouted as he shot past the frightened servants like a whirlwind. He leapt up the stairs in giant steps and burst into the headquarters. 'Olga! The tunnel is going to collapse! We have to stop all the traffic!'

Olga turned round with a red head, she sat with her mobile at her ear and held a finger to her mouth. Nervously pacing back and forth, Michael waited for her to finish.

'Yes,' she said at one point. 'Please wait a moment.' She switched off the microphone of her phone and looked at Michael with a frown. 'I heard you, but I have the municipality of Jablun on the line. What is the matter with the tunnel?'

'It is about to collapse! The municipality must close it down! If someone drives through it the roof will collapse!' he shouted shrilly. 'Right now!'

'Collapsing? How did that happen? How do you know, by the way?'

'Stone woke me up just now and said that the crack is full of water... Come on, believe me, no one else should go through!'

Olga didn't hesitate, opened her mouth to talk into her mobile phone, remembered that the microphone was off, couldn't find the button, dropped the phone and, after a great deal of fuss, managed to say: 'Sir? I just received a message that there is a danger of collapse in the tunnel. Would you please send someone to seal it? The slightest vibration from a car could cause the roof... No, I mean it, this is not a fabrication to keep that contractor out! Sir, listen ....Shit! He's disconnected!'

'Who was that?' asked Michael, wide-eyed with fright.

'That was someone from the building inspectorate. He reported that a column of lorries from a contractor was on its way, under police escort, to demolish a number of houses in the village. We were warned not to resist.'

He became pale. 'But that's terrible!'

‘Yes,’ Olga agreed gloomily, ‘I don’t think there’s much we can do about it now. It would be a real shame if those characteristic houses were to disappear. They may not have a very special architecture, but they are centuries old.’

Michael looked at her in horror at these words. ‘It’s not about that at all,’ he burst out. ‘The tunnel is going to collapse on all those people! We have to prevent that!’

He made a decision. ‘You call the contractor, Bertold, that he blocks the tunnel on his side. Quickly! I’ll do it on this side, I’ll fly over with Dia!’

‘Okay.’ Olga grabbed her mobile. ‘You go, I’ll take care of the rest.’

*Dia, pick me up at the guesthouse, I’m jumping out the window!* He ran to the window, opened it and jumped into the rain.

‘Michael!’ Olga roared after him from the window. ‘There’s one of us on the way to Jablun!’ She did not know whether he had heard her.

Before he hit the ground, Dia had caught him and shot like an arrow in the direction of the tunnel. Aided by obliging sylphs under her outstretched wings, Dia whizzed up the road, crossed the railway line the road went under, through a narrow side valley where the black hole of the tunnel had to be. The dense rain obscured their view of the tunnel entrance, but below they could see the lights of a car heading towards it.

*Faster! We have to get ahead of the car! Otherwise they’ll crash!*

Dia dived down until they had to be seen in the light of the headlights. The driver apparently did not see them in the pouring rain; he just drove on. It was only a short distance to the tunnel.

*Put me on the bonnet!*

Dia tried to match her speed with that of the car. Michael waved his arms like crazy for the car to stop.

*I have to turn away!* Immediately Dia swerved to the side and braked with all her might. It was thanks to the sylphs that they did not crash. Dia landed roughly on the slope, Michael scratched at branches and brambles, it was almost a crash.

But the car stopped. Someone got out. ‘Are you all right?’ cried a worried voice. ‘I saw you too late!’

‘Yes!’ shouted Michael. ‘Don’t go into the tunnel! It’s about to collapse!’

‘What are you saying?’ the driver shouted back.

Michael looked for a way down. It was raining so hard that the road had turned into a fast-flowing river.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ he said with relief when he recognized the man. ‘Yes, I was told that the tunnel might collapse at the slightest vibration.’ He wiped the rain from his face. ‘Pff, that was close.’

‘Are you serious?’ the man asked, startled. ‘How can that happen so suddenly?’

‘It’s because of all the rain,’ Michael said hastily. He kept the conversation with Stone to himself.

‘Gosh, thank you! You probably saved my life. I was just a hair’s breadth away.’

I saw you just in time!’ The man leaned against his car. ‘That was a scare! Suddenly a flying elf practically on my bonnet! You scared me to death, for a moment I thought I had run you over. Has the other side been warned?’

‘Yes, the contractor has been called to close the tunnel entrance. We’re flying out there now to stop everyone.’

Faster than his thought, Dia came down and took to the air before the admiring eyes of the man. It was, of course, special enough that she was flying with colourful butterfly wings, but her body was a feast for the eyes without that. Michael, who could sense the man’s thought, was no longer bothered by it. It was okay that people admired Dia’s beauty.

They rose like a windblown tree leaf along the slope, lifted by a welcome gust of wind.

*Things do seem to repeat themselves, but each time worse than the last,* he mused as they climbed quietly.

*What do you mean?*

*First we had the fallen tree that prevented our train from continuing.*

*That was to get you into this valley.*

*I’ve always thought so. Then the avalanche on the way to Zilina.*

*That was just bad luck.*

*And recently the landslide that buried those two trucks.*

*That was a warning. If such signals are ignored, they are repeated, but each time with greater force.*

*Like now with the tunnel?*

*The elementals are serious, yes.*

The sharp ridge of the mountain passed under them and they caught sight of the road on the other side of the tunnel.

They were too late! A line of trucks was only a few hundred yards from the tunnel entrance. The heavy trucks crept up the narrow road that ended in the gaping hole in the mountain.

## Chapter 21

### Tough confrontations

*Can you land in front of the tunnel mouth?*

*No, I don't dare.*

*You still have plenty of room.*

*It is not that. I don't dare show myself to those men. Something evil travels with them.*

*Then drop me off behind that bush, and I'll run the last bit.*

Dia released him in full flight just above the ground, so that he was immediately up to speed. Skidding and jumping, he reached the road just before the first truck. He screamed and waved his arms. He almost slipped in front of the heavy wheels. The driver looked aside for a moment, but did not stop. Again Michael screamed. The second truck also drove by. The third vehicle was a van.

It stopped; the driver opened his window and asked something Michael could not understand.

'The tunnel is collapsing!' The driver shouted something back and shrugged his shoulders. The truck that crept up behind him blew impatiently its horn a few times. At that moment the truck in front disappeared into the tunnel.

Michael had to watch powerlessly as the man closed his window and accelerated. Behind the fourth and last trailer came a police car. It stopped right in front of the dripping Michael, who, screaming hoarsely, could only wave his arms.

'What's wrong, young man?' the driver asked him in bad German.

'The tunnel is about to collapse,' he said. 'You have to stop the cars!'

The officer grinned. 'Yesterday he was perfectly all right. Not a good excuse, lad. You're the elf boy, aren't you? I'll give you some sincere advice: don't interfere. These people have permission from the municipality to do their job.'

'That is not the point!' almost cried Michael. There was so much rain on his face that if he had really been crying, it would not have been visible.

'Water has entered a fault line! Really, believe me! I...'

'Well, get in first.' The back door opened and Michael slid into the back seat.

'How did you get here, huh? Did your friends drop you off here to stop the cars?' The man next to the driver turned and looked at him suspiciously. 'Or did you block the tunnel?'

Michael looked at him with wide eyes. The car pulled up to follow the column. 'No!' Michael shouted, 'don't go into the tunnel! It's going to collapse!'

He fought to open the door, but it was locked.

'I don't want to die', he shouted. The driver hesitantly stopped the car and said something to his colleague, who grabbed the mobile phone.

At that moment the car rocked on its springs. Once again.

Drawn white, Michael sat in the back seat and felt the earth tremble.

Before his mind's eye he saw mighty lumps of mountain crack and shift a little. Only a few yards. Just the distance between the roof and the floor of the tunnel.

*It has happened.*

Stone. Michael sat stiffly. Something like a sigh reached him, a vague feeling of regret.

*We followed you; you did your best.*

In the meantime, the two policemen had come into action. One of them was talking into his mobile phone; the other had got out and, looking around suspiciously, walked a little way into the tunnel. Moments later, he came running back, followed at his heels by a cloud of dust swirling out of the tunnel opening.

He jumped into the car and, without saying a word, took off in reverse.

The car swerved into the verge where there was more room. The other policeman kept shouting into the mobile phone. Michael could only sit still in horror. Carefully he tried the door, but it was still locked. He gestured to the driver to get out, but the man shook his head impatiently.

After waiting a long time, the last truck, a semi-trailer with an excavator, reversed out of the tunnel at walking pace, completely covered in grey dust. A few moments later another grey dust-covered truck followed, and just behind it the van. It was heavily dented, the roof covered with grit and pieces of stone, and the windscreen was shattered, but it was still in motion.

After the van, nothing came out of the tunnel. The two trucks stopped. The drivers and co-drivers jumped out of the cabs. The men in the van were helped out. They looked confused and some were bleeding from wounds on their faces.

'I would like to get out,' Michael said timidly, but the two policemen did not respond. The codriver got out and walked towards the men who were reassuring their colleagues on the road. Michael could not understand what was being said over the mobile phone, but suddenly the driver turned round.

'You are requested to come to the police station as a witness. You obviously knew what was going to happen and the inspector would like to hear about it.'

'Yes, of course,' Michael stammered.

The wait was long. Only after a while did he calm down enough to make contact with Dia.

*I have to go with the police to their station in Jablun. Will you tell Olga and Herman that I am there and that the tunnel has collapsed?* A sense of concern reached him, followed by a confirmation that his messages would be relayed. He was too upset to understand Dia word for word.

Before long, another police car arrived from the direction of Jablun. Soon the narrow road was full of police cars, an ambulance, fire engines and, to add to the confusion, a shovel and a van sent by contractor Bertold.

One of the policemen came to get Michael and took him to a police car at the back of the queue, which turned and drove back.

In the police station, he was placed on a bench in a waiting room.

Most policemen had been sent to the tunnel; the office was manned only by a telephone operator who was feverishly transferring calls.

Hours later, Herman came in. He plopped down next to Michael and put his arm around him.

‘We were too late,’ Michael whispered, stunned. ‘They didn’t want to stop and drove straight into the tunnel. Only three came back. The two in front are still trapped.’

Herman’s expression darkened. ‘How could that tunnel suddenly collapse? I’ve come through it dozens of times. I would have driven to Jablun this very afternoon. I’ve come by train now.’

‘Water has seeped into the faults between two different types of rock, Stone explained to me. This allowed the rocks to slide past each other.’

‘Yes, water lubricates a fracture, as it were,’ Herman agreed.

‘Stone said the same thing.’

‘Why did the police take you, anyway?’

‘They think I have something to do with it because I was there to warn them that the tunnel was about to collapse. I think they think we sabotaged the tunnel to stop the demolition workers.’

‘Demolition?’

‘Olga had received a call from the municipality that a column of trucks was coming to the village to demolish all the empty houses, under police escort.’

‘So, that’s serious!’

‘You didn’t speak to Olga then?’

‘No, I ran straight from the mill to the station when Dia had warned me that you were stuck here. The train was just coming.’

‘How could you understand Dia?’ asked Michael, suddenly curious.

Herman rubbed his hair. ‘I had your sisters with me, they translated everything for me.’ He stood up. ‘First I’m going to ask why you’re here; then I’m going to tell them that I’m taking you with me. After all, you’re still a minor.’

‘Dad, wait a minute.’

Michael also stood up and took Herman by the hand. ‘People have crashed in the tunnel,’ he said softly. ‘I was too late, Dad.’ He started to cry softly.

## Chapter 22

### Arrested

After waiting a long time, the door opened and a grey-haired policewoman asked if they wanted to follow her.

With Herman's arm around Michael's shoulders, they followed her to a small, stuffy room where a man in civilian clothes was sitting at a table playing with a pen. He pointed with one hand to two chairs at the table and with the other he picked up a telephone that had just started ringing. He listened for a moment, frowned and looked at Michael penetratingly.

'Yes,' he sighed as he put the phone down. 'It's quite an ordeal. The fire brigade has tried to reach the buried trucks, but the tunnel is blocked by huge chunks of rock.'

'Maybe they can get there from the other side...?' suggested Herman.

The man waved his hand impatiently.

'That will take hours. Rescue workers have gone on foot, over the mountain, and an army helicopter has been ordered with equipment. We can't even reach that village!' he finished in frustration.

'The train is running normally,' Herman replied.

'Yes, maybe they should send an extra train with equipment from Zilina.'

He grabbed the phone and gave some instructions. The woman officer came in with a pencil and a notepad.

'The only recording equipment we have is taken to the accident,' said the inspector. 'We'll do it the old-fashioned way, with shorthand. Right, and now you, boy? Who are you and what were you doing there?'

'May I know who you are?' Herman interrupted him politely.

'Inspector...' They didn't understand the name. The policewoman saw it and wrote it at the top of the sheet of paper on which she had made the first shorthand scribbles.

Michael mentioned his name and other details.

'Are you the elfin boy?' Michael nodded.

'Good, tell me what you were doing there at the tunnel entrance.'

'I woke up early this morning in my tent. You may know that I have contact with nature beings?' The inspector nodded, but his face was incredulous.

'One of those nature beings said that the tunnel was about to collapse because water had entered a fault. I went as fast as I could to warn everyone. First Mrs. Jellisek, from the Environmental Federation, who started calling. Then Dia – the elf woman, you know – and we flew to the tunnel as fast as we could. On the other side, we just managed to stop a car. Dia almost flew into the mountain, it was so close. We immediately flew on to this side. She dropped me off behind a

bush, because she didn't want people to see her. I shouted and waved, but they wouldn't stop.' He looked at the inspector, depressed. 'The drivers of the front trucks are probably dead, don't you think?'

'We don't know yet. We can't get to them. But it doesn't look good. You were also at the scene when those two cars were buried under a landslide in Branočs, weren't you? Someone died there too. Now people from a demolition company are again the victims of a serious accident. Can you explain that?'

'I think because they didn't listen to the warnings, sir. The villagers had seen that a whole slope was sliding and had barricaded the road with carts and barbed wire. Those wreckers drove right through, despite our warnings. Then the earth shifted and they got under it.'

'It's quite a coincidence that just when a demolition company is on its way to Branočs for the second time to do its work, another half mountain falls down, just when you're standing next to it, isn't it?'

Michael looked quickly at his father, but he looked back calmly. Taking courage, Michael said, 'I was there both times to warn them, sir.'

'That is not a valid statement, young man. Can you perhaps add something, sir?'

Herman shook his head. 'I wasn't there both times, inspector. But there have been more dangerous situations since the flood in the Valley of Bran. The earth is still very unstable because of all the water.'

'How can you judge that?'

'I am an engineer and involved in the clean up of the Bran.'

'The Bran?' the inspector asked grumpily.

'That's the name of the river through the Valley of Bran, inspector.'

'Never knew.' A deadlock ensued. The inspector clearly didn't know what to make of it. 'Wait here,' he finally said and left the room. The policewoman sat looking at her notepad, correcting a scribble here and there.

It was a long time before the inspector returned, accompanied by another man.

'I'm sorry, sir,' the inspector said to Herman in a formal tone. 'I am forced to detain your son until further notice.'

Indignant, Herman jumped up. The other man put a paper in front of him.

'This is a detention order, sir, in case you can't read Slovak. There are indications that your son is involved in the collapse of the tunnel to Branočs. We have footage of your son explaining how he and Johan Wlajicek, who lives in Jablun, used dynamite to blast a mountain wall on the 29th of August, in order to stop the overflow of the Iboc in the Bran. If the collapse of the tunnel is the result of sabotage, the case falls under the Terrorism Act. We have the power to keep terrorist suspects in custody indefinitely.'

## Hope for salvation

Michael felt he had hardly slept when he woke up. His bed was humming.

Sleep-deprived, he looked around at the light that shone inside.

Where on earth was he? An iron door with a hatch made him realize with a jolt that he was in a police cell. Again his bed buzzed. It came from the floor, registered his bare feet on the cold linoleum. Were they drilling somewhere? But it was the middle of the night! He listened; it was dead quiet. If they were working somewhere, he should hear something. The humming continued, there was something familiar about it... Could it be Stone?

*We are glad you recognize us, it sounded dryly in his mind. We are guests of our slate neighbours. Vibrations here sound very different from those in our own limestone.*

*Stone! What has happened to the tunnel! What have you done? I am in prison! They think I blew up the tunnel!*

*Calm down, calm down. You people are so hasty. Listen carefully. I told you the tunnel was on edge. Why didn't you tell them?*

*That is what I did! They didn't believe me and went on anyway!*

*Then it is all right. That people drove on is their own responsibility. Maybe they will listen to you better in the future. But I am not here for that. There are still two people alive in the last vehicle. Those in the first are crushed.*

*Then we have to save them, I...*

*Relax, we will tell you exactly how to get to those people. Open your mind, and we will transfer the knowledge to you.*

Obediently, Michael allowed himself to be put into a trance by the fluid singing of the earth. He received images of hollow places in the limestone, connected by crevices and round tunnels.

*Do you know now? We don't know how a human being gets his bearings.*

*N-no, I only got something about cavities in the rock.*

*How can we teach you about the route to follow?*

*Perhaps you can start at the beginning. Where do I go in?*

Again, images of crevices and large cavities.

*That won't work. Can you guide me from the road?*

The way to the tunnel appeared in his mind's eye. It was in strange hues, as if the rock itself was glowing, but it was recognizable. The asphalt gave no light at all. At a stream beneath the road, he was led off the road, under a brick arch, to a hole from which water flowed. It seemed that he only had eyes, for he was led through the hole as if he had no body. After endless tunnels and hollows, his subterranean journey stopped at a narrow crevice.

*Behind it is the locked vehicle. You only need to cut a few arm's lengths through the last*

*barrier.*

*That will work,* said Michael anxiously, *but can people go through all those narrow gaps? I have only been there in spirit now, but to cut through and save those men, more space is needed.*

*Take on your ethereal body, it is about the same size as your physical body. We will guide you.*

Michael imagined his body and immediately felt as if he were standing in the cave. That was better. He walked and slid all the way back without getting stuck anywhere. Only the last part, just before the little stream under the road came out into the open air, was too narrow.

*We can make this stretch wider,* Michael said. *Will you help us if we go and rescue those men?*

*Of course. That's why I called you in.*

Back in the cell, he pressed a bell, but no matter how he pressed it, nothing happened. He couldn't hear it ring anywhere either.

*Dia, can you warn my father that two people in the collapsed tunnel are still alive and that I know a way to free them? He's probably with Bertold, here in Jablun.*

*I don't dare, going into a strange house.*

No, that might be too much to ask, he thought. *Who can you reach at this moment? It's urgent.* It was silent for a moment.

*There is no one awake who can understand me, Miche.*

*Can you reach Diana in her dream?*

*Yes, I will.*

*Tell her, she will wake up her sisters and tell Olga and she can call my father in Jablun.*

Now he had to wait. He tried the bell again. Nothing happened.

*Diana tells me that Olga wants to know what is going on.* Dia's message came after what seemed like hours. Michael let her into his mind so she could record the conversation with Stone and the trip through the caves.

A little later, Dia's reply came. *Diana has understood. She will now pass it on to Olga.*

The square of the barred window turned to grey. He could hear the town coming to life. There was a vague sound of doors slamming somewhere in the building. Immediately he called, but still no one came. Suddenly he became furious. In the collapsed tunnel people were fighting for their lives and here the police was too lazy to answer his calls. He kicked at the door and roared: 'Open up! There are two more alive! Open up, you imbeciles! I'm the only one who knows how to save them!'

A few moments later: a rattling sound and the door swung open. Two policemen dashed in and locked him in. One of them put him in a painful hold, lifting him off the ground; the other went wide-legged to face him.

'Ouch!' protested Michael. 'Listen, there are...'

'Shut up!' The man raised his hand threateningly; the grip became even tighter. Michael squealed in pain, afraid that his arms were being dislocated.

‘I see you’ve calmed down a bit. What was all that noise about?’ said the officer opposite him. The pressure on his arms eased a little. Tears of pain pricked his eyes; he blinked to get rid of the burning sensation. ‘Well, what comes of it?’

Michael shook his head. ‘I... I dreamt that there are two men still alive, in the tunnel, in the back truck. The ones in the front are dead,’ he said hoarsely. ‘I saw a way through caves to get to those men. If we’re quick...’

‘Dreaming, huh? Now you see what happens when you take the law into your own hands. There will be victims.’

‘I didn’t collapse the tunnel! Really, those men are still alive,’ Michael begged.

‘Leave the rescuing to others, sonny. You’ve caused enough trouble!’

With a nod to the other officer he walked backwards out of the cell, followed by the second man. The door banged shut and the lock clicked.

Michael rubbed his aching shoulders, upset at the violence the police had used against him. They considered him a dangerous criminal; otherwise they would not act like this.

He sat down on the bed and tried to think. For the time being he was stuck in here, that much he understood. He could not lead the rescue operation himself, even though he was the only one who knew the way. And there was a great deal of urgency. He tried to make contact with Dia and when that didn’t work with Stone. No response. He was still too much upside down.

With great difficulty Michael managed to calm himself.

There was a rattling sound in the corridor. The door opened. A policewoman, escorted by a burly policeman, put a tray with breakfast on a table that was bolted to the wall. He was thirsty and only drank the tea. Hopefully he would be left alone for a while.

He sat down with his back against the wall and focused his consciousness on the other world. It took a long time, but finally he slipped into it.

Dia was high in the sky above the tunnel. From her description, he gathered that on the Jablun side were cars of firefighters, army and police. On Branočs side there was nobody. To his question, she replied that his family was currently at the home of the contractor Bertold. He sought contact with Stone.

*Are you there again, boy?*

*Hello, Stone. I’m locked up, I can only help in spirit.*

*That’s too bad. Your friend from explosives is also locked up and far away.*

*Johan? Has he been arrested too? That’s a pity, he was just the man I had hoped to go into the caves with. Are those two men still alive?*

*Yes.*

*Is there still a risk of collapse?*

*Yes, and there is still water in the tunnel. It can’t get out.*

*How much time do we have left?*

*We don’t know your time exactly, but there’s not much left.*

## Chapter 24

# Telepathic networking

Michael was deep in thought.

He would guide the journey through the caves from here. But who would be able to make the trip in person? He got up and started pacing through the narrow cell; four steps out, two across, four steps back ... Several people were needed, a hole had to be cut, they might have to take oxygen and a stretcher, a doctor... Calm down, he reminded himself, think. In any case, someone had to come along who he could reach in spirit. But there was only innerspeech between his sisters and him. He couldn't let those children go on such a dangerous journey, could he? An idea came to him.

*Dia, can you ask my father through Diana if Bertold knows people who can do a cave climb? And have the equipment for it?*

*Okido. But why don't you ask her yourself?*

*I can't get in touch. It seems like innerspeech only works when we are in our own valley.*

*Yes, that is a possibility. Okay, wait a minute. I'll act as a go-between.*

*Miche! Is that you? Dia says we can talk to you through her!*

With a stab of joy, Michael recognized his little sister.

*Hi little mouse. Now we can talk. Listen, I know how to save the men from the tunnel.*

Sentence by sentence he explained what he had experienced, that he himself could not leave and how their father had to put together a rescue team.

Sentence by sentence, Diana told Herman and asked the questions Herman had.

*Miche! Here Lucy. I can hear you too. I'll go along as a guide. I find caves very exciting. Then you can guide me directly, through Dia, without Dad in between.*

*Hi Luus! Do you dare? Oh sister, I'm proud of you!*

*Of course I do. You'll be there, won't you? And that Sir Stone of yours will protect us, won't he?*

The ground buzzed as an announcement that the earth itself had something to say.

*Tell your sister that we will certainly protect the rescue operation. As long as they follow our instructions, they will be safe.*

*Miche? I heard it! I heard Mr. Stone himself! Listen, Dad is going to prepare the operation with Bertold. He won't go because he can't stand being locked up since he was tied up and almost drowned.*

*Does he think it's alright for you to come?*

*Diana explained to him what Mr. Stone had said. He's very worried, but I can go. I'll come back to you when we're on our way. Daddy wants to know if you are all right and if he should come and see you.*

*No, he has to make sure the expedition runs smoothly. I can manage here.*

Exhausted, Michael let himself sink backwards.

*Miche!* Startled he recognized Lucy's thought pattern.

*Yes?*

*Dad asks where we should go.*

*The entrance to the underground passages is on the Branočs side of the tunnel. Just before the entrance there is a small brick bridge under the road through which a stream runs. You must go in there.*

After a few minutes, she came back.

*We need mountains of equipment. How can we get them? We can only do it by train, says Dad.*

For a moment, panic seized him. How could he do that? With a helicopter? As far as he knew, there were none left in Branočs. The balloons!

*Just continue with the preparations. I'll ask professor Matt to bring the airship to pick you up. Dia, did you hear it? How do we get the ship to Jablun and back as quickly as possible?*

*I don't know, I can't communicate with those people.*

*Could you lift Diana?*

*I can try. You want me to pick her up, take her to the airship, and have her relay your instructions to me?*

*Exactly!*

*Okido. I'll tell her myself to go outside. You explain it to your father.*

Through Lucy, Michael presented his plan to Herman, who was immediately enthusiastic.

*Dad says he has never heard of such special children.* He could hear that she was laughing.

*Miche?*

*Wen!*

*I am taking over communication with Dad from Luus, so that she can prepare herself better. Diana's already outside... Here comes Dia! Is it possible?*

After a few minutes Dia came triumphantly: *Yes my love, I am already in the air with Diana. The sylphs are helping me, because she is a lot heavier than you. I will come back to you when we get to the balloons.*

*Miche?*

*Yes, Wen?*

*I'm going to help pack now. We'll all go ahead by train. The equipment is very heavy. We can't go with the balloon, Papa says.*

*See you later.*

*When we get there, I'll contact you again.*

He had certainly been asleep for a while, because he woke up when the police-woman came to take away his breakfast tray. She looked disdainful when she saw that he had not eaten anything, but he did not react and she left. Not much later,

the relieved message from Dia that she could see the airship and was about to land. It had been a tough flight with Diana over the mountains.

Her appearance on the balloon field, with Diana in her arms, caused quite a stir, Dia announced excitedly.

Through Diana, Michael explained to professor Matt what the intention was. They would set off immediately. Diana went with the ship to maintain the connection. Dia rose high to give the sylphs instructions on how to get the balloon to Jablun as quickly as possible.

At the end of the morning, Michael was brought in for questioning.

The questions all boiled down to the same thing: he could only have known that the tunnel was about to collapse if he had known that there were explosive charges installed, certainly by his friend Johan... Michael's explanations that the collapse had been caused by the large amount of water and that he had dreamed of being clairvoyant as an elf boy were impatiently brushed aside.

'Just confess, boy,' the inspector said wearily. He looked as if he had not slept last night. 'Traces of explosives and remains of detonating wire were found in the area of the collapse a month ago. Just tell us how you and this Johan did it. Then we'll file a report and you can go home to your family.'

Michael was tempted to give in. He would then be free to lead the rescue expedition himself... Surely he could retract his statement later? He already opened his mouth when the ground trembled. Coffee cups clinked, the inspector and the officer operating the recording equipment looked up, startled.

*All right, Stone, I'll keep my mouth shut,* Michael meekly admitted. He was quite shocked by the intervention of the elemental being at the moment he was about to succumb. There was no new tremor.

'All right,' said the inspector, obviously still quite upset. 'Back to your cell then.'

The officer brought him back.

He didn't want to be disturbed when communicating via innerspeech and waited for lunch to be brought in. He ate some crackers and drank a cup of coffee. Now he had to wait for the first messages from the rescue team.

*Miche! Where have you been? We're on our way to Jablun with the airship! I can see it already. Oh, how wonderful it is to fly!* came a message from the delighted Diana.

*Miche! We saw the balloon on the way! We just got off in Branoš. We have to walk the whole way because there are no cars available in the village,* Wendy reported a little later.

*There is a path where you cannot be seen. Do you remember where we looked at the angel?*

*That lumberjack's path?*

*Precisely. It goes under the railway line and then runs along the road for quite a while. There is a clearing where the balloon might land with the equipment. From there it's just a short climb to where the road crosses the stream.*

*Okido. I will tell Dad.*

## Underground

The afternoon wore on slowly.

Michael was annoyed that he was locked up here idly, while his family did their best to rescue the men who had ignored his warnings.

*Miche! We are over Jablun. We're going to land, Diana reported.*

*Do you know where you have to go? Bertold's yard.*

*Yes, Dia told me where it is and I pointed it out to professor Matt.*

Waiting again.

*Wendy: Miche, we are in the clearing, it was quite a climb. When is the equipment due?*

*Hi Wen! In an hour, I guess.*

*Luus?*

*She's flirting with one of the men who are coming along, Wendy reported.*

*Miche, what is it?* came Lucy through.

*Pay attention, girl, said Michael. Listen, go and explore the entrance. It is a masonry arch under the road. The stream comes out of the rock, I don't know if it is wide enough.*

*Okay, I'll go and have a look with Mattias.*

She must have charmed a guy, Michael grumbled. He knew his pique was out of concern, but couldn't that wench have waited until the locked up drivers had been rescued?

He paced restlessly through his cell.

The police station remained unusually quiet. All the staff had probably gone to the tunnel.

*Miche?*

*Yes Di?*

*We are taking off now. We'll be at the clearing in 15 minutes, professor Matt says, with the equipment.*

Tea was brought. Michael drank greedily.

*Miche! Here Wendy. I see them coming! Oh, they are already descending. Lucy and Mattias also return from their expedition.*

*Miche, this is Luus. We can just get through. Mattias has already been in it. We'll get wet, we have to go through the water on our stomachs. The hole is too small if we have to carry those men on a stretcher. Mattias says the people who stay behind should cut the hole bigger. I'll check with Dad.*

Michael could feel from a distance that they were busy in the clearing. He knew that Dia was hovering far above the mountain in order to maintain the connection with him.

*Miche? Diana again. I'm going back with the airship to get stuff from Jablun to chop up the entrance.*

Short time later: *Miche, here Luus. We're going into the cave now. Will you stay with me?* She let be known that despite her bravado, she found it scary.

*Stone? Will you help me?*

Michael was bodiless in the cave system for the second time. Crystalline structures in the limestone deposits glowed in pastel shades; the limestone itself was grey with glittering crystals and dark patches.

As Lucy stood before the narrow hole from which the stream flowed, her courage failed her.

'It's so cold! And so narrow.'

'Indeed,' said one of the cavers, wrapped head to toe in waterproof overalls. 'You're not dressed for it. If you get your clothes wet you'll catch cold.'

Lucy looked imploringly at Herman. 'Dad, I don't dare go through that water.'

Herman scratched his hair as he contemplated the situation.

'I think it would be best if you took off your clothes here and put them in a plastic bag. Then you can put on your dry clothes when you're through.'

'Daddy! I'm not going naked with all those men! And that water is so cold!'

'We won't look.'

*Miche, can't those men go alone?*

*No Luus, there are lots of side passages and dangerous pits. I really need you to show the way.*

'Okay then!' shouted Lucy furiously, before she lost her nerve. 'All of you turn around!'

The men obediently withdrew; Herman stood, legs apart, before the masonry arch.

In the dimly lit vault Lucy briefly shuddered with fear, but when she thought of those locked up men she manfully removed her climbing gear and clothes and stuffed them into a plastic bag. Without further delay she lowered herself on all fours into the stream, the bag of clothes clenched between her teeth. This way, she could not scream. Which she almost did when she had to lower herself even further so that her breasts were in the water. Every now and then she touched the top of the cave with her rear end. Because she was not very tall, it was fairly easy. After a few yards it became wider and a little further she could stand. Mattias had put up a lamp so that she could take in everything around her.

There was not much to see: it was a smoothly cut hollow of yellowish limestone that glistened here and there; in the middle ran the stream. She pointed the lamp, shaking her head, at the hollow where the water came out.

*No, look up, there is a corridor.* She held up the lamp and looked for something that looked like a corridor. Any black shadow could be one, but if she took a few steps to the side, it would turn out to be just a cast shadow.

*I cannot find it.*

*If you stand with your back to the opening through which you entered, it is diagonally to the right, in the direction of half past two if you were to measure it on a clock.*

*Yes, I see it. Thank you.*

She understood why Miche needed her to direct: the cavers would never have found that passage.

*Get dressed, or you'll catch a cold,* Michael good-naturedly commanded from the police cell. She dried herself, put on her clothes and went to see how she could reach the passage. It took some scrambling, but in the old riverbed, which may once have been a waterfall, there were enough supports. Puddling in the stream behind her alerted her to the arrival of the two cave explorers.

She shone on them with her lamp and called cheerfully: 'We can go on from here! Michael has just shown me the way.'

The one in front called out as he helped his companion. Together they pulled a large bag of equipment through the narrow opening and began unpacking it.

Lucy descended and stood by curiously.

'What was it like, creeping naked through cold water?'

'Oh well, nothing to it,' snorted Lucy. 'You would have liked to have seen it, wouldn't you? A naked girl in cold water. Brute.'

'Your father was standing in front of the opening,' Mattias said with a regretful look. 'Otherwise I would have looked.'

'Oh, you bastard! Well, I wouldn't have got undressed then!'

'How about you leave all that bickering and put some of the equipment in your rucksack?'

Still chuckling, they shared the equipment. Lucy took care of the portable telephone and the heavy spool of wire.

Mattias went ahead of them into the hole and Joris closed the row. Lucy felt safe between the two experienced cave explorers. They had to get down on their hands and knees until they could stand upright again.

Mattias stood still and glanced at the confusing number of curves.

'Now you can tell us again.'

*Miche? Miche?* 'I don't... I don't know. I can't get a connection,' she said in a trembling voice. Mattias and Joris studied the situation to see if they could find a route.

'It looks like Emmental cheese here,' Mattias grumbled. 'All holes. Life-threatening. Do you think you'll be able to get through to your brother later on?'

He still found it hard to believe that those children could talk to each other telepathically.

*Wendy, do you have a connection with Miche?*

After a while the answer came. *No, Dia says his attention is occupied by a conversation he is having with others.*

'We have to wait. We can't go on without his instructions. It's too dangerous,' Lucy said firmly.

## Chapter 26

# Outside

The airship landed on the lumberyard square for the second time that day.

Volunteers of the conference camp quickly unloaded everything. The airship would stay there to transport any wounded people now that ambulances could not reach the valley.

Two of Bertold's men were lugging electric-pneumatic breakers and a generator up the ramp. Wendy and Herman made room in the narrow space below the road so the men could carve out the entrance. So far, they had not seen a person on the road.

Suddenly, Lucy's high-pitched voice rang out from the loudspeaker:

'Hello, is anyone there?'

'Lucy! Dad here. Where are you?'

'We can't go any further. There are all sorts of passages and deep holes in the floor. Without Miche's directions, we'll get lost. But he doesn't contact us. What should we do?'

'Wait, darling, that's all there is to it. If it takes too long, you just come back,' Herman replied.

'Okay, Dad.'

The widening of the entrance was quickly done: the limestone was soft and the men were skilled. Herman and Wendy helped carry the pieces of rock outside. Soon the entrance was high enough to walk through with a crouch.

'What shall we do?' one of the men asked. 'Go straight after them? We're not moving very fast with these heavy things.'

'Yes, go ahead,' decided Bertold. 'Just follow the telephone line.'

After some preparations, the two men disappeared into the hole with the generator between them, the breakers on their backs.

'Come along, Wen,' Herman suggested. 'We're just sitting here doing nothing anyway.'

The lumberyard was crowded. The airship was tied to a couple of trees, the gondola hanging just clear of the ground.

'Where's Diana?' Herman asked professor Matt.

'She's with Olga.' He pointed. 'Two policemen have just arrived who came by train. They are talking to Olga.'

'Well, just wait and see.'

A few moments later, the sound of a diesel engine rang out; new voices joined the sound of people talking softly, people singing. A tractor, driven by a beaming farmer, appeared in the clearing with a fully loaded cart. Paul, Maria, some scouts and reporters jumped off.

The scouts immediately started to hand out the food they had brought. Olga followed Herman into the soup line and whispered: 'I just spoke to two policemen from Jablun. They wonder what we are doing. I told them it's exercises to remove trees from the forest in difficult places without damaging nature. Is that all right?'

'Yes, I suppose so,' whispered Herman. 'What were they doing here anyway?'

'They say they're checking out the situation on this side of the tunnel. They are waiting for experts to investigate the cause of the collapse. The army will bring in helicopters and equipment to go into the tunnel. At least, that is what they told me. However, they found this clearing unsuitable for helicopters to land. Therefore, they have no objection to the airship staying here. How is our team doing?'

'They can't go any further, they are waiting for instructions from Michael, but he is not responding. Lucy called it through. They have a field phone with them.'

'They can make mobile calls, can't they?'

'No, not underground. There's no signal there.'

'Oh no, of course. What now?'

'There are two of Bertold's men following them into the caves with breakers and a generator. Bertold is keeping watch by the telephone.'

When they had finished eating, Wendy and he walked back to the road. Bertold had little to report: Lucy still could not get in touch with Michael and sat drinking coffee with Mattias and Joris, waiting for new clues.

A little later Olga arrived with Yvette and another reporter.

'They ask if they can join the expedition to film.'

'Do you have experience in cave exploration?' wanted Bertold to know.

Yvette shook her head; the man hesitated for a moment and then said: 'Honestly, no, but is that a problem?'

Bertold looked at Herman to see what he thought.

'I think it would be great if you could do a live report, but it's not easy to get ahead in such unfamiliar caves, let alone with a camera.'

Yvette and the man deliberated for a moment.

'We have a small digital camera, but for a live report we need an Internet cable.'

'A cable is possible.' Bertold pointed to the portable phone device. 'They have 500 yards of wire, but that's not enough I think. It is three-wire telephone cable.'

'Then we would need a relay transmitter.'

'I have a laptop with wireless internet with me, but there is no UMTS here.'

'Hm, the relay transmitter of Slovak TV1 is still on the station square,' Olga said thoughtfully. 'They've retracted the transmitter mast, but they haven't taken it down yet. They are stuck now there's no way out. Maybe we can switch it on again?'

'I'll call right away,' said the reporter. 'The operator is still there, he has to stay with his equipment and is lodging above the café. I have his number.'

'But how do we get the signal to that transmitter?'

Nobody knew the answer to that.

‘Herman?’ asked Yvette, holding a microphone in front of his face. ‘I hear that your daughter Lucy has joined the expedition? How old is she?’

‘Thirteen. She’s guiding the expedition by the clues her brother is giving her telepathically,’ Herman explained with a certain pride in his voice.

‘If a thirteen-year-old girl can get through those caves, can’t I? I’m not afraid of confined spaces.’

Herman looked at her and began to laugh. ‘As far as I’m concerned,’ he said finally. ‘But Lucy has two experienced cave explorers with her.’

‘If I go just now I could catch up with them. They’re waiting for contact with Michel, aren’t they?’

‘Come, we’ll put it to Bertold. I don’t dare decide this on my own.’

Bertold looked at Yvette. ‘Have you ever been in caves before?’

‘No, but I grew up in the mountains, so I can climb and clamber. I’ve got light with me to record video, though unfortunately there’s no more than a quarter of an hour power in this battery.’

‘The men have a generator with them. You can charge your battery there.’

‘Oh, that’s brilliant,’ she said with relief. ‘I just don’t have any suitable clothes.’ ‘We do have,’ Bertold said, estimating her stature. ‘Though the overall will be too big for you. But I don’t have boots in your size.’

‘Oh well, I’d rather wear trainers anyway.’

While Yvette was getting ready, her colleague tried to connect his laptop to the telephone wire. ‘Luckily they have normal jackets on,’ he said. ‘We can connect Yvette’s laptop in the cave at the other end, the two laptops are then directly connected. Yvette can transfer the images from her camera to her laptop, which will then transmit them to mine. The only thing is that no calls can be made as long as we are using the cable.’

‘How will you get the images further, to the village?’ asked Herman.

The reporter pulled an iPod from his pocket. ‘32 gigabytes, that’s half an hour of picture and sound at this high resolution. All we need now is a fast courier with a mountain bike or a horse. Then we can transmit half an hour’s worth of images every hour with no more than an hour’s delay.’

He stood up and reconnected the cable to the telephone set.

‘All right, this works.’ The phone’s speaker crackled.

‘We got to the others in one piece,’ reported one of the men with the breaking equipment. ‘It was a bit of a drag, though, with that generator.’

‘Listen, there’s a reporter coming after you with a camera. She wants to pass on her images via the telephone line.’

‘Okay, let’s have it. It’s passable, at least up to here.’

## Connection

'I hear Michael again,' Wendy suddenly exclaimed.

She listened intently to the messages that reached her through Dia, high in the sky. 'He had been brought in for questioning. They seem to have arrested Johan!'

'Do they think they blew up the tunnel?' asked Herman anxiously.

'Yes, but be quiet, I have to listen.'

Wendy stood with her eyes closed, unaware that everyone around her was waiting to hear what she would say. A look of disappointment crossed her face.

'I'm not allowed to listen in, Miche and Luus say it will disturb them. It's very complicated to guide.'

In the cave, the two cave explorers, the two men with the equipment and Yvette were waiting for Lucy to hear from Michael how to proceed through the maze of passages, pits and ledges. Slowly she began to walk, describing in her mind what she saw, for she could not convey the images well. At one point, she stopped.

*We can't pass here, Miche, the ledge is much too narrow further on.*

*Okay, go way back. I think there is a gap there that gives access to a higher gallery.*

Lucy walked back and stopped at a narrow opening. She stuck her hand in.

*Yes, that is the right one.*

'We have to go through here,' she called out to the others, who were watching her anxiously as she made her way through. 'Can you make the passage bigger?'

Filmed by Yvette, the two men with the breakers connected their equipment to the generator and started it up. With a deafening noise, they hacked open the crack. When the dust had settled they shone through with a portable lamp.

'The path is clear,' they reported and stopped the generator.

'Poo, what a stench,' said Lucy, who did not like exhaust fumes.

Mattias went ahead. Behind the crack, an irregularly shaped tunnel sloped upwards. At the end, the floor dropped away into a large cave.

'From here we tie ourselves together,' Mattias decided. 'The rock is very slippery and crumbly. I'll hammer some climbing irons into it to string a safety line along. I wish we had some extra climbing irons with us.'

'I brought some,' said one of the men with the generator. He handed them to Mattias, who rammed them into the rock and hooked the rope into the clevis.

Carefully they shuffled along the treacherous ground.

*Luus? Soon there will be a steep part uphill. That is the hardest part.*

'Michael says that we will have to go up soon,' Lucy relayed. A little further on, it became clear what he meant: they had to climb an almost perpendicular shaft.

'You can't do that without tools,' Mattias sputtered, shining upwards. 'Certainly not with a generator, and certainly not if we have to go back with wounded.'

'Can you get up though?' one of the others asked. Mattias nodded and pointed

out a possible route. 'With a pair of climbing irons and a couple of footpegs I can get there. What did you have in mind?'

'How about my mate and I go back and get a hoist?'

'That would be a solution, but that would take hours, it has to be hauled all the way from Jablun, by balloon or by train.'

'Lucy, can your brother explain what it looks like up there?'

She nodded and pulled back a little. A moment later she had the answer.

'Michael says the rest of the way is passable, but it is a maze with many side passages. We have to be careful, because only one pipe is the right one and it is hard to find.'

'Okay, let's do the following: Joris and I climb up and help Lucy and Yvette up. Then we'll hoist the generator and a jackhammer so we can start cutting when we get to the tunnel. You go back now and get a hoist and stretchers.'

The men looked at each other and nodded.

While Joris and Mattias prepared to climb the steep wall of the shaft, one of the men called Bertold to tell him exactly what they needed. Because there was not much wire left on the spool, they decided to leave the phone down there.

The two men started the retreat. Joris started the generator and set up a couple of construction lamps so that the climbing route was well lit. Lucy and Yvette watched from the bottom as the two climbers made their way up. It was slow going, as they hammered footbridges into the soft limestone at regular intervals.

Yvette connected her battery to the generator to charge it. Then she connected the camera to her laptop to transfer the images. She took out the telephone cable and pushed it into a socket on her laptop.

'So, now let's see if I can get a connection.'

Yvette tried everything, but there was no connection.

'The cable isn't in your ethernet socket,' remarked Lucy.

'That's a big jack. The phone has a small one.'

'Shit, yeah, how did Tobias do that then?'

'Through the phone, I think. Maybe I should dial in.'

Yvette rummaged through her laptop bag and took out a cable, connecting her laptop to the phone and that to the telephone line. She searched and found the right exit in her software.

'I'll ask Wendy to have Tobias connect his computer. The phone will still be connected to the cable there.'

Intrigued, Yvette watched as Lucy retreated into herself to communicate with her twin sister.

'So, she'll tell him. Try and see if you can get any contact.'

A little incredulous, Yvette looked for the other computer.

'Yes!' she cried in surprise. 'Connection!' She typed in commands and the laptop went to work. The camera had finished transferring by now and she disconnected it.

‘Okay, we’re up,’ came Mattias’ echoing voice from above. ‘We’re going to do the following. First Lucy comes up, then we hoist the generator. Yvette, can you illuminate that with your camera lights? You come last, but then we’ll have the generator upstairs to light you.’

‘Yes, but I would like to transmit my images first. I won’t be able to do that later and I’ve just got a connection.’

‘Okay. But Lucy can probably come up.’

Lucy hooked the climbing rope to her harness and, shaking with nerves, started climbing the nearly vertical wall. It turned out easier than she had thought. Thanks to the footrests and the tightly held rope, she was able to get up fairly quickly.

In the meantime, Yvette was filming from below. Panting and sweating, she fell into Mattias’ arms as she was pulled over the edge.

‘Well done, girl,’ he said and patted her on the back.

Before long, the generator was up and running. Yvette climbed up skilfully.

When they were complete, they moved on. There was a whole section with a flat bottom where they only had to bend down occasionally. There were openings in the walls, but most were no more than polished cracks. The tunnel narrowed and they had to get on their hands and knees for a bit.

‘Okay,’ came Mattias’ voice from the front, ‘here are all the side passages. Lucy, we need you to guide us.’

She pushed past Joris and the generator and looked at the many dark openings.

*Miche, which tunnel should we go into?*

In his cell, Michael concentrated. He had more or less been able to follow Lucy on her journey, but now it came down to this. How was he to explain which pipe was the right one? He came to a decision. He would let Lucy try one passage at a time and judge from her position whether it was the right one.

A little frightened, Lucy crept into a pipe at his instructions. By the third, she had made it. *This is the one*, he signalled. *The rest of the way is easy. Note the cracks in the side walls. Ask me which one is the right one.*

Outside, the phone call from the cave had caused a commotion. Bertold had immediately called his office in Jablun to bring a hoist with the greatest urgency.

Tobias, Yvette’s colleague, sat excitedly at his laptop while Yvette’s film images were transmitted. It went by the telephone line but very slowly.

When everything was in, it had to be transferred again to his iPod; that went fast enough. He jumped on the mountain bike he had managed to borrow and sprinted over forest paths to the road.

From a distance, he could see the antenna of the relay station in the station square towering above him. The technician from the Slovakian TV1 had acceded to his request and made the installation ready to transmit.

Excitedly they connected the iPod and sent the images from the cave to the studio in Bratislava. Less than an hour later TV1 was on the air with the first images of the underground rescue operation.

## Breakthrough

‘We are there!’ sounded the loudspeaker. ‘Miche has led us to a crevice that we have to carve out. He says we have to remove about one and a half yards of rock, then we will come out in the tunnel! Mattias has already started. Yvette is filming everything.’

‘Lucy!’ cried Herman. ‘How is that possible? I mean, did you go back to the phone?’

‘Yes, I was just in the way anyway. It’s quite narrow in there. Joris brought me back and helped me down. My work is done now, I don’t need to guide anymore. Miche fell asleep, he was so tired.’

‘Have you been in contact all this time?’

‘Yes, it seems that he went out before us in a non-corporeal form. Don’t ask me how, I didn’t see anything. Keep quiet, maybe I can hear the generator.’

Herman held his breath so as not to miss a sound from his daughter.

‘No, I can’t hear a thing. I’ll wait for the others. I have a good lamp with me. It is very beautiful here.’ There was silence for a moment. ‘Oh, there are bones! Wait a minute.’ There was a rumbling and scraping sound. ‘A lot of them! They are in the clay. Animal bones, I hope...’ Scraping again. ‘I think so, I only see deer skulls and stuff. Wait...’ ‘I have a flat piece here, a shoulder blade or something. It has markings on it. Shall I take it with me?’

‘Yes, go ahead,’ Herman answered in a trembling voice. Could they have accidentally stumbled on a prehistoric inhabited cave?

‘Oh, I see light! Someone’s on.’ The line rustled and creaked occasionally as they waited for Lucy to continue with her report. ‘O...’ They could hear she was startled by something. ‘It’s Mattias! He looks hurt. Wait a minute.’ There was a clatter as she hurriedly put the receiver down on stone.

‘He’s covered in gunk and blood,’ she returned. ‘He’s on his way out now. He took a hell of a lot of stones and mud when they broke through the wall of the tunnel. One breaker is lost.’

‘Are you all right, Lucy?’

‘Yes Dad, I’m fine. Will you stay on the line?’ There was a slight hint of fear in her voice. ‘I’m fine.’

‘I’m fine here too. We just had a visitor...’ Herman told in all colours what had happened outside. More to support his brave daughter in her dark cave than that it was really important news.

Some time later Mattias came out on hands and knees. Bertold led him away, while Herman cheerfully kept telling his daughter what he saw.

‘I see light again! Someone else is coming,’ she interrupted him excitedly. ‘Oh,

it's Yvette. She's coming down. How well she can do that, all on her own! I had to be helped by Joris.'

A little later, Yvette herself came on the phone. Panting, she asked if Tobias was there. 'No, he's taking your first recordings to the relay station. Have they found the drivers?'

'No, the hole is not wide enough yet. They're still chopping, there's only one breaker left.'

'Have you got any new footage?' replied Herman. 'Can I help you?'

'Yes, if you want to do that. They're great shots!' she panted excitedly. 'If you plug the handset jack into the computer later, when I signal, I can connect directly.'

Transmission of the signals was still in progress when Tobias returned, sweating from the hard bicycling.

'We'll be on the air in half an hour!' he shouted enthusiastically when he was just within earshot. He parked the bike and sat down next to Herman.

'Gosh, what news, and what improvisations! Wonderful! Oh, there are pictures again'

'Yes, I haven't seen any myself, but Yvette has filmed the breakthrough to the tunnel. Mattias almost got buried under a stream of mud from the tunnel, but he managed to get out under his own steam.'

A little later the iPod was reconnected. Tobias went to the group of reporters who stood talking while their cameras recorded everything. He made some talks; one reporter accepted his proposal.

'I agreed with him that he could use some of our footage if we could mix his shots of the situation outside with ours,' he explained to Herman and Bertold.

At that moment, a man came panting up the path on a mountain bike. He was carrying what looked like a very heavy rucksack.

'Ah!' cried Bertold. 'Just in time. Smart of you to remember to bring your bike.'

'Yes,' gasped the man, putting his bike against a tree and, with a relieved sigh, letting the heavy pack slide off his back. 'There was a hurry and there are only a few cars in the valley, so I thought, I'll take my bike on the train.'

Mattias, who had by now been patched up and bandaged, joined them.

'I'll go right back, Bertold,' he said with a worried look on his face. 'Those men have been stuck for a night and a day now.'

'Can you carry that hoist by yourself?'

Mattias lifted the backpack and was noticeably shocked by the weight.

'You didn't bring a ten-ton hoist, did you?' he said jokingly.

'No, a one-and-a-half-ton electric,' the courier said sheepishly. 'We haven't got a lighter one.'

'Well, go on then.' Mattias, with Bertold's help, slung the rucksack on his back and buckled it securely. 'How much cable is on it?'

'12 yards of 5 mm stainless steel wire,' the courier replied.

‘Well, that’s more than enough and more than sturdy enough. We have power, so we don’t have to hoist by hand. If stretchers are needed, we will phone for them.’

Followed by the cameras Mattias dropped to his knees and crawled through the water back into the black hole. Tobias saw that the files of Yvette and the willing reporter who wanted to share his footage were on his iPod in the meantime, yanked it out of his laptop, climbed on his bike and undertook the second trip to the relay station.

‘How quiet you are,’ Herman asked Wendy, who had withdrawn a little.

‘Oh,’ she smiled shyly at her father, ‘I talk to Lucy all the time. She has found more drawings. She thinks she’s found a prehistoric inhabited cave.’

A moment later the phone rang. ‘This is Mattias. I’m going up in a minute to fix the hoist. Do you know that Lucy has found prehistoric drawings? I’ll ask Yvette to take pictures of them later.’

Wendy looked at Herman with shining eyes that said: you see?

‘Can you manage? I mean, you’ve got a lot of kilos on your back and you’re wounded,’ Bertold said worriedly.

‘Oh, my wounds are superficial. I’ll be fine on the ascent. The climbing rope is still attached to the crampons. Don’t worry.’

‘All right then, and good luck.’

Again time passed. Tobias returned and went to collect some more recordings on his laptop.

Lucy’s voice broke the quietness: ‘I see lights at the top of the tube. I think someone is coming.’ Herman and Bertold waved to the others that they were approaching. A reporter held his microphone near the loudspeaker.

Lucy continued with her eyewitness report: ‘It’s Yvette. She is waving at me. She is going down the rope. The hoist isn’t working yet because the generator is at the tunnel.’

For a while they heard nothing, then a resounding shout.

‘Yvette is shouting that they have found two men!’ cried Lucy excitedly. ‘Here she is herself.’

‘Hello all!’ gasped Yvette’s voice through the loudspeaker. ‘We have freed the two drivers of the rear truck. They can barely walk but are not hurt or anything. The two helpers will bring them down with the hoist. From here they will have to walk on their own again. Mattias and Joris are trying to get to the front truck.’ A message seared into the brains of Lucy and Wendy, who simultaneously cried out in horror inside and outside the cave: ‘Don’t! Don’t! It’s about to collapse! Get them back!’ They began to cry, the message had hurt and the message of mortal danger evoked great fear.

‘Yvette!’ Herman shouted above the din. ‘Get those men back! This is serious!’ In the consternation Wendy and Lucy sought contact with each other.

*Was that from Miche?*

*Yes, he was very emotional. He had fallen asleep and had not felt stone's signal at first. He warned that the rocks are still unstable and that they should not try to get to the front truck. The men in it are dead anyway.*

*Wait, I have to pick up the phone, Lucy said.*

Yvette climbed up to warn the men. There was a clatter as Lucy dropped the receiver, then her trembling voice came through reporting the innerspeech with Michael and that Yvette had gone to warn Mattias and Joris.

Outside the entrance to the cave, a growing crowd of people sat in anxious anticipation, listening to the thin sound of Lucy's voice from the loudspeaker.

'Oh, I have Yvette's camera here. I've connected it to the computer and there's a little window saying it's ready. What should I do now?' Herman hurriedly beckoned Tobias closer and pressed the receiver in his hand.

'Oh, Lucy? Here, Tobias. I'll tell you what you have to do to transmit the images.'

It was necessary to unplug the handset for this, but Lucy had got it right: the file was starting to arrive on Tobias' computer.

## Chapter 30

# Consultation

Under cheers of the bystanders, Joris came crawling out through the stream first, followed by the two rescued men.

Blinking against the sunlight, they stood stiff and rigid. Tears ran down their grey dusty cheeks. Paul and Maria immediately took care of them with soup and bread.

Lucy was next. She ran to Herman and fell into his arms. Wendy and Diana, who had been in contact with her the whole time, also crawled into the embrace. Mattias came out grinning, followed by the two men with the breaker and generator.

Yvette appeared last. She quickly changed the memory of her camera so she could continue filming. Tobias, who would have preferred to stay with her, hesitated for a moment but then jumped on his bike to take her last shots to the relay station.

Surrounded by reporters and bystanders, both the rescuers and rescued went to the clearing, where the scouts had meanwhile set up a field kitchen.

‘Where is Olga anyway?’ Herman asked when he was finally seated in the midst of his three daughters and was handed a plate of stew by Maria.

‘As far as I know she just left,’ Maria answered. ‘When she heard that the rescued men were coming out, she said she was going to Jablun to get Michael out of the cell. Valerie knows more about it, shall I get her?’

‘Yes, if you want to do that? Get Paul too, will you?’

With a grim expression on his face he stood up. ‘Luus, Wen, Di, come with me, we need to have a consult with Bertold.’

The contractor sat talking to the two rescued men.

‘Bertold, what are we going to do now? I have a few ideas I want to talk to you about. Mattias and Joris, would you come with me?’

In the absence of both Olga and Michael, Herman took the lead as a matter of course. The three men followed him to a spot under the trees where they could take a break. Valerie joined them with a big question mark on her face, Paul came with Maria.

‘Listen,’ Herman began, ‘a strange situation has arisen today. First the bridge was washed away and now the tunnel has collapsed. So the Valley of Bran is effectively cut off from the outside world for cars. Mattias and Joris, you were able to assess the situation in the tunnel. I understand that things are still unstable?’

‘Yes,’ Mattias replied. ‘When Yvette came to convey the girls’ warning, we ourselves had already ascertained that there was still a danger of collapse. When we tried to make our way to the truck in front, everything started to move. We ran like mad.’

‘How do you assess the possibilities of repairing the tunnel?’

Mattias shook his head. ‘It’s a total loss. You’d have to remove the entire collapsed section of the mountain.’

Hm...’ Bertold mused aloud. ‘That’s a good idea. In time,’ he hastened to add. ‘Why?’ Herman wanted to know.

‘The cement factory in Jablun hasn’t got a new concession of the municipality to mine limestone. They cannot continue in their existing quarry. The concession has been granted to another company. It is probably a case of nepotism. The cement factory would pay a lot to be allowed to dig up this mountain.’

‘Good, that’s something for later. Mattias, are those trucks salvageable?’

He also meant: those two dead men.

‘Out of the question. There’s half a mountain of loose rock weighing tens of thousands of tons on top.’

‘Very well, thank you. No tunnel, so no car traffic from Jablun for the next few years. Am I saying that right?’

Mattias and Bertold nodded.

‘Remains the bridge.’

‘There has to be built a whole new one.’

‘On both sides the bridgeheads have been undermined by the flood,’ Bertold said in a decided tone. ‘Repair is not possible.’

‘How long will that take?’

Bertold hesitated. ‘Depending on the priority: at least a year, maybe never. It’s a municipal bridge and I don’t see the municipality of Jablun spending any money on it for the time being. They can’t even get their new town hall financed.’

Herman triumphantly circled the circle. ‘It means, my lords...’

‘And ladies,’ Lucy interrupted him. She was just ahead of her sister; they fell into each other’s arms, giggling. Herman looked on with a smile.

‘It means,’ he began again, ‘ladies and gentlemen, that the Bran Valley will be inaccessible to cars for the first few years.’

‘On to the broken bridge,’ Paul corrected him. ‘They can park in the lumberyard square where Michael and Dia first landed. From there they can walk across the railway bridge.’

‘That’s so, but you can’t get here with heavy equipment anymore. I have a feeling that this isolation was done with a purpose,’ Herman said in an enigmatic tone.

‘Yes,’ came Diana’s clear voice, ‘that’s what Stone told Miche. They are protecting the valley from harm.’

‘Who?’

‘They?’ asked Mattias in bewilderment.

‘Stone and Water and Air and Fire,’ said Diana as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. ‘First there was Fire who cleaned up the factory. Then Water came and washed the river clean. Water also broke the bridge. Wind helped the balloons that cleaned up all the dead trees and now Stone has broken the tunnel

so the mafia can't come here anymore.' She smiled triumphantly for a moment. 'Because all those nasty men never go by train.'

'You're right,' Herman complemented his youngest daughter. 'I suspected earlier that the guardian spirits of the Valley are at work. That's why I want to talk to you about what else we can do to keep the valley safe from unwanted visitors.'

'Helicopters can still come here,' said Paul, 'How about launching balloons at all the places where a helicopter can land?'

Herman nodded. 'I was thinking about that too.'

'I'll just ask professor Matt,' Diana said, hopping to the shiny gondola where the professor was eating with his staff and students. The men watched in amusement as Diana wrapped the big fellows around her little finger.

The professor stood up, Diana grabbed his hand and dragged him to the discussion under the trees. Herman stood up, greeted him courteously, introduced everyone to each other and explained what they were deliberating about.

'Well,' the professor said with a smile at Diana, 'I didn't think I'd be surprised at anything since the wind spirits take us where we want to go. At least, as long as this little lady is with us. But now I am amazed. You really want to close this valley to cars and helicopters?'

Herman nodded. 'We are already inaccessible to cars. For helicopters we need barrage balloons, like those used in the Second World War.'

'That would take a lot,' was professor Matt's cautious response.

'Those balloons in the war were filled with hydrogen. Much cheaper than helium,' his assistant remarked thoughtfully. 'We can use that here too.'

'Telephone from Jablun,' Bertold said and handed Herman his mobile phone.

## Night flight

Herman stepped onto the stage in front of the microphone.

The restless murmuring in the tent slowly faded away. He tapped the microphone hard; the bangs from the speakers silenced everyone.

‘Dear attendees, thanks to your chairman Roaring Bear we can hold this emergency session. I requested this because of a phone call I received from the solicitor of the contractor here at work, this afternoon. I regret to inform you that Olga Jellisek, our honoured chairwoman, has been taken into custody on suspicion of inciting terrorist acts with lethal outcome.’

He raised his hands to calm the outburst of indignant hissing and shouting.

‘She had gone to the Jablun police station this afternoon to try to get my son released, who is in custody on suspicion of having blown up the tunnel...’

He could not make himself understood any more. ‘Outrageous! Out of proportion! What are these people thinking?’ were some of the indignant exclamations he could hear in the tumult. When the conference participants had calmed down a bit Herman could resume his speech.

‘An accusation of terrorist action with deadly outcome is about the most serious there is, people. Our only hope lies in proving that the collapse of the tunnel was of natural origin. Our concern is that this investigation be conducted in a thorough manner. I am afraid that the opposing forces we face will do everything in their power to prevent this. They can easily neutralize our movement by putting suspicion of terrorism on the entire Environmental Federation. That could lead to more arrests and to the organization being banned.’

The room was silent at that. A man stood up and shouted: ‘What on earth can we do then?’

‘Join forces!’ shouted a woman loudly. She stood up, held out her hands and pulled the people sitting close to her upwards. In front of Herman’s astonished eyes, a circle began to form in the middle of the tent. Hands found each other, chairs were pushed aside, some one began a mantra. The circle became wider.

Herman and Roaring Bear looked at each other: would this be a response to the arrest of their idols? Roaring Bear spread his hands in a gesture of: let it go as it is, I don’t know anything better.

The mantra was now chanted by hundreds of voices. Herman beckoned his daughters, who were standing with Marjorie a little to one side, and stepped off the stage to be included in the circle. Somehow the three girls were passed to the centre of the circle, which opened up and became a spiral. Wendy danced her pixie dance, barely aware of the people around her, who slowly circled around her and softly hummed a tune that seemed to resonate in the air.

Lucy stood with Diana cradled against her, rocking along.

*Let's go outside. Dia is waiting for us there,* Diana signalled.

Lucy moved slowly, telepathically guiding her twin sister in the right direction. Wendy danced in a trance and allowed to be led. The circles of humming people moved with them and stalked out without breaking ranks. The evening was clear with a frosty freshness in the air. Above them hovered Dia, invisible to human eyes. She had the alignment of the people in the tent reinforced by the muses.

*Where are you?* asked Lucy, who could not perceive Dia's astral light.

*There,* pointed out Diana, who could.

*I can't see what you see, Di,* Lucy replied. *Neither can the people around us. Dia, can you show yourself to the people?*

Dia dug up from the elemental knowledge repository how fireflies give light and tried it out on herself. Before the admiring eyes of the crowd on the ground, Dia's appearance high in the sky glowed in moon-white light. She tried out colours, causing them to flash like LEDs in dozens of colours. That was not her intention; she experimented a bit and changed the blinking to slowly glowing and extinguishing again. She extended the light phenomenon over her wings, mimicking patterns of butterflies. When she was satisfied with her appearance, she descended in wide circles and landed amidst the delighted girls.

The people let go of each other's hands to applaud. Lucy started waving her arms. The crowd went silent.

'Michael tells Dia that he and Olga are in a prison car!' she shouted in a clear voice. She listened again for a moment and continued: 'We must not worry, Michael says, but try to prove that the tunnel collapsed on its own.' Again she listened to Dia's inner voice. 'He says that he has been told that Johan has also been arrested, but that he does not know where he is.' When no more messages came, Lucy spread her arms in an apologetic gesture.

Marjorie, who had been in the background until now, stepped to the middle and put her arms around the twins.

'Dear people,' she began. To everyone's surprise, her soft voice sounded not so much amplified as very close. Some of the listeners realized that the little air spirits, the sylphs, had a hand in this. They transported the sound waves without loss from Marjory's mouth to the ears of each listener.

'I think that here we are at the centre of a great network of people all over the world who want the good. What is happening here, in this valley, is of such importance to humanity and world peace that opposing powers are doing their utmost to discredit us. I understand that the elements themselves have intervened to purify the valley and keep it free from the evils of the world. They cannot do this alone.' She looked silently at the people around her. 'That is our responsibility,' she finished softly.

A woman came forward. 'My brother is a lawyer in Bratislava. I will ask him to defend Michael and Olga.'

A group of young people came forward. 'Our professor is a well-known geologist. We will ask him to offer himself as an expert.'

An Oriental man came forward, bowed in four directions and said, 'I am an observer on behalf of Unesco and will urge my organization to supervise the research.'

A man followed him with the words: 'I am here as an observer for the President. I keep him informed of what happens here. He sends you his best wishes, also on behalf of his wife, and he will do his best to have the matter thoroughly investigated.'

Valerie stepped forward, clearly affected. 'There are a lot of reporters in Jablun who call us because they want to come here. Olga is not here and I don't know what to do.'

'I think it's important that we speak to them,' said Roaring Bear. Although he was more or less the unofficial leader of the world conference he had said nothing so far. 'Before they send wrong messages into the world.'

'But how do we get them here?' someone wondered.

'Or how do we get to Jablun?' suggested Herman. 'Tomorrow might be too late.'

'Professor Matt, can you fly your airship at night?' asked Paul, who was a wonder at finding practical solutions.

'Take off I suppose, but navigating? I've never flown in the dark. It seems a perilous business to fly over the mountains.'

Diana pulled the reluctant Dia towards professor Matt and his crew.

'Dia can steer the balloon!' she shouted. She looked at Matt with wide-open eyes. 'But then, of course, I have to come along.'

On the professor's face, his dismissive expression changed to endearment. He had not wanted to say no to the suggestion of a night flight and had only mentioned the risks. Now this wench was turning his excuse upside down. He did not dare look at her; he had the strong impression that she saw through his fear.

'How many people can you take, professor?' asked Herman, who didn't mind.

'I'd like to go myself, and I think there are a few more people who have something to tell the press.'

'Well,' hesitated the professor, 'under normal conditions our load capacity is a maximum of one and a half tons, but with the extra gas cylinders I need ... no more than ten, I reckon.'

'That's plenty,' Herman concluded. He looked around the circle.

'Who's going with us? Only if you have something to say to the press.'

Roaring Bear, Paul, Valerie, Bertold, Mattias, Joris and Yvette raised their hands.

'Okay, let's go,' Herman urged.

At the clearing the professor and Georg checked that all systems were in order. The farmer had brought extra propane cylinders from the depot at the café.

Ballooning at night costs lots of gas due to the colder air.

*I am flying above you to guide the sylphs*, signalled Dia to Diana as she took off. She left her lights off this time. The passengers stepped into the gondola, the burners spit out flames that lit up the balloon's interior and made it rise slowly.

Diana and Herman waved to Wendy and Lucy, who were watching them climb into the night sky, arm in arm with Marjorie.

The balloonists took no chances and quickly rose to a high altitude to fly well over the ridge between Branočs and Jablun. They did not need the engine: the wind Dia had promised blew them straight to Jablun. From above, the mountain range was barely discernible.

Dense clouds began to break up and occasional moonlight fell on the earth. From this height, they could clearly see the illuminated tunnel entrance on the Jablun side. On the Branočs side, it was dark.

'Dia asks where we want to land,' Diana's clear voice sounded in the quiet as the burners fell silent.

'Bertold, do you know a good place close to Hotel Terminus? That's where the journalists are staying,' Herman asked.

'Yes, there is a small park at the Iboc with a playground. But there are trees around it.'

'Dia says she can hold the balloon above the landing area so that we can descend straight down,' Diana said reassuringly.

She stood next to the professor and wrung her hand in his. 'Really, it will go very well.'

It went just as Diana had said: above the playing field in Jablun, the wind died down.

Controlled by Georg's skilful hands, the airship slowly descended in a straight line.

As soon as the gondola touched the ground, the professor jumped out to drill steel screw anchors into the turf to anchor the ship. Georg compensated for the reduced weight by releasing more hot air as the passengers disembarked one by one. Georg indicated that he was staying on board to keep an eye on things.

The landing had been extensively put on video, both by Yvette on board and by reporters on the ground, who had been warned by phone that they could expect a spectacular landing next to the hotel.

Encircled by the reporters and curious townspeople, they made their way to the foyer of the hotel.

## Riot

The press conference was chaotic.

It appeared from the reporters' questions that the accusation of terrorism had been made public by the Slovakian government. There were rumours that the army had been asked to intervene, but that this had been prevented by the president. The Secret Service was allegedly called in; the Secret Service was allegedly infiltrated by the mafia...

The footage of the rescue that Yvette and Tobias had managed to transmit to Slovak TV1 had spoken a very different language. Neither the police nor the municipal authorities had wanted to look into it and they stuck to their suspicions.

Herman and Diana explained in a barrage of flashes and lights how Michael had telepathically led the rescue expedition from the police cell. When Herman announced that Michael and Olga had been taken to an unknown destination an uproar broke out. This had not been told at the government's press conference, people shouted. A hostile atmosphere arose.

Herman tried to calm things down.

'Listen,' he shouted above the noise, 'I want to point out that the accusation that my son blew up the tunnel is not entirely unfounded.'

Immediately there was silence.

'I mean, it's only a month since he and the ecologist Johan blew up a mountain wall to restore the watershed between the Iboc and the Bran.'

'There's no evidence of that, is there?' it was asked.

'I have understood from Michael that the police know about it. They seem to have a copy of the video recording in which Michael tells them how they did it. Johan was also arrested on the basis of that recording.'

'Can we have that recording?'

Herman shrugged. 'If we can find it.'

'But they haven't blown up the tunnel, have they?'

Herman shook his head. 'No, the collapse has a natural cause. That's why it's so important that an independent committee of enquiry is set up to investigate the cause. During the rescue operation Mattias and Joris ... well, let them tell it themselves.'

Mattias came forward and told how, with Lucy as their guide, they had worked their way through the caves until they reached the tunnel and how they had freed the two survivors from their trapped cabin.

'Joris and I tried to get near the front truck, but the rock mass there is so loose that we didn't dare go any further. In our view, that whole section of mountain would have to be excavated to reach it.'

‘So the tunnel remains unusable?’ was asked.

Mattias nodded. ‘Branočs can only be reached by walking, train and air for the time being.’

When asked what the activists were going to do to get Olga and Michael released, Roaring Bear went into more detail. He explained which steps had already been taken. When he saw that Diana started to yawn, he ended the press conference.

‘We have to go back. Just come tomorrow by train to Branočs, there we can talk longer. The two rescued drivers stay in the guesthouse; they were exhausted. We want to talk to them tomorrow as well. Let’s not lose sight of the fact that they were part of a team of men and equipment who were on their way to demolish all the empty houses in Branočs at any cost!’

‘The mafia again?’ people asked, but no one answered.

The ship took to the air amidst many spectators. A number of policemen were watching, but they did nothing.

When they were in the air, Georg snorted: ‘They came at me on high legs at first, but it’s not forbidden to land a balloon, so they couldn’t do a thing.’

The return journey was long: they had to make a diversion to get home with the few whirlwinds Dia could muster. The professor and Georg, however, enjoyed not using the engine.

They landed on the balloon field well after midnight and went to bed.

The next morning there was a crisis meeting at the headquarters.

‘The most important thing is that the committee of enquiry is reliable,’ Herman began.

‘Can we influence it?’ asked Roaring Bear.

‘That’s what the other side will be wondering too,’ said Bertold gloomily.

‘Would it matter much?’ asked Paul. ‘I mean, there are no explosion marks.’

‘Those can be made!’ warned Mattias. ‘An unreliable commission can be bribed to present fake traces as real ones.’

‘A contra-expertise seems obvious to me,’ said the Unesco observer. ‘We do that often when in doubt. In some countries, such caution is absolutely necessary.’

‘I can submit it to my brother,’ said the woman who had offered legal assistance the day before.

‘I was able to reach our professor last night and he is on his way to Branočs,’ a student announced proudly. ‘He has done similar investigations before. He is an expert in landslides and mining and is a lecturer at the Technical University.’

‘That’s beginning to look like it,’ Herman drew a cautious conclusion. ‘May I invite you to continue in the same way?’

‘You can appoint my brother as your son’s lawyer,’ the woman remarked. ‘He is still a minor, isn’t he?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mrs. Jellisek must do the appointment herself. I will ask my brother to contact her. At least, if we know where she is.’

The people around the table looked at each other in shock: it was not at all known whereto the two had been transported.

‘The Secret Service wouldn’t have taken them to one of their secret prisons?’

‘Do those secret interrogation centres still exist?’ someone asked, worried.

‘Certainly not with the current president,’ said another.

Herman looked frowningly at the people gathered around the table.

‘Secret services also keep a lot hidden from their presidents, believe me.’

Herman bit his lip. That couldn’t be true, could it? He was about to continue the discussion when his daughters came storming into the room screaming. Alarmed, they all got up and crowded around the girls. Marjorie followed, pale-faced. Wendy was the only one who could make her understood; Lucy and Diana were too upset. ‘They hurt Michael!’ she sobbed against her father’s chest. ‘He was screaming in our heads!’

‘What’s happening?’ asked Herman with a calmness that hid an enormous anger.

‘He’s tied up, they’re beating him and he has to say he blew up the tunnel!’

‘Do you know where he is?’ he asked hoarsely. She shook her head.

‘He-he doesn’t know himself, they blindfolded him. It was a very long journey. That’s all he could say.’ She raised her head at the same time as Lucy and Diana.

‘Thankfully, it’s stopped. They’re not hurting him any more.’

‘Dear children,’ Herman began with great emphasis, ‘I would like to ask you to stay in touch with Michael as much as possible. We absolutely must know where he is.’ He saw that Diana wanted to say something.

‘Where is Dia, and what is she saying?’ Diana snorted some more, picked her nose and said: ‘Dia is far away. She’s all... angry. Much more than angry, but I don’t have a word for that.’ Her gaze turned glassy. After a short moment, she lifted her eyes and continued seriously: ‘She knows where Miche is, just not what it’s called there. She says we must go there with the balloon, only then can she point us in the right direction.’

‘Then you have to come with us again, Di.’

She nodded. ‘Just wait a little longer,’ she said in a sad voice. ‘I have to wash and dress and go to the toilet...’ Marjorie trotted her along and closed the door.

‘I take it you want to leave immediately?’ broke professor Matt the silence.

Herman nodded fleetingly, his head still very much elsewhere.

‘Then we’ll go and prepare the ship for a long trip, Georg,’ the professor announced and disappeared with his assistant.

A feverish activity ensued.

Some informed people and organizations elsewhere in the world by phone or e-mail. Others helped with the provisioning. Herman and Roaring Bear went out

to meet the press.

Reporters, alerted by the broadcasts of the rescue, had arrived in large numbers on the first trains from Jablun and Zilina. Herman, still shaken by the news about Michael, let Roaring Bear do most of the talking.

They reported on the events and their suspicions regarding the whereabouts of Michael and Olga Jellisek.

The heroic rescue of the trapped drivers was pushed into the background by the new events.

When Herman talked about the closure of the valley, he was interrupted by loud shouts: around the balloon field and the conference area, six transport balloons were rising up on their anchor rope.

'The balloons are there to protect us from helicopter landings. We are sorry that this also makes landings by your colleagues impossible, but we want to protect the valley from unwanted interference by the army, other authorities or malice organizations,' Herman explained.

Well, that's going to hurt, he thought grimly. Terrorists, huh? We'll give them a run for their money.

## Journey through unknown territory

Waved off by a crowd of reporters, conference delegates and curious, the airship rose majestically for the long journey to an unknown destination.

Dia was not there to guide the air spirits. This time they had to rely on their own propulsion. High above the valley, Georg started the engine. The propeller pushed the ship through the upper air layers with a loud roar, but at a reasonable speed. Wind and engine moved them roughly in the right direction.

Diana, pale and sad on Herman's lap, gave the direction. On board were Yvette, to capture everything on video, and Paul because he was so handy. Being the son of a locksmith, he could open all locks. Although they had a radio transmitter, they maintained contact with the headquarters as much as possible through the innerspeech between Diana and the twins. That could not be overheard.

Halfway through the day, after a meal of sandwiches they had brought with them, a call came in over the radio.

Georg, who did not speak proper Slovak, answered it in Russian.

'It's a military air traffic controller. They are following us on radar. He's asking where we're from and where we're going because we're not quite going in the direction of the wind.'

'Just tell them it's a powered airship of the University of Tübingen on a research flight,' professor Matt said, 'tell them the wind has changed and ask permission to go ahead. We are under 3000 feet and we only need to avoid special military low-flying areas and airport approach routes.'

After some back and forth messages and consultation of the GPS navigator, Georg turned in relief. 'We may continue our journey, but we must change course slightly, otherwise we will come too close to a military airport. Air traffic control will guide us further.'

The change of course was in the direction of the wind, so they could turn off the engine. The silence was a relief.

Diana was frowning at the map on the navigator's screen, which displayed their position and distance travelled.

'What is it, Di?' asked Herman.

She pointed, a little way off the screen. 'That's where we have to go,' she said firmly. 'Dia knows where we are and is afraid we won't make it. She can't change the wind here.'

'Let's see what you mean,' the professor said and scrolled the map across the screen until Diana pointed: 'There!'

'Bloody hell, that's a former Russian army camp! See that shading? Forbidden territory, forbidden to fly over or even come close to!'

‘But can we get near it?’ wondered Georg. ‘We have to travel quite a distance with a strong crosswind. I don’t think we have enough fuel for that, if we can manage it at all.’

‘Can we fill up somewhere on the way? I will look for a civilian airport to stop at,’ said the professor. ‘We need special aviation fuel. Oh, look, this is quite on our route. Georg, can you tell air traffic control that we’ll be making a stopover at Crete Airport?’

After the announcement on the radio there was little else to do but wait until the airport came into sight. Georg descended gradually along the slopes of the last hills. In the lowlands the airport was visible. It consisted of a concrete runway, a concrete area with a dozen or so aircraft, some hangars, a building and a car park.

‘A former Russian base too,’ said Georg.

They landed next to the office building.

Some people came running and a tanker truck, ordered by radio, drove up to the nacelle.

The officials from the airport looked at everything with curiosity.

Professor Matt filled in some forms, paid the kerosene and landing fees and they took off again.

‘We follow the old course for a while,’ the professor explained, while Georg passed on their position, altitude and course to air traffic control.

‘When we’re in the mountains we can get out of radar range. They can see us because of the aluminium gondola, which reflects the radar waves.’

The adventure had changed the somewhat sullen Georg to his advantage: he laughed constantly, explained things in detail and winked at Diana and Yvette.

‘We’ll wait in a gorge until dark,’ the professor announced. ‘There is enough moonlight to see the terrain and we have a laser altimeter. We’ll sneak right across the terrain to that secret base.’

Apparently the professor had overcome his initial fear of night flying.

‘And then?’ asked Herman cautiously. ‘Then we land on that base, free Michael and Olga and fly away again?’

‘In principle,’ Georg laughed, ‘as long as no one sees us.’

Herman looked at him what he meant by that.

Diana began to laugh. She had picked up something from Dia.

She pulled Herman’s nose. ‘He’s pulling your leg, Dad. They heard the weather report, of course. It’s going to fog, Dia said.’

Fog! Herman immediately had to think back to the adventure in the factory, before it had caught fire. Then the elementals had also created a dense fog.

‘Is it a natural fog?’ he ventured to ask Diana.

‘Yes, but Dia has it sealed off at that base so that no one can see or hear anything anymore.’

Professor Matt informed ATC that they would be spending the night in a valley

and would be back in touch tomorrow, using the excuse that their night navigation equipment was not working properly.

'Traffic control inquired at my university whether they were aware of my experiments. They have been reassured by the enthusiastic stories,' the professor laughed.

Once between the steep, wooded slopes of a medium-high mountain range, it was relatively easy to land the airship on a meadow in an uninhabited valley. While Georg anchored the mooring ropes they all climbed off to stretch their legs.

Paul stoked a fire to brew an evening meal from the supplies they had brought. They stood, pondering, watching the gently swaying contraption as it was gradually swallowed by the nightly darkness.

'If the fog is thick enough we can land right in the middle of the camp without anyone noticing us. But how are we going to find the camp in a thick fog?'

'Your daughter can show us, can't she?' turned professor Matt to Diana.

She nodded and tilted her head, while motioning to be quiet for a moment.

'Dia knows exactly where Michael is and how to get there,' she said as soon as they had exchanged messages. 'When we are close, she can steer us further with the wind. We won't be allowed to use the engine then. I'll give a signal if the engine needs to be shut down.'

'All right, we'll land unseen. Then what? Do we just smash open the prison?' Herman wasn't convinced yet.

'We could do that,' Georg grinned, 'we could steal a truck and drive right in.'

'Yeah, well, all kidding aside,' Herman retorted, piqued. 'I'm desperately trying to figure out how to get that boy and Olga out of there. Besides, I am scared to death that they will shoot. I've got my little girl with me, too, you know!'

'Dia will surely know how we can free Miche,' Diana said with a firmness that even convinced Herman.

'If there are doors to be opened, I can help,' Paul said modestly. 'As long as the locks are not electronic, I can open anything.'

'Come on, let's go once everyone has eaten. All aboard!' shouted Georg jolly.

The next few hours were exciting. The professor watched the altimeter and the GPS navigator, while Georg steered the ship on his instructions just above the treetops and rocks between the mountains. It was unavoidable to use the burners now and then if they had to rise quickly along a steep slope. At this low altitude, crosswinds that prevailed in the upper atmosphere did not bother Georg much, but local fall-offs and swirls gave him many a predicament.

It was thanks to his steering and the superior technology of the ship that they made good progress without hitting anything along the way. The passengers occasionally watched in horror as treetops at eye level slid by, but each time it was just right.

'We are now approaching the highest point. There is a pass between two peaks,'

Georg announced. He sat tense in the drivers chair and played the controls. The engine hummed softly, almost idling.

‘In the pass we’ll be visible to radar for a while, but that’s unavoidable.’

‘Does the balloon reflect radar waves itself too?’ asked Paul interestedly.

‘No, we tried packaging foil with aluminium in the beginning to reduce heat losses, but the balloon material deforms too much and the foil snaps off. So radar waves pass through unhindered. Only the nacelle reflects.’

‘Oh, then I have an idea for staying invisible to radar,’ Paul grinned. ‘If you let the nacelle pretty much drag over the ground, they can’t see a separate blip on their screen.’

‘Clever! How do you come up with that?’

‘Oh. I imagine how those men look at the screens..’

‘They only do that when the computer warns that the image is changing,’ the professor interrupted him.

‘Well, then we have to fool that computer,’ was Paul’s laconic reply.

‘I asked Dia and she says she can make anyone fall asleep,’ Diana said excitedly. ‘She has asked all the nature beings and elementals and spirit beings in the area to help. The computer being doesn’t want to cooperate because it’s an evil one, but the ventilation being and the sylphs want to help. They are going to mix sleep into the air.’

‘There’s your answer, Herman,’ was Georg’s reply from the helm seat, where he was busily implementing Paul’s suggestion. ‘Watch out!’ he suddenly shouted, ‘we’re going to crash! Fasten your seatbelts!’ Everyone rushed to find a seat and buckle up. The gondola banged hard against something. Objects flew from their seats; Yvette, who was filming, had been too late in buckling up and flew forwards, where she slammed into Georg’s chair with a thud.

‘Damn woman!’ he shouted and tried to make the balloon rise, but time and again they hit the ground, dragged along by a strong wind in the pass. Things rattled, Diana screamed, Herman cursed. Above their heads the burners burst into flame with a loud roar. Yvette rolled back and forth on the floor, silent and pale. Blood spread around her head.

## Chapter 34

# Escape

‘Oh God,’ Paul moaned, looking at the havoc.

The professor had fallen right on his navigation equipment and lay groaning among the debris. Georg managed to get the balloon off the ground.

‘Are we stable?’ asked Herman anxiously.

‘I’ll hold her for now, we’re going downhill,’ Georg replied in a choked voice. ‘How... Are there any wounded?’

‘Two: Yvette and the professor.’

Georg looked back in a quick motion. ‘Can you bandage them?’

He looked again, this time a little longer. ‘How are we supposed to navigate now?’ he wailed.

‘Does the altimeter still work?’ asked Paul, getting out of his seat and pulling the bandage box out from under it.

‘Yes, yes,’ Georg answered hurriedly.

‘Then keep the same course on the compass.’

‘Yes, how to do that in these mountains,’ said Georg in exasperation. ‘I have to wind through the valleys, then I have no use for a compass.’

‘Climb until you can keep a steady course on the compass,’ Herman advised. ‘I assume that the men at the radar are asleep by now.’

He examined Yvette. She was unconscious and bleeding from a head wound. They laid her down easy. While Paul was treating her head wound, Herman devoted his attention to the professor.

Diana looked on from her chair with a white face.

‘A flaw in the design,’ the professor said with a pained expression. ‘The navigation equipment can only be viewed standing up, so we’ll have to set it up differently later.’

‘Who would have thought that we would hit the ground,’ Herman said soothingly, helping the groaning professor into his chair.

‘Sir, it happens a lot more often than you think,’ the professor said. ‘Landings in high winds can be particularly rough.’

‘But then you don’t need to navigate. You will already be there.’

‘That’s true,’ the professor admitted.

‘Herman, can you give me a hand?’ sounded Paul’s worried voice behind him. ‘Yvette is unconscious; I can’t get her to come to. Maybe she has a concussion.’

Together they tried to revive her with pats on her cheeks and a wetted compress on her forehead, where a blue bruise appeared. She sighed and lifted her eyes.

‘Thirsty,’ she whispered.

‘Do you have a headache? Are you dizzy? Nauseous?’ wanted Paul to know first. She shook her head mechanically and groaned when it hurt.

‘No, I’m not seeing double either, I don’t have a serious concussion, I think.’ Herman held her upright while Paul held a bottle of mineral water to her mouth.

She drank voraciously, choked and asked coughing: ‘My camera! Where is it? Does it still work?’

Herman laughed nervously. ‘A journalist at heart! The camera is more important than her physical wellbeing.’

‘Physical well-being is fine,’ she smiled at him. ‘Apart from the bump on my head, I feel quite comfortable in your arms.’

‘Here’s your camera,’ Paul grumbled. He held it in front of his eyes and pointed it at the pair on the floor. ‘It still works. Only the screen broke off, you’ll have to use the viewfinder.’

Without being able to stop it, Herman bent over the Frenchwoman’s smiling lips and kissed them.

‘Here,’ Paul said and handed the camera to Diana, ‘video it. “Burgeoning love during balloon flight” or “Rescuer kisses rescued”?’

“Romance in the hot air balloon”,” Georg added as he held a tense course. ‘Are you going to sit down again? I have to give the engine full throttle to get against the wind and then we won’t be able to understand each other.’

When they were seated, Georg accelerated and the engine roared. The gondola immediately stopped rocking. Herman and Yvette, however, needed no words: their hands had found each other and were telling all they wanted to know.

Diana unbuckled and crawled onto the surprised professor’s lap, who put his arms around the frail child and looked sombrely to the back of Georg’s head, who was now completely alone.

They came out of a sort of daze when the roar of the engine finally died down to idle.

‘Professor?’

Georg’s voice sounded unexpectedly loud, ‘I’m not sure, but I think we’re near the prison camp. The hills are getting lower and there is a dense fog.’

Diana had fallen asleep on the professor’s lap; she got up and rubbed her eyes. ‘Wait,’ she yawned, ‘I’ll ask Dia.’

Herman didn’t move: Yvette was asleep in his arms against his chest.

‘Oeah,’ Diana yawned again. ‘Dia has seen us. Just turn off the engine.’

Without a second thought, Georg switched it off. It didn’t occur to him how strange it was that he was taking orders from a seven-year-old girl, even if it was a half-elf.

‘Dia can steer us in the right direction from here,’ she said and went to stand beside Georg. She pointed: ‘That’s where we’re going.’ She kept a close eye on the course and said after a while: ‘Now you have to descend until we’re completely in the fog. Pay attention, says Dia, because the fog bank is only thin.’

Georg turned on the compressor that pumped helium from the balloon back into the pressure cylinders. The red-lit numbers on the altimeter counted down.

‘Stop,’ said Diana. A wave of Georg’s hand and the compressor went silent.

Soundlessly they floated through an impenetrable clamour.

‘Dia says you have to follow the ground, about three of my lengths high.’

Georg looked at her and estimated. ‘That’s about ten, eleven feet, I think.’ He pumped back more helium and the numbers on the display began to count down again. At 16, he turned off the compressor, knowing the balloon would continue to drop a few more feet.

For a long time, nothing happened.

The balloon descended gradually as it cooled, keeping pace with the ground. The staggered numbers were the only evidence that they were still moving: the balloon hung in the mist, not a sound could be heard.

‘We are now over the camp,’ Diana listened.

Herman shuffled his feet restlessly. ‘Can they really not see us? It seems absurd that we could enter such a camp unseen.’

‘Dia says the men are asleep. The equipment sees us and gives alarm signals, but the men don’t notice.’

‘How did she do that?’ asked Yvette in a sleepy voice. Groaning in pain, she sat up and checked her camera. She switched it on and repeated her question.

Diana smiled into the lens and explained to the future viewers: ‘Dia says she cannot influence the electronic devices. They are charged with strong forces and do not respond to her energy. But the fans are simple electric motors and she has reversed them with the help of the electrical elementals. so that they run the other way. As a result, the shutters on the outside closed and no more air comes from the outside and there is no fresh air inside.’ She spread her hands in a comical gesture. Piece of cake.

‘Aren’t those men choking to death?’ Herman asked with concern.

‘No Dad, soon when we’re gone Dia will switch them back again.’

‘Either we hang still...’ came Georg’s voice from behind the drivers chair, ‘or we hover above horizontal terrain. The altimeter stays at 12 feet.

‘You may now carefully descend to 3 feet, can you do that?’ passed Diana. ‘Not lower, there are beams of light shining from devices.’

‘Laser monitoring,’ professor Matt muttered. Once again

Georg proved what a skilled balloonist could do with a precision instrument like this airship. Slowly they descended until they were exactly three feet above the ground. They still could not see anything. The fog was vaguely lit; lamps were probably burning somewhere.

‘What now?’ asked Herman nervously.

‘Now I have to get Miche,’ said Diana in a shaky voice. ‘Paul has to come with me to open the locks.’

‘You? No way!’ Herman shot up.

'I have to, Dad, because Dia has to lead us through the building and I'm the only one she can talk to.' She looked pale and trembled. 'I don't actually dare.'

'Come on, I'll go with you to video everything,' Yvette said. She grabbed Herman with her other hand. 'The four of us will go.'

Herman turned to Georg, who, with his gaze on the instruments, was listening intently to what was being discussed behind him.

'If something unexpected happens, take off quickly,' Herman instructed.

'How will I know you're coming again? Without Diana, we have no connection with the elfin lady,' said Georg with concern.

'We should have taken Lucy with us,' Herman said wryly.

'Do you have a mobile phone? We can signal with a mobile. One ring would be enough.'

'Do you think so?'

The professor looked confused. Hesitantly he took a bulky device out of his pocket. 'Then call this number.' He showed it to Herman, who programmed it into his.

'Okay.'

'Anything else you need?'

'Some tools,' said Paul.

He picked some instruments out of the case Georg pointed at and put them in his backpack.

'Let's go,' whispered Herman. 'Watch out for the laser beams, don't interrupt them. We can see them well thanks to the fog.'

One by one they descended a rope ladder made of thin steel wire. The compressor hummed; for each passenger less in the gondola a lot of helium had to be pumped back.

They stood motionless for a while on the damp concrete, taking in their surroundings. Apart from a single vaguely visible violet laser beam, there was nothing to be seen or heard.

Without saying a word, Diana pulled Herman in a certain direction. Paul followed and Yvette came last. In some places they had to crawl under laser beams, in others they had to step over beams that shone low above the ground.

A black shape appeared in front of them. An army vehicle. They crept past it.

Step by step Dia piloted Diana to a steel door. Herman tried the door handle. Locked. Paul bent forward, moved the handle and felt the lock. He closed his eyes and imagined the cylinder lock inside. He stuck a thin blade into the grooved opening. The wafer-thin plastic bent to the shape and slid in smoothly. On one side, he had worked the blade with small cuts to form a kind of tabs, which could bend independently of each other. He poked, shoved, turned... the springy blade took the pawls of the lock with.... click. He pushed down the handle and opened the heavy door. They slipped inside, into the dark. Paul closed the door without making a sound.

It was only in complete darkness that Diana's other vision awoke.

Shuffling along like blind men, they followed Diana through corridors, down stairs to a closed door. Paul repeated his opening trick. Light crackled through the door as he opened it. It fell on Diana's little white face. She stood with closed eyes and nodded that they could continue.

They entered a corridor with light bulbs on the walls, screened by heavy mesh, casting a yellow glow on dingy concrete. Paul bent down to pick the lock of the door they were stopping at, but Diana shook her head. She was listening. After a while, she nodded and whispered at Paul's ear: 'This door is not locked. There are two men on guard. Dia says they are sleeping. We have to be very quiet and not breathe. The air is not good.'

She repeated the message to Herman and Yvette's ears. Paul kept the door ajar so that they could slip past one by one. They held their breath.

The room was large and windowless. There were a few steel office tables with dilapidated chairs, metal cabinets along one wall, a sink with a coffee machine and a water cooler, a calendar with naked ladies and two men sleeping at a table with their heads on their hands. Portophones lay next to their heads on the table.

Without breathing, they crept past them to the door in the opposite wall. This was only latched. Paul slid them loose and opened the door. A bare, yellow-lit corridor with steel doors, clearly cell doors.

They went through. Paul closed the door behind him and breathed in carefully. The air was stale and reeked of mouldy concrete and musty mattresses, but was breathable.

Their hearts began to beat even harder: Michael and Olga could be in here!

Paul looked at the lock of the door where Diana was standing nervously. It was an ordinary lock. Easy to open. He put a couple of thin steel screwdrivers in the wide keyhole and fiddled with them until he felt he had got hold of all the pawls. Sweat gushed from their faces and backs, the atmosphere was suffocating. The lock gave a loud click.

Nervous, they pushed aside the bolts and opened the door.

Michael was sleeping under a drab blanket. Diana squeezed herself past Paul and Herman and put her hands around his head.

With a jolt, he sat up straight. Still sleep-drunk, he recognized his liberators and scrambled to his feet. Paul grinned at his friend and pulled Diana's arm. 'Where is Olga?' he whispered, straining to the limit.

Diana pointed, raised two fingers, but stayed in Michael's arms with her eyes closed.

'The second door?' asked Paul in confirmation. She nodded.

While Yvette filmed the reunion, Paul opened the designated cell door. Breathing became more and more difficult; he was panting like an asthmatic. He shook his head in disbelief when he saw Olga sleeping. It was all so easy.

He woke Olga, who sat up with a distressed cry.

At first she didn't recognize Paul, but when Yvette appeared in the doorway with her camera, her mouth fell open in surprise.

'What...?' she coughed away a frog in her throat, 'what... how did you...?'

She shook her head and stood up resolutely when she realized she was being freed. She hurriedly took off her prison night-wear and put on her clothes.

Paul closed the cell door behind them and did the same with the door of Michael's cell.

Olga was hurriedly embraced. Nerves made them save a more elaborate greeting for later. One after the other, sweating in the stale air, they crept past the two unconscious men. Paul locked each door again, grimacing at the guards' surprise when they would find the prisoners flown while all the doors were still locked.

Outside, Herman gave a single signal to the airship with his mobile.

The fog was still impenetrable, with vague violet laser beams. They would not see the rope ladder if it were hanging right in front of their eyes, but Diana led them, crawling across the wet concrete under some laser beams until she could triumphantly grab the ladder. One by one they climbed up, slowly to give Georg time to increase the balloon's buoyancy with each new passenger.

On board, they fell into each other's arms. Diana lay in Michael's arms, weak from exhaustion, joy, relief and endured fear. Whispering, they tried to tell each other all sorts of things, but their greeting was interrupted by an exasperated cry from Georg: 'Prof, we're too cold and too heavy and I'm out of helium! We're sinking! I must use the burners!'

Immediately the two huge gas flames ignited at the top of the gondola. The burning gas made a tremendous noise and turned the fog into a flickering yellow light. The balloon immediately began to rise.

'Phew, that was close!' puffed Georg, wiping his forehead. 'It was only two feet to the ground, we would have probably hit one of those laser alarms.'

The brief burst of fire had been enough to make the balloon rise. Georg shut off the gas supply and they found themselves back in the silent and impenetrable fog bank.

'I hope we haven't been seen,' muttered the professor. 'Diana, can you ask your friend to keep us hidden?'

Diana looked at Michael's face to see if he would do it. He hugged her and nodded. 'Dia is not aware of any signs that people are awake,' he said hoarsely. 'There is equipment that has noticed us, but no one is responding to the alarm.'

He looked around the gondola in satisfaction. 'How very clever of you to have freed us,' he said admiringly. 'I do know that Dia guided you, through this little mouse...' he kissed his sister, 'but still, you did it tremendous well.'

'Well, I'm perplexed,' Olga added. She looked devastated. 'I can hardly believe it. It looks like a James Bond movie.'

Yvette put down her camera and pointed at Georg.

'Thanks to him we were able to make this bizarre trip. What a pilot! He can

navigate this contraption within a few feet. Let's hear it for George!

'Hey!' he called out jolly, 'don't forget the prof! He designed this thing. This is the best airship that ever took the air!'

'Well,' said professor Matt a little shyly, 'Jasmine is the engineer, mind you, and without this little girl we wouldn't have known where to go. Cheers to Diana, our guide!'

'Not to mention our Paul, who can pick any lock!' continued Yvette.

'Ah Dad, you're the poor joker,' Michael joked. 'What have you actually contributed to this adventure? But comfort yourself; you are blessed with such special children.'

## Chapter 34

# Homecoming

The journey home was slow.

The engine roared to move the ship forward against the wind. Georg flew as low as possible because of the headwind. When he could no longer steer due to exhaustion, the professor relieved him, even though he was barely able to move himself.

Only above flatter land were they picked up by radar and called.

Professor Matt told air traffic control that they had a breakdown and were on their way home.

‘Our navigation equipment is broken, we are currently flying by compass and altimeter,’ he reported. ‘Can you give us a course to the nearest airport where we can fill up? We only have an hour fuel left.’

After a while the air traffic controller returned with co-ordinates, a compass heading, wind and weather data and the phone number of the airfield.

‘It’s a few miles across the border, in the Czech Republic. I’ll hand you over to our colleagues there.’

‘They won’t have woken up at that airport yet,’ the professor grumbled, ‘it’s just half past five. We’ll try in an hour.’

He shifted course and remained silent.

They woke up when the roar of the engine went to idle.

‘Georg, will you take over? I hurt my back and I can’t concentrate any more.’

Slowly it became lighter. They could see nothing through the windows but the eternal fog. While Georg had the ship crawl slowly forward, Herman called the airport. The professor sat in his chair, grey with pain, waiting for the painkillers to take effect.

‘They have us on the radar,’ Herman reported. ‘Course 258, six more miles.’ He could see the petrol gauge at zero; the engine was probably running on the last of the petrol in the duct. ‘Altitude 200 feet, we have to cross a power line at 90 feet.’ Georg let the gas flame roar for a moment and the balloon rose.

‘Another mile.’

‘They can hear the engine, drop to 100 feet.’

‘We’re right over them now! Stop engine, drop to ground!’

Georg turned off the engine and opened the air valve at the top of the balloon. With a light thump, the nacelle bounced to the ground. The compressor hummed to pump the precious helium into the cylinders. Another thump, a light shove, and they stood still.

Herman opened the door and jumped out. For a moment the ship wanted to rise again, but sank back when all the hot air had escaped.

Herman drilled four anchors into the turf and clicked the mooring ropes in place.

‘So, let’s stretch our legs and refuel,’ he said tiredly to the two men who were watching.

‘Where are you from?’ one asked.

‘If you’re from Poland, we have to notify customs.’

‘No, we’re from Slovakia. We were thrown off course by the strong wind.’

He pointed to the engine. ‘That thing does help, but if the wind is too strong...’

A tanker truck was approaching. Georg stepped out of the nacelle and helped connect the hose.

‘We hope to be home in a few hours. Jablun. That’s where we started yesterday,’ Herman continued.

‘Jablun? Didn’t a tunnel collapse there? We’ve seen it on TV. Two drivers were rescued, weren’t they? By a girl and her brother, I think,’ the man replied enthusiastically.

Herman was about to confess he was the proud father of the famous children, when Diana came out of the gondola.

‘It’s the fairy girl!’ cried the official excitedly. He pointed at Diana and shouted to his colleague: ‘She’s the fairy godmother! From the TV! Really!’

At his shouting more people came running up hastily; a mechanic still had an engine part in his hand.

‘What is the matter?’ asked Michael, poking his head out of the door sleepily.

‘Michael, the elfin boy,’ the people shouted.

‘Then you must be their father!’ concluded the official in surprise. ‘Is he free again? Your son was arrested, wasn’t he?’

Herman laughed and pointed to the airship with a gesture of his arm.

‘We just picked him up.’

‘Oh, but then the elf woman must be around too!’ The man looked around and then up at the sky. It was contagious: soon everyone was gazing at the sky. The fog had started to swirl and was lit up pink by the rising sun. A glimmer became visible in the mist banks.

‘There she comes,’ said Michael proudly. The colourful shadow became clearer and took on the outline of a floating butterfly. Speechless with admiration, the crowd watched Dia land thoughtfully beside Michael and fold her wings around herself.

‘Dad,’ Michael said softly. ‘I am going with Dia now. We’ll come to Branočs on our own. I don’t want to show up for the time being. It’s better if Olga stays in hiding for a while too.’

‘But, we need you, Miche,’ Herman replied.

‘Not really, Dad. You manage very well. We can always be reached through the girls.’

‘Yeah, I forget that sometimes,’ Herman sighed.

‘Olga can do plenty behind the scenes. It is important that she is in the valley, but cannot be found.’

‘We’ll have a council of war when we get back,’ agreed Herman, who saw that Michael was about to explode to disappear. Herman embraced his son and, with some trepidation – after all, she was not dressed – his daughter-in-law.

Before the incredulous eyes of the people of the airport, Dia slowly took off, hooked Michael with her arms and legs and flapped away.

‘Gosh,’ said the mechanic, looking disdainfully at the engine part he held in his oil-covered hand, ‘that’s a lot easier than the way we have to fly.’

Laughter broke the spell. Busily talking, the people went back to what they had been doing.

Georg helped disconnect the hose from the tanker and the professor filled in the eternal forms.

They shifted each other during the last stretch. Although they were deadly tired and the professor was in a lot of pain, they hurried to the Valley of Bran, their home base. They navigated on an ordinary road map and the compass.

In the higher layers of air, the fog had disappeared. Only deep valleys were still filled with a white cotton blanket.

‘There!’ sighed Herman with relief. ‘At last! The Valley of Bran.’

A long train stood by the platform. Georg made a model landing on the circle in the middle of the balloon field, between the barrage balloons that were still faithfully standing guard there.

Their arrival had apparently been communicated to the local authorities by air traffic control: a cordon of armed policemen stood around the landing site. Behind them, hundreds of reporters, conference delegates and curious crowded in.

Herman got out first, with a hand on Diana’s shoulder whom he pushed ahead of him. There were loud protests, a girl screamed angrily, a few policemen struggled to stop Marjorie and the twins, but they were too quick. They ran towards the gondola and embraced Herman and Diana in a barrage of questions and kisses.

Yvette had recorded it all and got off third, followed by Paul and Georg, who clicked the mooring ropes to the ground anchors around the landing circle. The professor was the last to step on solid ground, his hand on his aching back.

A surly looking inspector stepped forward. ‘I’m afraid I’ll have to take you all to the station for questioning,’ he announced gruffly.

‘Why?’ the professor asked in surprise. The balloonists looked at the policeman disapprovingly.

‘You are suspected of being part of a terrorist organization and of making clandestine trips abroad. You have been sighted over the Czech Republic and have made several landings.’

‘That’s not clandestine, inspector,’ the professor replied bitterly, showing him a handful of papers. ‘We have permission to do scientific research in three countries with this airship and we have filled up with aviation kerosene twice on the

way. Furthermore, we had trouble with the equipment and crashed into a mountain, injuring my back and breaking the navigation equipment.'

'We have indications that you are transporting people and material illegally,' the inspector persisted.

The professor pointed behind him. 'Go ahead, you can look in the gondola if you want.'

The inspector silently sent two subordinates inside, while he himself looked at the landing forms and receipts the professor had handed him.

I'm happy we dropped Olga off in the valley next door, Herman thought. She was right that the police would probably be waiting for us.

The inspector withdrew, took out his mobile phone and started calling. A little later he came back and consulted with the two policemen who had visited the gondola.

He stepped up to the group of balloonists. 'I have consulted with the public prosecutor and explained the situation. For the time being, I see no reason to take you in for questioning,' he said without blushing. 'However, you may not take off until further notice. Until then, two of my people will remain here to guard the balloon. I would also like to ask you all not to leave Branočs until things have been sorted out. I am taking these papers with me for inspection,' he announced.

'Go ahead,' said the professor indifferently, 'you can keep them: they are copies and I have a few more. And I won't be leaving for a while: I'm going to sleep for a long time first.'

At a signal from the inspector, the policemen broke their cordon. The crowd that had gathered behind them rushed to the airship and surrounded the weary travelling party.

While Herman addressed the press and Georg closed off the gondola, Marjorie took the girls to their room.

After the press conference, the terrain emptied. The train left for Jablun, loaded with policemen, and silence returned to the village.

## Chapter 35

### At home

The next morning, the weather was beautiful.

Herman was surprised to find Olga at the headquarters.

She was sitting at a breakfast table and pointed to a chair and the coffee pot. She closed her phone and grinned cheerfully. 'That was our new lawyer. He's going to demand the charges be dropped today. Also, we got an message from the developer on the mail to make an offer on all their property in Branočs! I mailed back our last offer.'

'That's nice!' said Herman. 'Now that car traffic has become impossible they probably don't see any point in it anymore. But aren't you in danger of holding a public meeting here again?'

'They won't arrest me for a second time, not after our story is all over the papers today.'

'Daddy, are we all going to live in that house?' They were standing in front of an abandoned farmhouse, high on the slope, near a spur of the forest.

'No dear.' Herman tickled Diana through her tousled bunch of hair. 'Marjorie is going to live here with you and the twins. I may be buying this house with Marjorie, but I'm going to live in the village myself.'

'With Yvette?' said Wendy mischievously.

Herman blushed and cast a quick glance at Marjorie to see how she would take it. 'Is it that obvious?' he murmured.

Marjorie laughed and pulled her daughters close. 'Di, Herman and I have been living our own lives for a long time now. It's all right. Together we have you and that's why it's nice that Herman is coming to live close to us.'

'Will Miche come and live with us too?' asked Wendy dreamily.

'I don't think so.' Lucy drew a wrinkle above her nose, because she really didn't like what she had just nodded off. 'Dia can't be in a house, remember? If Miche wants to be with her all the time, he's bound to live outside too.'

'Yes,' Marjorie said softly and gazed into the sky as if to find her son and his lover there. 'But we will make a room for him, won't we?'

'Dad, will you make a room at your place for Miche too? When it's winter he'll probably want to sleep inside,' Lucy asked.

'Yes, I've already agreed that with him.'

'Herman,' asked Marjorie with concern, 'how long will the renovation take?'

'We're going to make the front house habitable first. That can be done in a week if we do the painting ourselves.'

'How will we get the materials? And furniture? I mean, now that there are no

more cars...?’

‘Everything has been thought of, Mar,’ Herman reassured her. ‘Bertold has arranged for transport of building materials by air.’

‘With the professor’s airship?’ asked Lucy.

‘Yes, Jasmine is already designing a new, larger airship under the guidance of professor Matt. It will take a while to build it. In the meantime, Bertold can occasionally hire the professor’s airship.’

‘What about water and light?’ asked Marjorie.

‘There are tile stoves in the house and fire wood is abundant. For electricity we will install solar panels and we can get water from the ground.’

‘Gosh, we’ll be almost self-sufficient,’ Lucy thought. ‘If we also plant a vegetable garden, the valley will take care of everything for us.’

The forest slowly but inexorably started to show its autumn colours. The many volunteers were preparing to transplant young trees. Once the leaves had been fallen, the planting plan for the devastated river valley could be implemented.

The Dutchman whom Michael had met at the opening of the World Conference had been put in charge of the landscape plan. The Garden Goblin, as everyone called him, was quite insecure about it. He had always done his gardening work alone or, at most, with a helper. Here, there were almost a hundred people who wanted to know what to do from him.

He got help from an unexpected source.

Janos came to help him organize twice a week. Both men could communicate with the nature beings. As soon as Janos arrived with the first train from Zilina, they stood with the volunteers in a circle around the place they were going to work that day. Janos, who knew nothing about gardening, had the garden goblin indicate what was to be done. He translated that into work, which he then divided up. The cooperation worked so well that the wood elves and gnomes, who until then had worked without guidance, organized themselves in the same way.

Michael often watched from a distance. It became quite common to see some wood elves and gnomes at work with a human volunteer. Here, too, it was Janos who proved able to harmonize people and nature beings. After a day like this, he said goodbye exhausted and took the last train home for he also had his busy job in the hospital.

On a beautiful October day, Michael and Janos were walking through the forest at one of the rare moments when Janos’ help was not needed.

‘What about it, Janos?’ asked Michael. ‘The longer I think about it, the clearer it becomes to me that our meeting with you is not accidental.’

‘O?’ Janos had obviously been thinking about other things.

‘I understood from Stone that we were led to this valley on purpose.’

‘By that train accident, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hm.’

Michael looked at Janos from the side. Didn’t he want to say anything about it or couldn’t he?

‘It must be, Miche,’ Janos began after a long silence. ‘But it was a complicated operation. I mean, you arrive in Branočs, your father is called away, Diana falls ill, there’s no transport and no phone, you borrow a van, you almost die in an avalanche, then there’s the bus driver who drops you off at the spa instead of the local hospital, where I wasn’t at the time because of a conference, Dr. Wenceslas knows me and the Environmental Federation...’

‘You’re the umpteenth incarnation of the shaman Janos, who came here two thousand years ago, aren’t you? You had a hand in those too, didn’t you?’ interrupted Michael.

‘Not really, Miche. I only got my first clue when I saw that tree in Diana’s aura, which made me understand that there must be a dryad in the child.’

‘Then who organized it all like that?’

Janos laughed and gave him a good-natured punch.

‘That was you yourself, my dear boy. You and Diana, along with your Dryad of the Willow and Diana’s Dryad of the Forest.’

Michael smiled shyly.

‘I’ve often thought that myself, but I can’t remember anything about it. Only that I felt very unhappy and insecure the whole journey here. I think it was more our dryads than Diana and me. They’ve known you a long time, haven’t they?’ Janos nodded thoughtfully.

Michael sat with Olga at the edge of the cirque. After a long silence, he began to speak.

‘Olga, I put the management of this valley in your hands.’

It didn’t even sound strange from a sixteen-year-old boy, Olga marvelled. ‘With Herman and Diana you will get along fine. The conference working groups will provide the necessary knowledge.’

‘I know, Miche. I speak to them daily.’

He peered into the distance.

‘This is where the new world begins,’ he said softly. ‘Nature beings, science and technology merge here...’

‘What will you do, Miche?’

‘I am learning how humans can manage the elemental realms. This cirque full of waste is my test case. I have been offered help from people at the conference who have been working on this for some time. I must concentrate on this in the coming time. If I’m constantly distracted by politics and the like, I won’t be able to do much of it.’ He stood up. ‘Olga, I am leaving. I’m going to learn how to install a guardian spirit for the river.’

Olga got up and hugged him.

‘I wish I were so light that a fairy could carry me. Now I have to walk all the way back,’ she sighed.

‘No, you don’t.’ Michael pointed in the air to the airship that was floating state-ly. ‘Here comes your lover to fetch you.’

Olga changed colour. Michael laughed hilariously.

‘Wendy saw it straight away when you were talking to the professor.’

‘Well, yes, I had also noticed that a lot of people find each other in this valley, this summer,’ she laughed sheepishly. ‘Now I am one of them.’

Michael dipped his face into the brook and drank.

*Lillylo, are you ready?*

A shudder reached him, followed by a feeling of determination.

*I accept,* she pronounced the formula.

*Listen to the chants of the people, Lillylo, then you will learn to understand them and you will be able to make yourself understood.*

*Will you stay with me?*

*Yes Lillylo, I’m staying. I will be the Keeper of the Valley. I will watch and give directions if needed.* He laughed suddenly, which caused a loud gurgle and gasp, for he still had his face underwater.

*I will have the most work guiding the people, water nymph of the Bran, because we have to reshape the whole river.*

*That must be nice work, Michael of the Valley.*

*Yes Lillylo, it will be.*

## Twelve years later

Michael showed himself less and less.

According to Irina, he lived with his beloved elf Dia near her focus tree, a giant willow at a clear stream in an inaccessible valley adjacent to the Bran Valley. His family saw him more often. Especially in inclement weather, they could expect him at the door at dusk. On dark days, the dim light alone was not enough to energise him and he loved to eat bush soup with Diana. If there was fresh bread, he could not stay away from it and enjoyed a fresh slice with butter from the valley and homemade strawberry jam.

The twins wanted to continue their education and Marjorie took them to the villa in Hilversum in the spring. Diana stayed and went to live with Irina for the time being, until her tree house was ready.

Irina had not completely lost her fixation on Janos, but had married Johan, who, as an ecologist for Unesco, had become governor of the Bran Valley. They single-handedly built a wooden house where the scout camp had been. They later had two elfin children, a boy and a girl.

They were often visited by Olga and her sister, a quiet, good-humoured woman who weaved the most beautiful things.

Although they lived in Bratislava, where Olga had been a member of the government for some time as Minister of Defence, they spent much of their time in their summer house in the valley, a converted part of an ancient farmhouse which was still functioning as farm. Olga had some happy years with professor Matt, until he suddenly died of a heart attack.

Maria and Paul were married and travelled the world with their young children in their camper van. Maria had become coordinator of the international World Conference on Biodiversity. Paul had built Diana a tree house in her beech tree, with the help of numerous handy scouts. She lived there alone since the age of nine, living off the food she gathered from the forest and dressed in beautiful robes woven by Olga's sister. If she was dressed at all. She hardly ever spoke and only dealt with Irina and Johan when necessary.

Once in a while they had a cosy gathering at Johan and Irina's house, with Olga and sister, Janos, who had retired as an internist but shared a thriving practice with Dinja in Zilina, and occasionally Dr. Wenceslaz. Most of the time, Herman and Yvette, who lived together in Paris and had a summer house in Branočs, were there, too. Yvette had given birth to their child, a boy agile as quicksilver. Herman was still working for the international engineering firm. The two of them travelled a lot.

Wendy trained as a dancer and singer at the Kleinkunstacademie in Amsterdam. At sixteen, she started performing in small theatres and was sometimes on television with her own combo.

She enjoyed her profession and enjoyed her countless admirers.

After grammar school, Lucy graduated cum laude on the University of Amsterdam as a mathematician and physicist and lived with her professor. Besides their work at the university, both were fanatical speleologists and could often be found in the caves in and around the Bran Valley.

The twins had innerspeech contact occasionally, with Diana as the third and sometimes with Michael and Dia, more than among themselves. Their lives had become very different.

Their mother Marjorie had housed the twins in the villa in Hilversum during their studies until they went their separate ways; she was still preoccupied with her workshops.

Doctor Wenceslas kept working as a doctor at the spa in Zilina, was married and had a summer house in the valley, where he could often be found with their children.

The guesthouse was now run by a young couple from Jablun, relatives of the owner. In the meantime, more guesthouses had been sprung up and camping at the farm had become more popular. The old café was now a restaurant with a star.

Increased tourist traffic had prevented the railway line from being discontinued. The old, heavy diesels had been replaced by light French trains running on natural gas from Russia. The old road bridge that had been swept away had never been rebuilt, nor had the collapsed tunnel been reopened. Mountain bike trails had been built instead. A suspension bridge over the river connected the cycle route with the old road to Zilina. There were car parks for people who wanted to come by car and some camper places on the old loggers' squares.

The restored sawmill was run by volunteer millers.

In the winter half-year, there was enough water for a few hours of operation per day. When no wood was being sawn, a small hydro turbine provided the village with electricity.

The small railway yard had been refurbished and was in heavy use, as all traffic, people and goods, went by train. Nowadays, the groceries were brought by a goods train, which called at the village four times a week: twice in the direction of Jablun and twice in the direction of Zilina and also transported the products of the valley and sawn wood.

The Dryad of the Forest had become something of a legend. Diana appeared only to visiting classes of small children, to whom she sang in a language that no one knew and which evoked images. The children made the most beautiful drawings afterwards.

Michael and Dia, who were visiting Diana more often than anyone knew (except perhaps Irina), showed up occasionally. Reports from indigenous peoples all over the world indicated that the two had been spotted in forests and nature reserves. Occasionally, photos taken by visitors with their mobile phones circu-

lated on the Internet, but they quickly disappeared again.

The professor with his transport airships had had to give up the fight against commerce. His invention had been too early. After his death, his assistant was appointed professor.

Yasmine had started a small business in South America operating some of her airships in remote areas, mainly to pick up and drop off children at school, subsidised by Yvette's foundation. Georg did the same with the airship of the first hour somewhere in Manchuria.

When the cirque was empty and all trees were draining in the mill pond, the recovery could begin. It was a select group that worked there from time to time, mostly people who learned the trade from Janos and the garden goblin and came there to take their aptitude test. Michael appeared to be the right person to teach them how to appoint a governing nature being. In this way, the spring nymphs Lillylo and Ellilie became the examiners of people in training, a role they performed shyly but steadfastly. Lillylo was slowly gaining ground, where her water displaced the old groundwater. Only when that process was complete could she assume governing of the Bran in its entirety from the original point where her stream flowed into it. The nixe of the upper stream was back in action, fascinated by the restored dam and the new sluice in the mill canal. Especially when the new water wheel turned, he was exuberant.

The many special woods that came out of the sawmill attracted sculptors and woodcarvers. Not all logs were suitable for producing building timber in the mill. Heavy twisting branches and roots were particularly popular with the woodcarvers, who made elves and gnomes from them.

Other products from the forest, such as beech nuts, wild garlic and other herbs also found their way to the cooperative shop built in a new earth house near the little station.

The local farmers had set up a cooperative where their milk was processed into all kinds of dairy products, which were very popular with tourists and the growing number of permanent and temporary residents in the village. The cultivation of organic vegetables and potatoes had slowly grown along with the outlets. The only thing they lacked was grain, so bread was still brought from Jablun by the first train.

Water from Lillylo's stream was sold in hand-filled glass bottles. She had agreed to have a small wooden jetty built on her bank for that purpose. She found it exciting that undines with their healing power were being distributed among the people.

When it was certain that the railway line would remain in operation and that new trains would run, a Slovakian collective of architects and timber constructors succeeded in obtaining permission to build a roof over the platform, turning it into a real station.

The planted trees on the site of the old factory did not grow well at first. The wounding of the earth was far from healed. It had therefore become a testing ground for healers and artists who were engaged in healing the earth. It stretched along the old banks of the river into the bowl valley. No gnome wanted to go there, but a new kind of nature creatures had arisen that had more in common with man's inventions. Very small creatures, only visible to Diana, Michael and Dia, had emerged from the burnt foundations of the factory. Or rather, Michael had brought them into existence with his urgent wish to heal the earth. These chemistry beings were able to change all kinds of chemical compounds. Actually in the same way as the "classical" gnomes interwove earth energy with the matter of trees, bushes and plants.

Johan, who lived with Irina and their children next to the stream, had found an explanation for the many streams in the Karst landscape. Usually surface water goes underground into the many caves and hollows in the limestone, as Michael had once found. In this valley, a glacier had flowed during the last Ice Age, leaving an impenetrable layer of boulder clay on the limestone surface.

The nomadic camp on the other side of the railway had acquired a semi-permanent character due to the never-ending stream of researchers, healers, artists and scientists. Other nature lovers built tiny houses, yurts and other structures of their own, which they rented out to the researchers, who usually only stayed in the valley for a few months. An informal organisation had come into being that managed the comings and goings of visitors, coordinated accommodation and food and took care of the waste, for which a goods wagon was used. The contractor Bertold had designed and built small water purification plants everywhere; there had never been a sewer.

The Valley of Bran had thus become an Island of Consciousness, an Oasis of Humanity.

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