

Sample Translation



Mirror Child
by
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Chapter 1: The Disappearance

[Juli realizes that her mother has been kidnapped.]

“You better not look,” my father said, blocking my path.

“Why not?” I asked and ducked to pass under his left arm with which he was leaning against the doorframe. I almost succeeded but then he grabbed me by the hood of my jacket.

“Not now.”

“But why not?” I shook my head to loosen his grip. Usually he wouldn’t even touch me.

Letting go of my hood, my father put both hands on my shoulders. They felt heavy. My dad was tall and skinny, not a hunk but rather the weeping willow type. Now he bent down to look me in the eye. I stared back. He looked away.

“What’s all this about?” I shook off his hands. “What’re you doing here anyway?”

“Juli,” he said, and this time he didn’t look at me. “There is something I have to tell you.”

Since he was acting so strange, I had figured that much. Also he was not supposed to be home that day. It was my mother’s turn that week. My father did not want to show up when it was her turn and vice versa. That was an agreement their lawyers had worked out and my parents had signed at the court. It was suspended only in an emergency.

My heart was beating against my ribs as if I had swallowed Zero, our canary. I pulled myself together to conceal the fear that was rising in my chest.

“Juli, my little girl,” my father said with unfamiliar tenderness. “There’s something I have to tell you. Something bad has happened.”

I tore myself away from him and shot past him into our house.

I ran through the hallway which was dark because all the doors were closed. I could hardly see anything. Outside it had been sunny. Blinded, I stumbled over

the shoes my brother, Jaro, and my sister, Kassie, had taken off and dropped right in the middle of the hallway. During the weeks we had with Mom things were just lying around all over the place. During the weeks with my dad all the shoes were put away in the shoe closet, all the cups were in the kitchen cabinet, their handles facing in the same direction, and all the newspapers were neatly filed away by date in the magazine holder.

I swung the living room door open.

Even Mom and us three kids together couldn't have created that kind of mess. The newspapers were scattered all over the floor. All the flower pots had been pushed over; there was dirt in between them; the stems of the plants were broken and single petals were strewn all over the place, which gave the room an inappropriate festive air. Somebody had yanked the books from the shelves and the drawers from their hinges. The door of Zero's cage was open. The cage was empty apart from a single yellow feather that got caught in the wire mesh and was fluttering in the breeze.

I pressed my back against the doorframe, slowly slid down to the ground and bit my hand in excitement. Burglars. Somebody had broken into our home.

My father came in and squatted down beside me.

"You weren't supposed to see this terrible mess," he said.

I looked at him and he flinched.

No idea when exactly it had started but something had changed between us. As a little kid I had adored my dad. Later I had just loved him and eventually I had found myself pitying him. When my mother had decided to leave him, he had been pretty devastated.

After their separation he would sometimes break out in tears totally unexpectedly at the breakfast table which embarrassed my brother and sister and me so much that we stared at our whole wheat croissants. He even told our neighbors in the street how unhappy he and all of us were and how mean it had been of our mother to decide on a whim to leave our intact family. By doing

that, he conducted himself in a manner he would have called scandalous if it had been anybody else.

That part about “on a whim” was totally incorrect, too – for years our home had smelled of an oncoming storm, the air had been charged with it and the thunder had already been rolling in the distance. And though Mom had left Dad, she hadn’t left our family. After all, Jaro, Kassie and I were still there, too, and my mother did not intend to stop caring for us after her separation from our father. Still I was mad at her in the beginning because my father had to suffer so much because of her. But eventually I no longer felt like constantly having to comfort him. He had come into my room once too often when I had been fast asleep, just to wake me up and tell me how lonely he was and that I had to take better care of him, being his oldest daughter. Which didn’t make any sense because until then he had been preaching that I should enjoy the final years of my childhood before the serious business of life would start. Unlike him, I did not have to worry about a thing apart from school and sticking to a few rules. When he had been my age, he had not had it this easy and I should consider myself lucky. He probably was even right: Except for my parents’ separation there was nothing stressful for a long time. I took the school bus to school and came home the same way. The household seemed to take care of itself. I never had to babysit my younger brother or sister – my parents or grandparents took care of them. I never went shopping for food and had never cooked a meal in my life. The only thing I had to clean up once in a while was my own room.

Sometimes life was almost boring.

When my father started to demand that I care more for him, I initially tried to do right by him. I took care of him as well as I could. I let him pat me on the head; I let him call me his most precious treasure in a tearful voice, and even at one thirty at night I handed him the perfumed tissues his company manufactured and of which we therefore had a large supply in all scents. And I slowly stopped believing him.

Because I knew only too well that he could be quite different as well. My dad worked in the management section of the HYDRAGON Corporation which produced hygiene articles, and as a little child I had been immensely impressed whenever I got to visit him at the office. That was where I noticed for the first time how much my father could alter his voice depending on who he was talking to at the moment. Dominant or distant to his secretary. As warm and friendly to some of his colleagues as if they were part of our family. And once I noticed something pretty incredible: In a conversation with a wrinkled dwarf, by twisting his body and crossing his legs in a rather interesting way, my father actually managed to make himself a whole head shorter. The other man was the owner of the company.

Eventually I began to keep my distance when Dad's week started and he moved into our home with a suitcase and discussed important matters in the kitchen with Mom before she left with her bag. They called it "delivery" as if we were packages with labels that read "Fragile".

"Your mother has disappeared," my father said, and that was also what the police officers said who were taking pictures with flashes. A police car was parking in front of our house and a man was sitting in our kitchen. I was told to stay seated and let the officers do their jobs, and so I sat there and one of the policemen told me something about his nephew, a tennis ace who was almost my age, namely thirteen.

"I'm not thirteen – I'm *fifteen*," I said angrily. "And my mother hasn't just disappeared. Something terrible has happened here; even a blind person can see that." Even under happier circumstances I would not have remarked on the tennis successes of the police officer's nephew. I hated tennis. Unfortunately there wasn't any other sport I was good at, either. Yet the policeman kept pretending not to hear me. He had probably taken a professional course on the

subject of how to mash the brains of youngsters with small talk after a crime so that they would not disturb the investigations.

I, however, wanted to assist them. I wanted them to get to work at once and find my mother. After all, people didn't just disappear, not from their own homes during daytime. Not in our times – the times of total Normality.

So I kept getting up and running over to the police officers who were walking through our house, lifting carpets and looking behind mirrors as if my mother was hiding behind one of them.

“This morning everything was still okay here, Mom made breakfast for us, she was in a good mood and planned to paint all day.” Every small detail could be important; my brains were rattling, searching for details that might help clear up the whole matter.

They weren't even listening to me. Not at all. They gathered in the living room, exchanged glances, and what did they do then? I couldn't believe it. They started to straighten out the room. They picked up the books and put them back on the shelf. My father winced because he preferred the books in alphabetical order but the police officers couldn't know that.

One of them came in with a brush. It was funny to see this tall man stooping to sweep the plant dirt from our floor tiles. Another one picked the newspapers off the ground and stacked them on the windowsill. A third officer stared at Zero's cage as if he couldn't believe that the cage really was empty. Then he closed the cage door with a meaningful look on his face.

I raced into the living room and yanked the door open. “It has to stay open in case Zero comes back,” I said. Zero was often flying around outside; my mother would always open the window for him and he had found his way back home every time.

My dad looked at me and shook his head. “Didn't I tell you to stay in your room?”

“I thought you said I should stay in the kitchen.” What did it matter where I was when my mother had disappeared and someone had ravaged our home.

“*And* I thought that you shouldn’t mess up the trace evidence after a crime?”

Though I said it softly they heard me. All of a sudden the air inside the room felt colder. They all stopped sweeping and sorting newspapers by date and stared at me.

“Who said something about a crime, honey?” one of the policemen asked; he was a chubby guy with a pink bald head and three stars on his sleeve.

I tried to remember what I had learned in law class at grammar school. The mysteries my father was sometimes watching on the entertainment channel at night were more useful now, however. Since I had been fourteen he let me stay and watch them.

“When somebody is abducted by force, that’s a crime,” I said, unsure of myself.

“Who’s talking about an abduction, honey?”

I looked from one police officer to the next one. Their faces glistened. No one had ever called me that before.

“I do,” I said. “I’m talking about it. Somebody has abducted my mother and ransacked the room. Anyone can see that.”

The police officers looked at each other and started to laugh. It sounded good-natured enough but something about their laughter scared me.

The plump guy with the bald head approached me. Now he was standing right in front of me which turned out not to be a smart strategy. He was rather short and I was taller than most of the other kids in my class. Therefore a major portion of his superiority was lost when he patted my shoulder and said very, very good-naturedly, “There is nothing whatsoever that would indicate that your mommy has become the victim of a crime, honey.”

“But obviously she’s disappeared. Without a trace. Or has she not?” I tried to sound calm and level-headed which was not an easy feat.

Beaming, the man patted me some more. My shoulder started to itch. I was afraid that his fingers might slide down and touch the scar next to my left shoulder blade. Then I would have hit him in a reflex reaction – it was my most sensitive spot.

But that couldn't happen under any circumstances. I had taken too many liberties as it was. After all I needed those police officers with their indifferent eyes to stop making fun of me and start looking for my mother. So I had to check myself and be at least polite.

At school we had a minor subject called conflict evasion. Though it was not a mandatory subject, my dad had made me sign up for it. What we mainly had to do in class was to form simple contexts into long and winding sentences – until our arguing partner had forgotten what it was all about. My father argued that in times of Normality it was one of the most important skills you could have. Even though I wasn't looking for a fight anyway, neither at school nor at home. Conflict evasion had probably been my father's favourite subject at school because he never handled the arguments he and my mother were having very proficiently. She, on the other hand, could become rather loud. Sometimes dishes were smashed on the walls while my dad put his head into his hands and reminded my mom in a shrill voice of the fact that the walls in our street were really thin. As if she could think straight at those times.

“So your mother isn't there – so what?” the policeman said now. “You know, young lady, sometimes women just don't feel like staying around any more and simply leave. When you're grown up, you'll see what I mean.” He laughed.

“And who made this mess then?” I retorted.

“What mess?” The man in the uniform looked around. I followed his glance and got the feeling of having been tricked badly. By now the room looked almost normal again; the only thing that was missing was Zero's chirping.

“But I saw it with my own eyes,” I said. “Everything in the room was turned upside down.”

The policeman dismissed my words with a wave of his hand. “Oh, *that* mess. That was nothing more than a burglar, a poor Freak who climbed through an open window, searching for cash and electronic goods. He probably got mad because he couldn’t find as much as he had been hoping for and so he left a few signs of his anger. We see it all the time. The drug addicts among the freaks are getting to be a big problem.” Sighing, the policeman picked up a torn book cover from the floor that his colleague had overlooked.

I didn’t say anything. What could I say anyway?

A burglar who breaks into a home in our area at a time of day when all the women are cooking lunch and are watching out for any unfamiliar car plate in the street? If at all, it must’ve been a very stupid burglar indeed. Or one who was totally stoned.

“Now the lock will be changed, just to be on the safe side, and then everything will be normal again,” the policeman said and smiled, his gold teeth glittering so brightly that I closed my eyes.

“And what about my mother?” I asked.

“Oh well, mothers come and go.” He laughed so hard that even my dad apparently couldn’t take it any more.

“Go up to your room and do your homework,” he said so briskly as if it was all my fault. I complied because I did not want any of them to see my tears.

Chapter 2: A Phairy

[Juli comes to know that her mom is a Phairy.]

I wanted to believe more than anything in the world that my mother had left the house on her own free will and would return soon. But as much as I tried to believe in that theory, it seemed simply absurd. I hadn't even had a key on me and my mother had known that. She hardly ever left the house. In the morning she had intended to paint all day until we would come home from school. First Kassie and Jaro because I usually had classes in the afternoon that weekday but they had been cancelled this time. My mom was reliable even though my father liked to make her look like someone who didn't remember in the evening what she had said in the morning.

"Stop talking about her that way!" I yelled at my father when he told my little brother and sister the night after mom's disappearance that our mother had most likely gone on a spontaneous trip. After all she tended to have off-the-wall ideas, he said, maybe she had met someone, you never knew what was going on in that head of hers.

Anger was pulsing through my own head.

My father and my brother and sister were sitting at the kitchen table. Jaro made big eyes and was as tense as a spring; Kassie leaned back with one eye shut tightly. My dad tried to tell them what had happened. His version anyway. Well, he tried to. I interrupted him because I couldn't stand to listen to him any more. "This is bullshit. Mom would never have just dropped everything and left! She was always looking forward to her week with us, and when it was your turn, she missed us! Only she didn't whine and complain about it like you always do!" My father abruptly stopped talking and looked at me with a mix of anger and wonder. My brother and sister were too intimidated to say anything, and the way I was suddenly talking to him surprised even me. I had never used this tone

of voice on him. After all I was an elite grammar school student; I was well-bred.

As soon as Jaro and Kassie had come home, they had immediately attached themselves to our father. Despite his half-hearted affirmations that he had everything under control, they did not miss the fact that obviously something terrible had happened. Unlike me, they still believed every word he said but it didn't seem to comfort them.

Actually I had intended to keep my mouth shut. I didn't want to let on that I suspected that obviously something bad had happened to our mother; I didn't want to cry or get upset which would scare my little brother and sister even more. I didn't want them to feel as abandoned and miserable as I did. Still I could not listen to these stupid lies Dad was telling about our mother.

"If you ever say something like that again, I'll stop talking to you altogether," I hissed before he picked up Kassie. He liked to carry her around. And whenever our father was around, she acted like a baby, although she was a slick little kid at any other time.

Somehow I managed to get through the day, to eat a few sandwiches for dinner, brush my teeth and go to bed. I crawled under the blanket and rolled up into a ball after having locked the door to my room from the inside, turning the key several times. It was the first time that I had ever locked my room.

I could hear Jaro cry outside in the hallway. He knocked on my door but I had covered my head with the pillow and tried to go to sleep. So I stayed put while Jaro kept knocking on my door. I couldn't take care of him; I felt bad enough myself.

Yet I stayed awake all night, thinking.

Finally I gave up the idea of sleeping. Again and again I went over the things that had happened today from the very first moment I had realized that something was terribly wrong.

It had probably been the moment I had seen my father standing in the door at noon. I had not been happy to see him because it wasn't his week. Actually I had braced myself for an argument between my parents because at first I had assumed that my dad wasn't sticking to their agreement again. Once in a while he would show up during Mom's time, "just to say hello", hang around in the kitchen, try to talk to us, making us all nervous. We were always glad when he finally left. After all there was the agreement and usually my father was a great fan of agreements, especially written ones.

The longer I stayed awake and pondered the matter, the less I wanted to believe that something bad had happened to my mother. I just didn't want to. I convinced myself that everything was just a misunderstanding; call it a little incident. Let it be some idiot or a burglar who ... who did what with Mom? Dragged her out of the house just like that?

Somehow things would be cleared up, my mom would come home, my dad would leave again and start his week a day later than originally planned to even out his extra time with us.

That was part of the agreement, too: Each parent was entitled to make up for missed time if he or she had a serious reason. My father, for instance, had been sick quite a lot lately, and then our mother took care of us during his time. Later he would come for two weeks at a time to make up for the days he had missed. I was lying under the covers, trying to figure out what had happened without having any idea that yesterday, that very second I had come home and found Dad in Mom's place my world had started to turn upside down. It was nothing but a vague hunch that until now my life had perhaps not been my real life after all. The idea scared me. I pulled the blanket over my head, a curtain over these thoughts that bothered me.

I didn't even want anything to change. I was ready to wait until the morning, and by then everything should be normal again, thank you very much. I didn't want another life. Mine was just fine, not exciting but mine.

I probably started to change as early as that night. But I did not notice it because I wanted to change myself even less. I had always been Juliane Rettemi, honour student in tenth Grade at grammar school, the second tallest girl of our class who nevertheless looked younger because of her round face and whose record of invitations to birthdays was just below average.

I had a totally normal haircut (medium brown, shoulder-length, a bit layered), had received the same shots as all the other students my age; my teeth were free from any cavities and my school bag came from a popular manufacturer of leather goods. I could only stand out from the crowd of my female co-students by my size when we stood in one row in front of the large mirror during physical education.

Two symmetrical scars on my shoulder blades, each one a bit over an inch long, were the only thing that made me different from my peers. As a small child I had fallen and hurt myself there. I had no memory of that. Sometimes the scars would itch. For the swimming lessons I always wore a bathing suit with extra thick shoulder straps so that nobody could see a thing. Scars were something for Freaks, they thought stuff like that was cool. My father had told me once that Freaks liked to mutilate themselves with knives and branding irons in order to stand out even more. No wonder they were always on the lookout for new drugs to cope with all that. I didn't like it when my father was talking about this cult; it made me sick.

Since my parents had finally decided not to live under the same roof any longer but rather that each of them would move into our house for one week at a time, my life had become somewhat more relaxed. In the weeks my mother was there things were pretty much the same but the arguments and the tense silence were gone. During my father's weeks I had been torn apart by pity at first but that was still easier to take than the atmosphere that had been lingering at home in all those years when my parents had tried to stay together for our sake.

My brother, Jaro, and my sister, Kassie, also felt better after our parents had separated; at least that was what I assumed. They were twins, seven years old and in first Grade since that summer. They went to elementary school. Like all secondary schools, my grammar school started in fifth Grade.

Unlike me, the twins could still wear their regular clothes to school. I, on the other hand, had two school uniforms in my closet, a black one for normal schooldays and a formal one that consisted of a skirt with red and dark blue checkers and a blazer. Plus several white blouses. The skirts came down to my knees and in the black uniform I looked like a crow. There was hardly a girl these clothes looked good on but at every other morning call our principal said that we should wear our uniforms proudly – after all you could tell by just looking at them which elite school we were attending and that we held the future of Normality in our hands.

Right now the future did not interest me beyond the question when I would see my mother again.

Shortly before my alarm clock rang I had fallen into an uneasy slumber. The metallic clattering sound of the clock woke me up with a start at dawn; my temples were pounding and my thoughts as sticky as dried-up chewing gum. Though I was tired, I jumped out of bed at once. The night was over and that gave me new hope. I desperately wanted to believe that the worst was over after yesterday and the sleepless night. It could only get better.

I bent over the railing and saw from the top of the stairs that a light was on in the kitchen downstairs and that someone was moving around rattling dishes and silverware. I almost fell down the stairs and actually managed to slip on the safety mats that each step was covered with, hurried through the archway into the kitchen and found my father there, dressed in his morning gown.

Yawning, he was slicing bread; his face was wrinkled and grey. It was too early for him as well; in the mornings he was always in a bad mood.

“Have you heard any news?” I asked.

He looked up. “Can’t you at least say good morning?”

“Good morning,” I said. “Have you heard anything?”

“From whom?”

He looked at me as if he had no idea what I was talking about. He was a bad actor and I was fuming inside.

“FROM. MY. MOTHER. WHO. HAS. BEEN. ABDUCTED.”

“I thought we agreed that she *hasn’t* been abducted,” Dad said and took a sip of coffee.

“We did *not* agree on that,” I stated. “Maybe you can tell the twins that but not me. It’s not likely that she’s sitting in a beach chair somewhere right now!”

“Don’t yell at me, Juli,” my father said. “It’s still very early and I’ve got a headache.”

“I’m going to the police today and ask them again,” I said.

He looked up. “Why?”

“Because yesterday I had the feeling that they didn’t really care about the case. I had the feeling they think we’re stupid.”

“That’s nonsense,” Dad said. “Nobody thinks you’re stupid. The police only did their job. There’s no reason whatsoever to panic. After all they’re the experts. They’ll know better than you do what to do in a case like this.”

“But they don’t! Instead they even destroyed the evidence.”

“How do you come up with such funny phrases?”

I shrugged.

My father put down his cup. “You read too much,” he said. “And the wrong stuff.”

He had always thought that I was reading too many cheap novels. He himself consumed completely different things. He called my favourite novels and movies Freak stuff. That meant a waste of time and a dangerous one at that. He was convinced that my books presented a deceiving reality that was distracting

me from normal life. He himself read a lot of newspapers and non-fiction books that had to do with his work, philosophical treatments on the principle of Normality, and he devoured mysteries. He also enjoyed novels about disasters. It baffled me why he kept calling the imaginative covers of my books repulsive while the bloody and grossly realistic book covers on his nightstand made me gag.

Most novels we had at home belonged to my mother. Almost all of them were very old books, provocatively outdated in size and cover design. Once in a while I would leaf through one of them but I didn't understand much of what was written on the pages. The print was hard to decipher and gave me a headache after a few seconds of reading. And not only me. After my mother had moved out and Dad's first week had started, my paternal grandmother came over to do some serious cleaning. The first thing she did was to take dozens of books from the living room down into the basement, stuff them into boxes, have the bookshelves picked up by the clearance service and cover up the newly empty spaces with wall rugs and gigantic mirrors.

That was the reason for my first little dispute with her. After all there happened to be a few of my own novels among those books and I didn't feel like having to sift through the boxes in the cold, dark basement every time I wanted to read one. Though I would never have admitted that sometimes I was still too scared to go down into the basement by myself and therefore preferred to let young Kassie go down first. She only demonstrated fear whenever father was around. That way he could rescue her immediately which made him happy while my little sister would gloat. Because apart from those times there was nothing that could scare her.

"I'll ask around at school if it's normal for the police to act like that," I mumbled and reached for the jam to fix me a sandwich. "Maybe somebody there knows something about it."

“Juli!” My father, who was in the process of opening the thermos, peering inside to see if it still contained any coffee, nearly dropped the lid. “You can’t tell anyone what happened here, you understand?”

“Dad!” Kassie’s holler did not come from the nursery upstairs but from the ground floor. From my father’s bedroom. She had been sleeping in his bed again. For some reason that bothered me. Maybe I was jealous. That’s what my dad accused me of when I told him he shouldn’t spoil Kassie so much, that she was too big for that. And then he would say that I was just jealous because I was much too old to sit in his lap. Even though he actually liked to point out that I was too young for most things in life – as if the fact that my butt no longer fit in his lap was the only thing characteristic of my age.

I took a deep breath. “I’ll tell anybody anything I want,” I said slowly and clearly though actually I had intended to keep my mouth shut in the sense of conflict evasion. “And *you* can’t tell me not to.”

Dad’s bottom right eyelid started to twitch.

“Not one word to anyone, Juli! I don’t want your whole school pointing their fingers at you!”

“Their fingers? At me? Since when do you have to be ashamed of a misfortune that has happened to you?”

“You just don’t understand, do you?” my father sighed.

“Then explain it to me!”

That moment the bedroom door creaked and Kassie’s quick little feet flew over the marble tiles. Apparently Dad had not heard her footsteps, since he bent down to me and said in a voice that made me jump:

“Now get a grip on yourself, will you, Juliane? That’s not my girl. You know too damn well that your mother...” He paused for a moment and bit himself on his lower lip, “that she’s one ... one of these...”

“What?” All of a sudden that sense of fear was back, stronger and worse than last night. “What is she? Is she sick?”

“Worse, Juli. Much worse. Don’t pretend to be so stupid. She’s...”

“What is she?” I almost yelled.

My father closed his eyes. It was not until then that he finally managed to utter:

“Your mother, Juli, is a Phairy.”

The room I enter with shaking knees is small and humid. A cooking pot simmers on an ancient stove. Flames shine through the gaps in the oven door. I have to stay calm. I mustn't scare the little child that is sitting on a bench, rubbing its eyes.

Chapter 12: Her Big Brother

[Juli searches for her mom. As she doesn't know anything about Phairies, she depends on the help of her new friends Ksü and Ivan.]

Ksü's brother, Ivan, was a student and looked like he was in his early to mid-twenties, maybe a bit younger. It was hard to tell because of his moon-blond hair that was almost ash-grey. He didn't look like Ksü at all. He was beautiful. I felt shy when he sat down at our table. I had never talked to a man his age and felt as if my tongue was glued to my gums. It was as if we were apart not just by a few years but by a whole generation. I almost called him "Mister" – but something told me that the two of them would have found that pretty silly. "I interrupted you," Ivan said. I was grateful that his laughing eyes only looked at me once in a while and that apart from that he turned to his sister who was prancing around him as if he had just returned from a trip around the world. "Won't you try a slice of my wonderful fresh tasty one-in-a-million blueberry pie?"

Ivan would. I forced myself to look away. Staring at him while he was eating was all I needed.

Ksü took a piece of cake, too. "I've been asking myself the whole time why it is that normal people hate Phairies so much," she said to her brother with a mouth full of pie. "Even Juli is just sitting there without knowing what to make of it. I haven't met anyone in a long time whose mind is so clogged up. She's

practically a Phairy herself but she'd rather question the existence of Phairies as such, therefore questioning her own existence as well."

"Don't say that crap!" I interrupted her enraged. "I'm normal. And that's a good thing, too."

Ivan smiled. "Why are you so afraid of the chance that you might be a Phairy yourself?" he wanted to know.

"Because ... well, because..." How to start?

"Maybe because Phairies currently have a little image problem," Ksü came to my rescue. "To be exact: a huge one."

"Not funny," I interrupted her.

"It's their immortality," Ivan said calmly, addressing me.

"What?"

"Phairies are hated for their immortality. The whole life of any normal person centers around their fear of death. That's why there must be rules for everything. They take a million measures but everything only has one purpose."

"To live longer?"

"No." Ivan picked a crumb off the table cloth with his index finger and put it into his mouth. "To forget their fear of death for the moment."

I got goose bumps. For the first time these days I wasn't thinking about my mother but about my father. Dad had always been proud of being normal and had kept pointing out to us kids what you normally should or shouldn't do. Actually I had thought that there was no choice – either you were normal or you were lost. I didn't know anybody in person who wasn't normal. Such existences lived outside my world that I had considered to be rather cozy until now.

And whether I liked it or not, I had to admit that Ivan's words held some truth.

"Oh yes, so that you won't get the wrong impression." Ivan paused while I looked at him expectantly. "The history of normal people and Phairies also includes some rather dark chapters. Both sides probably hold ... err ... a lot against each other. That has always affected their relationship, especially since

the events of the past have become legends by now that don't have much in common with the historical truth."

"Eh ... what exactly are you talking about?" I started but Ksü pushed me with her elbow and asked her brother sanctimoniously, "Say – do you still remember the name of the artist who painted that girl on the window sill?"

Ivan looked at Ksü. I had never seen such an expression before – at first glance it looked calm but I got the feeling that it concealed something which was terribly sad yet rather solemn. And a bit reproachful as well as if Ksü's question had been very, very stupid.

"If I were you, I'd start to remember that name, Ksü. Her name's Laura. And she's probably the best painter of our times." Ivan paused. "And she played a tragic part in your life, Ksü. I know you have no memory of that. But I already told you about it more than once. If your memory is still not functioning well, I'll return it and get my money back."

That last sentence was probably supposed to be a joke but obviously it wasn't a good one. Ksü completely ignored it. She just looked at me inquiringly and I nodded: Yes, my mother's name is Laura. Laura Rettemi – she had taken my father's name when they got married. I had never known her maiden name.

"I don't know which one of us is less well informed, Ivan." Ksü flashed him a sweet smile. Ivan looked at her questioningly but Ksü hesitated; she looked hard at me until I finally got it: She wanted to leave it up to me to tell him.

I tried to make my voice sound casual while I looked into Ivan's eyes that grew big when I said, "That painter you're talking about happens to be my mother."

Immediately I wished I had kept my mouth shut. Until now I had just been his little sister's new friend to Ivan. That had been an uncomplicated matter compared to now. Though he tried to act the same way towards me as he had before, it was obviously not an easy feat. He started to look a lot more often at

me. He kept shaking his head as if he couldn't believe it. He mumbled something.

"Excuse me," he said three times. "I'm just rather surprised. Laura is ... something very special. For the whole world in general and for Ksü and myself in particular."

I didn't say anything. Lately I had been pretty surprised more than once.

"You see?" Ksü said triumphantly to me. "I told you we don't put up just any cheap crap in our kitchen."

"I don't like these standard phrases," Ivan stated.

"My mother doesn't hold a licence," I said. "She's an unauthorized painter."

"Course she's unauthorized." Ivan's laughter sounded sad. "It would be funny if she wasn't. When I say she's the best painter of our times, I mean it. Have you ever noticed that everybody sees something else in the Quadrum?"

"No," I said. I had never talked to anyone about the Quadrums before. I thought about how the rest of my family usually reacted to them.

"Do you know why many people can't bear to look at them?" Ivan asked.

"Because the Quadrums aren't pictures. They're mirrors."

I frowned. "But then everybody would see themselves in them."

"Don't you?"

I looked at the girl on the window sill. "Well, there's one thing I know for sure: That's not me."

"Either you're too close or you'll have to grow a bit more," Ivan stated.

Disappointed, I looked away. He should leave comments like that to my dad.

And regarding my size, I also really did not intend to grow any more.

"But how did you even get it? My mother never sold her Quadrums. They must all be stored in our attic."

Ivan shrugged. "There are many ways."

"Such as?" I stared at him.

"I don't want to insult you but do you really have no idea?"

Silently I shook my head.

Ivan combed his moon-blonde hair. “There’s such a thing as a black market. There are people who are committed fans of the Phairies’ arts. Some of them will even risk their lives to save the Quadrums from being destroyed. There are friends the painter has given Quadrums as gifts. And studios are broken into.”

“That’s right.” I especially paid attention to that last sentence. We actually had had a burglary in the past – after a vacation we had spent at our cottage in a holiday resort as we always did. At the time my parents had not made a big fuss over the break-in even though every room, even my mom’s studio, had been ravaged. My father had complained a bit about the chaos and the impertinence and had some insurance person come over. My mother’s Quadrums hadn’t been an issue at all. I never would have thought that they might be of importance.

“Each Quadrum costs a fortune,” Ivan said. “There are only a few around. The story of Laura’s Quadrums are, well ... rather bloody.”

“I’ve got one in my room,” I said. “My brother and sister have one, too. Right now the Quadrums are our only memory of...” I stopped myself from saying it before I would break out in tears in front of Ivan.

“Her mother has disappeared. Without a trace,” Ksü explained to Ivan who looked helpless. “Her parents are divorced but her mother has had shared custody for over two months. A few days ago she just disappeared.”

For a moment Ivan’s face froze; then his features relaxed again and he whistled admiringly through his teeth. “Really?” he said. “I never would’ve thought it possible for a Phairy to get custody of her children.”

“Yes, I heard that, too,” I said bitterly.

“But when it comes to Laura ... things are probably different.”

“Why’s that?” I stared at him. What did Ivan know about my mom?

“You have no idea how valuable her Quadrums are, do you? What kind of money we’re talking about?”

“You guys must be rolling in dough,” Ksü summarized it less diplomatically.

I nodded automatically. Yes, we probably were rich, even by the standards of our block. We had always been told that my father's family was very wealthy and that his hard work on the management level was paid extremely well. My mother had had nothing when they got married. That hadn't changed later because soon after their wedding she had to take care of me and later of the twins. Painting was merely a hobby and an expensive one at that: the heating of her studio, the paints, the canvases. Sometimes my father had added up the expenses.

"Do you think Dad has any idea how valuable the Quadrums in our attic are?" I wondered aloud.

Ivan shrugged. "That would serve as an explanation why he agreed to shared custody. Greed is the only thing that can be stronger than the fear of death."

"What do I care about all that money and those Quadrums if my mom's disappeared? Do you get what I'm saying? She's gone!"

"I do get it," Ivan said.

"And if you know so much about everything, then you might also have an idea what could have happened to her?"

I glared at him, knowing that it was impolite – even provocative or worse: a downright request – but I didn't care.

Ivan looked away before I did.

"I wish I could help you somehow," he said. "But unfortunately I have no idea how."

We talked long enough to forget the time. It no longer startled me when Ksü passed cake crumbs under the table. I also didn't look to see whom she was feeding them to; instead I just pulled up my feet and put them on my seat. I tried hard to conceal my disgust; I didn't want Ivan to consider me even ruder than he probably already did because of his pets.

I felt tired and empty yet exhilarated. My head was spinning and I was glad that we were not talking about my mother any more. Instead we were talking about totally different things: How Ksü liked it at our grammar school, how happy she was to have met me. I would have loved to ask her which school she had attended before. Ksü only offered the information that she had been ill for a long time. And that she still didn't know whether she really wanted to stay at grammar school. I told her that it had been hard for me to adjust, too. However, the question of leaving grammar school had never come up for me – after all it *was* the top school, my father was paying for it, period.

Suddenly two things struck me. The first thing was that their parents still hadn't come home yet. The second one was that it was already dark outside. Ksü had turned on the red ceiling lamp over the kitchen table. We were sitting in the warm cone of light, reddish shadows falling on our faces. All three of us jerked up at the same time and simultaneously glanced at the clock on the wall.

“O no!” Ksü cried. I immediately pictured my grandmother reporting me to the police as being missing right now because she had neither Ksü's name nor her address or a phone number. Usually I was home by now.

“I'll drive you home,” Ivan offered. “My bike's faster than Ksü's bike.”

“I'll follow you!” Ksü called out but Ivan shook his head.

“You can't tell me what to do,” Ksü said.

“Yes, I can,” Ivan grinned. “I even got that in writing.”

“So what. I'll come with you anyway.”

“Well, then I'll ask you to be so kind as to stay here and watch our house so that the other half won't fly away as well and we'll have to camp out,” Ivan said.

I had expected that Ksü would continue her protest but she only stated that she had never seen a more imbecile big brother in her whole life.

I followed Ivan outside. He owned a motorbike any senior would have killed for. It was black with some red design on both sides that looked like wings. I didn't have the time to examine the artwork more closely, though. Ivan had

already mounted the bike. I climbed aboard behind him, equipped with Ksü's red helmet. My heart was pounding and I felt incredibly clumsy.

"Take care of yourself and see you tomorrow!" Ksü ran down the steps to the bike, jumped up unexpectedly and managed to kiss my cheek in mid-air.

That confused me so much that I even forgot to say goodbye.

"You have to hold on to me," Ivan said softly but I would have heard and understood these words despite the noise of a thousand engines. And then the vehicle started to move and I had trouble breathing and could not tell whether Ivan was taking the same way back to the center or a completely different one. Trees and houses shot past me, melting into one long multi-coloured ribbon. Now and then I got the feeling as if the bike was lifting off a few inches but that must have been my imagination. Talking was impossible though actually I was kind of glad of that.

It didn't take more than fifteen minutes until Ivan stopped the bike softly and gently right in front of our house. I climbed out of my seat. My legs felt rather stiff.

"Thanks for taking me home."

I couldn't see Ivan's face behind his visor. He reached out and quickly touched my shoulder and then he was gone and I couldn't even watch him disappear because within mere seconds he was gone and a moment later I didn't even hear his bike any more.

Feeling as if I was in a trance, I walked through the door. I had totally forgotten to ask about with Ksü's and Ivan's parents.

I don't know how it came to be that I am suddenly sitting on this bench, the child in my lap; holding her close, I run my hand over the bandage.

"What happened to you, sweetheart?" I ask, cradling the small yet heavy body in my arms.

"Ow," the child whines, pressing her head against my shoulder.

Chapter 21: The Dementio

[Juli breaks out of her "normal" life. Now she is Juli, the daughter of a Phairy.]

Looking in the mirror, I knew that I didn't want to look like that any more. If I had to wear that crew's uniform to school, then at least the skirts checkered in various brown shades should be banned from my personal life – the kind you found inside the closet of every girl on our block, as if they all had agreed to serve normality even in their spare time.

I took my skirt off and threw it into the corner. Ksü handed me one of her jeans. I put it on; it fit like a second skin. It had faded into patches of different shades of blue and there were holes in the knees. I had never worn anything like that. A Freak outfit. Had my father seen me like this, he would have sent me away to change immediately. And until recently I would have done it on the spot, too. "Cool," Ksü said. "A bit unusual for you, but you look good."

I left my white undershirt on. I had seen on campus that young freaky women wore lingerie as outfits – silky petticoats or tight undershirts with lace like mine. I looked in the mirror. My new look seemed improper but somehow attractive as well.

I had to do something about my hair, too. Like Ingrid, I went to the hair stylist for a trim every four weeks. I always kept a few strands out of my face with

hairclips. Now I took off the clips and barrettes. I pulled at my hair so impatiently that it hurt and I tore out a few hairs in the process.

“Scissors and hair dye,” I said.

Without saying anything Ksü handed me a pair of scissors. I cut into that thing I had always considered to be my hairstyle – without mercy and close to the roots. A hair strand fell to the ground. I got rid of the next one and then another one. I was actually getting in the mood. My head kept shrinking and started to look like a plucked chicken.

“Stop it,” Ksü said after a while. “That’s enough.”

I put down the scissors with a certain bittersweet feeling. Shook my head; cut pieces of hair were flying around. There wasn’t much hair left.

I was hardly myself anymore.

“I like it.” I nodded at my image in the mirror and inspected the cans of hair dye in the box Ksü had put down in front of me. Brown, red, black, blonde. None of them were the right thing. Finally I found the can I had been looking for. Blue.

“*Wooley*,” Ksü said when I put dark blue foam into my palm and started to evenly distribute it in my hair, repeatedly and very thoroughly. But I didn’t need much of that stuff for the bit of hair I had left on my head.

I put the can down and started to massage my head with both hands, vigorously rubbing in the foam, and watched my hair changing under my fingers from a brownish red to yellow to white and then to a blue shade that was turning brighter by the second.

In the mirror I saw Ksü who was standing behind my back, watching me.

My hair dried quickly. It was shimmering brightly in the light. It turned as blue as the sea, then as blue as the sky. I was no longer Juli, that harmless girl in the third or fourth generation of normal people. I was the daughter of a Phairy, an outcast. I looked like a Freak. Tomorrow I might spray my hair in the colours of a rainbow for a change.

“Don’t I look like one of you now?” I asked.

Ksü smiled. “One of who?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“Unfortunately I don’t.”

I merely shrugged. It was so simple – here the normals, there the freaks, and the Phairies somewhere in between. Everybody was somebody.

Only that Ksü and her brother had to make everything so complicated all the time.

That night I had a dream that was so strange I knew right away: I won’t talk to anyone about it; I will push it into the deepest corner of my memory, cover it with the cobwebs of forgetfulness, never take it out again. It was more than just a dream; it was rather as if I’d been somewhere and had seen something I shouldn’t have witnessed.

A man and a woman were talking to each other; I was standing right behind them, I could see their shapes, shoulders, hair, I could hear their whispering voices.

“If you don’t help me, I’ll die,” the man said.

“And if you stay alive, you’ll pay dearly for it,” the woman said. “And I and my children will, too.”

“I’ll protect you from those that are like me. I could never hurt you,” said the man who would soon be my father.

“If I want to be free again because I won’t be able to breathe, you’ll try to destroy me and yourself as well,” said the woman who would soon be my mother.

“No. That’s a promise. You think I’m just desperate. But the truth is, I love you.”

“I think you’re confusing two different things.”

I wasn't dreaming at all; I was at a different place in a different time, and I was listening to my parents who were discussing whether they should take the risk and become my parents.

The next morning I woke up exhausted. When Ksü's alarm clock went off, I just pulled the covers over my face and pretended to be asleep. Ksü whispered in my direction if I was awake and would go to school. I didn't move. A few moments later she cautiously climbed over me, opened squeaky closet door, and then I heard her steps on the stairs and Ksü's and Ivan's voices downstairs in the kitchen.

Ksü didn't come back into her room. I stayed in bed for a while, dozed off and woke up again, pushed the blankets off my face, looked around. Ksü had not pulled the heavy curtains back. Sunbeams made their way through the orange material and tickled my nose. I had to sneeze. I thought about my father and that I hadn't come home for two nights in a row without contacting him. But even though I was in big trouble I didn't have a guilty conscience, especially not when it came to my dad. On the contrary: Let him go through the same emotions I had gone through when my mother had disappeared – maybe he would finally understand me after that.

I threw off the covers and sat up. The air mattress I was sitting on felt like warm pudding. I looked down. Ksü had lent me her pink pyjamas with the black skulls.

"Ksü!" I called softly but there was no reaction. When I automatically smoothed my hair with my fingers, I pulled my hand away, startled by the unfamiliar sensation of my new stubbles. Then I tried to dance downstairs in a kind of inexplicable exuberance while calling out Ksü's name. When I arrived on the bottom step, I heard a discreet cough which I ignored, however, because another rat scurried past in close proximity. And I was already in the kitchen when I saw

Ivan who had spread out a newspaper on the dining table and was looking at me, pulling up his eyebrow.

“Ksü’s already in school,” he said. “We decided not to wake you up. You were so miserable and exhausted yesterday.”

“That’s ... very considerate of you.” Oddly enough I never knew what to say when Ivan was around. And then I always acted extra silly. As if I intended to leave the dorkiest impression I possibly could. Anyway, Ivan looked at me with curiosity and indecision and I painfully became aware of my frazzled blue head. My cheeks started to tingle again.

“I must look pretty stupid,” I observed.

“Not at all.” Ivan smiled. “Remember, I grew up among Freaks. You can’t shock me with blue hair. On the contrary – they’re kind of my idea of perfect beauty.”

I looked at him warily; he managed to smile yet at the same time remain completely serious. But now that he had mentioned it, I might just as well ask him.

“You grew up among Freaks? But you’re not one yourself, are you? Isn’t it a genetic matter?” *And in particular: Where did your parents go? Are they sick or in prison?* Yet I didn’t dare to say these last two sentences.

Ivan was still smiling. “You just come into the kitchen in the morning and ask me a question I want to base my doctor’s thesis on. I’ve always asked myself why everybody is acting as if it was a genetic matter. To me it’s obvious that it’s a matter of how you’re raised. But to satisfy your curiosity: I do come from...” His face darkened for a moment. “... a Freak family.”

“A Freak family?” Now we were getting closer to the secret. I wanted to stick to my guns even if it was obviously difficult for him to continue. “How’s that possible? You look totally normal. Proper clothes, your hair is cut and not dyed ... at least it doesn’t look dyed ... O geez, I must sound like an awful nerd.”

“Not at all,” Ivan said. “I did an oral report in school once – when I was younger than you are. It was about the issue why Freaks hate natural hair colour and decent clothes so much. My findings were sobering. It has a historical cause. By rejecting these things, the Freaks are trying to distinguish themselves from the normals. That has placed a value on the way a person looks that I find unjustified. Even as a child you’re already geared towards finding these things beautiful. To be honest, I’ve always found it a bit of a burden. The Freaks would be much better off if they remembered that freedom is not a matter of hairstyle but of your heart. If they’re so proud of having no restrictions, then why do they insist on a certain hairstyle? After all that’s exactly what the normals have been doing for decades.”

“Mmmh,” I mumbled. What mattered most to me was that he didn’t like blue hair. And the day before I had been so proud of the fact that a bit of hair dye had made a different person out of me. Yet in Ivan’s opinion all that was childish and superficial. I didn’t need to get upset; I had already lost.

Frustrating in a way but also a relief.

I sat down opposite him and looked around. The kitchen was a mess. Two packs of butter were sitting on the table top, one of them torn open, a few grapes, a cut loaf of bread on a wooden plate. Crumbs and sugar were scattered all over the counter. It smelled of cinnamon and vanilla. It all reminded me a bit of mom. Again I thought of my home, my brother and sister, Dad. They had all left for the day by now. Ingrid was probably dusting the shelves right now.

“Please serve yourself if you want anything.” Ivan was absorbed in his paper again. I was grateful for that because I was starving and it would have made me rather nervous to have him watch me eat.

I cut myself a slice of bread. It was still warm. I spread butter on it; it tasted slightly salty. I chewed cautiously and kept peering at Ivan. He looked up.

“Is there something you want to ask me?”

Ha. I had nothing but questions on my mind; each one of my thoughts ended with a question mark. Only that again I didn't know how to phrase the most urgent ones.

"I haven't even asked you yet how your talk with Professor Melchior turned out," Ivan said. "After all I'm enrolled at one of his seminars and had to bribe his secretary with laced Phairy tea so that she would give me an appointment this fast. She figured I needed the appointment myself."

"Oh, so that's how it worked," I said awkwardly. "To be honest, I expected more from my meeting with him. After all this guy's a professor and my mother's lawyer. And yet he doesn't even know what happened to her. He figured the whole time that she was happily living according to the agreement he's negotiated for her. Isn't that strange?"

"Why?" Ivan asked. "If she hasn't contacted him, he can't know any more."

"But she surely would have contacted him if she could have. Obviously she didn't get the chance before she was..." I swallowed hard.

"You know, Phairies don't communicate very much with people from the outside," Ivan said. "They tend to stay to themselves."

"You talk about them as if they were an endangered species," I stated. And then I asked him the question that had been stuck in my soul like a splinter. "Tell me, does the word *Dementio* mean anything to you?"

Ivan lowered his head, moved his lips and then looked at me again.

"Do you really want to know?"

I nodded though something inside of me started to shiver.

"The Dementio Rule is another law that violates the Phairies' basic human rights," Ivan said. "If just one normal person files an application, the Phairies concerned will be picked up by a special brigade, secretly, so that no one will notice it."

Again I swallowed hard. The lawyer had told me exactly the same thing.

Probably because it was true. "And what will happen to that person?"

“He or she will be taken to the Dementio and subjected to a treatment that...”

Ivan obviously found it hard to go on.

“Is meant to kill the Phairy?” I croaked.

Ivan shook his head. “Worse than that.”

“What exactly is going on there?”

“Nobody knows. Everything that has to do with the Dementio is top secret.”

We sat there for a while without saying anything. I tried to eat my buttered slice of bread even though I wasn't hungry any more. Ivan looked at his paper again but his eyes seemed to stare at one spot without moving. I tried in vain to read a passage in the newspaper. It was different from the papers they sold in our quarters; it contained more pictures and the print was hard to decipher. I hoped that Ivan would leave it on the table so that I could look at it later.

But when he was done, he rolled up the paper, put it in his pocket and nodded at me.

“I've got to go,” he said. “Try to recover; you really need to. Ksü will be back by lunchtime.”

“Okay,” I said. And when the sound of Ivan's rattling motorbike was gone, I took a deep breath, dropped my shoulders, relaxed my back and cut another slice of bread and then another one. I couldn't let horror news spoil my appetite. I had to regain my strength.

When I looked up, I saw a rather small rat sitting on the table straight in front of me, watching me with beady eyes. Actually this one wasn't disgusting at all. Even pretty cute. Its tail wasn't naked either but covered with fine hairs if you looked closer. I offered the small animal a crumb and was happy when it grabbed the morsel of bread and scurried away. After that I immediately washed my hands with the dish soap sitting by the sink.

Later I took a tour through the house but I suddenly found myself on the patio that led into the yard. There I discovered a large enclosure for the rats, including a little house made of wooden crates and turned-over clay pots, a jungle gym

made of branches and twigs that came with ladders and tiny bells. The door was open; several rolled-up furry balls were sleeping inside.

I ran into the field barefoot and all. The grass tickled the soles of my feet. I ran across the field that led me to a pond which was grown over with plants that had small leaves and that were split over and over again by the back of a reddish fish.

I thought about putting my feet into the water but something kept me from doing so; perhaps it was respect of the fish who called this pond its home, and I didn't want to push my feet into its face.

I laid down in the grass and looked at the clouds. My mother had mentioned once that doing nothing but looking at clouds had a calming effect on your nerves. She had uttered these words at a coffee klatch on the occasion of somebody's birthday. Ingrid and Reto had stared at my mother, shaking their heads. Doing nothing was a no-no for us. After all we were normal.

My nerves failed to calm down. I thought the clouds reminded me of Mom's profile and flowing hair. That made me sad; I rolled on my stomach and suddenly fell asleep.

Again I was dreaming of my mother, she was looking at me, waving, calling me to her as if nothing had happened, but even in my dream I know that it couldn't be true. Something bad had happened to me, and even her dreamed smile did not change that.

I woke up when Ksü grabbed me by the shoulders, shook me and yelled, "Here you are! Thank God! I thought you had run off again! I skipped the last two lessons just to tell you. Guess what? Professor Melchior has told my brother, and my brother has sent me a message and that's why I'm home early, because: The Professor has gotten a hold of the list of all Phairies that have been taken to the Dementio, and YOUR MOTHER IS NOT AMONG THEM!"

Chapter 28: The Disease

[Last chapter: Juli has found her mum. She has lifted the secret of the Quadrums. She learns about her parents big secret.]

We squeeze into the back of the mint green police van, the officer sits down across from us. He doesn't let me out of his sight any more. I hold on to Ksü's hand; I want to prevent us from being separated.

It takes over an hour until the van reaches the other side of the city and I start to recognize the familiar white buildings and boxwood hedges of our quarters. I look out of the latticed window. I try to remember how I used to walk down those streets on my own feet, unsuspecting, naive, for many years until that day my mother disappeared. But it doesn't trigger any emotions. This part of my memory remains strangely empty as if I hadn't gone through all those years myself. Maybe Ksü had felt the loss in a similar way until she entered my mother's forest.

"Your father will straighten you out alright." The police officer gives me an encouraging nod. "I've never seen a normal girl running around the way you do."

"Me neither," I say and look out of the window. The man doesn't bother me; I have the feeling that I can read his simple thoughts. He's not mean but always prepared to yank out any tender plant of illegal living that dares to push itself through the tears in his normal existence. The society of Normality was built on the shoulders of people like him. He feels comfortable in this society, he's willing to sacrifice others so that everything stays the same. He, too, is responsible for the things that happened to my mother and Ksü's parents. The van stops; its automated door slides open. I climb out, reach out for Ksü. I'm still afraid that they will separate us if we don't watch out. The moment I touch her hand I remember the Inspiro inside her body. I pull my hand away

spontaneously but my willpower is stronger than my disgust which quickly subsides.

I walk ahead, Ksü is next to me, the police officer is behind us. I don't want him to drag me inside our house like a dog that has run away and for whose return a reward has been offered.

I'm scared. I don't feel tough enough to face father and grandmother.

But my little brother and sister are here, too, and my mother needs my help.

My home welcomes me as frostily as a tomb with pulled-down blinds. The heater has been turned off; it is dark; the familiar scent of an artificial summer breeze, Ingrid's favourite dish soap, crawls into my nostrils. It feels as if I was entering a house that has not been occupied for a long time. I notice that Ksü, who is by my side, pulls back her shoulders and clutches my hand even harder. She, too, would rather have stayed outside but I know that she won't let me down.

"Hello!" the police officer hollers. His cheerful tone of voice sounds out of place in this house. "Doctor Rettemi, look who's here with me!" An echo catches his voice and throws it back. A cold shiver runs down my spine.

"What's going on here?" I look at Ksü; helplessly she shakes her head.

When I see Kassie at the far end of the hallway in front of my father's bedroom, I hardly recognize her. She looks older, her steps don't make any sound, her face is so serious. She looks at me, hesitates as if she can't believe what she's seeing. Then she starts running towards me, stops abruptly a few feet away from me and looks at me again. Finally she takes a step towards me, reaches out for me and touches me cautiously. I squat down in front of her; she finally throws her arms around me. I forgot how narrow her shoulders really are.

"Kassie, what's wrong? It's still me, I just look a bit different. I came back because of you two; I won't leave you any more. Where's Jaro?"

Kassie waves at Ksü behind me. She completely ignores the policeman.

"Is Jaro okay?" I ask worried.

“Yeah, Jaro’s fine,” Kassie says. “But Dad’s very sick. Because Mom says we have to come live with her now.”

I follow Kassie into my father’s bedroom, Ksü enters behind me, then, keeping a certain distance, the police officer who apparently wants to return me in person, preferably in exchange of a written receipt. Everything seems so strange that I don’t pay any more attention to him. I enter Dad’s bedroom, a room with blinds that are pulled halfway down, a room that makes me shiver even more. Surprisingly my father is not at work though it’s daytime; he’s lying in bed and his face looks a bit like Ivan’s face did on the sofa. Only that Dad’s features are even more drawn, he’s pulled the covers up to his chin, I look at him, can hardly believe what I’m seeing.

“Dad, what’s wrong?” I have forgotten how mad I am at him.

Ksü exhales audibly and the police officer coughs discreetly.

Ingrid is sitting by Dad’s bedside, holding a cup in her hands. Automatically I register the fact that its contents smell a lot like the HYDRAGON air refresher for the toilet bowl. Reto is standing next to her. My father is lying on the side of the bed he already slept on when he was still sharing the bed with Mom. Kassie now sleeps on the other side of the bed as I can tell by her small pillow with the flower print.

Jaro is sitting there, too, his legs pulled up. When he sees me, his face registers the same surprise as his twin sister had. I wonder if I was really gone in their minds. If my mother managed to make them feel close to me in a way only she knows. If she can whisper to my brother’s and sister’s souls from any distance because unlike me they are still children and therefore know no doubts.

“What’s wrong with you, Dad?” My throat feels raw and hot. I make my way past my grandparents, sit down on the edge of his bed. Ksü lingers a few feet away, Jaro gives her a friendly nod and stares at me again.

My father looks at the police officer.

“You may leave now,” he says very quietly.

“But,” the policeman whips out a pen and a notepad with pre-printed forms.

“You may go.”

The policeman shrugs. Then he complies.

Glancing at Ksü, Dad makes a face.

“She’s staying,” I say.

My father must feel very weak because he doesn’t object. Now his eyes and lips are the only features in his face that are moving. “I want to talk to you alone,” he rasps in my direction.

“I don’t trust you.”

Pause, glances, silence. I reach out. Our fingers lock.

Ingrid gets up. She doesn’t even look at me. Perhaps she abhors my blue hair. Apparently she has stopped considering me her grandchild. Hissing and wildly waving her arms in the air, she shoos my younger brother and sister out of the room; Reto follows them. I watch Jaro and Kassie leave. I have come to take them to our mother and I don’t want to let them out of my sight.

As soon as the door is shut behind them, my father puts his hand on mine. It startles me. His hand is freezing cold and dry.

“What’s the matter with you, Dad? Did you catch the flu?”

“Your mother,” my father says very softly. “Your mother has called your sister.”

“And my brother,” I add for the sake of all the facts.

“Do you know where your mother is? You must go get her.”

“What?” I shake off his hand. “Are you kidding? After everything that happened? You trapped her and then you turned her over to the special brigade. Had she not escaped, I would never have seen her again.”

“Careful,” Ksü warns me behind my back.

I press my hand on my mouth.

“I’m not asking you to reveal your secrets,” my father says so softly I can hardly hear him. He must feel very sick. “I need your mother. Only she can help me.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because she’s a Phairy.”

I’m certain this is another trap. Maybe he isn’t all that sick after all.

I can’t decide whether I feel hate or sympathy; right now there’s nothing in between for me.

“I withdrew my application, Juli.” I have to strain my ears to understand what he’s saying. I want to get up but my father grabs my jacket and tries to hold me back. His fingers slip.

“Nothing will happen to your mother, I guarantee it.”

“So what is it you want from her now?”

My father looks at me.

“There’s something you don’t know.”

“Then enlighten me.”

It’s clear that he doesn’t want to. But he also realizes that he can no longer force me to do anything for him. He must convince me.

“Your mother saved my life once,” my dad whispers.

Behind my back Ksü is holding her breath.

“A great way to show her your gratitude,” I say. “Did you have an accident, too?”

My father attempts to look me in the eye. I look into his dull coffee brown eyes.

“I was very sick,” he says. “I had no more energy left. She made it possible for me to live on.”

“Your agreement,” I say.

“Yes.” He looks surprised. “Though I repaid her by ... helping her, too.”

I don’t inquire what it was. There is something else I’ve just realized.

“That is why she didn’t lose everything at court the way all the other Phairies do. Because you knew you might still need her.”

“Horrible ... things ... are caused by Phairies,” my father manages to say.

I nod automatically.

We remain silent for a while. The clock is ticking, my father is breathing hard.

“But then why did you have her put on the list?”

He closes his eyes.

“I have to understand it,” I say harshly.

“You’re never on the safe side with Phairies,” my father whispers. “They always remain dangerous. I was too afraid of losing everything.”

“But shouldn’t you fear for yourself first of all if you betray her? Or...” Then it hits me. “You found someone who could replace her. Who will keep you alive in her place. Did you meet another Phairy?”

“No, it’s not that.” The corners of my father’s mouth twitch in an attempt to smile. “It’s not what you think.”

He closes his eyes, pressing his lips together. The clock is ticking. Ksü is breathing softly.

I see the empty bedside where my little sister sleeps at night.

I let out my breath. “Kassie.”

My father doesn’t say anything.

“I can’t believe it.”

My father takes a deep breath. The sentences he says are coming very quickly and chopped.

“Your mother wants to take her away from me. She can’t do that. Go get your mother, I have to talk to her. I won’t hurt anybody. I just want Kassie to be with me. I’ll die without her.”

“She has given you so much energy that you thought you could break the pact you made with my mother? The pact in which you promised not to hurt my mother even if she left you?”

“I ... promise her now ... that she’ll be safe.”

“Why should I believe anything you say?”

“Because I’m dying, Juli,” my father says and a cloudy tear creeps out from under his eyelid, rolls down his temple and cheek and leaves a tiny wet spot on the snow white sheet.

In front of the door to Dad’s bedroom I press my face against the wallpaper. I’m confused and speechless.

Ksü grabs my shoulders. I wonder if she has understood the same things I have.

“We have to take your brother and sister to your mom. But you have to let Laura make her own decisions. You have to let her know what you heard and saw.

She’ll know what she has to do.”

“Yes,” I say. “That’s right.”

We walk through the spooky house, past the doors with the golden handles.

Ingrid and Reto are sitting in the living room in front of the electric fireplace that is turned off. Ingrid’s folded hands are resting in her lap; Reto leans back in his chair, studying the pattern of the wallpaper. They don’t move when we walk past the living room door.

I find the twins in the room I always slept in but now it’s no longer my room.

This is not my house, not my room, not my life any more. He’s not my father, they are not my grandparents. Maybe I’ll see that differently one day. But now they are my enemies.

But these are my little brother and sister standing in front of the quadrum and holding hands in a rare harmony. They are looking at the painted house.

“Are you ready?” I ask them. They nod. How come they know? Why don’t I have to explain anything to them? Am I the only one who has been taken by surprise?

There is a fifty-percent chance that a Phairye’s daughter will become a Phairy as well.

Kassie is a Phairy, even a blind person can see that. She knows things others don't know. She's only seven. My father wants her by his side as a replacement for our mother. Her, not me.

A Phairy's sons are very special...

However the sentence ends, it is correct.

I'm my mother's only child who's not special.

I take Ksü's hand, position myself behind the twins.

"We go first," Kassie says. And then I hear, "Poor Dad."

She jumps.

For the first time in my life I wake up in the morning because sunbeams are tickling my nose. Because a little kitten with orange fur lands on my legs and starts licking my toes with its rough tongue. Because my brother and sister are laughing so loud. Because it smells of coffee and freshly baked bread. Because my friend – or her Inspiro – slaps me with a pillow. Because my mother is holding wild strawberries under my nose so that the scent will tickle me awake from wild dreams that continue when I open my eyes.

Life in my mother's world seems so incredibly sweet to me that I have to pinch myself every morning.

I haven't gotten much of it yet. I'm much too involved in myself. I don't do much: listen to the wind in the tree tops, lie around on my bed, read old books, and when my mother is out in the woods with the twins and Ksü, sometimes for hours at a time, and they all come back with misty eyes, I never go with them. I stay inside the cottage and they leave me alone. I read a bit; then I close the book and ponder on it.

Ivan's here, too. "He'll make it," my mother says. Apart from the cut on his head, he also has an open wound on the back of his skull. My mother has put some kind of leaves on it and soaked the bandage in a fluid that was simmering on the stove for several hours while we held our noses. That bandage makes

Ivan look like a mummy. Since he has regained consciousness, he's been lying on his side, watching everything that's going on in the room. He is still weak and it is hard for him to adjust to the changes. When all the others are out, it's my job to look after Ivan. We hardly talk to each other. My mother says that Ivan needs piece and quiet after having suffered a concussion. I don't mind; I don't want to talk either.

My brother and sister are happy and Ksü acts as if she was intoxicated. After she has stopped crying about her parents she's kind of like she used to. I often have to think of that thing my mother calls an Inspiro. Doesn't Ksü's body belong to her any more? And who has always been communicating with me – she or her Inspiro?

And I'm waiting for Jaro or Kassie to ask about our father. But they don't. I wonder if they're thinking about him all the time the way I do. But it seems as if they had forgotten that he had ever existed.

I'm not happy. Even though my mother's world is a true paradise – or because of that. I feel as if I had snuck into her world even though I actually had to do all these other things. I'm waiting for the day everything will collapse, the day armed police officers will come charging into the forest, burn down the cottage, hurt or kill us, and hopefully quickly so that the little ones won't have to be scared for too long because there's nothing worse in this world than the fear of death.

I can't shake off the feeling that I have done something forbidden.

I hope the days I am spending here feel shorter for my dad who has stayed on the other side of the quadrum. I haven't told my mother about his request, about his words to me.

Until the day I can't take it any more.

I grab her by the sleeve, pull her outside on the patio, hiss at my brother and sister to leave us alone for a second, and tell her that my father has asked her to come back to him. Or at least Kassie. I can tell that she knows about Kassie. It

doesn't surprise me to see that my mother's face closes up as soon as she hears these words.

I keep on talking. That my father guarantees for her safety if she helps him. That he will die without her. That I feel guilty because I didn't tell her right away because I was concerned about her. That I hope nothing has happened yet that you can't turn around.

Laura listens to me. Then she gets up, kisses me on my forehead, jumps off the patio down into the grass. I know where the path she has just stepped on with her bare feet leads to.

"Stay here!" I say, swallowing my tears. "I don't think you can trust him."

"Don't worry," my mother says.

"But I do worry! What good will it do if everybody's sitting around here being happy while something happens to you?"

"I'll be back soon," my mother says. "I promise you I'll be back soon."

"That's crazy – first we were separated because you were here and we were with Dad, and now we're here and you're going back to him."

"I'm not going back to him," my mother says. "But I'll see what I can do."

I don't say anything else. She puts her hand on my cheek for a moment and starts to swiftly walk along the path. It is the path that leads to my former room at home.

I run after her.

My mother is too fast for me. She has disappeared so quickly from my sight that I start to panic. There's something menacing about being in the forest without her. I don't want to let her walk off like that, not even for a short time. Because I'm her oldest daughter – if my mother is not around, I'll have to represent her. But how can I do that if I don't know my way around? Until now I have considered the forest to be a merciful place. But then I was almost always inside the cottage. And my mother was always there.

If my mother stays in the outside world for an hour, it could feel like weeks out here in the forest, I think, shivering. And what if she stays away for several days? Will that feel like a whole life without her here? Right now after I've got her back?

I quicken my pace.

As soon as I have taken my first deep breath, I know I'm making a mistake. I don't know my way around. I keep getting further and further away from the cottage in which my brother and sister and my friends are. Deeper and deeper into the dark woods. I hear the call of a wild animal in the distance. The sound doesn't tell me anything; I don't know anything about animals.

It doesn't even take five minutes before I no longer know which direction I just came from. I don't dare to yell because I'm afraid of my own voice. I just keep running through the shrubbery, thorns tearing at my clothes, scraping my legs. A clearing. A cottage, smaller than the one we're living in now. It's old, white and crooked. A baby rattle is lying on the patio.

I recognize the cottage. It is the house in Jaro's quadrum. The door is leaned shut. The silence inside is suddenly interrupted by a soft whimpering. Though something inside tells me to stay away, the urge to enter is stronger.

I open the door.

The room is small and the air is sticky. There is a simmering pot on an ancient stove. Flames shimmer brightly through the crack in the oven door.

I have to be quiet. I mustn't startle the child sitting on a bench. The toddler is not even two years old yet, has tousled hair and dirty feet. She wears wide coveralls; apart from the thick grey bandage around her chest her torso is naked. Apparently the child has just woken up, she's crying but when I enter, she stops and looks at me full of hope.

And even though I'm very scared myself, for the first time in my life I sense that there is a pain that is bigger and more important than my own pain. I don't

know how it came to be that I am suddenly sitting on this bench, the child in my lap; holding her close, I run my hand over the bandage.

“What happened to you, sweetheart?” I ask, cradling the small yet heavy body in my arms.

“Ow,” the child whines, pressing her head against my shoulder.

“Does it hurt? Where’s your mommy?”

“Mommy,” the child says, showing a hint of a smile and nodding eagerly. She points at the door. “Mommy!”

“Mommy will come back soon?”

She nods again, tears rolling down her grubby cheeks. Then she listens quietly for a moment. “Mommy soon,” she repeats after me.

I gently pick up the child, her small body is heavy and her skin is soaked with sweat, and put her on the bench, throwing the blanket over her shoulders even though her body is already rather warm. I look through a window and see my mother coming out of the forest. It’s not my mother of today. This one is younger, slimmer, maybe even a bit shorter. Carrying baskets, she hurries towards the house.

I realize that once again I’ve tumbled upon something that’s none of my business. I am absolutely not prepared to meet my mother who appears to be no older than myself and who has to take care of a dirty and crying baby.

I jump out of the other window. This time I know that I will land in Jaro’s room. “Mommy!” the toddler coos behind my back.

I can still hear the child when I land on the carpet. And after I have scrambled on my feet, I automatically twist and turn to grope for the two symmetrical scars next to my shoulder blades. They’re still there. I wrap my arms around myself and scratch myself until I bleed.

I am shaking all over when I leave Jaro’s room, a cheerful, bright room with yellow curtains, a blue blanket with clouds painted on it, filled with toy cars and

stuffed animals arranged in neat rows on the shelves. The rug with the street map design is dust-free. Someone has cleaned up this room and it is obvious that the boy who used to live here hasn't been in this room for a while. How much time has passed? Is my father still *alive*?

My parents' house is still as quiet as when I left it. That reassures me a bit. I was afraid that I would find it full of people dressed in black waiting for my mother. That she would walk into a trap.

When I move my feet on the tiled floor, the sound echoes through the house. I have goose bumps.

I walk along the hallway, downstairs, past the kitchen. The house appears to be abandoned. Slowly and quietly I approach my father's bedroom.

The door is leaned shut. I put my hand on the golden door handle and press it down very gently.

I get the feeling that something like that has happened to me before. Dreaming and listening at the same time. I don't make a move. Each breath I take would betray me. This time I'm prepared to hear it.

My father is lying in his bed, his long skinny body stretched out under the thin covers, his eyes are open. My mother is kneeling on the floor. She has put her hands on the mattress to support her weight but every time my dad's hand starts to crawl towards hers, she pulls her hand away. She doesn't want to be touched. "I've been waiting for you." My father's voice is weak, I can barely hear it. "I told everyone that nobody can stay here so that you don't have to be afraid to come. I wanted to prove it to you. You can trust me."

"I know," my mother says. She turns her head slightly but she cannot see me. She's kneeling on the floor with her back to the door. Still I think she knows I'm here.

"I can't take it any more," my father's voice rustles through the room. "You have to help me."

“I’ve already given you everything I have,” my mother says. “If I help you any more, there won’t be anything left of me. I have to protect myself. I have children.”

“Then leave *her* with me,” my father whispers. “She’s keeping me alive.”

“No,” my mother says.

“She’s my daughter, too,” his voice rustles through the room like the wind rustles through dry grass. “I’m entitled to her.”

“Not to that,” my mother says. Her back is very straight, she pulls her hand away from my father’s fingers.

“But that’ll be the end of me,” my father says. I can’t see any tears but I hear that he’s crying. “Isn’t there anything you can do for me? I don’t want to suffer any more.”

“There’s only one thing I can still do for you,” my mother responds. “But it’s what you’re most afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid of anything anymore,” my dad whispers.

“You know what I can do,” my mother says. “Is that really what you want?”

My father hesitates.

“Is it just like that other thing, only the other way around?”

“Just like that.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Not you.” She moves, wants to get up.

“Stay!” My father’s cry keeps her back. My mother sinks down on her knees again.

“Do it now,” he says. “I can’t take it any more.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I would like nothing better than to close the door right now but I’m afraid the slightest movement could interrupt them. I hold my breath. My mother takes both my father’s hands into her own hands. That’s all I can see.

Nothing happens for several moments. And then his face becomes distorted, he arches his back, I get the feeling he is screaming right now but I cannot hear anything as if the sound was turned off.

And then he sinks back into his pillows, his face is peaceful.

“Thank you,” he says before he closes his eyes.

“Forgive me,” my mother says. She lets go of my father’s hands, crosses his arms over his chest with one swift movement, holds one hand to his mouth. My father’s lips are moving strangely, his face which has looked so relaxed just a moment ago becomes distorted again, turns into a grimace, his lips pull apart. I can’t believe what I’m seeing when a small grey bird slips out of his mouth, is captured by my mother’s hand, ruffles its feathers and shakes itself.

She puts the bird on her left shoulder, gets up, lingers by the bed for a moment to look at my father. Then she walks out.

At the door she collides with me. The shock has rendered me speechless; tired and sad, she looks right through me.

“Juli,” she says. “My big daughter. Let’s go home.”

She closes the door to the bedroom, takes my hand.

“But...” I want to go into the room once more but she stops me from entering it.

“Don’t turn around. Ever.”

I obey. The bird on her shoulder is cleaning its feathers.

I don’t ask the question. The word *Inspiro* is pounding in my head. The same as with Ksü. A breath that’s not your own. A life that seems to have been borrowed. Is that true? I know too little about it to be able to tell.

The bird beats its wings against my cheeks.

My mother presses my fingers closely together. Her hands, which are usually so warm, feel cold.

Suddenly I start to cry. My mother waits until it’s over. It doesn’t take long for me to calm down again.

“That means that my father is dead,” I say, totally calm. I am as cold as a block of ice. Every one of my thoughts is covered with indifference. Especially that one, the most horrible one of all. *Maybe he’s better off this way.* I will cry later. “We’re going home,” my mother repeats, shivering.

I glance at her from the side. My mother is looking ahead but the beady black bird eyes are looking straight at me.

“Now it’s all over,” I say. “Now you’re free. My father’s dead.”

“Rudolf is not your father,” my mother says. “This is just the beginning.”