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Stadt aus Trug und Schatten (City of Betrayals and Shadows)

Prologue

The wind whistled through the city streets, scrabbling at the house fronts, filling the place with the stench of smoke and mudbanks, which clung to people's nostrils until nobody could think of anything apart from those milkily opaque river waters. It was icy cold, as if no beam of sunshine had ever penetrated the dark alleyways between the houses. Indeed, Eisenheim had dwelt in eternal darkness since the beginning of time.

Eisenheim, the city that knew neither daylight nor sunshine. Darkness had always loomed over its roofs, which stretched out towards the horizon in all directions. From time to time, the light from a gas lantern would flare up in the darkness, and the whole sky was filled with the smoke that rose from countless chimneys in a town quarter called Schlotbaron, and merged to form a menacing storm cloud.

The blackness also filled the narrow alleyways in the heart of Krummsen, in the western part of Eisenheim. Here, tendrils of mist rose from the river to creep over the pavement and curl around basement windows, and snatch at the old man's feet. They were the feet of a man who people could walk past without remembering anything about him.

He was wearing a plain grey coat with an old-fashioned baggy look about it. It was creased, as if he had dragged it on any old how. His cap had been drawn over his face and cast a deep shadow over it. Only his beard, which reached down to his chest, was noticeable. Its silver hairs were spotted with specks of blood, the same blood that was trickling over his hands. "Amadee," he whispered. "What have they done to you?"

Slowly, the girl he was carrying in his arms opened her eyes and gazed at him. She was grievously wounded, as he had instantly realised. The man could hardly bear to look at her wounded and bloodstained face. Now that she was looking at him, his eyes filled with tears.

"My poor child. I never wanted this to happen. I should never have allowed things to go so far, never - "

"He," the girl started to say. It was no more than a gasp. Her hand grasped at his coat. The old man swallowed, "That's all right," he said, stroking her long hair, which reached down to the pavement, stained with blood and filth. "It's all over now. I am taking you home, and you will be safe there."

He didn't know if she could understand him, because his words did not appear to calm her. She kept on gazing at him, her bruised lips trying to form words. "He," the whisper came again, and this time it sounded as if her voice was coming from far away, a hiss in the darkness. "He ... knows it!"

The man froze, and bit his tongue. "What," he gasped, rather too sharply. "What have you told him?" The girl did not reply and seemed about to lose consciousness again. She groaned and her eyelids trembled as they started to close. "Please, Amadee!" the man grasped the girl more tightly, so tightly that she screamed with pain, twisted, and tried to push him away with what was left of her strength.

"Tell me," he shouted. He had to know at once. The girl slowly responded and began to sob.

"Flora," she murmured, "I've ... betrayed her."

1 – Dream Shadows

Flora? Really, girl! Are you asleep?

I sat up abruptly.

"What? Oh, no, not at all."

My head felt strangely light as if it had been filled with helium, like a balloon. But I still didn't know what had just happened to me. A bit later on, I realised where I was, but it took a few more blinks before I noticed that the whole class was staring at me.

"It didn't look like that to me," said the teacher.

Herr Bachmann was standing right in front of my desk in the third row, and glaring at me over his moustache. It was the seventh lesson, and Herr Bachmann had turned the light off and drawn the curtains so he could torment us by showing, for the third time that week, a film about the *Buddenbrooks* novel so ancient it must have been made back in the olden days. He would stop the film every few minutes to ask us questions. It looked as though I had fallen asleep during one of these pauses, which really confused me because I always take care to know what's going on around me. It just wasn't like me to fall asleep during class.

However, I had spent half the night helping gather up a huge number of soft-water crabs which had escaped from one of my father's aquariums and were running around our living room. That morning, I had felt horribly tired when the alarm woke me. No, what had really confused me was not falling asleep but the fact that I had been dreaming.

After all, I never dreamed, ever.

And certainly not that stuff.

"It seems to me that you are not sufficiently interested in the subject matter. To fall asleep! This is unacceptable." Herr Bachmann declared. He pressed the control button to start the film again.

“But I never fall asleep,” I said, because that’s what I was thinking.

Herr Bachmann seemed to think I was trying to talk my way out of trouble. He put the remote back in the pocket of his mustard coloured jacket (he always wore mustard coloured suits, with matching socks and shoes)

“No?” he said. “So what’s been happening, then?”

“Tony has gone to the lake for a few weeks.” That was the last scene I could recall.

“And then?”

“There she’s fallen in love with a student called Morten Schwarzkopf. But he is poor, so they can’t get married yet. When Tony goes back to Lübeck, she realises how important it is to keep in with her family, and she agrees to marry Grunlich,” I rambled on.

Herr Bachmann cast a triumphant glance at me

“Ha! We’ve not got that far. You *were* asleep!”

I shrugged. Luckily, I know the book!

A few giggles could be heard around the classroom. My friend Wiebke, who was sitting on my right, kicked my shins. Red patches were forming on Herr Bachmann’s neck and cheeks.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, we’ve been talking about nothing but the *Buddenbrooks* for half a year. Everyone here knows the story by heart,” I told him. “And this film is a bit, well, it’s actually really boring.”

It’s like one of those ads on the online shopping channel, which one can at least laugh at.

“Boring?”

By now, the red patches had nearly spread all over his face. Herr Bachmann’s cheeks were puffed out so he looked like a fat tortoise ready to explode.

“So you find my teaching *boring*?”

“Well, maybe...”

“No, Herr Bachmann, Flora just thinks this particular film is a bit boring. But your teaching has made sure that we are all really well up on the *Buddenbrooks*. So, it must be really good,”

Wiebke launched one of her beaming smiles at Herr Bachmann for good measure.

Wiebke’s smiles were simply devastating; I didn’t know anyone who could lay on the charm like her. Herr Bachmann was clearly not proof against it either, because he instantly started to mellow. “Well, if that’s the case,” he stroked his moustache, and considered. “I think that I have indeed succeeded in teaching you a great deal about this literary masterpiece. So, good, we will just watch the film in this lesson,” he added, and pressed play. “Diplomacy,” Wiebke whispered, looking at me sternly over the tops of her specs, as Tony agreed to marry Grünlich on the screen.

Diplomacy, the word that Wiebke had been reiterating like a prayer-wheel every time during the last eight years I managed to put my foot in it. There had been plenty of opportunities for saying it, and each time, I had promised to think before I spoke in future. "You must have some loose bits of wiring in your brain," Wiebke told me. "Maybe you'll get lucky and grow out of it."

I hope so too; after all, I am liable to blow my top, especially when I don't intend to. The rest of the lesson passed with no more snoozing on my part. Herr Bachmann did not interrupt the film again, so I used the time to think about my dream. At any rate, I thought it had been a dream. As I said, I had never dreamt anything before, and had always thought that was normal, until now. "Dreams just distract us from real life and are mostly nonsense anyway," is what Christabel, our housekeeper used to say. Since my parents separated ten years ago, she had been looking after my father and me, or at least trying to. "If you happen to be so unlucky as to have a dream, tell me, my angel-child, and I will give you one of my pills, to make sure you fall asleep again, sound as a log."

This offer had always seemed a bit strange to me, but now... My dream had indeed been horrid, like a scene from a horror film. Although the images were thankfully fading from my memory, one of them still stood out clearly in my mind's eye. I was in a dark room that smelled like a dentist's surgery, lying on my back. No, I was actually floating on my back, in a container that was filled with a cloudy substance, and I couldn't help thinking that Dr Frankenstein was going to pop up at any moment and stick an electrode into my brain. An old-fashioned light hung from the ceiling; it had a twisted glass fitting that was filled with a shimmering liquid, which served to reinforce this impression. It made everything look pallid and grey, as colourless as in an old black and white film.

"I think she is coming round, Master," a man spoke from somewhere beyond my field of vision. He sounded excited.

"So soon?" came the reply, from someone who was clearly older, whose voice reminded me of rustling paper.

A wrinkled face leant over me. I made out icy grey eyes, set in a web of wrinkles, and a bushy beard, with stuff sticking to it. Fine, glistening black droplets which appeared to be caught up in his silver hair....

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a bell.

"At last," said Wiebke, leaping to her feet. "I thought this lesson was never going to end."

"Yeah, me too," I agreed half-heartedly, shoving my things absentmindedly into my rucksack.

Then I slipped inside my neon parka, which Wiebke thinks simply ghastly, because its square shape makes me look even smaller than I am. In fact, once it's on me, nobody can tell if I'm 16 or 13 years old, but I loved it because it came down almost to my knees and my hands simply vanished inside its too long sleeves, no

problem. Two precious advantages when you're the sort who catches cold easily. "Let's go, now. Linus is waiting for us at the school door," Wiebke said, twisting her black mane into a knot, and pulling me by one of my arms towards the exit, past the teacher's desk, where Herr Bachmann was writing something in the class book, which looked suspiciously like my name, Flora Grassmann. My grade for group speaking had clearly dropped through the floor.

I chewed at my lower lip and tried to keep up with Wiebke who only slowed down when we reached the equally dark-haired boy who was waiting for us at the edge of the school yard. Linus was leaning against the fence in a relaxed way and he grinned at us over the heads of a horde of middle schoolgirls who seemed to be hanging about in his neighbourhood. "Buongiorno, ladies," he called, holding a pizza carton under our noses. "One of everything with extra cheese."

We grabbed our slices hungrily, chewing as we headed towards the underground station, because we all three of us lived at almost the other end of Essen. Linus was Wiebke's twin brother, and was in a parallel class because their parents wanted them both to 'develop into independent personalities'.

In fact, they were as similar as two people of different genders can be. It wasn't just that they both had fine, clear cut faces with matching silky eyelashes. They also laughed at the same jokes, liked the same things and were quite simply inseparable. Sometimes I had the weird feeling that they could read each other's thoughts, as now, when Linus suddenly pointed at my face and asked, "Wicked, what have you got there?" I touched my cheek and felt lines and folds that definitely did not belong there, but somehow reminded me of the zip on my pencil case. I must have used it as a pillow when I took that little nap. "We were watching *Buddenbrooks* again, in language class," I explained, "it was yawningly boring."

Linus glanced at Wiebke and was instantly in the picture. "So you fell asleep and Herr Bachman caught you at it?" His pierced lower lip stuck out as he thought about it. "Well done, you!" Linus's arm crept around my shoulders to give them a pat, and settled there.

No sooner had he done so than Lavinia, who had been tagging on behind us, as she did every day, trying to attract Linus's attention, rushed forwards. "Have I told you that I mean to have my birthday party in the Knight Club?" she panted, as if she had been running to catch up with us. "Really?" Linus fell back while Wiebke and I rolled our eyes in synch. Lavinia was one of those girls who slap on far too much make-up and always insist on pulling XS clothes over their fat hips. For the last few months she had been pursuing Linus wherever he went. More precisely, since I had stopped going out with him, and the news had reached her ears. (I really liked Linus, but going out with him felt too much like dating Wiebke).

While we were travelling on the underground most of the talk was about the discos in Essen and surroundings, a subject to which I, an established party pooper, could contribute little. So I leant back in my seat as the red and white tram slid like a worm along its rails between the traffic jams heading out to the A40 motorway, and dozed. The sun shone through the dusty windowpane and painted bright patches on the upholstery, which had once been brightly patterned, but was now faded and dirty. Over the years, the furnishings had turned the colour of old chewing gum and somehow, seemed to smell of it too. Tram smell. I sighed as I leant back. I was really bloody tired.

I don't know whether it was due to the fact that it got dark when the tram entered the tunnel just before reaching the Bismarck Platz stop, but it was at that moment that I saw it for the first time. That moment, when I realised that something had changed. I saw a shadow.

Actually, it was just a movement, right beside me, on the other side of the window. Something flickered in the darkness, which I glimpsed out the corner of my eye. To start with, I thought it was an optical illusion, and I took a closer look. No, there was no doubt about it. Even though I couldn't explain it, I instinctively knew what it was: there was something, something large and shapeless. And it was running alongside the tram.

I could feel the hairs on my arms standing up. "Hey, guys, did you see that?" I said, interrupting Lavinia who was just talking about foam parties, and I pointed at the window. "What, then? The inside of the tunnel?" she asked crossly, raising one of her plucked eyebrows.

"How incredibly thrilling. So, to go back to what I was just saying...."

"No, there is something ... alive. Can't you see it?"

What could it be? An animal maybe?

"Don't be scared, Flora, it's only your reflection," Linus said, grinning at me.

"Ha Ha," I glared at him

Wiebke frowned, and drew closer to the window before shaking her head. "I can't see anything, sorry". At that moment, the tram stopped at the next station, which was all lit up, and shadow vanished. I blinked, and said,

"He's gone now."

"He?" Lavinia looked amused

"Or it. Maybe I'm just seeing things. I'm so incredibly tired today."

I was hoping that whatever I had seen had simply disappeared into thin air. Naturally, my wish was not granted.

The next time I saw the shadow was when Wiebke and I got out at the main station and strode over its green tiles on our way to the Ballet School. There he was, standing among the crowd of travellers who were going in all directions, right in front of the chemist's shop. At any rate, I thought he was standing there, though he didn't

have a proper shape. It was more of a dull patch. A black hole, about the size of a basketball player, simply rose up from the tiled floor, and was apparently invisible to everyone else.

I felt weak in the stomach. Was I really seeing all this? Just then, a man in a suit and carrying a briefcase walked smack through the shadow. "Hey, did you see that?" Wiebke was weaving her way through a group of Japanese tourists and I grabbed her rucksack to make her stop. "There it is again, over there." Wiebke's eyes followed my gaze, she was looking straight at the patch of shade, and I realised that it was staring back at her. It suddenly seemed to be stalking her, like a wolf sniffing out a trail. But Wiebke only shook her head, saying,

"I really don't know what you're looking at. Maybe there's something wrong with your eyes. After all, we've just been watching that film, about a boy whose retina came loose and he started seeing flashes of lightning all the time, when there wasn't any."

"But I'm not seeing lightning flashes, but a shadow. That's kind of the opposite," I replied crossly, and started walking again. "Come on, we need to keep going."

Once school was over, Wiebke and I used to go to ballet lessons in the old town three times a week. Not that I was overly fond of tutus and such-like, but I did love the feeling of being able to control my body down to the tiniest muscle. Afterwards, I would be so incredibly tired, something that I really didn't need to be, today at any rate. I could scarcely be more tired than I already was. Not a good way to start an intense training session.

Indeed, my performance that day was just one big disaster. I was already unable to concentrate on my bar exercises, because I kept on watching out for the shadow, as if it were likely to burst through one of the mirror walls in the practise room. When it came to counting my pliés, I was always out, and I ended by making a complete mess of my sequence with leaps, which drew Isabelle, the ballet teacher's, ire upon me. She was constantly telling me to correct my arm posture.

"That looks like the wings of a dead bird, Flora. Watch out for your elbows."

"I am doing that."

"You are not. And remember those wrists."

"Ye-es."

"Your elbows!"

I was totally frustrated after only half the session, and couldn't keep going. So I made my excuses, muttering "I don't feel well", and rushed into the changing room. Of course I was used to making mistakes, and with my small frame (a snub-nosed dwarf, as Lavinia was fond of describing me), was never likely to be chosen to dance in Swan Lake.

This time, though, it was just too much for me.

I was so tired I could scarcely keep my eyes open. Hastily, I pulled my clothes on, not even bothering to remove the clips that held my brown hair in place for training, and ran out into the street. Without worrying about any strange shadows or giving a thought to my dream, I hurried towards the bus stop. I suppose I thought I was going crazy. Not that I had any experience of that, but one did hear fairly often about people who suddenly started seeing things that weren't actually there. Maybe Wiebke's theories about the wonky wiring in my brain weren't so silly after all. Seeing shadows! My goodness, maybe I had brain fever!

"Flora! What's the matter?" Wiebke called, when she caught up with me near the town library. She too had only partly changed, and her pink costume was visible inside her jacket. I told her breathlessly about my self-diagnosis, which she rejected with energetic cries of "Rubbish!"

"So, what's the problem? You can see black patches. It could be due to circulation problems. What you need is certainly not a padded cell, but a coffee," she declared, steering me towards the Starbucks.

"No," I protested, "you don't understand. They're not just patches, they are... creatures, d'you see? They're alive." I hadn't the slightest idea how I knew that, but I was sure of it.

"I am your best friend, and that means that I understand everything," Wiebke said in a tone of voice that allowed of no contradiction.

Five minutes later, we were sitting on a comfy sofa sipping at big cups full of cappuccino foam.

"Maybe they're the ghosts of dead people, who have unfinished business and need your help," Wiebke said, smiling at me. She giggled, "That would be so cool, wouldn't it?"

Unfortunately, I couldn't laugh at her joke. Wiebke looked at my face and grew serious again. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to poke fun at you. But I still don't think you're going crazy. Nor that there really are any shadows."

She pulled a hair-grip out of my pony tail, which is naturally a bit too loose. I was having another go at growing my hair. I'd been trying for years, but never managed to get further than shoulder length. Somehow, I would always lose my nerve and subscribe to the mysterious view that a bob suits my face. This time, though, I had promised to keep going. Anyway, by then my mane had already grown down to my collarbone. "Maybe you're not feeling too well today," Wiebke said thoughtfully, taking a great mouthful of cappuccino, and burning her tongue in the process. "Are you getting your period?" She inquired quietly. I shook my head,

"No, and it doesn't feel like that either. I am totally tired, and I saw those things, I really did."

"It's just so weird." Wiebke propped her head on her hand, and her pink diamanté earrings clinked when they touched her glasses.

"I think so too," I said and at that very moment, I froze as if I had just seen a car accident.

Another shadow had appeared.
A rather taller one, this time.

Wiebke's eyes followed my gaze out onto the street, where the shadow was hanging in front of the Starbucks window like a low-flying thunder cloud.

"There," I whispered. "There's one of them, again."

"Where?"

The shadow was floating right in front of us, taking up the entire top half of the window, like a black hole that had been ripped out of the world. A black mass, a flickering entity with no eyes. All the same, I knew that it was staring at me. I started to tremble,

"It's there".

"Do you mean the one beside that tree, over there?"

Wiebke was pointing at a lime tree on the other side of the road. "No," I gasped, incapable of moving. The shadow was staring at me, and I felt as if it was peering right through my eyes into my soul. As if it were wondering if I was the one it was seeking. What sort of rubbish notions were these? I blinked and the.... thing went away. It surreptitiously drew itself in, as if getting ready to jump. Then it vanished.

Only then did I realise that I had been gripping Wiebke's hand. I quickly let go. My fingers had left white marks on her skin. "Sorry," I muttered.

"That's OK," Wiebke's eyes now showed real concern. "Boy, you went so white, I thought you were going faint. Maybe you do have a problem with your circulation, that makes everything go black before your eyes. Hey, drink some coffee, or would you rather have a glass of water?"

"The cappuccino's fine," I said quickly.

By now, I was desperate to get home and hide in my room, where I could pull my bedclothes over my head and go crazy in peace.

"Listen, I really need to lie down for a bit."

"Good idea," Wiebke stood up. "One of the couches has just been freed."

"Actually, I was thinking of my own bed," I explained.

Then I emptied my cup by throwing my head back and waiting for the rest of the foam to slide into my mouth. That's the best bit, after all.

"Shall I ask my Mum to come and fetch us, to take you home?"

Wiebke had already brought out her mobile to call her parents. I shook my head. Wiebke's mother looks just like her, just a bit older, and was a passionate mother and homemaker. Whenever I went to stay with Wiebke and Linus, she would be baking cakes or cookies, making ice cream or putting a bar of chocolate on one's pillow. She always made me feel like pitiable orphan, something I really couldn't face at the moment. I hastily replied,

"Sweet of you, but it's not necessary. The bus stop is just round the corner."

"Ok, then, but I'll chum you to it, in any case."

"That's great," I said, longing for my bed.

Everything would surely look different once I got home. How could I have guessed that the next catastrophe was already waiting for me there?

2 – An uninvited guest

My home was in a part of the town called Steele, in a little side-street near the River Ruhr. The houses here were old and tall, with fancy fronts and damp basements, and they loomed against the bluish grey afternoon sky like sleeping monsters. Our apartment was on the third floor of house number 34, a sandstone building with Art Deco window sills. Our name plate read 'Fam Gerstmann' in fancy letters.

The stairwell was also a bit Art Deco, with its black and white tiles and elegant banisters. A pale echo of an earlier age that vanished, along with any potential burglars, by the time you reached the door of our apartment, which bristled with burglar alarms and security locks. "On account of the fish," my father had explained when I was still little. Our apartment contained more than 20 aquariums, some filled with sea water, and some with soft water, and all of them loaded with all kinds of valuable sea creatures. (My father owned a specialist aquarium shop; we would occasionally tease him by telling him he was his own best customer.) Although I still had no idea what sort of burglar would be especially interested in our clown fishes and sea anemones, both my father and Christabel seemed completely obsessed by the thought of being robbed. They were constantly fiddling with the alarm system. In fact, they had recently installed an electronic security system around the windows, and my father's study was fitted with a photo-electric barrier. The whole thing was getting out of control. Just to come through the front door, you needed no fewer than five keys, so it took me ages to get in. Particularly because I was balancing a full washing basket on my knee, which I had brought up from the laundry. I could hear voices as soon as I entered the hall.

At first, I thought that Christabel was watching another action film from her extensive collection, then I realised that it wasn't Jackie Chan but my father who was talking in his bedroom about 'protective measures' and 'dubious restrictions based on rumours'. He sounded serious.

Was something up with the shop? I felt my mouth grow dry. My father was never at home at this time. Suddenly, I was fully awake; I dropped the washing basket and my rucksack and rushed into the living room. "Is everything OK?" Three heads spun round in surprise.

"Oh, angel-child, we weren't expecting you just yet," said Christabel.

Two quick steps, and she was beside me. She was wearing her usual flowery smock and fluffy pink slippers, but her dyed red perm was not as neat as usual, today. There was even a lock of hair dangling in front of her face, making me

wonder once again how old she really was. 60, at least! In any case, too old for shocking pink lipstick.

Beside Christabel my father seemed almost colourless with his mousy brown hair and plain clothes. He was a lanky man almost two meters tall, but if he hadn't exuded such an air of authority, sitting in his wingback chair, you would scarcely have noticed that he was there, next to his housekeeper. In any case, it was neither Christabel's hair nor my father's tightly compressed lips that were doing my head in, but the boy who was making himself comfortable on our sofa. His green eyes were looking at me, no, he was staring at me as if I were a ghost. He was about my age, blond hair, a pale face with freckles, and good-looking in a strangely cool sort of way. Not my type, I decided and immediately wondered why the thought had crossed my mind just at this time.

"Who..." I stammered.

"Take a seat, angel-child," Christabel grasped my arm. I shook her hand off straightaway.

"Who is he?"

"This is Marian Immonen, an exchange student from Finland. He is going to live with us for a few months," my father explained, with a truly unhappy expression on his face. As for me, I had the strange sensation that I had misheard him. Strangers were never allowed to enter our apartment. That was a golden rule, one that was almost as important to Father and Christabel as their alarm system. During all the years we'd been friends, I'd never been allowed to invite Wiebke around. Crazy, like I said. But I had accepted it. Ever since my mother had stopped living with us, we hadn't been a proper family anyway, just a chaotic house share. I had hardly ever felt the need to complain about it to anyone.

But, now we were playing host to an exchange student? I folded my arms over my chest.

"Where's he going to sleep?"

"I'm getting a camp bed in the study," Marian said. His accent was clear enough and he was a bit too sure of himself for my taste.

Somehow, I seemed to have heard his voice somewhere before

"I'm not talking to you at all," I told him, glaring instead at my father and Christabel

"I want to know straightaway what's happened. Why is he here?"

"It's only for a while," my father said.

I waited in angry silence for an explanation, but nobody appeared ready to provide one. For a moment, the silence hung between us like a fog that was sucking up the very air we were breathing. Even the fish in the aquariums that lined an entire wall in the room seemed to be expecting something as they swam up to the glass sides.

Christabel and my father looked steadily at each other, while Marian gazed at his hands, as if he was wishing he could disappear. I too was earnestly wishing he were somewhere else, in the Finnish Forest or something, but not here with us in Essen, where my family was about to do something desperate. My father's ebony eyes had a tormented look about them, and he resorted to propping his head up with his hands and giving a great sigh. "You see, the problem is that the shop isn't doing too well at the moment. We get paid a bit for being a host family and..."

"I don't believe you," I interrupted him, appalled to hear how harsh that sounded. "I mean, you can't be serious about that. For years, we've not allowed anyone, not even a workman in here, and now we're suddenly taking in a total stranger? If we really need money, why don't you sell a couple of your own fish, if they are so valuable? Why don't we sack Christabel?"

"Flora!" All at once my father was absolutely furious. "Christabel is a member of the family".

"Yes, I know, sorry," I said in a rather subdued tone, because once again I'd shot my mouth. Of course we wouldn't sack Christabel. She was the world's worst housekeeper but I loved her. She had practically raised me (well, I'd actually raised myself, but she'd been around at the time). "That's OK," said Christabel, placing her hand on my arm again. This time I let it lie; it was a bit comforting to be touched. Until the next half-hearted attempt at an explanation, at any rate. "Do understand, angel-child, that this is how it has to be," Christabel began.

"It won't be that bad either. You're sure to make friends."

"Pah," I replied.

Something was not right, here, what were they trying to hide from me?

"I'm not a child anymore, so do me a favour and tell me what's up."

"We've just done that!"

"Rubbish!"

My eyes were brimming with tears. That was just what I needed. What was the matter with me? Only yesterday, everything had been the way it always was, but then I'd had that strange dream, which still made no sense to me at all. I had seen shadows where none should have been, and now I had come home, only to find that my family had suddenly cast off their most important principles without telling me the real reason why.

My lower lip started to tremble dangerously so I did the only possible thing; I decided to retreat. "I don't want him here," I muttered in Marian's general direction, and rushed into the hall. I slammed my bedroom door shut, and then threw myself on my bed, buried my face in the cushions and sobbed. That went on for quite a while, until I had had my fill of crying, which I was in no particular hurry about.

Hot tears rolled down my cheeks and formed damp patches on my pillow. I let it happen; there were too many thoughts whirling around behind my eyelids. I was furious, and confused. Above all, I was wondering if my life really had gone off the rails in a mysterious way, or whether I was simply experiencing a psychological

blackout. Could I possibly have summoned up my dream, the shadow and the boy in our living room, out of sheer exhaustion? I didn't actually think that was the case. On the other hand, here in my bedroom, everything was as usual. My eyes slid over my embarrassingly tidy desk by the window, the wall, which was painted deep red, the bookcase, and my cupboard, which was almost ridiculously small for a girl (in fact, I only had as many clothes as I really needed). Above my bed hung the only decoration that I had succeeded in growing fond of; it was a mobile made with brightly painted wooden birds.

My mother had sent it to me with a letter of apology from Brazil, where she was now living with her new family. At any rate, that is what I had told myself, successfully, after I had bought the thing six years ago in an antiques market. Truth to tell, I had never heard a word from my mother since the day she left us. And the birds had tiresomely gloopy eyes. However, I simply couldn't get rid of them. It was absurd, but as far as I was concerned, that mobile was my last memento of Mama.

Someone knocked briskly at my door.

"Angel-child," Christabel asked, "may I come in?"

I did not reply and pulled the duvet over my head, closing my burning eyes. For about quarter of an hour, I tried to fall asleep. After all, I was by now totally weary, my limbs were so heavy and my hands and feet felt like they had concrete buckets stuck to them. Surely I would see things more clearly if I could get some rest. But I simply couldn't sleep.

I heard a scratchy sound against the wall behind my bed head, where my father's study was. Apparently, they were putting up the camp bed. So they were serious.

I still didn't want to believe it.

Slowly, my head started to ache. I threw the duvet off with a sigh, because it was much too hot underneath it, took a deep breath and stood up. First I sat at my desk and took out the little notebook that I wrote my homework in. Just a couple of maths exercises for tomorrow. I'd done them yesterday.

Then I noticed the basket with all the ironing in it and started to pick out the socks and fold them into little balls. Of course, that should have been Christabel's job, just like the cooking and washing. Although Christabel was supposed to have trained in one of the best colleges for domestic staff back in England, where she came from, she did not seem to be capable of doing anything of this kind. Instead, she accompanied my father almost everywhere, and took a decided interest in martial arts. My father seemed to find all this perfectly normal and was anyway so busy with his shop that I had done most of the housework since I was a child.

So I was all the more surprised when, three-quarters of an hour later (I was just folding the hankies) there was another knock at my door.

“Dinner’s ready,” said my father. “Please come along.”

“I’m not hungry!”

“You certainly are.”

Indeed I was. I was as hungry as a wolf, as I now realised. All I’d eaten that day was an apple and a solitary slice of pizza. I shuffled reluctantly to the door and followed my father into the kitchen, trying my hardest to look deeply hurt.

Marian and Christabel were already sitting at the table. Christabel’s conscience was clearly bothering her, but Marian’s expression was inscrutable. He now looked a bit older than I had thought; his broad jaw gave his face a rather angular look that I had not noticed before. On the table stood dishes of pasta, tomato sauce and grated parmesan. I sank onto my seat. “Who did the cooking?” I asked listlessly. “It was me,” said my father, who had put on a T-shirt with ‘I heart guppies’ on it. He sat down beside me and handed me the first dish with obvious pride. Indeed, it didn’t taste too awful.

All the same, that dinner was a rather silent occasion, mainly because I spent most of the time staring at my plate. Christabel made a few attempts at getting me to talk, either about my day at school or her careful attempts at imparting information (such as, Marian comes from South Finland, when we went on holiday there the year before last, we were almost neighbours). I replied in monosyllables. Most of the time, the only sound was the clicking sound made by Christabel’s fingernails. They were so long that she had trouble holding her fork, and they were pointed enough to slit a person open. Of course they weren’t real nails, but the gel kind you get in a nail parlour, so they were much harder than normal nails. And clearly much more dangerous.

In fact, Christabel had always been the one who assumed the role of protector in our family. I could still remember that holiday in Mallorca, five years back, when a pick-pocket had run off with my father’s wallet. Christabel had not only caught the guy, and rescued our property, but she had also... re-designed him. All our money had been inside that wallet, including my father’s and my passports. I had been rather shocked when I saw her rush at the young man who had not reckoned with our elderly housekeeper’s martial skills. She put him out of action in a trice by dislocating his shoulder. The poor guy had howled with pain. Though I am no friend of physical violence, we couldn’t fail but be glad that Christabel was there. My father would have been completely overwhelmed by the whole affair. He couldn’t bring himself to hurt even a fly.

Now, though, Christabel was looking more nervous than aggressive. Her eyes were constantly moving between Marian and me, backwards and forwards. Even when I wasn’t looking at her, I could feel her watching me. It was just as if she were waiting for me to make friends with that dratted foreign student that she had taken on. But that was one favour I was not going to do her. I hastily shovelled the pasta down.

Finally, I managed to finish my helping. Although I wasn't quite full, there was no question of sitting there any longer, just to get some pudding. I was still much too angry. Without waiting for the others to finish, I stood up and announced, "I'm going to sleep," and was almost out of the door when I suddenly halted. No! It couldn't be true! Had I finally lost my marbles? I whirled round and glared across the room at the sink.

Out of the corner of my eye, I had spotted a movement. A movement where none should have been.

A shadow.

Had these things now pursued me into my own home? I blinked, and the place next to the worktop was empty.

Goodness me. Should I ask my father to take me to a psychiatric clinic? I was sure that there had just been something there. Right beside the sink, and it had taken a step towards me. I could feel a vertical wrinkle forming on my forehead and rubbed my eyes. I ought at least to have my eyes tested again. I would need to that in a few months' time anyway, to get my driving licence. The thought that I might be blind or crazy by the time I took my driving test made me smile, and cringe at the same moment, because that smile surely meant something else. My father was sitting with his back to me, and noticed nothing. Christabel and Marian were watching me with extremely strange expressions on their faces.

"Is everything OK, angel-child?" Christabel asked. I blinked and stammered, "Yes, sure. Good night."

I staggered uncertainly to the bathroom and stood under the shower, letting the warm water splash over my head and back for longer than necessary. It did me good. As if it were washing all my confused thoughts away. I felt my muscles relax and the merry-go-round of my thoughts gradually slow down. It slowed down so much that by the time I was lying in my bed, full of food and dozing, I had decided that I'd been mistaken, back there in the kitchen.

It had been a long, strange day. No reason for seeing a shadow behind every corner, I thought as I propped my cuddly sheep cushion under my neck and reached for a book on my bedside table, meaning to read for a bit. However, my eyes were drooping after only a couple of pages. I was so tired, so incredibly tired. More tired than ever before in my life. Sleep was overwhelming me like a wild river that threatened to swallow me up. I felt as if I were being dragged down into the depths. As if I were falling into a dark night. As if I were sinking down to the bottom of a dark volcanic lake. It felt good and restful, and quite different from usual. Normally, I would slowly subside, and sleep quite lightly.

This time, though, I let myself fall, exhausted, further and further into the darkness, a silky black lake that slid over my skin like a caress. Until the gentle darkness was suddenly pierced by a light which blinded me and made me flinch. I could not see where it was coming from, but for one brief moment, I felt as if I had been entirely lit up. My insides were filled with the brilliant clear light. It was almost as if I myself were shining like a shooting star and dashing over the night sky. I enjoyed the heat on my skin which seemed to be stroking me, and saw nothing but brightness, which made me feel safe. If only I could have stayed in this light forever.

Shortly afterwards, though, it went out as suddenly as it had started shining. The darkness that had seemed so pleasant before enveloped me again, but this time its grip was icy, and it dragged me down into its abyss. I was freezing, and wrapped my arms around my body as I fell, noticing at that very moment that I was no longer alone. All around me were shadowy forms, and they too were falling. We were all rushing downwards like human raindrops. We froze as we hurtled towards a ground which drew nearer with every second that passed. I made out a sea of roofs and chimneys, which seemed to stretch from one horizon to the other. A grey city that glowed greyly at me. But I felt no fear, was strangely impassive, as one can only be when dreaming.

Was I really dreaming again?

I couldn't tell, and just kept falling. The dark city below me drew steadily closer. Streets and squares emerged out of the jumble of houses. People were moving around in them, growing rapidly larger, while I hurtled straight at the roof of a square-shaped house, rushing, faster and faster. I was just about to touch it.

I was waiting for the crash, and blinked, closing my eyes for a fraction of a second. In that instant, though, I sensed that my fall had come to an abrupt end.

Incredulously, I opened my eyes.

3 – Eisenheim

I was back in that room. I recognised it by its smell and the implements hanging from the ceiling. This time, though, I was not floating in a mist-filled tub, but lying on a sort of stretcher. And I didn't feel as numb as I had been in my dream at midday.

I sat up briskly and noticed that my initial impression hadn't been so wrong, either. I had landed in a kind of lab, albeit a very dusty one. The room was small, scarcely smaller than my room. Maybe it only seemed that way, though, chock-a-block as it was with *things*. Every centimetre of wall, apart from a gap for the low wooden door, was covered with shelves, on which heaps of books, crucibles, boxes and test tubes lay about in a terrible muddle. Peeking out from among them were instruments and

strangely-shaped metal objects, which looked suspiciously like scalpels. Something slimy was floating in a preserving jar on one of the highest shelves.

I swallowed. Could this possibly be a place for operating on mad people? After all, my stretcher was set pretty much in the middle of the room, and it reminded me of my GP's leather consulting couch. Also, the smell was right, although the dust and cobwebs didn't fit with the notion of sterilized equipment. Also, the muted glow from the oil lamp that hung from the ceiling didn't look much like professional lighting. A shudder ran through my body, mainly because I suddenly realised how insipid and colourless everything around me seemed. Washed out and faded. What kind of strange dream was this? I looked down and noticed that I had lost all my colouring too. For a moment, I just stared at my greyish white hands.

Then I heard a long drawn-out squeaking sound, which made me jump, and the door of the lab suddenly opened to admit the old man who I had already seen in my previous dream. "Ah," he said when he saw me. "You are awake." More quickly than I would have thought possible at his age, he took two steps and was beside me. Although his long sweeping robe and his bushy eyebrows did not give the impression that he was just about to do a brain transplant, I shrank away to the further end of the couch.

"Who are you?" I asked huskily.

"You must be scared, Flora, that's completely normal. Naturally you do not understand what's happened to you today," the man drew closer. "I am Fluvius Grindeaut and there are no grounds whatsoever to be afraid, all right?"

All the same, I kept on shifting further back. Too far; I landed with bump on the tiled floor. "Hops a daisy!" said the bearded man as I rubbed my sore bum. Strange that a dream could feel so real.

"What... is this place? Where..." I was stuttering.

"Please, Flora, you really must --"

At that moment, just as I was pulling myself together and realising that I was wearing dark baggy trousers with a matching shirt and soft leather boots, another figure appeared from nowhere. A second later, and he was standing there, scarcely two meters away from me. I jumped, because this was someone I already knew.

It was Marian. Tall, pale and just as colourless as me, he was looking at me, his jaw firmly clenched. He was wearing the same sort of clothes as me. He folded his arms in an emphatically casual way, and ran his eyes over me in a long assessing gaze.

"Flora?" he murmured doubtfully.

I squinted at him and took another step backwards, feeling my shoulder knock against one of the shelves. I began to run my hand along it, searching for something I could use as a weapon. "Do relax, please, Flora, we will explain everything," the old man repeated imploringly, before turning to Marian and glaring at him.

"Did I not tell you not to turn up here? Not until I had spoken to her."

“Pray forgive me, Master,” Marian said, just as my hand touched something soft and furry that made me jerk it away in disgust.

“I should not have watched by her side for so long.”

“Indeed,” the man turned to me once more, saying, “Come, Flora, we have much to arrange and should do so in a more agreeable place”

He opened the door and signed for me and Marian to follow.

I hesitated at first. I didn't trust these people, but I was also scared of the gloomy lab. Furthermore, I was now really keen on waking up. Unlike my dream at midday, this one had definitely gone on too long. I tried the old trick, and gave my arm a jab, but apart from feeling a surprisingly real amount of pain, nothing happened.

Marian was standing expectantly in the doorway, watching me.

“Come along, he said,” and it sounded almost friendly.

I sighed and followed the two men outside, along a rough stone passage lit by grey brackets, which ended in a wrought iron door. Straightaway, I was in the open air again.

It was night-time and we were walking across a little square with huge houses all round it. On the far side rose the outline of a church, and there were more alleyways branching off on either side, which I could only guess at in the darkness. The icy cold air struck at my face though my clothes were proving amazingly warm.

“It's not far,” the old man said, heading for the church, “you really don't need to be afraid.”

“OK,” I said, surreptitiously falling back a couple of steps.

“I will ask Mafalda to make tea for us,” he went on, glancing back at me over his shoulder with a smile on his lips. The smile froze on his mask-like face because I decided at that moment to run away. I simply turned round and ran for my life. Without pausing to think, I rushed into the nearest alleyway. “Wait!” the man shouted hoarsely. “Stay here!”

I paid no attention and simply kept on running, regardless of where, just to get away from those people. The houses loomed up on either side of me, in the darkness. Now and then, there would be a beam of light from a window that cast a dim shimmer over the alley. My steps were almost inaudible on the cobbles, and all I could hear was my own panting and the beating of my heart. All the same, I felt I was being pursued.

Marian was behind me, somewhere.

He soon caught up with me, being simply much faster than me, and I soon felt a current of air at my back. The darkness was my only recourse, and I hoped to lose him in the tangled alleys. I quickly took a turning and ran along a street that curved many times. Then I squeezed between two house walls and came out onto a straight

street. I thought I had lost him, this time, but then I noticed that I had ended up in a dead end.

Marian leaped at me and grabbed my shoulders in an iron grip. I defended myself, trying to shake him off, and to hit him, but it was useless. Nonetheless, I didn't give up, but twisted and turned, shouting "Help" as loud as I could, while my nostrils filled with the smell of wood, resin and earth. A wood, I thought suddenly. "He-lp," I shrieked. "Do calm down, Flora, nobody wants to hurt you!" Marian shouted, holding me a bit more tightly.

"Calm down!"

"But I don't want to calm down," I gasped, "Help! Can't anyone hear me?"

Nothing was moving, anywhere.

"Please," Marian tried again in a friendlier voice. "We are helping you, you'll come with me, won't you?" he asked, forcing me to look at his face. "Won't you?" I gulped, bewildered, because he looked so different from back then, at noon-time. His blond hair was bleached almost white, and hung loosely over his face. His green eyes looked like grey marbles, in this strange city. Like shiny glass. Something in his hard gaze affected me deep within, without my being able to understand or explain it. It was a strangely familiar yet unknown feeling. The expression on his good-looking face unsettled me; I could have sworn it contained a spark of friendliness.

At the same time though, I could feel myself growing horribly angry. "What are you up to, crashing into my family, and crashing into my dream?" I spat, and the spark died. "I don't know you. I don't like you. And I don't need your help, do you get it?" For a long moment, we glared at each other, then I pursed my lips and stared past him meaningfully, and waited. Marian held me for a few seconds more, then his grip loosened.

"I get it," he said at last, and finally let go of me.

He turned round abruptly and walked away. Without looking round once. I watched him go, dismayed and out of breath, until he had disappeared around the nearest corner. I was alone. Exhausted, I crouched in a doorway and rested my head against it. My upper arms were hurting where Marian's hands had held them; they were sure to develop bruises. I sighed. Bruises in a dream, how weird was that? What was happening to me? Although I didn't know much about dreams, I didn't feel that this one was normal. The opposite, in fact. I had wandered into a crazy dream world, which seemed almost real to me, although I was far too old to believe in places such as this. I wanted to know the time and felt in my pocket for my mobile. In vain, of course, because I was dreaming. A beastly dream with no mobiles. For a while, I just sat on that door-step, uncertain what to do. Maybe the most sensible thing was just to wait until I woke up, I was thinking, when suddenly something shot at me from out of the darkness and dragged me to the ground with a growl.

Sharp fangs flashed before my face, and I could smell its foul breath. It was an animal, no doubt about that, and it was snapping at me. In my panic, I twisted out from under the creature, which about the size of a sheepdog, avoided the monster's snapping jaws and punched its flank. My knuckles scraped against its scaly body, and the creature's lizard-like eyes narrowed to slits. It lunged at me again, and this time its needle-like fangs grazed my shoulder. I screamed, though it surely wasn't a deep wound. Warm blood was seeping down my arm as the creature leant on my chest, ready to rip my neck to shreds. "Filibert! Down! Come here!" a child's voice shouted.

The monster actually let go of me, instantly, and trotted over to the girl who had appeared at the end of the alley, wrapped in an old-fashioned coat and a fur hat. I picked myself up, aching all over. The monster was rubbing itself against the little girl's legs, as harmless as an earthworm. She must have been about nine. A frown appeared on her forehead when she saw me. "So... so very sorry," she stammered, though she did not look particularly upset. "I've only had Filibert for a couple of weeks, but he is rather wild, even for a drago."

She felt in her coat pocket and then held her hand out to the creature at her feet. The drago, as she called it, seemed to be considering briefly whether to bite her, but it ended by snapping up the titbit that she was holding out to it.

"Your pet nearly killed me, little one," I gasped, pointing at my shoulder.

A dark patch the size of a plate had formed above my right collarbone. The girl patted the monster's head,

"I'm really sorry about that. Somehow, he's always doing that sort of thing," she said, throwing me a conspiratorial glance. "My mother's told me that, out there, where the eternal night begins, there are demons lying in wait for anyone who dares to go there. I have been wondering if Filibert could have been possessed by one of them." The little girl was whispering now. "That would be really cool, wouldn't it? Don't you think?" She threw me a gap-toothed smile.

"Not bad," I replied slowly, and flinched when the beast looked at me.

"Anyway, nobody else has a possessed drago," the girl said in a hurt voice, and turned round. "Filibert and I must go now. And your shoulder will heal soon. It's only a scratch, after all."

Totally perplexed, I pressed my wound to stop it bleeding and followed the pair with my eyes, even after they had vanished into the confusion of alleyways. A monster had attacked and bitten me! Was my tetanus jag up to date, at least? I tried to visualize the most recent stamp on my record sheet, but then shook my head firmly. Goodness sake, this was a dream, nothing else. Admittedly one of the rubbish sort. And, the way it looked, one that I was well stuck inside.

I tucked my hair behind my ears and huffed on my icy hands. A cup of hot coffee would be just the thing, I thought, scarcely registering that I had left the doorway. I decided to explore the city, which looked more and more remarkable the more I saw of it. I walked on, without knowing where my steps were leading, and it was not long before the silence was broken by a rushing sound that gradually grew louder. And clearer. As I drew closer to the sounds I was able to make out voices, and hear cars and people. Curious, I turned a corner and suddenly found myself on a wide street, lit by gas lamps. It was a bit like stumbling into an old black and white film. People of all ages were wandering among the shops and cafés, their menus written in swirly letters. They were all dressed in old-fashioned outfits, the women in tight dresses with low waists and matching hats, the men were wearing cravats and carrying walking sticks. Splendid old-timers were wending their way past playing children and cylindrical billboards showing ads for variety shows and plays. 'Rue Monsieur le Coq' could be read on an elegant sign on the wall of one of the houses.

On the other hand, I was also noticing things that I had never seen in this kind of film. People, for instance, would start flickering and then vanish into thin air in a second, while others would appear from nowhere. There was a woman leading three of those monstrous lizard dogs, as if they were cuddly pets. And, floating above people's heads, were loads of globes about the size of footballs, which glowed and cast a soft shimmer over their colourless faces.

I wandered slowly along this street like a sleep-walker, though none of the people paid much attention to me. Now totally caught up in my dream, I was fascinated by the villas and town houses from another era, the palaces and squares with fountains and monuments, which reminded me of photos on old post cards. On one occasion, I nearly tripped over when I spotted the familiar outline of the Eiffel tower on my left, with the unmistakable onion towers of the Kremlin behind it.

A little later, I yelped with surprise when the old-timer beside me simply rose into the air and floated over a van that was blocking its way. The car then traced a respectful circle round the tip of a tower that I would have said was Big Ben, if it hadn't had a dozen dials on its side, all showing different times, instead of just one clock face. As if a crazy architect had tried to display every possible time-zone, I thought, but then I broke off in mid-thought. Surely it was much better not to try to understand what was happening. After all, dreams were not logical.

So, I kept on walking and the street grew noticeably narrower and darker as time passed. There were no more shops, and if I did see one, its windows would be boarded up. The houses grew uglier, more dilapidated. At this point, I remembered that I'd wanted to drink some coffee, but the cafes lay far behind me now. There were fewer and fewer people about, and finally I was alone.

Now, I could smell the stink of hot oil and gases. Gradually, more and more factories and chimneys of every kind rose up around me, black smoke belching out of them, to hang like storm-clouds in the unlit sky. In the distance, I recognized a mine-shaft, which reminded me of the coal mine in Zeche that we had visited last year as part of our history course. Apparently I had reached the industrial area, in this place.

All the same, I didn't turn back. Something, a sort of feeling, was drawing me deeper into this dreary region, until I came to a square that was covered with thick patches of grey fog, which hung damply over the dirty cobbles and made it impossible to see clearly. That was why I could scarcely make out the people who were marching in long lines, one after the other. They looked defeated, damaged. And there were so many of them! Faceless men women and children were filing past me. Enveloped in rags and exhaustion, they streamed towards the factory doors that were arranged around the square, dark pits that seemed to swallow them up, with their shuffling steps sounding like one long slurp.

I slowly made my way through the workers, their tired eyes scarcely seeming to register my presence. For my part, I was recognising more and more individual features, sunken cheeks, and bony shoulders. And a girl's face! "Lena," I shouted in amazement, when a girl with bushy eyebrows and acne pushed past me. She was clearly Lena from my class! But she did not react, and didn't even look up. "Lena, wait for me, do!"

That was a mistake. My voice echoed over the square, and beyond the dreary footfalls, as if I had been speaking into a megaphone. Above me, the night sky filled with neighing sounds and I realised that my big mouth had let me down again. Someone had noticed me. Someone who definitely did not sound as he were just going to ask me nicely to leave the premises. "There! There's someone there, a girl!" a voice shouted somewhere out of sight. I threw my head back and was stunned. "Seize her! Don't let her get away!" a man's voice ordered from somewhere above me. "I'll take charge of it," another man replied, while I tried to shake off my surprise.

I was simply fascinated by what was going on high up above the square, and by the beings who were circling around up there. To start with, all I could see were the hooves of the enormous horse that was floating down from the sky. Then I saw its mighty legs. They were treading the darkness, while its meter-long wings flapped in the night air. The rider was guiding the animal through the air in an almost elegant manner. He had whiskers and a top hat, and was spurring the horse on, dropping down on me like a bird of prey. I could feel the animal's glowing eyes staring at me.

At last, I was running away. For the second time that night, I was fleeing. I ran blindly through the workers, shoving them aside and sensing how the gaps immediately closed up behind me. It was impossible to say if the people were trying to help me,

or simply seeking to return to their places as quickly as possible, like elastic bands snapping back into shape. At the time, I couldn't have cared less.

The pitch-black horse was now flying right over the peoples' heads, neighing frantically. I ducked and rushed forward. I had just reached the end of the square, and the wind of its mighty wing beats was blowing my hair into my face. For a moment, I could see nothing, only darkness. A dirty, famished man was running though the crowd at my side.

"Now or never!" he gasped. "I've had my fill of labouring for a pittance in this filthy hole."

"Halt!" the rider shouted above us.

"Never!" the man sprinted again, ran past me and...

... ran straight into the hooves of a second winged horse. I saw the being lower his head, and a second later, a crunching sound rang out, causing a shudder to race down my spine. The man screamed. Then, the sound of a body striking the cobbles. And wing-beats. So close! I could feel hot breaths at my back. Wasn't that the end of the square? I dashed blindly into the nearest alley. It was scarcely more than a gap between two works, but it saved me. My pursuers were right behind me, but the entrance was too narrow, and both rider and horse were forced to veer upwards again.

"Where is she?" someone shouted angrily. "You haven't lost her, have you?"

"No, she's right here, below."

The voice stopped, because I had thrown myself into a dark niche beneath some concrete steps. I landed hard on my knees, as the wing beats grew quieter, and were hopefully going away.

"Oops," someone whispered right beside me.

I jumped, instantly whirling round. The shock was almost enough to make me leap out of my hiding place. A smell of unwashed body met my nostrils. I made out a man's face, right in front of me. It looked pasty and dirt-encrusted, just like his ragged jacket and trousers, the left leg of which had been cut off above the knee and sewn up, because his shin and foot were missing. The man was half sitting, half lying. His head was a bit too big for his emaciated body and it was covered with bald patches, as if someone had taken whole handfuls of his stiff hair and ripped it out. He looked pitiful, but he was smiling, as though, just for a change, he wasn't someone who wanted to kill me. "Good evening, gracious lady," he said, an anxious expression playing on his face. "If only I had known you would be paying a visit to my humble home, for I have nothing to offer you at present. The best fresh ashes, of course, but they are not to everyone's taste."

He swept some powder up off the ground with a deft movement of his hand, and dribbled it into his mouth. "Personally, I find it excellent," he mumbled as he chewed.

"There's nothing better."

"Um," I replied.

"Oh, do forgive me," he wiped his hand on his jacket and offered it to me.

“My name is Barnabas.” Rather dubiously, I shook his hand, which was still filthy, and, as I noticed, icy cold.

“Um, Flora,” I stammered, “My name is Flora.”

“Charmed.”

I was silent and listened out for a long moment, in case the flying horse was returning. All was quiet, though.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Barnabas, catching my eye. “They’ve enough on their hands with the shift change. We are safe here for the time being.”

I leant against the wall in my relief, and took stock of my surroundings. The space was larger than I had realised, and I made out a heap of rags at the back, which the beggar (that’s what I took him for) seemed to be using for a bed. The whole floor was covered with a layer of ashes, an inch deep.

“Do you live here?” I asked

“More or less. Less rather than more,” Barnabas replied.

I nodded, while he shoved another handful of ashes into his mouth and ate them with relish.

“And you, dear lady? What brings you here?” he asked, licking his fingers.

Well, indeed, what did bring me here? What was this ‘here’ anyway? I wrapped my arms round my knees and stared at the grey underside of the steps, which formed the roof of our hiding place.

“I don’t know...” I said truthfully, at last. “This is, I think, one of my dreams, the second, to be precise. I fell asleep and was suddenly in this city and...”

“I understand,” Barnabas interrupted, wrapping his arms around his chest.

“You are new”.

He appeared to ponder for a moment, then gave me a strange look. I sensed that he was examining my clothes and appeared to see something he hadn’t noticed before. A predatory look crossed his face momentarily, then he was smiling at me again. “When you got here, was anyone expecting you?” he asked in a friendly way.

I bit my lip. Had it been a mistake to run away? I did not know, and had the feeling that I knew far too little, in any case. Marian’s face appeared before my inner eye, pale and hard. “We’ll help you,” he had said. Though I hadn’t needed any help. Or hadn’t I? No, after all, this was all a dream. A stupid, horrible dream, from which I would sooner or later awake. “Oh,” said Barnabas. He had apparently misinterpreted my silence.

“Well, that does sometimes happen. In the mines, there are occasional, what shall I say...” the beggar cleared his throat. “There are accidents with it. In a few cases, the overseer doesn’t notice that this causes one of the workers to awake.”

“Accidents with what?” I asked. “And, awoken? What does that mean?”

Barnabas’s smile grew broader, but I had the feeling it did not reach his eyes. He shook my hand again, this time much more firmly.

“Welcome,” he said solemnly. “Welcome to the Kingdom of Shadows, to Eisenheim, the city of wandering souls.”