

Do Not Kiss the Sleeping Beauty by Marketa Chaloupkova.

Thanks to Michael Blue for correcting the book.

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In ordinary cities such as London, New York or Hell (yes, it's a real place in Michigan) people are scared of ordinary creatures such as snakes, wasps or mice. In London and New York people may be worried that if they bother someone, they will tell them "Go to hell! People in Hell usually do not tell anyone to go to Hell because they are already there. In a small town called Boggy Den the danger has a completely different form. Her name is Mrs. Crystal Blue.

Mrs. Blue looks like a helpless old woman at first glance, but as she slowly wanders down the street, it is not advisable to look at her strikingly large hat, behind which she has either the first spring flowers or reddish autumn leaves, or her long plaid coat or a wooden wand that rhythmically hits the cobblestones. It's wise to watch her shadow. And the people it touches. If you look carefully, you will notice the mayor's shaking knees. You will see the director of the meat factory searching his pockets and looking for his inhaler, or the police chief catching his fainting wife in an experienced motion.

Generation after generation respectfully greeted the ever-bent, shrinking remarkable lady. And they bow a little as did their parents and the parents of their parents before them. Of course, there are those who miss her without paying attention to her. Tourists come sometimes even to Boggy Den. But anyone who has lived in the town for some time has heard of Mrs. Blue and most people have enough sense to get out of her way and at the same time they remove any garbage on which the the old woman could slip or a branch that she might trip over.

But let's spill the beans. Mrs. Blue is neither a sorceress, nor a dangerous murderer. She is the principal of a local grammar school and she has been it's principal for decades. The little old lady is ninety-six years old, and she considers the word "retirement" to be vulgar. To her it is as bad as any other word that is being replaced with three dots or stars in any decent article. Many years ago, when Mrs. Blue was only eighty, the mayor of the city (who did not attend her grammar school) suggested that maybe she should retire. Immediately he was told that Mrs. Blue owned some important buildings in the town. Since then, no mayor has ever come up with such a vulgar idea.

It is not common to have a grammar school that is a corrective institute at the same time. It sounds as a contradiction because a grammar school should be a schools for good students. However, the grammar school in Boggy Den was such a remarkable school. If a

headmaster expelled a child who tried to burn a school or drove half of the teaching staff mad, you could bet that Mrs. Blue would take such a rascal in with open arms. And in the next few years such a rebel would become the next mayor, a director of the retirement home, a national theater soloist, a rose grower, a butterfly breeder. They would either care for something fragile or tame the forces of nature. After all, I believe that if you visit a nuclear power plant, a circus or a prison, you will find several employees who will have the signature of Mrs. Blue on their Report Card. And in the last case, all of them will be on one side of the bars, where there are jobs, dressing rooms for employees, and doors leading out onto the street.

The rebels who came to the grammar school in Boggy Den never talk about what happened to them when they got detention. Folks say it was something so terrible that there were no words to describe it. No one who ever got detention talked about it to anyone else. They don't even talk about it among those who experienced it as well - they just exchange that look. A look that says: I know it and you know it, and we'll both be silent forever.

There are even some detention legends at the grammar school. Bloodthirsty Brian, Tearing Cecily or Edward Arson. The three were no geniuses. Bloodthirsty Brian anatomized earthworms only to find that they had no blood, Cecily proved her bravery while she tore (by bare hands) a wasp's nest hanging on a nearby tree, and Edward wanted to set fire in his former school and he started it with his own chair - so they terrified others by their own stupidity. But when they joined their forces they managed to make a big mess together. There is no point in describing the whole story. Perhaps some other simple mind would take it as an inspiration. I will just say there was a lost teacher, a laxative, a toothless dog, a rusty hoist, a broken bomb, nine dead rats and one fake banknote. You can imagine how all of this managed to keep busy not only the police patrol but also the firefighters for the whole night, and why people ever since believe that the local supermarket is haunted. More importantly, where tears, wails, swearing or slapping did not help, the intervention of one little old lady changed everybody. The three of them got detention and it is said that they have aged three years in one night. Brian whose favorite toy was a scalpel until then, began playing the harp and practicing water gymnastics. Instead of shooting with airguns, Cecily began experimenting with growing vegetarian carnivorous plants, and Edward began to compose poems instead of throwing crackling balls at dogs.

One of the harshest prank at the Boggy Den grammar school is to encourage new students to provoke the seemingly helpless old woman. And for someone to be so malicious and recommend something so suicidal to others, one or the other must be completely stupid.

One of the unfortunate ones who had been provoked to do something like that was a boy called Oscar Mild. He was thirteen, he was brand new in the city and he hadn't heard anything about Mrs. Blue. Oscar's father was a wealthy businessman, and in Oscar's former

school everybody knew it. The boys treated him with respect, knowing that Oscar would invite them now and then to a private golf course and there was a small gazebo with a refrigerator full of chilled cola and ice lollies. No one even made fun of him or his big, protruding ears. Oscar was quite a good boy, he was bright and he was not brought to the grammar school by his own trouble, but by the problems of his older sister Ella. She was expelled from a school another city after she organized motorcycle night races on the school football field.

Not everything that happens to us is fair. David Baily knew about it. Unlike Oscar, he had a perfectly normal name and he had both ears slapped to his head and even hidden under the overgrown brown curls. But not only had he not had a rich father, but had no one to call a dad. His mother, David and his three older siblings, barely made a living, and they were all crowded in a small flat in an old building. David wore worn clothes from his two older brothers (and, worse, from his sister) and dined day after day the nasty leftovers of food that his mother brought from the factory canteen where she worked as a cook. Coincidence brought Oscar and David together in one class. And anger and envy led David to urge Oscar to throw a wet sponge on the blackboard at the most inconvenient time – during a lesson of chemistry led by Mrs. Blue.

Mrs. Blue was by no means evil enough to condemn someone to a dreaded punishment for a mere wet sponge. But at her age she hadn't heard or seen the best. She did not even notice the impact of the sponge on the board and actually noticed it when she slipped on it. At her age, every fall was dangerous, and a fracture could mean death, and so even though nothing happened to her (except that she had to go through the strenuous march across the street to her apartment for a dry skirt), she considered Oscar's attack to be an attempt to murder her. And it is clear that for an attempt to murder one deserves to get detention.

The next three lessons were the longest Oscar had ever gone through in his life. At the break, some good person began to tell him stories he knew nothing about. Oscar listened to him with eyes open wide and started to dread the worst! He realized how stupid and how foolish he was. Oscar did not regard himself as a hero, but he was not a coward either. He certainly did not consider the idea of running away to avoid the punishment.

Oscar's stomach was so tight that after his lessons he didn't even have lunch and went straight to the headmistress's office and shyly tapped Mrs. Blue's door. He heard her shuffling footsteps, and then the door slowly opened. The old lady didn't say a word, she merely gestured to Oscar to follow her. She carried ancient-looking keys in her hand. But there was nothing so special about that. The whole school was from the late nineteenth century, and although it had been repaired and renewed over the years, there were quite a few old doors.

The old lady had her office on the ground floor and now she panted up the stairs to the first

floor, standing there for a moment, and as she caught her breath again, she led Oscar to the double-leaf stained glass door. There was no sign indicating what the door was hiding. Mrs. Blue struggled for a while with the castle before she managed to unlock the door. To Oscar's surprise, they opened with unexpected ease and without a creak.

Before they came in, Oscar could smell the old, very dusty library. The air was full of dust, which was everywhere, on the bookshelves and on the floor where he could see a narrow path in the dirt. Evidently Mrs. Blue did not want him to sweep the dust or fight the spiders, nor was she interested in the old crumbling books. She went in her own old footsteps to the other, much smaller door that was hiding at the other end of the library, unlocking it, and it only opened with a reluctant creak. The old woman stepped back and motioned for Oscar to enter. She hadn't said a word all the time.

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Oscar had to bend down to walk into a small room hidden behind the library. It was a small, gloomy study. Only a little light penetrated the dirty window, and the dark wood on the walls made it even more unpleasant. There was only a desk, a torso of a rotting chair, and a pitcher of very old water in which several insect corpses floated. A large tapestry hung over the table, and that was all. Oscar turned to the old lady, hoping her to finally speak and to tell him exactly what his punishment was about and how long he would have to stay in that dark room. But Mrs. Blue did not enter. Just as Oscar turned, the door clicked shut and the lock creaked. He could hear the headmistress slowly leaving and closing the second door behind her. And all without a word.

Oscar didn't understand what that meant. Why are school detentions embroiled in such frightening fables? Does the terrible "horror" really meant being locked alone with a few dead flies and live spiders in a small, dirty room? Maybe all those rumors were just a lie or something that a princess in white dress, suffering from arachnophobia, had spread among the students. Oscar shook his head in disbelief, then went to the window and tried to open it. But he couldn't. He stood there for a moment, watching life on the street. He saw David Baily coming out of the school cafeteria, and at the same moment his belly rumbled. He scolded himself that he was intimidated by such a tale and didn't eat his lunch. Who knows how long his detention will take. But there was no point being mad at David, and Oscar knew there was no point to scold himself. He just had to entertain himself for the moment he was here and forget hunger.

Oscar studied the wall tapestry for a while. It was a fairy-tale scene - a castle, thorns, a maze, a dragon, a sea bay, rocks and dwarves. It wasn't a fairy tale that Oscar knew, or there were more fairy tales mixed together. Hard to say. The tapestry bored Oscar after a

while and he turned his attention to the desk. He found an old book in one of his drawers and began to flip through it curiously.

The book was relatively thin, hiding only one long poem with no rhymes:

The castle sleeps in the arms of roses
and its gates are covered with bushes,
the echo of betrayal sounds in its corridors,
the prince's name is whispered by thorns.

You will see it but you will not find it
if you choose the easier path,
the straight road leads the other way
and you'll only see the reflection of its luster.

The right path is intricate
and the left leads to the dragon cave,
and an old aged beech stands,
at a place where they separate.

Dragons are the kings of dark nights,
but you are safe during the day
however, you will not pass without help,
even when dragons dream and sleep.

Dragon Rock will give you a hint
how can you walk through the maze,
wait for the time when the moon watches,
why should you fumble through the bushes.

Behind the labyrinth is a river
and the pitfalls of an old bridge,
under it there's a small boat waiting,
perhaps I have said enough.

Only if you pass obstacles,
then you can find the sleeping towers,
if you are afraid, hurry back,
let the coward crawl under his bed.

While Oscar was reading the poem, it darkened outside. That was weird. He was locked in the room for half an hour, so it should be half past three. Moreover, it was September, and such darkness could not be at this hour. Not even in the middle of December. He went to the window astonished and a little frightened. And there he gasped. The street and the cars were gone. Oscar stared out at the gleaming surface of a lake, reflecting the first stars. He tried again to open the window, and this time the handle under his hands obediently slackened.

Terrified, Oscar backed to his desk and flicked through the poem quickly in the fading light. For a moment he hoped to see school grounds and the street again when he was finished reading it. Only a lukewarm breeze, the smell of water, and the chirping of insects came through the open window. Outside it was getting darker and the lake remained stubbornly in its place.

While Oscar huddled on the dusty floor trying to recover from his shock, the night crept in.

And it was a real country night, just a black, impenetrable darkness, no street lamps, no lights in the windows of houses, no passing cars, only darkness and thousands of stars that glittered both in the sky and in the reflection in the lake. Oscar walked to the window, looking for any sign of life around him, but not only had he seen nothing but heard nothing but the silent splashing of the waves that shattered the shore.

Oscar pulled his cell phone out of his backpack. He didn't have a signal, but yet he tried to call someone. Unsuccessfully, of course. He used his cell phone at least as a flashlight and walked to the door. The handle beneath his hand slackened, and the door not only opened, but collapsed with a loud thump to the floor. Oscar gasped and touched the door-frames, which began to crumble under his hands because the wood was completely rotten. Then Oscar heard a terrible scream and he jumped to the window and closed it in a single stroke. The animal roar had ended, but now Oscar could see a flame moving above the lake. It looked like a huge flying torch and it was heading in his direction.

Oscar staggered out of the room. But his way was blocked by falling rotting shelves. Where there was an old unused library a short time ago, there was now something more like a dump consisting of rotten wood, broken shelves, piles of crumbled books and loose sheets of paper. Oscar cleared his way through them until he reached the stained glass door, which was also not locked to his relief. He ran through them into the hallway and stopped at the last minute. Where there was a corridor before, there was only a huge hole in it, in which birches grew. Oscar felt the cool air and saw the stars above him. There was a ruin of what was supposed to be a school building in the strange place he found himself. Oscar carefully backed to the library and returned to the room where he left his belongings. It was clear he couldn't do anything at night, it was too dangerous. There was only darkness and silence again. No flames or noises disturbed the lonely place.

3

Oscar didn't know where he was. Was he in the same place at a different time, or was he at a completely different place? Is this all real or is something wrong with him? The night had come so unexpectedly that he wasn't too tired, he was just terribly hungry, so he only huddled on the floor for a long time before finally falling asleep on his backpack. He awoke when the sun was already high in the sky. He wondered where he was for a moment, then ran to the window and threw it open. Sea ripples were playing in front of his eyes, what he considered to be a lake at night was actually a sea bay. The sea stretched as far as the eye could see. And there was nobody else. He had seen no fisherman, no human dwelling, no ship, not even a seagull, and he couldn't smell salt in the air. Oscar picked up his backpack from the ground, thoughtlessly throwing there the book with the one single poem and headed for the door. At the last moment he thought of something, he returned to the room

and took a picture of it with his cell phone. A crumbling desk, tapestry, window view. Then he finally went through the library to the school corridor, if you could call it so.

Oscar did not dare to walk past a hole in the floor, the hallway was so shaky that he was sure it wouldn't be able to bear his weight and he would break through. A little awkwardly he managed to jump on one of the stronger birches that grew in the hole. He rubbed his knee, but then he climbed down the young tree quite easily and safely down to the ground floor. Everywhere there was at least a meter of fine white sand. Oscar did not want to explore the remains of the building and climbed out the nearest window opening he found. Then he went to the sea. The building was only fifty meters from the shore. Oscar turned to look at it. Most of the roof was gone, the perimeter walls were all peeled, the windows broken, and he could see that much of the school had missing floors and ceilings, and instead of students it was full of birch trees and bushes.

Blood was running down his knee, and although he knew it was going to hurt, he had nothing but seawater so he washed his knee with it. To his surprise, it didn't hurt a bit. Oscar stood in surprise for a moment, then bent down, took some water in his hands, and sipped it. The water was not salty! Oscar had never heard of a sea without salt. He was increasingly confident that he was not at any normal place on earth and at any other time, but somewhere else. Where, of course, he didn't know. He took a long sip, then looked at both sides. He was in a sort of bay and couldn't see far into either side. He had to choose one direction, so he decided to walk to the right. After a while he took off his shoes and walked on the wet sand barefoot, it was much more comfortable. But soon he began to feel tired. He was terribly hungry and the backpack with his books was too heavy. It was really hot, so he tied his sweatshirt and jacket around his waist. He was glad that he wore pants with legs that had zippers and could be removed, so he made shorts of them.

Oscar had barely walked two kilometers. He left the bay where the school ruins stood and found himself on a long sandy beach. Before him was only sand and nothing else, there wasn't any sign of buildings. Grass and pines began a short distance from the beach, and he saw some rocks in the distance.

Oscar headed for the woods and sat there, opened his backpack and put all its contents on the sand – it contained some notebooks, a textbook of chemistry, mathematics, English and history, and a sweatshirt and sneakers for his football training. There was now an empty drinking bottle, a comb, a hand cream, a wallet, the poem book, and his cell phone. Oscar stuffed all the textbooks into a plastic bag. He kept just the poem and he hid the rest of the books into a hollow of a tree. Though it was quite unnecessary, he brushed his light short hair with a comb, then thoroughly put some cream on his face. He put all his clothes into his backpack and left only his football T-shirt in his hand. He wanted to soak it in the water and tie it around his head to protect himself from the sun.

"Are you a hero?" somebody said behind him.

Oscar turned, startled. In front of him stood a little boy sucking some odd fruit. He was wearing shorts with braces and a canvas shirt, and what he bit into looked like an orange, but he was eating it with bark.

"What?" Oscar blurted.

"Looking for the castle?" the boy asked.

"Is the castle far?" Oscar replied, delighted to hear about something human built in the area.

"How am I supposed to know where the enchanted castle is as no one who has gone looking for it hasn't ever returned yet?" Oscar swallowed enviously as he watched the boy eating. The boy added, "When I am big enough, I will kill the dragon and the evil prince and deliver the princess."

Oscar thought the boy was trying to drag him into some of his children's games while he needed to find out something real about his surroundings. So he asked, "Listen, do any people live here?"

"No," the boy said quickly.

"Where do you live?" Oscar asked him.

"I must not talk to anyone or take anyone home."

"I just want to ask a few things of someone older," Oscar explained.

"No, I can't help," the boy said. "Once we had one of the disappearing people at home, and Dad forbade us to bring strangers home. There are some weird disappearing people or heroes looking for the castle, and I must not talk to such people."

"Who are the disappearing people?" Oscar asked.

The boy went pale. Oscar's ignorance seemed suspicious.

"I have to go," he said.

"Wait," Oscar pleaded. "Is the castle this way?" He asked, pointing to the right where he was going.

But the boy turned and ran away through the trees. Oscar had no idea how he might have frightened him, but he had no intention of pursuing the boy. Obviously there were some people living here, and Oscar hoped to meet someone soon. In the meantime, he decided to

continue walking. He didn't know what was in the distance ahead of him, but once he had chosen some direction, he decided to stick to it. After all, who knows what to expect on the other side of the bay.

Oscar went back to the sea, soaked his T-shirt and turned it into a turban. He drank, then continued his journey. He had only walked some fifty paces when he saw a small sand castle. He had no doubt it was built by the small boy he was just talking to. There was a huge mass of thick seaweed growing where the boy played. Oscar looked at it carefully and saw something orange shine between them now and then. He threw the rucksack back into the sand and didn't even undress. He jumped between the seaweed and found there the orange-like fruit. He bit into it hungrily, and it was the strangest thing he'd ever tasted. The fruit's skin was slightly acidic, its flesh resembling marzipan, and then he bit its seed which was soft and tasted like smoked meat. Oscar ate one more fruit and then he was satisfied. He drank some water, and then, out of curiosity, he tasted also the seaweed on which the fruit grew. It tasted like soaked unsalted crisps and when Oscar let it dry in the sun for a while, it started to crunch quite nicely. So far, Oscar has only found the seaweed in this one place, and he spent at least an hour making supplies. He dried a full bag of seaweed and put a few orange fruits in his rucksack before he set off again. The seaweed disappeared after a while, and he walked along the clear water, in which a fairly large number of fish swam. Oscar had no idea how to catch, eviscerate or bake one. He had no knife, no fire, no nerves to kill the fish, so he was glad that there were other possibilities to feed himself.

He walked along the beach for about two hours. The rocks he had seen on the horizon in the morning were now much closer, and he could see the towers of the castle, hiding in the distance behind the rocks. Oscar had no doubt that the boy he was talking to had never left his village as he had no idea the castle was so close. Maybe that's why he was making stupid stories about it. It was late afternoon and after another hour of walking, Oscar saw signs of people living here.

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At a place where a small stream was pouring into the sea, he could see the barely tangled hut of branches among the trees and a field where something that looked like large carnivorous plants grew. Oscar came closer and saw hairy legs sticking out of the shabby dwelling. He heard was also a loud snoring. Oscar gazed cautiously and from a respectful distance, the giant carnivores. He had never seen anything like this before.

"What do you want here?" an annoying girl's voice said, and a girl emerged from behind one of the plants. She was only a little older than Oscar. Snoring in the hut ceased and after a while a 15-year-old boy climbed out of it.

"Get out of here," he said to Oscar.

"I just wanted to ask a question," Oscar said.

"We don't advise or help anyone," the boy said.

"We don't do any good deeds at all, to be clear," the girl added. "We're not going to evaporate like steam over a pot."

"Don't explain anything to him, Cecily," the boy said. "You can help and advise him, without realizing it."

"Aren't you Brian or Edward?" Oscar asked. He had heard of a well-known trio of school children, one of whom was the girl Cecily, who had grown vegetarian "carnivorous" plants. He just thought it was an old story. "I am," the boy said hesitantly, wondering if it was a good deed. Then, in his slow head, he compared Oscar's question with his answer and decided that he should continue and added, "Edward."

"We lost Brian," sighed Cecily, "it is a terrible loss for us. He could kill and cook fish. But he was too soft. He saw a poor traveler, explained something to him, gave him some food and he was gone."

"Don't say anything else," Edward frowned, then scanned Oscar properly, and when he saw one of the seafood in the translucent side pocket of his rucksack, he snorted contemptuously. "Are you eating this sea trash?"

Before Oscar could answer, Edward reached for the fruit, pulled it out of Oscar's rucksack and tossed it casually to one of the plants. The carnivore snapped at it swiftly and began to eat it. It looked like it was really biting, then the plant opened again and a small blue pancake fell from it.

Oscar bent down for it. After all, it was his fruit that Edward fed the plant. One of the carnivores grabbed Oscar and gripped his arm. He jerked away from it, but it took considerable effort. His arm was all drooled, if I can say that plants drool and the plant juice began to burn him uncomfortably. Edward and Cecily just laughed in amusement. Oscar ran to the nearby stream and quickly dipped there his arm, which began to blister. It burned unpleasantly. The water in the creek was salty! This was such a weird place.

Oscar did not even look back, wading through the saline brook and hurrying to the fresh sea, where he washed his injured arm again. He would prefer to sit by the water, because his arm hurt the least when he kept it wet, but he wanted to get out of sight of the two as quickly as possible.

"Bad deed," Edward grinned and Cecily gave him high five.

"Say hello to the dragon!" Cecily called out to Oscar, but he didn't even look back and headed toward the castle. He was still clutching the blue pancake that had been ejected by the carnivorous plant. He didn't know whether to taste it or throw it away and decided to try it when Edward and Cecily were no longer in sight.

"Dragon," Oscar muttered to himself. Could there be such a thing in a country with a sweet sea and a salt stream? He remembered the animal roar he heard at night, and the flame that lit up the black night. Vanishing people, he thought. If Brian was one of the schoolchildren from Boggy Den grammar school, maybe his disappearance actually meant returning home. But those fools haven't realized it. If they were here for punishment, could it be a good deed or a series of good deeds that would allow them to get back?

Oscar marched along the beach, dipping his arm in the water every moment. His forearm was red and full of painful blisters. He walked on the beach for about an hour, and when he took a break and looked back, the hut was only a small point somewhere in the distance. But the cliffs were getting closer and closer. Oscar finally took the blue pancake and broke it. To his surprise, honey began to flow out of it. Oscar ate a whole half of the pancake and the blue crust tasted like almonds. It was yummy but he decided he had enough of sweet for the day. So he ate some of the crunchy seaweed he had with him and wrapped up the rest of the honey pancake in a bag. Then he swam in the sea to relief his hand. After drying and dressing again, he decided it would be appropriate to start looking for a place to sleep. The cliffs were about two hours' walk away, and since it was late afternoon, he decided he should not delay too much and set off on his next journey. By the time he reached the rock, he was already quite tired. He ate two more orange fruits and ate the rest of the honey pancake, had a drink and also filled his bottle with water. It was getting colder, so he pulled on his sweatshirt and put on his jacket, then crawled into the first cave he had found. He fell asleep before the stars appeared in the sky.

Oscar slept like a log and only in the morning began to be awakened by cold, wet feet and stupid dreams. He dreamed of a small dragon who was drooling terribly and licking his legs eagerly. But the wet feeling had nothing to do with any living creature. Oscar had forgotten that there was a of tide, and tiny sea waves were now breaking into the cave, reaching the feet of the lighthearted sleeper.

Nothing will awaken a man as quickly and perfectly as startling. Oscar was on his feet in a moment. The sea was relatively shallow, so there was no problem wading around the rock back to the beach. To his delight, Oscar even found some seaweed that the sea had ejected into the sand. And among the fading lashes he found several tempting pieces of fruit. These were somewhat darker in color and looked a bit like mango and their skin was much harder than the one of the orange fruit and was slightly bitter. When Oscar fought his way under the

skin, he discovered a soft flesh that tasted like baked apples. The inside of the fruit tasted of cinnamon and nuts. Oscar decided to name the fruits for himself. The first one, which tasted of marzipan and looked like an orange, he started to call it a marzirange and the other one he called apple-nut. The names were not very original, but it was still better to think of marziranges than of orange balls. Oscar had three more marziranges from the day before, and found five apple-nuts in the seaweed, one of which he had eaten for breakfast.

He had seven more fruits for his journey. The tide did not allow Oscar to continue along the water, the sea was reaching to the rocks. Relaxed, fed, and in a fairly good mood, Oscar made his way along the rocks to find a way to go around them or through them. The rocks were jagged and there were numerous paths between them. But the first one Oscar came across had a dead end. Another ended after about fifty meters in a small area, from which led a narrow path, more suitable for a mountain goat than a human. Oscar preferred to return. The next entrance to the rocks looked promising, spacious, and Oscar could see into the distance. It looked like a pleasant way. Except for one detail. Oscar saw several prints of great talons on the ground. It looked like prints of a huge lizard. Oscar hesitated. Shouldn't he rather wait for the tide to move back and continue along the water? Shouldn't he look for another way? Shouldn't he return? While he was thinking this way, an elderly man appeared on the road with a basket on his back. Oscar greeted him, hoping the old man wouldn't be as reluctant as the people he had met so far.

The old man laid the basket on the ground and smiled at Oscar in a friendly way. "Another hero who's going to try his luck," he suggested.

"Do you know where this road leads, please?" Oscar asked.

"Well, if you're going to kill a dragon, you're on the right track," the old man replied. "But what I've heard, the dragon is still leading the force measurement."

"Are you saying there is a dragon among the rocks?" Oscar asked.

"What blocks?" The old man looked incomprehendingly, adding a little hesitantly, "There are no blocks growing here."

Oscar smiled, "No blocks growing here?"

The old man frowned and said, "Who is grinning near? Near what?"

"Would you tell me how to get to the castle or somewhere where people live?" Oscar tried again.

"You can meet the seven dwarfs. But people don't live in the castle," the old man said. "That's why it's also called a sleeping castle. The castle is cursed. There are just the plants,

lots of bushes, that's it."

"Just bushes?" Oscar repeated after him and added. "I guess only nuts grow there." Because he was sure that he was talking to somebody who was going nuts.

However, the old man was the second person who had said something about the castle being cursed, so even though Oscar had made fun of it, he knew that this rumor would not be just the idea of that little boy in the woods. Maybe there will be something about it, perhaps something that has a scientifically justifiable basis and what the local people simply do not understand.

"And beware of the lighthouse, that's the most dangerous place around," the old man remarked. "There are dragons living in the lighthouse, at least a dozen. And if you want the dragon to grow well, you must feed it with cabbage. That's my advice, hero."

With these words, the old man picked up his basket from the ground and continued his journey without speaking again. He didn't hear Oscar murmuring something about nuts and bananas behind his back.

5

Oscar made his way between the rocks along the path the old man had come. After all, it wouldn't be such a dangerous road when the old man walked along it. He could follow the old man's indistinct footprints in the sand, and here and there he could see prints of a giant animal. However, these dragon claws were rare. In one place there were several at once, then nothing in a long distance, then three or four and again nothing. Oscar walked the meandering path between the rocks for half an hour before he reached a crossroads. There was a huge tree stump and there were three paths. Oscar chose the left one, leading back to the sea and thus to a source of drinking water and food. In addition, he saw the old man's footprints on it. After a few meters, he saw a large number of dragon prints, that startled him, but after all the old man had come this way, and no dragon had obviously eaten him. Oscar went stubbornly on. It was hot enough, and he would soon need to refill his little bottle.

Oscar continued on the path for another half an hour, and the path between the rocks led him back to the beach. It was lined with rocks, but the sea had already begun to retreat, leaving at least a narrow stripe to walk on. And in the place where Oscar found himself, a large number of seaweed grew in the water and he found there both marziranages and apple-nuts. But there was something else - something that Oscar was not at all happy about. Less than a mile from where he stood, a lighthouse was towering above the rocks. Oscar didn't know what to do next. He ate, refilled the bottle and picked several other fruits and put them into his backpack. All the while he kept his eyes on the lighthouse, but there wasn't anything

moving.

Oscar wondered if he was going to go on and risk passing the lighthouse or coming back. But then he heard some sounds from afar. Someone was coming. Oscar grabbed a branch and quickly erased all his tracks in the sand. Then he hid behind a large boulder on the beach and waited. He had a great view of both the road and the lighthouse. The steps were relatively silent, and Oscar hoped it belonged to a human or some not very dangerous animal. The dragon would certainly make a much louder noise. In addition, dragons can fly. As soon as Oscar thought of it, he was scolding himself. He thinks of dragons as if they were real. But then he remembered last night - the roar and the flames he had seen above the bay.

The footsteps approached, and in a moment the crazy old man with a basket appeared on the path. Oscar sighed. But he had no desire to talk to the old man for the second time, so he crouched behind the boulder and didn't move. The old man came to the beach and waded through the seaweed for a while, gathering their fruits. He put them in a basket, from which he had taken out a package wrapped in canvas. When he filled the basket sufficiently, he stood still for a moment, looking cautiously at all sides. Then he unwrapped his package, pulled something out of it, and pushed it into the wet sand several times. Oscar could not see well what the old man was doing. He remained hidden behind the stone. The old man contentedly watched his work, took his basket and headed out towards the lighthouse. He stopped every fifty meters, always looked around carefully, and then slammed the object into the wet sand several times. He went on alone in shallow water, leaving no trace of him. Eventually he climbed out of the water and followed the path between the rocks. Oscar lost sight of him for a moment, but then the old man emerged again, headed straight for the lighthouse, and disappeared inside. Oscar just shook his head and went to the beach. After a while he found fresh dragon prints in the wet sand. He opened his mouth with astonishment and ran another fifty meters. There were other dragon prints. He walked another fifty meters to check where the old man made more prints.

“Wow, old guy, you are not as crazy as you pretend,” Oscar said aloud, gazing toward the lighthouse. Tales about a dragon are not a bad security system. Oscar had no doubt that the old man was just pretending to be a confused fool. He became curious. But at that moment he heard an animal roaring from the lighthouse. Oscar recognized the sound he had heard during the first night but he was convinced that the sound was fake just like the dragon prints on the beach. He really wanted to watch the old man, but decided to pretend to be scared for now and as soon as the roar ended, he ran back from where he had come.

He had no idea if the old man had seen him, or if the dragon roar was made just as a precaution, he stopped on the road between the rocks where the old man couldn't see him. Whether the old man saw him or not, Oscar thought it was better to pretend to fear and

watch the old man secretly. Oscar went back to the crossroads. He decided to explore the area a bit, but at the same time he did not want to move away from the lighthouse. On the way back, he noticed that there was a cleft between the two rocks in which coarse clumps of grass grew. He managed to climb the smaller of the two rocks. It was not a difficult ascent. The rock had many holes and it was easy to climb. It was more like climbing a ladder or climbing broken stairs. Oscar could see the landscape in front of him now. Because there were several high rocks around him, he could not see too much of his immediate surroundings, but he could see well the lighthouse that towered nearby and for the first time he saw the castle, from which only the towers had been seen. He could not see other human dwellings in the area. He could only see the sea, the rocks and the far-reaching forests. If there was something on the far side of the bay, it was now too far away for Oscar to see. In this wasteland, there was nothing else. The only interesting thing to do here was to watch the old man and explore the castle.

As Oscar sat on top of the rock watching the sea, the castle and the lighthouse, he remembered something. He had a tapestry on his cell phone that hung at school. There was a castle, a sea, a dragon, and other scenes. Oscar looked at the photo and found that the tapestry was actually a map of the landscape. The bay, the beach, the rocks, the castle, all of these were shown in the right place. Oscar smiled as he saw the dragon wrapping around the lighthouse. In the photo he saw three paths that led out of the rocks. The first road curled along the lighthouse back to the sea, the next led more or less straight to the castle, the third went inland and led into a maze. Behind the maze, Oscar saw a big river and a bridge. Oscar remembered the poem, there was something about the labyrinth and the bridge. He took the book out of his backpack and read it again. The poem was talking about a beech at a crossroad - after all, Oscar reached the crossroads, where a large tree stump stood. Could it be the remains of the beech tree? The book urged him not to go directly to the castle, but to take the right road, across the maze and across the river, which he was not supposed to cross over the supposedly dangerous bridge. Oscar also had to smile at all the dragons. The author of the poem had probably never tried exploring the dangerous left path alone. Oscar now also noticed that when he was upset for the first time, he hadn't finished reading the poem. There were other verses:

But whoever goes to the thorns,
to find the princess, truth and gold,
to seek for fame and perhaps wealth,
he has not set on easy way.

The goal is just the beginning,
a castle waiting for a hero,
you cannot wake up with a kiss,
the tower is better to miss.

Truth begin search in underground,
there is the one who doesn't sleep,
the one who knows best his drink
listen and always think, yeah think!

Oscar read the whole poem several times until he remembered some of the sentences by heart. Then he put the book back in his backpack and went down again.

Ascending the rock was a bit more difficult, and Oscar had some new scratches when he reached the ground but he didn't care. He wandered between the rocks until he reached the crossroads. To his surprise, he saw that a boy was coming from the middle way. They were only a short distance apart when Oscar realized that the boy before him was none other than David Baily, the traitor because of whom was Oscar stuck in in this strange place.

"David?" Oscar blurted in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

6

"Who are you?" David asked hesitantly.

"We know each other from school," Oscar said.

David felt a little relieved to hear about something normal like school. "I'm not recalling you," he admitted, "what grade are you in?"

Oscar was a little puzzled, he looked at David properly. David, who was standing in front of him, seemed a bit smaller than David he knew from his class. This David had very short hair, while older David had overgrown restless curls falling over his ears.

"Third grade," Oscar replied. "And you?"

"The second grade," David said quietly. Obviously, this version of David was a year younger than Oscar. This David was not so confident either. He seemed to be a little intimidated in the presence of his older classmate, and he didn't know how to treat him.

Oscar decided to keep some ace up in his sleeve and not to explain to David that they had a conflict. Nevertheless, Oscar was thinking hard - is it possible that all the kids from detention could get to this place at the same time regardless of their real age? Is the time going differently here? How is it that he met Cecily and Edward here although the rumors of them were years old? What about David? Why did he treat Oscar so coldly and was so hostile later? Does his older self remember that they were here together? However, he knew David that was one year older back in his world and that brought Oscar some comfort. David is certainly going back, there was a way out, and he knew David would find it. Maybe he could just stick to him and soon he would see David evaporate and be where he was supposed to be.

"How did you get here and how long have you been here?" Oscar asked.

"I've been here for about five days," David said sadly. "The headmistress locked me in such a tiny room and I drank some water from the jug standing there, and suddenly everything changed. It was immediately raining outside, so I couldn't see anything. When the rain stopped, I realized I was here by the sea. "

"I didn't touch the water," Oscar commented, and in turn told David how he got here. "So the headmistress did something to us, or perhaps it is the room," David said.

"Where are you coming from?" Oscar asked now.

David waved his hand behind him. "It's all weird here. Do you see the castle in the distance?"

Oscar nodded, "I'm headed there."

"Then save yourself the way," David told him. "It's just a mirage. I went there, I saw it all the time, and when I came to the place where the castle should be, it just wasn't there. It was all thorns, thistles and darts, and that was it. From a distance, it looked like a huge castle."

"Wasn't the mansion just overgrown with thorns to be seen?" Oscar asked.

"No," David shook his head. "There was no castle. It's just an optical illusion, it's just bushes and there's nothing behind them."

Oscar reached into his bag for the book and thoughtfully found the right verses. In the poem it was said that whoever goes the middle way will only see the castle, but will not find it!

Oscar began to take the whole poem much more seriously. He showed the book to David, who obviously never saw it because he was eager to read it now. Finally he closed the book and looked bored.

"I think it's just bullshit," David said. "A fairy tale. There's really nothing here in this place. I met a girl who said that if I went the other way I would go to town. So now I'm planning to go back, I've had nothing but blueberries and raspberries for days."

Oscar pulled one marzorange and one apple-nut from his backpack and handed it to David. While David was devouring it, Oscar explained how he could easily get such a meal. He also told him about the carnivores. Oscar was grateful for the luck he had in this respect. If he hadn't met the little boy right from the start, he would have been hungry while walking along the sea full of food. David had little to wear, he had just a T-shirt and no other clothes or school bag. As he explained to Oscar, he had all the stuff in the dressing room when he went to the headmistress. Oscar then lent him his sweatshirt. It began to darken and at the same time to cool. Oscar just thought that David could remember it and behave later in school in much more friendly way.

David reluctantly agreed to stay with Oscar this night and accompany him to the beach. Oscar told him of the crazy old man and false dragon tracks and his desire to look at the lighthouse. David did not consider it the best idea, and he was most interested in the beach full of seaweed and food. Oscar read the poem several times. He didn't believe in dragons, so he didn't worry about the part that dragons were masters of the night. He decided to go to the lighthouse at night so the old man couldn't see him. Indeed, if the lighthouse is a supposed dwelling of dragons, it will also be a dragon's rock, and it should have told Oscar how to walk through the maze. David laughed as Oscar studied the poem, but Oscar was just too curious to return to town with David.

Finally, it was dark enough for Oscar and David to go to the beach. The old man could no longer see them from the lighthouse. They sat on the beach for a while, talking quietly, and watching if something was going to happen at the lighthouse. Oscar, however, couldn't sit at one spot too long. He was eager for action. David didn't want to go closer to the lighthouse, so Oscar entrusted him with his things and he went to the lighthouse alone only with a cell phone that could be used as a flashlight. However, he didn't want to waste his battery. The light of the stars and of the moon were enough for him to see the sandy beach. Oscar was barely halfway when there was an annoying animal roar. But it did not discourage him. He still had a good kilometer ahead. He could see that light was shining in the lighthouse, and another light, or rather a flame, now appeared on its side.

Oscar soon reached the place where the old man had disappeared from his eyes in the morning. He shone for a moment on the path that wound up the rock. The flame at the lighthouse began to move. There was another terrible dragon roar. Oscar felt uneasy.

Something great stood by the lighthouse, and he only vaguely saw a silhouette that had lifted off the ground and soared up into the sky. The night was lit by a flame and a terrible dragon roar echoed over the sea. Oscar remained frozen, staring at the monster. He persuaded himself that there was no real dragon in the lighthouse, how else could the old man live there, and why would he make false dragon tracks on the beach? And if the dragon really spewed fire, wouldn't that flame look different? Would it not go out for a moment, would it have no other form? After all, what was moving away from the lighthouse looked more like a big torch. Oscar calmed down and set off again.

The old man seemed gone. Nothing moved at the lighthouse. Neither man nor dragon. But Oscar heard a dog's bark. He walked cautiously closer. There was a small house next to the lighthouse and he heard a furious dog barking from the house. He saw through the window a silhouette of a huge angry dog, who was very concerned that someone other than his master was hanging around. Oscar peered through the window. The house was actually just one larger room. There was a stove, a table and two chairs, a bed, a wardrobe, and a dog bed. In short, the common things one needs to live. Oscar walked to the lighthouse. The door was unlocked and narrow steps led up. He stepped on them carefully. He reached the gallery below the lit dome and found a large telescope on a movable pedestal. He bent down to the binoculars and started to explore all the directions. Above the sea he saw a fading flame. He wished he had the opportunity to see the landscape through binoculars during the day. If he could just watch the silhouette of the mysterious castle! He was looking through his binoculars for its outline, but the castle was not enlightened and it was too dark. But Oscar was intrigued by something else. He saw the way he wanted to go the next day. The moon was shining fairly bright, and perhaps the path was full of some light stones, it was visible in the dark a little. Oscar examined it thoughtfully.

Suddenly, there was another breathtaking look. Somewhere in the direction in which the road led, flames lit the dark night. The fire spread, its clear line progressing into the night gradually, then suddenly ran in all directions. Labyrinth. Oscar could see it clearly now. It burned in front of him, bright and radiant, its unmistakable contours shining into the night. Oscar studied it closely. He could see the outlines of the road that led into the labyrinth and on the other side continued, perhaps to the castle or to the strange illusion that the castle might have been. Oscar tried to remember the labyrinth. He took a picture with his cell phone, but unfortunately the battery showed only the last piece. Oscar preferred to turn it off. He made a mental picture of the labyrinth. From here he could easily determine how he should go through it. He hoped it would be as easy when he was inside.

Oscar was so biased about watching the maze that he jumped in terror as a dragon roar suddenly resounded through the night. The flame was returning to the lighthouse, and Oscar hurried down the steps and ran into the darkness. Above the dark sea, the sound was frightening, and the flame could be considered to be something coming from the dragon's

throat. But Oscar was only a short distance from the lighthouse when the "creature" approached him, and when he saw the monster's body, he had to smile. For a moment, before the flame landed, Oscar could see the air balloon's outline in the light that the lighthouse had cast.

Oscar continued quietly back to the beach and carefully set off down the path and then on a two-kilometer walk to the spot where he had left David. He was getting really tired. In the end, however, he arrived behind a boulder from which he watched the old man in the morning, but he could not see David anywhere. He turned on his cell phone, illuminated the area and made sure he was in the right place. The place was right, he saw his old footprints in the sand. But David's trail led back to the rocks. David was gone, along with all of Oscar's belongings.

7

"The coward," Oscar said aloud. He had no doubt that David was afraid of the supposed dragon, despite everything he had heard from Oscar before. David ran away for life and he hadn't thought of waiting for Oscar, let alone helping him. And he disappeared with all of Oscar's things. He certainly had no doubt that Oscar would no longer need any of this. He probably assumed that the mysterious dragon had eaten Oscar as an appetizer before he set out to have a good dinner. Oscar was angry. He didn't have much, but they were useful things. Now that he was going to move away from the sea, he will miss his bottle. He thought he might catch up with David. He was so annoyed anyway that there was no use going to sleep. So he did not hesitate and quickly walked among the rocks.

He stumbled through the night, lightening his way by his cell phone. Too late he realized he hadn't brought anything to eat. He was too far from the beach and it wasn't worth going back. Maybe he'll catch David! Maybe David was just too frightened, Oscar should not necessarily take his behavior as a betrayal, for the supposed dragon had frightened him for a while too. He thought David was really going back and heading for the city. He was all the more annoyed that he had taken his backpack and water bottle. After all, he would go to the city along the beach all the time and would have plenty of food and drink.

What a surprise it was to Oscar, when he reached the crossroads and saw that David's footprints led along an old tree stump and disappear on the way to the labyrinth. Really? David simply had to pretend his lack of interest in Oscar's poem. Oscar would be surprised that someone from such a poor family would not be attracted by wealth and fame. But it could mean that David was acting this way on purpose, perhaps disappearing from the beach right after Oscar left. Maybe he's trying to overtake Oscar. He couldn't figure out any other reason why David might want to act like that on his own. He considered the possibility

that David most likely did not want to share any treasures. The only other possibility was that he might have considered Oscar dead, but now Oscar ruled out fear as a motivation. If David was so frightened, he would be walking towards the city and would not face another danger.

Just when he missed the crossroad, he had to turn off his cell phone. Battery low! Sadly, Oscar slipped it into his pocket. The moon was almost full, and the night was really bright but he had to be careful. So he started to walk really slowly. After a while the sand was replaced by fine white stones, which reflected in the moonlight and the road was thus quite visible. After all, Oscar was able to see the road at least in part from the lighthouse, just because of the reflection.

He could see better, and suddenly the road turned sharply, and a burning labyrinth stood in front of him. It was built of about two-meter-long stone walls from which flames were burning. The walls were too tall for Oscar to see what the burning substance was. After all, he was more interested in the guard lying at the entrance to the labyrinth. Two small men sat on a blanket and played cards. One of them saw Oscar, put his helmet on his head, reached for his spear, trying to look like a soldier seriously doing his duty. The second, who was more interested in the game muttered something about heavy traffic, and then he also reluctantly rose. They tried to look as dreaded guards but it wasn't really working because they were two heads shorter than Oscar, who was not too tall.

"Good evening," Oscar blurted, "haven't you see a little brown-haired boy recently? Coming from the same direction as I?"

"Little," one of the dwarves repeated, outraged, and Oscar was angry with himself for the expression. David must have been a bit taller than the two men.

"Have you noticed that we would get something, Sodbeard?" the other dwarf turned to his companion, and his eyes slid to the basket at the edge of the blanket, in which he had a shot wild goose and some sweets.

"No way, Brownbeard," Sodbeard replied.

The two men fell silent and stared at Oscar.

"I have nothing," Oscar snapped.

The two dwarves just shrugged, sat back on the blanket, letting him know that he was not worth their attention.

"Can I go further into the labyrinth?" Oscar asked. The entrance to the labyrinth was closed by a gate.

"I don't know which pocket I have the key in," Brownbeard murmured.

"And I think you should not bother looking for it," Sodbeard said. "Let's not burn the midnight oil for somebody who lacks good manners."

"The little rat I asked you about, stole all my things," Oscar tried to mollify the dwarves. The dwarves ignored him.

"Come on, don't be heartless," Oscar pleaded. "I'll get you something on the way back."

"So we are heartless," grumbled Brownbeard. "We who freeze here week after week, we have to set the labyrinth on fire, and if we are unlucky and it is Saturday, we will lose a dance and roast wild boar... We who suffer on guard ..."

"And you shouldn't forget about the streams of beer that flow down there right now," Sodbeard reminded him dreamily. "And the heavy rain of the last week when we had a patrol. Indeed, we suffer very much, and it is outrageous when a lad comes here empty-handed."

"I'll get you something on the way back," Oscar offered again.

Sodbeard grimaced. "The way back, I'd like to see that. You'll probably die in the labyrinth. You'll never get out of it. "

"Or maybe you'll die on the bridge," Brownbeard said. "You will probably make a wrong step and you will fall into the river and you will be eaten by predatory fish. I don't even remember the last time when someone came back. "

Sodbeard, who was a bit slower than Brownbeard, thoughtfully scratched his chin. "Well, remember last week, old boy? Two went back. One who spent ten minutes in the labyrinth and then he gave it up and the other who ran from the bridge. Without a leg."

The Brownbeard scowled at Sodbeard. Apparently the Dwarves were exaggerating and they had only two speeds of thought. Slow and slower. Brownbeard was slow and Sodbeard even slower.

Brownbeard corrected Sodbeard now and said, "Without a hand." For he knew it was hard to run without a leg.

The dwarves were so engrossed in the account of their suffering that they heard the steps of the newcomer at the last minute. They jumped to their feet again, this time with surprising speed.

"Your majesty," Sodbeard said, trying to resemble a salute.

"We were just giving good advice to the newcomer," Brownbeard blurted, searching quickly his pockets.

"Very useful advice," Oscar said sarcastically, but no more. For the time being, he had decided to do the two dwarves a favor, maybe they would be a little more willing later. Their boss was a hefty older dwarf who was richly dressed. While Brownbeard and Sodbeard had ragged hats, plain canvas trousers and smocks with patches, the newcomer, on the other hand, had a carefully stitched clothes and a fur cap, his beard was braided and he had some beads in it as decoration.

"I hope so. If I find out you're hanging around, you're going to be punished by another Saturday patrol," their boss threatened. "What is this?" He walked to the bribe basket and pointed to it by his shoe.

"Your majesty, Mr. Greatbeard," Brownbeard said quickly, "tired travelers have left their cargo here because it was too heavy to be dragged along."

"Yes, sir," Sodbeard nodded. "We would never take any gifts, but then we remembered the poor Sootbeard's widow and thought we might give it all to her."

"Great idea," Greatbeard nodded. "I'll make sure she gets it, and I'd rather hand it over to her personally." With that, he bent down for the basket and hung it on his forearm.

"I am waiting," he gestured to the two dwarves, who were trying not to show their disappointment that the boss took their bribes. The dwarves, in their slow minds, wondered for a moment what the commander might be waiting for. Then Brownbeard realized that he should probably open the gate for Oscar and quickly unlocked it.

"Thank you very much for great advice, willingness and help," Oscar told him ambiguously. He saw Sodbeard smiling gratefully behind the back of Mr. Greatbeard. The dwarves, however, did not mislead their commander. Apparently he heard them a moment before they noticed him.

"You lazy bunch," he scolded them, "How dare you hang around here and blackmail the comers? Do you not know that delivering the castle is in our best interest? Who will we be selling our gold and precious stones to if there is no living soul around? You have a patrol instead of two other Saturday dances!"

Oscar could hear the commander's angry voice for quite a while as he wandered in the labyrinth. He went into a dead end twice and tried in vain to remember the right path. He was too upset, so he finally sat down for a moment and tried to concentrate. He scribbled a stick on the ground, wondering what the pattern he had seen from the lighthouse reminded him. The trail had a special shape. Dragon's back, he realized after a while. It's like walking on a

tail dotted with thorns. Oscar tried it and the road went on and on. He lost his way twice more, but always returned quickly and took the right direction. The labyrinth flared into the night. In many places the walls were crumbled, in some parts the walls were so damaged that he had to climb over the piles of rubble or intertwine among the bushes that grew here, blocking his way. Obviously the bushes did not belong here, the labyrinth was originally just walls and here and there some small rock or boulders that were artfully used as part of the labyrinth.

Finally Oscar saw the gate at the other end. It was locked too and he heard snoring from behind it. There were two more dwarves on the blanket. Oscar remembered the old man mentioned seven dwarfs. Oscar's prospect of talking to a dwarf was not appealing at all. He preferred to climb the gate. It wasn't that difficult and he carefully walked around both sleepers. He went on for a while until he was far enough from the labyrinth. When its glow ceased to illuminate his path, he crawled under a tree and fell asleep.

8

Oscar woke up early in the morning because of the chill . He opened his eyes and puzzled for a moment at the pineapples hanging above his head. He fell asleep under a tree with some strange fruit. It really resembled a small pineapple, with an ordinary stalk on its upper part. Oscar managed to pluck one fruit, it was not easy, but then he discovered that it had such a skin that he could not peel it. So he walked with it to a great stone and hit it hard. The fruit broke , there was a puff of smoke and it smelled like some mushrooms. So much for breakfast, Oscar sighed. He wanted to leave, but then thought better of it, he plucked another fruit and took it with him. Maybe it could be used as a weapon.

There were some sandstone rocks around him and they looked much more different than those by the sea. And then all of the sudden Oscar stepped into an exotic world. It resembled a rain forest. There were high trees, lianas, blooming orchids and two great parrots were flying overhead. A little farther he found the lake. The water was muddy and unpleasant, but at least it was not salty, and Oscar swallowed two gulps in disgust to quench his thirst. In his mind he was berating David.

He saw several carnivorous plants at the pond. He tried to throw the stinking pineapple to one of them. The carnivore spit it out immediately, and Oscar quickly stepped aside so that it wouldn't hit him. Oscar dodged and the pineapple fell into the water with a thump. A small crocodile emerged from the pond, hurrying through the water to where the fruit had landed to check it. Oscar hurried away in terror. There is such a dangerous creature living here, and he drank from that pond a little while ago, putting his bare hands in it! He decided to be more careful next time.

The forest ended as suddenly as it had begun, and Oscar stumbled over a beam hidden beneath some plants. All these plants and animals didn't seem to belong here and he was apparently in the remains of a former greenhouse. The plants, however, evidently grew well even without the protective glass. Unfortunately, all of these were probably grown just because of their beauty and no matter how much he tried, he didn't find anything to eat. He wasn't very lucky and not only because of the fact that he was beginning to get really hungry, but because of what was before him - an aged bridge and there was another dwarf standing by its entry.

Oscar knew that the bridge was to be full of danger, and that it is better to cross in a boat. But as he tried to look for it, the dwarf ran toward him.

"Hello, sir," said the dwarf. "My name is Bakedbeard , may I be at your service?"

"Bakedbeard ?" Oscar asked.

"Well then, sir, that name has come down in our family for several generations, since the time when his Majesty Bigbeard the fifth accidentally burned his beard and my grandfather, his devoted servant, placed his huge beard on a stove because he didn't want to have something as valuable as beard when his lord had lost it."

Bakedbeard was apparently as eager in his ministry as his ancestor when he rushed to Oscar so willingly.

"There should be a boat," Oscar looked at the banks. But he saw nothing but a foaming river.

"I'm afraid all the boats that were here are on the other side, sir. Or maybe at the sea. The river is quite wild this time of the year, and it's not easy to get to the other side. In the morning, a young man tried to tie up a raft from two trees, and the current carried him away like a toy. "

Oscar grinned a little gleefully.

Bakedbeard continued. "Let me recommend the bridge, sir, it's not as dangerous as it seems. All it takes is basic mathematical knowledge. "

Hesitantly, Oscar walked over to the bridge and looked at its cobbles. The bridge was covered with huge cobblestones and carved figures.

"Basic mathematics?" Oscar asked.

"Yes, sir," Bakedbeard nodded , but at that moment Oscar noticed with horror two books laid on Bakedbeard's chair. They were called " Fun Differential Leisure Examples" and " Jokes

on Exponential and Logarithmic Functions". Oscar was wondering what Bakedbeard considered to be basic mathematics.

"We dwarves are not allowed to cross to the other side of the bridge," Bakedbeard informed him. This was quite good news because it meant that Oscar wasn't going to meet other dwarf. He had only seen six of them so far and he didn't need the old man's words of the seven dwarves to come true.

"How can I cross the bridge then?" Oscar asked hesitantly.

"It's quite simple," Bakedbeard said. " You get to start here, at number five. In the second row, you can see a square with twenty-five on it. Multiply the numbers by five and when you get to the middle of the bridge, start dividing them. All these scary stories about the bridge come from those who simply walked on it and didn't bother with any mathematics. It is said that the former king had this bridge built so that no one really stupid could get into his kingdom. A lot of weird guys wanted to look for a dragon to kill and marry the princess. I recall John Stupid, Johnny the Fool, Johan Nut or John Bananas, this bridge cooled them down a bit. "

Bakedbeard thought for a moment , then hesitantly added, "I didn't even ask you what was your name."

"My name is Oscar, don't worry ," Oscar replied.

"That's good," Bakedbeard seemed relieved. "Sometimes I forget the protocol. I see a young boy without a pack of cakes and I forget he might be John, who ate them all. Most of those Johns couldn't count to five, but once one of them got to the other side and I was in trouble. That was a long time ago, when people still lived in the castle. Anyway, I will not waste your time, Mr. Oscar. Break your arms. That's what people say to others when they want to wish them good luck, am I right?"

"It's break a leg, actually," Oscar corrected him, thanked him for his advice and stepped on the bridge. He went from five to twenty-five, then 125, to 625, hesitated for a moment, and then proceeded to 3125, then the numbers were too large and he started to guess them by their finite digits. So he managed to proceed two more rows when the cube suddenly wobbled under his feet and began to sink . Oscar jumped instinctively into the next field. Of course, that was not the right number, and even this cube moved under his feet. The cube simply tipped him and he slid down.

The first block fell whole into the river and Oscar soon followed it. He was fortunate that the water was deep enough in that place and he did not hit any stones. Unfortunately, the current was quite strong, it was a ferocious river full of rapids and salty, of course. Oscar sputtered the bitter water. It was a fight just to swim on a spot. Seeing his struggle,

Bakedbeard cut a small tree with two powerful swings of an ax and hurried to Oscar. The ax and heavy clothing were not exactly the best swimwear.

He somehow managed to get to Bakedbeard, the act could not be called swimming, and leaned exhaustively on the tree on which the dwarf swam . The current carried them quickly away and they drove near the other bank. Soon they got to places where there was a relatively large mass of sand. Oscar felt the bottom under his feet, jumped off and extended his hand to Bakedbeard . The dwarf let the tree go and Oscar pulled him to the shore. There they were lying exhaustively for a moment, watching the trunk of the tree, which was stuck at a stone for a moment, then jumped, turned and slipped into the river again, disappearing from their eyes.

"Don't doubt your mathematics skills, sir. It was the right cube," Bakedbeard told him. "A traveler recently told me it wobbles. But we cannot go to the bridge to repair it."

"Why don't you go to the bridge?" Oscar asked after coughing up the water.

"I don't know," Bakedbeard shrugged . "I was told not to go to the bridge and across the river and never thought about it."

"If someone tells you to jump out the window, will you do that and don't think about it?" Oscar wondered.

Bakedbeard thought for a moment, then asked, "What's under the window?"

Oscar shook his head and crawled to his feet. "What are you going to do now?" He asked the dwarf. "Will you go back?"

"I will have breakfast now," Bakedbeard replied , pulling out a fish from under his moving beard. He cut its head off with an ax and threw it back into the shallow sand. He sat on the shore motionless for a moment, waiting. Soon the first scavengers, small fishes, and crayfish arrived to the fish head, and in a while a crab of respectable size appeared. The dwarf swiftly jumped at it, then turned to Oscar, "Will you join me?"

Oscar nodded hungrily. The dwarf gutted the fish and wrapped it and the crab in some leaves, then went to a group of trees that grew near the river, and Oscar spotted the tree with pineapple-like fruits between them .

"Do you eat it?" Oscar blurted.

The dwarf just grinned. He shivered the fruit a while until it started to smoke. Then he threw it to the ground, the fruit broke and fire flames popped out . The dwarf put the meat on the fire and then did the same with the other fruits. Then he decided to answer Oscar's first

question: "I can't go back now. There is a big hole in the bridge and I have had enough water for today. "

"Maybe you could put some wood over the hole in the bridge," Oscar thought.

Bakedbeard sighed, " I said the dwarves were not allowed to cross the bridge. I broke the law and it would get me in trouble. I'm kind of an outlaw now. "

"Because of me?" Oscar said uneasily. He began to feel guilty.

"Don't worry about that," Bakedbeard said . "It was my fault that I didn't warn you of that bad cube. I thought it would last a while. And it was my free decision to follow you. Besides, I always wanted to look here. The castle has been cursed for nearly a decade, and none of the bumpkin who has come here has brought the people back to life. Before, it was fun to keep a guard at the bridge. Scholars were flowing here and I could talk to them. The merchants used to pass here on their way to the ferry, and a mobile library came now and then. Those were golden times. Now I haven't seen a new book for ages. I know by heart all the stuff I have in my bookshelf. I can't live like that anymore, " Bakedbeard said firmly.

It made Oscar a little relieved and he tasted the fish the dwarf had offered him. The meat was tender and pink and tasted almost like salmon. Crab meat was similarly tasty, and when they ate, Bakedbeard extinguished carefully the smoldering remains of the fruits, then led Oscar to the large chalices of plants growing by the river and showed him how to drink from them. The taste of the nectar resembled elderberry juice and Oscar felt wonderful. He was wet and he didn't sleep well that night, but with a full stomach and guide, the world looked cheerful. In addition, the days were really warm and the clothes began to dry soon.

"Listen, do you have another name?" Oscar asked Bakedbeard.

The dwarf sighed a little, then replied, "My name is John Philip Bakedbeard ."

Oscar understood why Bakedbeard was so reluctant. Most of the fools whom the bridge should prevent from entering the kingdom were called Johns and so was he.

"Could I call you Philip?" Oscar asked.

"Yes, please, I prefer using my middle name," Bakedbeard replied with a grateful nod.

Thus happened that Oscar went to the enchanted castle with dwarf Philip.

Oscar learned that it would take whole day to reach the castle. They could arrive there in the evening, or if they were too tired, they might spend the night somewhere and arrive to the castle in the morning.

At first they returned to the bridge along the river and then continued on the gravel road that intertwined between meadows and forests. But many of those meadows were just deserted fields.

"Why is the castle actually cursed?" Oscar asked Philip.

"You're not local, are you? According to your age and clothes, I conclude that you are one of the disappearing people coming from the mysterious Land of the Detention. "

" Hmm , I am," muttered Oscar. "I don't really understand how I got here and how to go back."

"From what I have observed and heard, most of the people who come from Detention are young men, who have not shown much bravery there," the dwarf glanced hesitantly at Oscar and added, "I don't mean to insult you. After doing something brave, they usually go back. But it seems to me that somebody has to show only a bit of courage, and another will stay here longer before he is allowed to go back."

Oscar sighed. He didn't want to explain Philip that "Detention" is not the name of a country. Anyway, the dwarf did not ask and answered Oscar's original question.

"So the castle," he said again. "As I said, the castle has been cursed for about ten years. The king and queen had two children, twins. Princess Rose and Prince William. Many scholars, as well as noble princes, were interested in the young princess, while the prince wandered through the neighboring kingdoms, courting the ladies there. To be honest, I think it's just the official version. The Prince was only eighteen and whenever I had the honor to speak to him briefly as he returned from his travels, he seemed interested in everything else - from alchemy to books, exotic animals and shipbuilding, but the thing he never mentioned was marriage. That is why I do not want to believe what is being said .

So people say this: As the nineteenth birthday of both the twins approached, the parents chose a noble and wealthy prince for princess Rose to marry. Prince William at that time also began to think of betrothal to a young lady, but she was not noble and the King and the Queen did not agree with it. They even threatened that he would not become king if he married her. Some say that the girl came angrily at Rose's engagement feast with an alchemist who had cast the curse on the whole castle. Everyone turned to stone on the spot. The whole castle has to sleep hundred years before the horrible curse passes. According to one version, the prince and the girl escaped from the castle, according to the second version they live there and cast a curse on everyone who enters its gates."

"What do you think of all this?" Oscar asked Philip. "Do you have your version?"

The dwarf sighed. "First, I do not believe that the prince had any desire to marry. There was an alchemist indeed and I believe he is the key character. Something must have happened between him and the royal family. I know that Prince William came home two weeks before the banquet - he was terribly angry, hurried very much, and said nothing to the guards at the bridge. It wasn't exactly like him. That day, the alchemist, who was, by the way, called Master Sherry, was escorted by the guards from the castle. They obviously wanted to make sure he crossed the river and left. But somehow he had to come back here, because it is said that the day when the engagement feast was supposed to take place, he was present in the castle and taken straight to the dungeons."

"Who was the princess to marry?" Oscar asked. "Does that person play a role in this?"

"Maybe," Philip replied. "His name was Prince Frederick and he had something to do with Master Sherry. The alchemist lived in his castle for couple of years."

"And the curse, do you know at least if it can be broken?" Oscar asked. "How many people have already tried and how is it that no one has succeeded?"

"There are quite a lot of people going to the castle," Philip explained, "but they are mostly curious travelers. I think you call them tourists. Many of them are painters who go to paint the castle from a distance and then sell the paint in the city. Some travel to the pond, where they kept goldfish, which allegedly always fulfill every people's wish at full moon. I haven't heard of any fulfilled wishes yet, but people still try. Some, especially the lads from detention wander this way in confusion without a goal and not knowing what to do.

And then there are heroes. You can easily recognize a true hero," Philip sneered, "he is going to kiss the princess and he needs no advice from anyone. And he will never return, unlike all those other travelers. I have heard that the whole ballroom is already full of petrified heroes who were trying to kiss the princess and hoped that they were the real ones whose kiss will surely wake her up. One of the servants returning from there told me that they had to clear the fossilized princes for half a day to get to her. And then, his lord, turned to stone too, of course."

"So whoever kisses the princess will petrify?" Oscar assured, "but whoever just walks through the gate of the castle and gets into the princess's proximity, can live and get back?"

"Sort of," the dwarf nodded.

Oscar recited the conclusion of the poem he had found at the school. Although David took the book along with all his things, he fortunately remembered much of the poem:

...a castle waiting for a hero,
you cannot wake up with a kiss,
the tower is better to miss.

Truth begin search in underground,
there is the one who doesn't sleep,
the one who knows best his drink
listen and always think, yeah think!

Philip paid close attention and asked where Oscar had heard the poem. But their further conversation was interrupted by the sound of horse hooves. After a while, a horse with a richly looking rider appeared on the road . The dwarf just sighed.

"Hello, traveler," the rider said. "Tell, if I go right, to my future bride, to fame and to eternal glory, to make happy end to long story."

"The castle is in that direction," Philip said , shoving in front of him. "At the crossroads go right."

"Thank you, kind man," the Prince thanked.

"Anyone who kisses the princess will petrify," Oscar offered.

"Oh , do not worry about me,
my lips taste like a honey bee,
my second name is courage
and wisdom is my luggage,
I am sure I am called to save,
me, prince charming Edward Brave.
My stallion is eager now,

so I must fly and say good-bye.

"So this was a demonstration of what a hero looks like, he won't come back," Philip said as the prince disappeared among the trees.

"Every week there go on average twenty-two people to the castle. My estimation is that a fifty-three percent are the heroes, fourteen percent the young men from Detention, one percent are the girls from Detention, twelve are painters and remaining twenty percents are other forms of travelers who usually want to try the goldfish or just see the castle."

"What about stupid Johns?" Oscar added.

"They're not that stupid," the dwarf said. "I haven't seen one for at least two years. I include them in the statistics as other travelers. They usually try their luck in another country far far away. There lives a king, who has three daughters and a very large prison for this sort of wanderers. "

"I hope that the underground mentioned in the poem is not a prison full of stupid Johns," Oscar said.

"I doubt it," Philip said. "Most of them thought algebra was a vulgar word. Hardly any of them managed to cross the bridge, as I told you, and if by any chance any of them had succeeded and asked if they could get our princess, the king usually told them yes, if you bring me nine heads of a seven-headed dragon. They were not sure whether they would be able to count them and gave up."

"But there aren't any real dragons, are they?" Oscar said cautiously, and briefly told Philip of his hike, including what he had seen at the lighthouse.

"Yeah, I know," the dwarf replied. " Actually it was Master Sherry who came with the idea to build the balloon and locals know about it. But they like to make fun of foreigners and wanderers this way. The old man, Mr. Graham, who takes care of the balloon , was a quite a famous inventor himself. He invented a flooreater and a cookhelper. The first is a machine that eats dirt from the floor, and the second is a kitchen helper that makes the dough and that can mash food. Very useful things. Although the castle was cursed and no one pays for his services, he continues to take off with the balloon almost every night. I heard he started using it for fishing.

Because of these rumors nobody bothers him at the lighthouse. So he can devote himself to his inventions without being disturbed, I have heard that he is working on some salt spout that can be built into mills. While they make flour, at the same time they would separated salt in that process and there would be no need to acquire it by evaporation."

As they spoke, the sound of horse hooves came up again.

"There's some traffic today, " the dwarf said. " Already a second prince. Well, no wonder, only one painter went to the castle yesterday, so they're catching up today. "

" Is there any other way than the bridge?" Oscar asked.

'About a kilometer above the bridge is a ford, most princes come from there. The locals usually walk through the labyrinth. Many of them know it by heart and consider it fun. Sometimes they just go through the labyrinth, make a Sunday picnic by the river, let the kids practice some math on the bridge, and go home again. "

" This is a bit harsh teaching," Oscar said.

"Do not worry, on Sunday , when the weather is nice, we put a special net below the bridge for the kids to fall in," explained Philip.

"Get out of the way, yokels!" The Prince, who had reached them in the meantime , cried out. "I want to tell all locals, that I came here to become king, deliverance to all I bring!"

The Prince hurried past them and Oscar and Philip could still hear his outcries: "Rose my lips you will soon dine, I will wake you up, you will be mine!"

Oscar burst out laughing and proclaimed, "I brush my teeth five times a day, you'll be taken by my smell. I have the latest dental floss, as berries tastes my lip gloss!"

Philip laughed and joined his companion: "I have nothing to do with brain, thinking is like a heavy chain."

Philip took a notebook from his pocket and asked Oscar to stop for a moment and he wrote down the statements of both princes. While Philip was writing, Oscar peered over his shoulder. There were many rhymes in the notebook, and Oscar had no doubt that they were all authentic. One of them was: "I am a handsome and brave knight, I came to overcome the night, the long sleep and every wicked course, for this I have a special course. I learned the miraculous kiss, the princess will wake with a bliss."

They were making fun of the "heroes" they had met for a while and Philip read a few more verses to Oscar, but then they had to save their breath and go up a steep hill. As they came to the top, they finally saw the castle in front of them. It was still quite far away, but he proudly towered toward the sky, despite all the thorns that clung to its walls and towers, trying to hide it from the passers-by.

Now that the castle was in sight, Philip looked grimly. Oscar was wondering about the ban to cross the river. Was he allowed to come here before the castle had been cursed? He didn't know, whether Philip had been here before or not. Did he see the castle in its full glory? But Oscar saw the dwarf's expression and did not want to ask. At least not now.

As they approached, there were more and more signs of human activity. Abandoned houses and neglected vineyards and orchards, trees that needed cut with small, unripe fruit, gardens overgrown with weeds, a ruined windmill, a broken footbridge over a brook, a crumbling wagon by the road. Only the road itself was trodden, because many people came to the castle.

They had been walking for several hours without eating, and only when Oscar's belly grumbled, Philip decided that they could take a small break and soothe their hunger. Oscar wondered what the dwarf wants to eat in this wasteland, but it turned out to be no problem. Philip simply walked to the nearby meadow and pulled out several long roots. They washed the roots thoroughly at a nearby stream, strangely flowing with fresh water. The dwarf started eating without hesitation and Oscar bit into the plant with a little reluctance. Things that grow here were really strange. This one tasted like dried meat and it wasn't bad at all.

"What about a dessert?" the dwarf asked and patted his stomach. He wandered for a moment among the trees, while Oscar remained lying on the bank of the brook. He was really weary and his eyelids were heavy, and if Philip hadn't returned, he would have fallen asleep on the spot. The dwarf carried something that looked a bit like coconuts, but the inside of the fruit was not hollow, it was brownish and tasted like a very stiff chocolate pudding. It was really nice and Oscar felt tired and lazy after all that meal. Philip, however, insisted that they set out on the journey. It took them another two hours to get near the castle and by the time they arrived there, the sun was slowly beginning to hide.

They came to a village that was less than a kilometer from the chateau and he didn't see any people there.

"Did the curse turn the whole country to stones?" Oscar asked.

"No, no," Philip said. "Some people live here. The curse itself affected only the castle and some people fossilized here in the village, but many people just moved away out of fear and others followed, because they had no business to do, and so gradually the life in the neighborhood died down. But there should be an open inn somewhere I heard."

It was strange to go through that cluster of dead houses. There were about fifty houses here, and they only saw one old woman, staggering home and two wandering cats. Some of the houses were so desolate that there grew birches and bushes even inside them and from the

collapsed roofs. Others were simply empty. The gardens were unkept, with no flower beds. They did not see any toys, tools, pets or carts anywhere. And no other people.

Only at the very end of the village did they see smoke rising from a large building. The house was not very well maintained, the inscription on it was cracked and shabby, but it could be seen that the lawn around the house was occasionally mowed, the trees in the garden were pruned and treated and had lots of fruit. There was a goat eating grass, the laundry was hanging there, and cap behind one of the apple trees belonged to a little boy who shyly hid from them.

They entered and a bell rang above their heads. The bar was empty, but after a while a 15-year-old girl appeared and asked what she can offer them.

"Would there be beer and some roast?" Philip asked.

"We don't have it," the girl replied. "But we have soup, bread and sausages."

"I wonder why she asked what we would have," Philip muttered as the girl put plates with soup in front of them and ran off. However, the bread and sausages eventually improved the dwarf's mood although he wasn't very pleased with the fact that she gave them chamomile tea to drink. Eventually she led them to guest rooms and Oscar fell asleep in the moment when his head touched the pillow.

He woke up in the morning before his friend. Instead of the girl there was her mother this time and Oscar was not the only guest downstairs .

"Delicious, truly remarkable food," the richly dressed young man at one of the tables stuffed himself with plain bacon and eggs and praised them as if it was something really special. Oscar had no doubt he was here to save the princess, and he greeted him provocatively: "Good morning, brave sir, let your name be eternal."

"I see that some noble lads from Boggy Den speak like local princes," somebody said behind his back. A girl of his age entered the room and sat down next to the stranger. "This is Kevin," the girl introduced him, "and for your information he's not a stupid prince."

Kevin swallowed hard and shook Oscar's hand, "My friend, I am the mystery hunter of her Majesty Queen Liz the Second, the ruler of the island of Great Tania."

"Kevin's something like a detective," the girl translated into modern language. "He graduated from a famous University in Camford.

"And this is Lucy, my guide of the past three days," Kevin introduced the girl.

Oscar introduced both himself and his friend Philip, who was just stepping down the stairs.

The woman brought them more plates of food.

Lucy looked a little tense, and Oscar was worried that she was displeased with him because he was making fun of her friend, but after a while the atmosphere relaxed a little. Turning Oscar's allusion to humor, Kevin added a couple of hilarious stories about how he met various crazy heroes on the way. Philip even pulled his notebook from his pocket and read some other funny things the princes had said.

Oscar studied Lucy and wondered if he had ever seen her before. She was a short brunette with big green eyes and laughed very nicely. She wore a denim skirt and a green sweater and she looked a bit out of place next to the tall, bony detective in sort of middle-ages clothes. After all, Oscar with his modern clothes looked strange too next to a dwarf who had a plain linen dress, a cloak and an ax behind his belt. But people were obviously used to it here. If Oscar remembered it well, grammar school students made whole fourteen percent of the travelers heading for the castle. Oscar wondered just how many percent of the students were turned to stone statues in the princess's proximity. However, nobody mentioned that a student would ever be lost during detention.

"What brings you here?" the dwarf asked Kevin and Oscar stopped thinking about school. He was also quite interested in the answer to this question.

"Tense situation in Great Tania ," Kevin sighed. "A good half of the noble families have lost at least one son because of the local castle. The nobility is divided. Part insists that our kingdom must help solve the problem here. The other half would like the castle demolished so that there was nothing to save and they would stop losing their descendants here. "

Until now, Oscar had not realized that the enchanted chateau caused such widespread problems.

"So can we go there?" Lucy suggested.

Kevin left his horse at the inn and they walked to the nearby castle. Old apple trees grew on either side of the road leading to the castle and the alley ended by a high wall that was partially hidden by rosebushes. The gate to the chateau was open.

In the overgrown garden was a big pond full of goldfish that lazily swam in the tank and looked as dull as any other fish. Oscar doubted their magical abilities.

Two massive staircases led to the entrance to the castle and the door was wide open. Two fossil guards stood by them, looking more like wax figures. The fossilized people were colorful, it was no gray stone, but when Oscar touched one of them, he felt only cold and hard matter under his fingers.

"Isn't it dangerous to go to the castle?" Oscar said. " We should go underground."

The dwarf reassured him: "People who were inside and did not try to kiss the princess had returned safely. We have to look around here."

They entered and found themselves in a hall full of statues. It seemed like a museum of kisses. The young men standing here had mostly closed eyes, pursed lips, and reached out to the pilgrims as they walked on the purple carpet.

"Oh, Lord Byron, Lord Bacon, Lord Harrold ," Kevin sighed as they passed by the fossilized nobles, which apparently had been very effectively removed to the hall. Then Kevin sighed, paused, slipped his hat, and whispered, "His Majesty Prince Harry."

They walked through a wall of fossilized heroes, and even if they wanted to, they couldn't dodge from their direction. If somebody wanted to look in any other room, they would have to move the statues in front of the doors first. And there were so many that there wasn't any space for them.

"There should be nearly five thousand heroes," Philip said , "and we can be glad that during the ten years there were twice floods that cut the castle from its surroundings, otherwise there would be many more."

The interest in the princess was really great and someone had to toil before he removed all the statues and got to her . They reached the open door of another hall, and it was crammed with statues too.

"They look like sardines in a box," Lucy chuckled and turned to Oscar. "Imagine everyone suddenly waking up."

Oscar burst out laughing. He noticed the statues of two young men almost touching their lips. What would their surprise be when a curse was broken or a curse in the worst case passed after a hundred years - the last thing they were trying to do was kiss the princess and when they woke up, they would be kissed by some strange bearded guy!

Then they walked into the main ballroom, all the dancers were pushed to the sides, and even the ballroom was filled by all the daredevils who hadn't thought for a moment that they could be as little unlucky as all those before them. Lucy and Oscar looked at each other significantly several times again when they saw a particularly successful sculpture. A young man who had been leaning to a fat cook, a violinist, who was aiming the bow at the navel of another noble lord or waiter holding a mug over a kneeling knight.

There was a red band near the royal throne , and there was a sign on it: Before you kiss the princess, please move away the prince in front of you, preferably down to the hall.

The sleeping king and queen looked as if they were about to rise from the throne. They stared in surprise at the girl who had fossilized at the stairs leading down from the royal seats. It had to be Rose. She sat on the steps, her lovely face tense, and her long hair fell to the floor. She had long, pale blue dress and at her feet laid to Oscar surprise his own backpack. One of the unfortunates who were turned to stone was none other than Oscar's classmate David.

"Good for you, Baily," Lucy spat in surprise and anger at the same time. "I'm here because him. This guy attends the same class as my brother. They were fighting in front of the school and I was trying to tear them apart, and in the end we all ended in detention."

"Where is your brother?" Oscar turned to Lucy.

"I hope he's back home. He is such a lover of nature, constantly rescuing insects from cobwebs, birds falling out of the nests and so on. Here he helped every unfortunate animal he found. He fed a goat, with some dandelions, returned a fish that jumped ashore to the water and helped a toothless squirrel to peel nuts. And suddenly he was gone. He just disappeared."

"I think we need to do some good deeds to get back," Oscar explained his theory.

Meanwhile, Philip had removed David and the two princes they had met with Oscar the previous day somewhere out of the way.

"Prince William is definitely not here," the dwarf said.

"Who are these?" Oscar pointed to the twelve men who bowed before the king's throne. Each one had a wooden chest in his hands . A young man stood by them, gesturing at them and everyone seemed surprised and it seemed that they wanted to rush to Rose but they didn't manage it.

"These are the alchemists and Rosie's fiance, Prince Frederick ," Philip pointed at the young man. "The alchemists came from his court and were to bring Rose rare gifts on the occasion of their engagement. "

Kevin walked over to one of the alchemists and opened the box in his hand. It was empty. Lucy opened more chests and said, "Whatever those gifts were, someone stole them long ago."

"Is Master Sherry among them?" Oscar asked just for sure, though he knew the answer.

Philip shook his head. "As I said, they escorted him behind the bridge."

"Where is the underground or a prison?" Oscar asked. "Shouldn't we look there?"

Philip nodded and Oscar told everyone of the words from the poem that had brought him here. They should definitely be careful not to drink from a source they could find here. Kevin began to explain something about how he can check the quality of the water and that he was prepared to test the local well.

"What about towers, roses and spinning wheels?" Lucy suggested.

Philip just rolled his eyes. "Are we in a fairy tale for little children?"

Oscar just smiled, but Lucy replied, "Of course not, a curse is such a normal everyday thing."

"I think it's a very advanced alchemy," Kevin said. "And this is a very serious matter."

They left the room of nobles and went out into the fresh air, descended the stairs, ran in all directions, and began to seek entrance to the chateau cellars.

"I think I found it," Lucy said after a moment.

11

The others hurried to Lucy and looked at each other questioningly. Under the sign Prison was nailed an inscription: Attention, angry prisoner, he bites! Don't feed him with your hands. But you can throw him something from afar.

There were torches in a basket by the door and the dwarf lit one of them. They went down into the dark underground, where there were eight dungeons. Their bars were open and the cells were empty. Dust and stale straw could be felt everywhere, the floor was muddy and there were traces in it showing that someone came here sometimes. The corridor continued to the rear, where the stairs led further underground and there was a warning sign: Watch your head!

They walked down the steps carefully and reached another similar corridor. They could smell alcohol. The first door on the right were labeled Torture Room and in recent years, especially plums and grapes have been tortured here according to the smell and modified equipment. Someone was obviously involved in the production of plum brandy and wine. The torture chamber was fitted with bars and the entire corridor was closed. There were other dungeons in it, and at least in the first two someone had stored their kegs. The cell at the very end of the hallway was fitted with double bars, and behind the iron bars sat a dirty fellow.

"Could it be him?" Oscar asked in a low voice.

Philip shrugged and tried to call the man, "Master Sherry?"

The man turned. He was grumpy, and his long, greasy hair fell to his waist. But he didn't say a word, and after a while he bent back to what he was doing.

From above, footsteps reached them. Someone was coming underground. It turned out to be a tall young man with glasses, and by the keys that rocked on his side, he was clearly a jailer.

"Greetings," the dwarf said. "Is this Master Sherry?"

"Yeah, that's him," the young man said, adding quietly, "but don't think he'll talk to you. He's nuts. When I took over this prison two years ago from my uncle he behaved like a wild monkey. Totally crazy. He was screaming and drooling and behaved like an animal. No wonder, he was sitting here on his own for about eight years."

"He doesn't look very wild," Lucy said.

The young man smiled proudly and strained his chest a little. "I consider it as a big success," he said. "Work therapy. He crochets blankets and he is completely quiet. Sometimes he even says a sentence. Nothing wise, nothing that makes sense, but at least he doesn't swear and scream here."

"Is he your only prisoner?" Oscar asked.

"Well, yes," the jailer nodded. "After the curse, the guards soon released all petty thieves and other criminals. That is if they hadn't turned to stone. But this one is very dangerous and he must never leave this prison. This is what my uncle told me."

"Do you know anything about what Master Sherry has to do with the curse?" Oscar asked.

"Nobody told me much about him," the young man shook his head. "Just that he's dangerous, he can't get out of here, but it's good to keep him alive."

"What does he say?" Kevin asked.

"Well, he shouts the name of Prince William often. He says something about dragon's teeth, he speaks about unicorn's horn and feather of a fiery bird and laughs maliciously as if it was something funny," the jailer explained.

"Listen, is your uncle still alive, is it possible to talk to him?" Philip asked.

"Why are you so curious?" the jailer replied. "People usually don't come here. The noble ones rush right to the princess, the others usually just whisper their wishes to the fishes or paint something and go back. Once there was a painter, he painted this guy, and then a few more curious people came to see him. But he bit one of them. That was when he was wilder."

At that time I added here another set of bars."

Kevin intervened in the conversation and tried to explain to the young man that they had a serious mission and that what was happening in the enchanted chateau had far-reaching consequences for the surrounding empires.

The jailer seemed to feel even more important and willingly said, "Well, I think I can help you as for information. But.... Now I'm telling you something like a professional secret. Prince William himself had escaped the curse and gave the order to write down everything the man would say, even if it was all nonsense. And that's how it's been done for ten years. There is a new book for each year and there are actually two books from the first year when he was talking a lot."

The jailer was glad that his job was so relevant and he unlocked the torture chamber with a serious expression. There was heavy chest with a massive lock and he opened it and took out a box with several books in it.

"This is how it looks," said the young man with a clerical expression on his face, browsing through the last pages in the current notebook:

Monday 8th July: he is silent, humming, he said: "but that's a pretty good thing"

Tuesday 9th July: works silently and then said: "let us make a blanket with a fiery bird"

Wednesday 10th July: he is crocheting and talking: so this will be a bird for that bird, yeah fiery birds are suckers - you little bastard, you knew it - but movement is healthy – enjoy it, William, you royal bastard. (He said that and I'm really sorry to write it here!)

Thursday 11th July: She was pretty but too skinny, you could see her bones. And then it all went wrong. Don't trust the royals. Yeah, bones, I would eat one if he gave it to me.

Friday, 12th: Who's supposed to eat cabbage with rice, why doesn't he bring me something normal. (Told him to be grateful, crochet blankets and shut up. When I sell it, maybe I'll give him a piece of rabbit. A little work never killed anybody.) He told me: Bullshit, work kills people and don't bother cutting the rabbit, I can eat a whole one. And I need red cotton.

"These are very useful notes," Kevin said with a serious face. Lucy and Oscar bit their lips and didn't look at each other so they wouldn't laugh.

"We'd like to look into those older books, if you let us. And of course it is clear that if the curse breaks, your merits in this matter will be emphasized. And otherwise I will gladly recommend you if you ever longed for some important work at the court of Queen Liz."

After this praise, the jailer willingly lent them all the books. He wasn't too glad that they

wanted to take them outside and checked them from a distance, but he didn't disturb them.

Of course, they rushed first to the volumes of the early years and the dwarf took the very first.

"This is interesting," he said after a moment. "The prisoner refuses to drink water. He requires milk, beer, wine or anything that has nothing to do with the castle well. And he advises us to do the same the following month. Guard Peter Green, who disobeyed him, turned to stone... And a few days later: guard Steven Clock drank water from the well and his leg paralyzed. "

Philip quickly flipped through the pages of the notebook: "Here, after thirty-two days, Sherry drank water from the well for the first time."

"He's the one who knows best his drink from the poem," Oscar said. "It means the well is no longer a problem."

After a moment, Lucy said: " It says here: Sherry told the prince that if he wants to break the curse, he needs a hair from unicorn's tail, dragon's teeth and fiery bird's feather. The Prince eventually went to find these things. "

"So he confessed he had thrown the curse on the castle?" Kevin asked. "Is there a reason?"

"A curse?" Lucy looked at him. "Should we call it that? He had somehow poisoned the water. But what can poison water so that people petrify?"

"It's not just water poisoning," Oscar remarked. "Anyone who kisses the princess turns to stone too. Even nowadays. Those people have never touched the water. So there is something else that has still this power. What could possibly do it?"

"Red vitriol," Kevin replied without hesitation.

12

"Red vitriol?" Lucy repeated. "I only know the blue vitriol."

"I have never heard of a blue vitriol," Kevin looked at her.

"I thought there was no red vitriol, that it was just a myth," the dwarf said. "Something like philosopher's stone and other nonsense."

"But if a red vitriol existed, and I think this castle is a proof of it," Kevin said again, "it would be exactly the substance that could do it. It would poison those who swallow it and also

those who just touch it. It would turn them into stone and made them sleep for years. A person carrying it would be able to transmit the poisoning simply by a touch. For example, I don't think it is necessary to kiss the princess. If she had the red vitriol by herself, it should turn to stone everyone who touches her, just her face or her hand, maybe even her clothes."

"Did you know about this for all those ten years?" Lucy frowned.

Kevin shook his head. "Her Majesty asked me to start with investigation a year ago. I spent all this time consulting with the most important alchemists and searching in the world's oldest and largest library, which is located in my homeland. And there I recently came across a book that convinced me that red vitriol was more than just a rumor."

"Where can this thing be mined and how does Philip know about it when it's such a secret?" Lucy continued.

"Philip is a bookworm," Oscar said. "I think he knows a lot of things others haven't even heard of."

"Well, I know the red vitriol is not mined anywhere," the dwarf said. "I think it has nothing to do with rocks. It is a stone, which is formed in the stomachs of dragons."

"It's not that you could not know the term," Kevin explained, "but people think it's just a mythical substance. I never heard of anyone who had seen the red vitriol, who owned it or knew about it anything more. "

"If all the dragons are as real as the one at the lighthouse," Oscar said, "I don't understand where could Sherry get the rock."

"Have you never seen a real dragon?" Kevin asked. "Have your parents never taken you to the zoo?"

"Dragons are quite normal animals," Philip added, "only the really huge ones with many heads are almost impossible to find. But as for dwarf dragons there are many farmers that breed them."

"That's what it's all about," Kevin explained. "A dragon must have seven heads to create a red vitriol. Otherwise, only an ordinary dragon stone will be formed in its stomach."

"Ordinary dragon stone," Philip muttered, "dwarves value them more than gems."

"What about an antidote?" Lucy asked. "I hope it won't be the saliva of a fourteen-headed dragon."

Kevin shook his head. "It's difficult with an antidote. Very little is known about the red vitriol."

Maybe living water would work, but... ”

Oscar was about to make a comment, but Lucy nudged him.

"But the spring of living water spurts only once every five hundred years, and we can't wait another four centuries," the dwarf finished.

"Master Fireball, the greatest of today's alchemists," Kevin began, frowning at Oscar, who started giggling at the mention of Fireball, "has a theory. Terrestrial dragons love agave, eat their leaves, but prefer flowers. The rarest of all the agave flowers is the dragon's agave. It only blooms once every thirty years. We went through several dragon books with the master and learned that two hundred years ago a living seven-headed dragon had been caught in the Midnight Wood. They kept him in a huge cage, but then the dragon fell ill and almost died. Finally, he was cured by dragon-agave flowers. The Master believes that a dragon in whose bowels a red vitriol is formed can poison even himself and that the dragon's agave could be an antidote. But it's just an unverified theory."

"Where does such agave grow?" Lucy asked.

"In the mountains where big dragons live," Kevin replied.

"Is it far?" Oscar wondered.

"Well, the mountains are the most dangerous place in the world and only a few people dared to go there," Philip informed him .

Oscar frowned, turning to Kevin. "I thought – as you know it all so well – that you would have a bag of this flower with you."

"I think we need a hero to help us," Kevin said, and when he saw Oscar's expression, he added, "I mean real hero. Such as Black Arnold."

"There's a little rough way to check your theory of poisoning," Philip said to Kevin when a tiny young man appeared in the castle gate.

"Listen to me, young man," the dwarf stopped him. "You're going to kiss the princess, aren't you?"

"Naturally," the Prince replied. "No curse can stand in my presence, my name is Prosper of Midnight Wood, whatever I touch must start to bloom."

"And could I give you some advice, your prosperity?" Philip asked. "All the others have tried

to kiss the princess on her lips, but here is a honorable scholar from the court of her Majesty the Queen of Great Tania and he thinks that it is necessary to kiss the princess three times. First on her hand, then on her face, and finally on her lips to make it work. Would you be willing to give it a try? We are not noble enough for such a task.”

The prince waved his hand as if he were chasing away some insects and said, "My ability dare you doubt? The curse is for me just a clout. My charm is sharp like the best sword, from her I expect the “yes” word.”

Apparently the Prince was unwilling to accept any advice, but he was eager to give orders. He gestured to Oscar and said, "Take care of the Prince's beautiful thoroughbred.”

Lucy rose from the ground and bowed deeply to the prince. She had an admiring expression, and addressed him as an experienced actress: “Respectable prince, I would be honored to show you the way to the princess. Would you allow your servant to lead you to her throne? And it would also be my greatest pleasure to bear your cloak.”

"Come, maid," the Prince agreed, tossing his cloak casually to her.

The prince and Lucy disappeared inside, and meanwhile Philip led the sweaty horse to the pond, removed its saddle and let the horse drink.

"What is happening to all the horses that remain here?" Oscar thought.

“Well, there was a robber called Robert Hood in the woods. He and his men had always been able to make sure that nothing was left behind here and that nothing was left in their pockets. Instead of raiding people, he had long since started to trade with horses, and he and his companions have become quite rich and important traders. He even built a small castle nearby and sent his son to Camford to study. He's trying to pretend that he's something more than just a raider.”

Meanwhile, Lucy returned and hailed at them from a distance: “The merciful prince changed his mind and came to the conclusion that the more kisses he gave the princess, the better. In the end, he didn't actually kiss her. He took her hand and started turning to stone. But it was pretty scary, I wouldn't want to see it again.”

Kevin was bent over the workbooks and looked up at the others. " There's no direct confession in the first book. He merely asserted to the guards and prince that he could remove such a curse if he had the necessary things and still sought freedom. But here in one of the other books are notes from a time when he turned crazy in that prison and I think we can take it as a confession and confirmation. Listen up! Prince Will visited Sherry after a long time, and then he shouted: I would need another piece for that royal sucker. It's a pity he didn't become a statue with the rest of them.”

"I think we can take it as a clear confession," Philip said.

"I am really sure now that there is no spell, but a red vitriol," Kevin said firmly.

"And we probably know where Sherry took it," Lucy said mysteriously. "You said they had a seven-headed dragon in the kingdom of Midnight Wood and when I went inside with the Midnight Prince, I dared to ask him if Master Sherry has ever been at their court . He said: The scruffy dog, he stole us - then stopped and added - why should I speak with some maid about our royal problems. Then he didn't talk to me anymore, but at least we know Sherry was there and stole something there."

"So all we need now is the antidote," Oscar sneered. "And if we didn't find the agave or if it didn't work, would there be any other solution?"

"Then there would be nothing left to do but find a seven-headed dragon and talk to him," Kevin sighed.

"Dragons speak human language?" Lucy asked.

Kevin rolled his eyes, "Of course not. We would have to ask for help someone who understands the language of animals, like Queen Goldilocks's husband . I cannot imagine he would be willing to travel to mountains, seek a giant dragon and talk to him. Although I have heard that the gift is perhaps hereditary, but I do not know for sure. "

"And don't dragons eat humans?" Oscar asked.

"Pardon?" Kevin blurted. "You don't mean that, dragons are herbivores."

"What about the Black Arnold? Who is he? "Lucy changed the topic.

"Black Arnold," Philip said, "is the greatest hero of our time. People tell fantastic things about him. He overwhelmed the fleet of a well-known pirate called Francis Drage. He is fabulously rich and has a collection of the most unusual things on earth. If you'd like to get magic beans, horn of a unicorn or golden apple, Black Arnold will either have it or can get it. He repaired an old fortress on a nearby island, which was generally known as the most dangerous place in this country. But Black Arnold wasn't scared and he build a house there!"

Philip said it with admiration and enthusiasm, and Lucy had to smile. "I hope there's a ship somewhere," she said.

"There are some ships in town," Philip replied, then mysteriously added, "but why waste time? Let's just find the King's study."

13

That was harder to do than to say. In order to be able to pass through any door, they had to remove the statues that were in front of it. On their first attempt, they managed to open only a room full of other statues, but for the second time they found a passageway and the search could begin. Lucy was admiring the magnificent room equipment, furniture, paintings, tiled stoves and murals, but Philip urged her to hurry. Moreover he didn't want to tell them why they were looking for the office.

Eventually they found it. A very primitive telephone stood on the royal table.

"This is a distance-talker," the dwarf said with admiration. "I think it's probably the biggest

invention in the world. It was invented by Mr. Graham, about whom I have already told Oscar. But I didn't mention that because if you don't see it with your own eyes and see how it works, you won't believe it anyway .”

Oscar didn't even think of laughing, not wanting to spoil the dwarf's joy, but Lucy still plucked his elbow into his ribs. He repaid her by tugging her braid. Kevin glanced at them with that look, "are you serious?" Oscar felt like a little boy at that moment, ashamed, he left Lucy alone, and walked to the table.

Philip had already picked up the phone, pressed something and waited. After a long wait, an old voice answered him. Philip introduced himself and quickly told the old man on the phone what was going on and why they needed his help.

"Could you fly your balloon for us, Mr. Graham?" he finally asked.

They were discussing it for a while, and finally the dwarf thanked the old man and hung up. "He will come for us as soon as it gets dark," he informed the others. "The balloon is his big secret, he refuses to fly by day."

There was hardly anything to do and they had a long afternoon and plenty of time ahead of them. Kevin gave the kids some money and asked them to bring some food from the inn. He himself remained buried in the books. Philip helped him. Lucy and Oscar laughed at some of Sherry's crazy cries, but after a while it seemed all the same, and they didn't mind a walk.

"Prince William is a pretty mysterious character, don't you think?" Lucy suggested. "He somehow escaped the curse or rather poisoning, he tried to interrogate Sherry, then he went into the world to seek out the nonsense things that Sherry told him, and he appeared at the castle occasionally, even though Sherry was saying just some weird stuff and cursed him."

"No one really knows where the prince is now and what he is doing. Do you think he has already given up or that he lives nearby and sometimes comes to see his fossilized family at least?" Oscar asked.

"He instructed the jailers to write down everything Sherry said," Lucy reminded him. "It doesn't seem that he gave up. Moreover, he probably pays him somehow, he has to keep an eye on the castle from distance. And I do not blame him that he does not live in a castle full sculptures. But I do not believe that he married some princess and lives as if nothing was happening. People would know it."

"It seems to me as if the earth swallowed him. Who knows if he's still alive. The last mention that he personally spoke to Sherry is almost three years old, if we haven't overlooked anything," Oscar thought.

At the inn, they purchased some food, they explained to the innkeepers that they would be gone for a few days, but that they were all right and asked them to take care of Kevin's horses. Then they set out on their way back.

"Well, we know a little what happened here," Oscar said on the way back, "but we don't know why."

"Money or love," Lucy replied promptly. "It's so in every detective story."

"Or revenge," Oscar thought. "Remember that Sherry was there personally when the

poisoning occurred. Maybe he risked his life to see it. He could also set the vitriol somewhere at night and just disappear. "

"I think he has set up the vitriol in more places," Lucy thought. "He poisoned a well somehow, but at the same time he made sure that Rose would certainly get her dose. You know how surprised those people around her looked, it seems that it had affected her sooner than the others."

"He could have had an accomplice," Oscar said. "Prince William is a suspect. Remember the poem:

..the echo of betrayal sounds in its corridors, the prince's name is whispered by thorns.... He was able to move freely around the castle and survive it."

"If the Prince was Sherry's accomplice, why wouldn't he get rid of Sherry to wipe out all evidence?" Lucy asked. "I wouldn't suspect the Prince."

"Maybe he keeps him alive because he wants to get some information out of him. Perhaps," Oscar thought, "he accidentally poisoned someone he didn't want, and that's why he's looking for antidotes."

They reached the castle, and since the grass was too tall, they had a picnic on the way. Kevin invited the jailer to eat with them and interviewed him all the time. However, they did not learn much from him, perhaps only that the Prince had not visited the chateau during his entire service. He received his wages from the Prince's butler, who regularly went to the castle and checked his notes every time. Kevin eventually returned the books to the jailer.

"Have you learned anything more from them?" Oscar asked.

"Just one thing," Kevin said. "I'm pretty sure Sherry has no idea how to cure the poisoning. He mentioned every substance that came to his mind and sometimes he even confessed to not knowing it. But then he always came up with another possibility, a fiction, but the only sensible thing he could think of was living water. But it is not available anyway, so it doesn't matter. "

"I wonder how the vitriol works?" Lucy said. "Oscar and I were wondering what had happened here. Probably it wasn't such a problem to poison a well, but Sherry had to give it even to the princess when she was so terribly contagious. Moreover, it began to affect her sooner than the others. Why?"

"Red vitriol is extremely rare," Kevin reminded her. "I don't know much about it, I can't answer these questions."

"Do you know what it should look like?" Lucy asked. "Is it something like a red stone?"

"Maybe we should look inside again," Oscar suggested. "What the princess is wearing, or if there is something suspicious there."

"That's a good idea," Kevin said.

"I would take gloves," Philip muttered. "We must be really careful."

They listened to Philip's advice and first looked for some gloves in the castle. Lucy also thought it would be good idea to find Rose's room. It seemed they wouldn't be bored before Graham arrived for them.

"Wow," Lucy threw back one of the doors, and for a moment just stared at the room. There wasn't any doubt that she was in Rose's room. Everything there was completely pink. There were pink duvets and bedspreads, a pink canopy bed, table tops and embroidered curtains, and motifs of pink flowers on the carpet. Fortunately, the furniture was white. Besides the bed there was a dressing table with a mirror, an armchair, two side tables and a very small bookcase. The books had titles such as: Fashion for young ladies, Stun him with a smile, What to talk about to young princes, Conversation for nobles, How to properly match jewelry and dresses and so on ...

There were even two doors leading somewhere, one led to a private bathroom and the other to a dressing room. Lucy quite enjoyed it as she scrambled through her clothes. She put one to her body and looked at herself in the mirror, but Philip urged her to be careful. Still, she tried at least Rose's hat, looked at her shoes, finally picked one of her leather gloves and closed the dressing room with a sigh.

Meanwhile, Kevin was poking through the fireplace. "She burned a whole pile of letters," he informed the others. There remained little burned pieces with a few words that they were able to read.

"... wanted to see you again soon ..." Kevin muttered the words that he could read, "... and bring ... the books ... he was at his court to be with you Prince Frederick was," after a moment Kevin waved with one piece of paper, "this letters was definitely written by somebody else than her fiance Prince Frederick, by some other man!"

Meanwhile, Lucy was checking the frills on Rose's dressing table. The jewelry were probably somewhere else. Here she found only some make-up, bows and similar accessories.

Oscar searched Rose's bed and finally pulled something from under the mattress with a triumphant cry. Notebook in pink cover with flowers.

"Rose's diary," he informed them, barely opening the book. "I think you can leave that fireplace, Kevin."

14

Oscar flipped through the diary for a moment, then cleared his throat. He began to read a little theatrically:

Master Sherry brought me a book about butterflies and beautiful lilies. Prince Frederick of the Honey Kingdom sent me earrings again. He doesn't even bother to remember what I like. I wear earrings only when I have to. They hurt my ears. I take them solely for balls and important events and I am always glad when I can take them off. If only he would send something for my neck. But Master Sherry is so attentive and kind. Although he's a few years older than the prince, he doesn't have such a belly. I know I have to marry someone noble, but I'd be really glad if he didn't have a noble barrel around his waist. I wish Sherry was a Prince and his alchemist looked like Prince Frederick and not the other way around. Although Frederick's face is handsome. I think the prince of the Dragon Empire is really cute and handsome, but William says he's an asshole. If I want an ox for my husband, he will bring me one from the pasture...

Oscar flipped through and smirked :

Today I spent the afternoon with Buster of the Dragon Empire and I must admit William was

really right. Even if he looks the best, I must admit he 's a foolish nerd. He's only talking about himself. I asked parents why they wished so much for me to marry and did not push Will into anything. My mom gave me a lecture that the best age to marry is by the age of 20 or everyone would think I stayed single because no one wanted me. People say about Princess Anabel from the Land of Unicorns that she has a big nose, yet it is not true at all. They just gossip about her because she is single at the age of twenty-three. Will said people slander her also because she has a sense of humor and they do not understand it. I asked William if he was interested in older girls, but he just laughed.

Today I spent the afternoon with Frederick. He gave me earrings again, and when he saw my expression, he asked if everything was all right. I told him they often hurt my ears. Frederick was astonished. He said that Sherry had told him that I loved earrings and that I liked those earrings before. He was really angry, but then he said he would deal with him later and told me about a tournament. I had to laugh so much. Even though I don't like him very much, I must admit he is witty.

"It's getting interesting here," Oscar said.

Sherry sent me another letter. He still flatters me. He asked me to meet him tomorrow.

Sherry told me that he loved me and that he wanted me to run out of home with him. He told me he had something that everyone would be afraid of. He would be very powerful and rich, and I don't have to worry about not having money. I asked him what it was, but he didn't want to tell me. If I love him, I don't have to worry and just go with him. I could never imagine marrying anyone but a prince. I told him that if he were a prince, it would be something else, but I couldn't imagine being with someone my parents disapproved, that I couldn't see them, and so on.

Sometimes I don't really know what to do. William is back in the neighboring kingdom. Dad speaks all the time about Frederick and he thinks it's a deal. I like Frederick, and I think he takes it as a sure thing too. Mama mentioned the Prince of Midnight Woods, but my dad said that they have several cases of insanity in their family and he doesn't want any crazy grandchildren. I wrote a letter to Will.

William came today. He told my dad about the letter and he immediately sent Sherry away. He ordered the guards to escort him beyond the bridge and told him that if he ever crossed the river, he would imprison him immediately. I was terribly angry with Will, I thought we were going to talk about what I wrote to him and not that my parents would be involved. My parents gave me a lecture on why I should marry a noble prince. Blah , blah , blah . I scolded William that he didn't keep it to himself. He told me that I was a goose.

I shouldn't even think about such a complete nonsense. An honest man who has nothing to be ashamed of will not flee away with anyone and will not marry a girl without asking her father. If he has something so rare and can be so terribly rich, then why does he work for Frederick? Well, why? Because he's a liar and a fraud and has nothing to offer to you, little girl!

And he knew about the earrings too. Frederick confided in him that he did not know what to give me for gifts and told him about the earrings and about Sherry, which shows that Sherry is insidious. He just doesn't behave like the right guy. The worst thing is that William is probably right, but I didn't admit it to him when he shouted at me and called me a goose.

Frederick arrived today. My dad told me straight away that he had spoken with him about me and that he was going to propose to me. I can say no. We can wait another year, but then I'll get married. That he would send me to the island school for young ladies for that year, that I

needed to see a little what the real life was all about, and that I would no longer have any private teachers. Scarlett was there and said it was terrible. Frederick lost some weight. He took me for a walk and told me that he had bought a new horse and that he was absolutely amazing and that he lost weight with it. He brought me a beautiful orchid. He said he was done with the earrings. Then he got serious and told me that Dad had told him about Sherry and that he had fired him, and he couldn't go to his court anymore.

It's not just about me, but it seems that there is something terribly rare Sherry had stolen. It's supposed to be a gem or something. Before he was fired, they searched him, but found nothing with him, so they let him go. But someone is secretly tracking him. Frederick then bit his lip and asked me if I was going to warn him, and asked if I loved Sherry. I told him I had liked him for some time, but I wouldn't think of running away or marrying him. That Sherry loves me, but I just thought of him that he was fine. And that's it. Frederick was then silent for a while, so I thought he was about to propose to me, but then he started to talk to me about his different views and plans, and he also understood how I felt and how it feels to be forced to do something.

And that I should just travel a bit like William and not sit at home. I told him about the island school. He told me he knew about a much better school and would recommend it to my dad. And that was it. It was a nice afternoon and I have to say that I think better about Frederick now. This is weird. The first day I'd be willing to say yes, and he just won't ask.

I talked to my dad. I told him I was willing to marry Frederick, but he hadn't propose to me yet. Dad asked if I didn't want to do this just to keep me from school, and I said no.

Then a servant told me a friend wanted to speak with me through Graham's distance-talker, but it was not a friend but Sherry. I didn't send him to hell like I would like to do, but I tried to ask him about the rarity he had, but he didn't tell me. I told him that maybe I would go to the school, that I just felt like I had to think twice about my life. He said he would call again. I told Frederick about it, but no one else. He wasn't very excited about my search, and he begged me to be careful. He promised me he wouldn't tell Dad, but I saw he was a little angry. So I told him I'd get rid of Sherry next time, if he still called, and that I wouldn't talk to him anymore. I just thought I might get some information out of him, but I really didn't care. If I loved Sherry, I wouldn't tell him everything. He told me: you are an imp, aren't you? Come to me. He took my face in his hands and I had goosebumps everywhere. He asked me if he could and I just closed my eyes. He kissed me and then he asked: Will you marry me? Fourteen days ago, I wouldn't believe that I could be happy saying yes.

Oscar flipped through the pages to see if there was anything else interesting. Eventually he came across something:

He talked to me again. He was furious when he heard of the engagement party. He didn't even let me speak, he said he knew they had forced me into it and so on and so on. He tried to persuade me, begging me to run away with him, he loved me and would take care of me. I decided not to pretend anymore, and I told him plainly that I wanted to marry Frederick and that I would never marry him, even though I always thought he was fine.

" The last entry, " Oscar said:

The engagement starts so terribly! Sherry called me yesterday, he was completely calm, saying that he understood that I was marrying Frederick and that he wanted to wish me happiness and if I could meet him for the last time and secretly take an engagement gift from him. If I can meet him at dawn. I said yes and I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone, but I told William. I begged him not to be angry and not to tell anyone, unless it was clear if Sherry had really stolen something or not. William said he would just look after me. We met at the spring

that feeds our well. Sherry behaved strangely. Like he was up to something, and the meeting with me seemed more like an excuse. He pretended to be cool, but he wasn't, and all his wishes were so insincere. He gave me a beautiful box and begged me not to open it and take it to the engagement party. Then William and the guards came on him. They arrested him, cast him in the deepest cell, and interrogated him the whole morning. William had ordered the guards to come for him if necessary. He cursed me madly when the guards attacked him.

Will just murmured something that this shows his real character but I was glad he didn't talk to me about it more. I told Sherry to calm down that if he is innocent, we'll release him again soon, and if not, then he deserves it. The guy was really crazy about me. He is stupid that he trusted me to just meet him, after all the rumors I heard about him.

Well, today is my big day and I don't want it to be spoiled. Now I have to let it go, the maid just brought my clothes. I hope that I will look great and we will enjoy the day with Frederick.

15

"Well, then at least we don't have to guess what happened here," Lucy said. "Do you think the princess really took what Sherry gave her? It must have been a little thing, a piece of jewelry or something."

"We'll go there," Philip suggested.

"Surely he had poisoned the water in the spring before he met the princess," Kevin said. "If she fled with him, she would have avoided it, and if not, I think he made sure she didn't get spared by any chance."

Thoughtfully they went again to the ballroom, equipped with Rose's gloves. First, they took the Prince of the Midnight Wood away from Rose. He somehow did not manage to flee the curse, despite his legendary reputation, and then they began to examine Rose. She had a crown of precious stones on her head, and they immediately rejected it. The earrings had blue stones set to match her dress. But Sherry wouldn't give her earrings anyway. She wore a necklace, also blue, and in a similar style was also a bracelet that was on her wrist.

"She has something in her hand," Lucy said, carefully bending over to the princess's clenched fist. Slowly and carefully, she pulled the object out of her hand. It was a hairpin with a small rose, in the center of which was a translucent red stone.

Kevin took a fancy scarf from one of the princes, pulled a wooden box out of an alchemist's hands, and wrapped the clasp in the scarf and closed it in a chest.

"Do you think this is really it?" Oscar asked.

"We'll probably find out soon enough," Kevin said, adding a little sharply, "That guy over there will test it."

Another "hero" came to them and knelt before Rose. "Oh, beautiful," he said, not paying attention to the others, "your sleep will be overwhelmed by the powerful magic of my kisses, I know you sleep, but if you saw my lips, you would know they are the lips of dreams."

"Don't you mind that she is betrothed and that she likes her fiancé?" Lucy murmured, but she said it more to herself.

Prince kissed Rose and nothing happened. The beauty continued to sit still on the stairs, and the Prince scratched his hair thoughtfully, then tried several more times.

"I find it disgusting, everyone drools at her and she can't resist them," Lucy whispered to Oscar. "Poor girl, we should remove her somewhere."

"You are not worthy of my lips, it is clear," the Prince finally gave up, "other and better one will enjoy them!"

With that the Prince just walked out of the ballroom.

"We just saved your life, you nut," Oscar remarked as the prince left.

"So now it's very clear that this is a red vitriol," Kevin said, rattling the box. "She or her maid managed to put it to her hair without touching the stone. Maybe the pin slipped from her hair, and she grabbed it in her hand and fossilized. And through her turned to stone anyone who touched the vitriol indirectly."

"It must have been very strange," Lucy thought, "I wonder how it was going on."

"We will find out what exactly happened here, when we break the curse," Philip said.

Lucy urged the guys to carry the princess from the ballroom to her chamber. Oscar couldn't resist a prank, he took her crown and placed it in the hair of an elderly fat maid standing nearby with a tray of glasses. He took the tray from her hand and found a cloak somewhere and threw it over her.

While he played this way, Lucy wanted to look closely at the queen's dress. From the raised steps on which the throne stood, she could see something that, due to the many stiff figures that crammed in the hall, could not be noticed before. There was a fountain in the middle of the room. It was somewhat unusual, but it had to be beautiful when it was dark, the chandeliers were shining there, and the water was spraying high in the light of the lit candles. Maybe when the fountain was in operation, it was spraying up to the ceiling. And the water droplets could fall on the dancers, who, without knowing their future misfortune, turned into the rhythm of the music. And the tiny drops of water fell on their faces, contaminated with poisonous red vitriol. Engagement feast, food made from the well's water, the fountain, and moreover the hairpin. It was almost impossible to escape all this once somebody entered this hall.

Lucy felt a bit uneasy in the ballroom. She was wondering why Rose wore Sherry's present. How mixed were her feelings towards him? Did she feel guilty or did she feel some sympathy towards him? Or did she just like the hairpin?

Lucy appreciated when Philip and Kevin returned and they all went out into the fresh air. It was getting dark and from a distance there could hear a dragon roar. Graham simply could not miss the opportunity to turn his arrival into a theatrical performance.

"I see you aren't such a loser as the others," the old man said to Oscar. There was obviously nothing wrong with the inventor's memory, and he navigated the balloon in which they were crammed like sardines with masterful skill.

They were moving away from towers of the castle, the trees were far below them, and the wild river crept down like a snake among the pine forests and hurried toward the sweet sea

that had taken her into her quiet arms. Then the darkness covered everything, and all they saw was the light of a nearby lighthouse and another flickering light very far above the sea.

"There we go," Graham pointed to the distant lighthouse on the island.

"Philip said something about it being one of the most dangerous places on earth," Lucy reminded. "I would like to know why."

"Yeah, this," Graham waved. "It used to be. Five years ago, but the prince, I was going to say that Arnold had long ago taken care of it at the prince's wish. Giant scorpions lived on that island. Big and dangerous monsters. They were able to spray their poison at a distance, sinking ships, killing sailors and eating them. Black Arnold exterminated them to the last and settled on their island."

"Do you know Black Arnold personally?" Oscar asked. "Have you ever been there?"

"Yeah, I have," Graham replied. "I sent him a pigeon today to let him know we're coming."

"I had no idea you knew Black Arnold," Philip said.

Graham shrugged, seemingly reluctant to talk about it, and then changed the topic and he started to ask Philip and Kevin about the details of what they were doing at the castle and what the dwarf had briefly outlined during their phone call. Or perhaps I should say distance-talker communication.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he would fly to the island every night," Oscar whispered to Lucy. "What else might he be doing with the balloon? He said he was catching fish, but how many can one person eat?"

"Maybe he even helped Arnold fight the scorpions," Lucy thought.

The flight itself took just over an hour. The island was not too far from the shore, but the balloon was not the fastest means of transport. Oscar estimated that the ship might get there faster. When they landed, it was so dark that they couldn't see anything from the island. The lighthouse, where the balloon descended to the ground, was about half a mile from the fortress, and a servant with a torch was waiting for them and led them to Arnold's house.

They entered the entrance hall through a small courtyard. The servant led them to one of the rooms on the ground floor. There was a fire in the fireplace, and a small feast was set up on the table. Graham apologized and left them. He obviously went to give Arnold some details about the visitors he had brought.

Lucy and Oscar were hungry and the food looked delicious, but Philip told them to wait a while before Graham returned and refused to touch the food. Oscar and Lucy sighed and started looking around the hall. Everything was purposeful, relatively small, but luxurious. The chairs were padded, tapestries hung on the walls, there were vases of fresh flowers, and even the porcelain on the table was richly decorated and there were artfully shaped glasses near the plates. The fortress resembled a small castle without unnecessary pomp, but it was still full of luxury.

It took about ten minutes before they could hear footsteps. A maid that was waiting in the room to serve them dinner, wanted to hurry and open to her master, but he threw the door open with unprecedented vigor and stepped into the room.

"Let me introduce you to the most famous hero of our times," Graham, who came along with

Black Arnold into the hall, smiled.

Arnold was a young man of about thirty, with pale wavy hair, beard and dark, piercing eyes. He looked bright, but a bit sad and he was dressed all in black. Philip stared at him wide-eyed and it took him a moment to speak. Finally he walked over to him, bowed a little, and when he addressed the famous hero, it was up to Lucy and Oscar to wonder.

"Prince William" the dwarf said, still surprised. Graham smirked behind the Prince's back. It was obvious that he was enjoying this surprise immensely.

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After introducing themselves and recovering from the shock, they settled with Prince William for a rich feast. There was a stuffed bird, baked fish with lemon slices and almonds, mashed potatoes with fresh herbs, bread with olives, pickled vegetables, cheeses and sweet desserts.

They were eager to taste it all, while the prince, who has apparently eaten something earlier, took just some cheese and olives on his plate, but instead of eating, he was asking them one question after another. Kevin briefly told him of his theory about the red vitriol, and among the bites he asked the prince if he could describe what had happened in the ballroom at that time. How long did it take for people to turn to stone? Did it happen at once or gradually? How did Rose feel and behave?

The prince decided to put aside his own curiosity for a moment, and let his guests eat and rest and he started talking.

"Rose's engagement party began shortly after noon," the Prince said, "but I wasn't there from the beginning. The first person to fossilize was the maid who dressed and combed Rose. She had barely left her room. The footmen found her in the hallway, took her away so that she would not alarm others, and they came for me. They did not want to disturb my parents or Prince Frederick on such an important day. I interviewed the second maid thoroughly. She told me that when they went to the chamber everything was fine, but then this girl said she felt weird and ran out the door. The other maid helped Rose herself and nothing happened to her. At that moment, I did not associate it with Rose or anything else, it was just weird. It was a hectic day, we detained Master Sherry in the morning and spent about two hours interrogating him, I barely prepared for the feast and I was just welcoming some important guests, when this happened. It was something really unusual and shocking. I was waiting for the doctor if he could tell me what it was, and other servants started looking for him as well. Rose started to complain about her headache. Because of all this, I came to the feast a little later when the second course was being served. This saved me. I didn't eat the soup, cooked on that day from the water from our well. We found out very quickly that the disease was spreading through the water, but at first we didn't know what was going on."

The Prince sighed and continued, "We ate, and then the music played and we started dancing. An hour had passed since the feast had begun until people fossilized. The doctor gave Rose some herbs for her headache, but it didn't help her much. But she did not want to spoil Frederick's big day and coped it as well as she could. She danced with him for about two dances, and Frederick then said that he had some gifts for her and summoned the alchemists from his court to present them to her. Rose walked toward them, but collapsed on the steps below the throne, feeling sick. She held her head in hands for a moment and suddenly it happened. It was just a short while. She turned into stone before my eyes."

William shuddered, "It was like an avalanche. As if suddenly the whole hall had fallen asleep. Several people jumped out and went to her to see what was happening, but they froze themselves on spot, barely taking a step. There were a few people who remained unchanged. Panic spread among them and they fled from the hall. At that moment, a servant hurried into the room saying he had given water to our horses, and they all petrified. Another man came from the kitchen where all the cooks had fallen asleep, and there was a fire. It was total chaos. It was necessary to extinguish the fire in the kitchen and people were running in with new and new information of what had happened.

From the dungeon, I was informed that one of the guards fossilized as soon as he drank water from the well and that Sherry laughed at it and refused the water himself and demanded milk or beer. I motioned to one of the servants to draw water from the well and gave it to one of the cats, which immediately fossilized. Then we were sure it was really the water. I gathered all who remained in the castle, and I forbade anyone to drink from the well. From the entire chateau, where we had about three hundred guests and over seventy servants, I had twenty-six people and only three of all the guests.

I instructed them to search the entire castle for any other accident. They checked all the candles, remained animals and found a few other people who had been doing their work in some remote corner and had not noticed what was happening. I asked them all what they had eaten or drank. Me and the three guests who survived the engagement party were the only ones who had no soup. I arrived late and they refused it because they did not like it. I only drank wine and ate roasts and dishes that were prepared the day before as I later found out. The servants who were spared were mostly people who had not yet had their lunch that day, and if they drank something, it was either no water, or it was the water they had left in a jar since the day before. During the afternoon I spoke to each of them. And, of course, I realized that we had arrested Sherry at the spring in the morning and started to interview him."

„It was a confused day. I was shocked, but there was so much to do. In addition, some servants fled on the first occasion in fear, and even the surviving three guests left soon. I summoned several doctors and scholars from the vicinity, but one of them touched Rose and fossilized. Then they were much less willing to help. Gossips also began to spread. The fact that I survived led to various rumors that I was somehow responsible for all the mess. I spent the whole week trying to get something from Sherry, talked with scholars and doctors, and there were various uninvited guests - witches, charlatans and the first heroes - who thought she would wake up when they kissed her.

In the early days, I still had some guards and servants at the castle, but when I started traveling to search for help and advice, most of the servants left. In the end there were only jailers, a few gardeners, a cleaning lady and cook. Only twelve people. Now, after ten years, there are only two people who oversee the castle and our prisoner. At first, I wanted someone to take care of the castle, to make it secure, and to ensure that none of the crazy princes had access to Rose. Then I gradually gave up.

I secured the most precious things, got rid of the animals and I stopped trying to care for the castle, I did not prevent the princes from going there. I preferred to talk to scholars and to find out how to save my family. People from the immediate vicinity of the castle fled anyway. Somehow the poison got into the water in the village, and after two days several people fossilized there. Before the water was cleared, only four inhabited houses remained. People went to neighboring empires or nearby cities and villages, even from places they didn't have to. It seems as if the life died out in the immediate vicinity. "

"Did you trust Sherry when he asked you for a fiery bird feather, dragon's teeth, or a unicorn's hair so that the castle could be delivered?" Oscar asked.

"The first years we tried almost anything," Prince shrugged his shoulders. "We have traveled the world, asking for help from every empire, every known alchemist and scientist. We traveled into the jungle, shipwrecked at a desert island and spent there several months. I saw the fiery birds, big dragons, sea snakes and sea maidens and collected many remarkable objects. In the end, we stopped traveling, conquered this island, and started focusing more on books and correspondence with anyone who might know something."

"Who was helping you?" Lucy asked because the prince was using plural.

"I had four irreplaceable helpers," the Prince replied. "Three of them were friends from childhood and studies, siblings Felix, Fortunate and Fidelius. They are the sons of one neighboring king, but they are known as Tall, Wide and Bright-eyed. My fourth helper was Princess Anabel, an old friend, and my wife for the past six years. A year after the wedding we had twins, it's almost a family tradition, and we stay on this island, we have some privacy here while we are not too far from the castle."

"When you have such a collection of rare objects, do you have dragon's agave?" Oscar asked.

"Not with me," Prince William shook his head, "but I know where we might find it and I have a dragon to my disposal."

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They talked with the prince late into the night, Kevin had to tell him in detail about his quest, explain everything about the red vitriol, tell him about how they met, what had happened to them in recent days, and he was astonished that they found his sister's diary and by the power of the hair clip she'd taken so naively from Master Sherry . The past started to fit together like pieces of puzzle and they have seen almost the whole picture. Of course there was an empty space here and there. They wondered how the red vitriol works, why the water stopped being dangerous just after a month, while the hair-clip caused fossilization all the time. And maybe even more quickly than before. But the biggest question now was whether they could save the castle. Will they get dragon's agave and will it work?

They spent the night in the fortress and in the morning they had opportunity to meet Princess Anabel and the five years old twins Leonard and Rafael during breakfast . Lucy found their names quite strange, but it was hard to say what is normal in a place where someone has a pet dragon, Lucy thought. And thinking about names she dared to ask princess Anabel about the name Black Arnold.

"Is it because of his black clothes and all the sadness?" Lucy asked.

But Anabel started to laugh. "Well he chose the nickname Arnold not to let everyone know who he really was. But our friends started calling him Black when he fell into a pond full of mud. It's not very dignified name."

"The dragon is ready," Prince William said cheerfully after he came in, "we've already spoken to him."

The hope his guests brought with them seemed to improve Prince's mood.

"How do you talk to such a dragon?" Oscar asked.

"Well," the Prince smiled. "I have a guest here who is very helpful in this."

Old Graham refused to join them, so it was again only the four of them, Prince William and his mysterious guest.

"Where are we going?" Lucy wanted to know.

"The nearest of the dragon's islands in the Little Dragon Archipelago," the Prince replied, unfolding the map in front of them.

It was a strange map. The fairy-tale world had the shape of a book. Oscar and Lucy marveled but they did not ask anything. If we can speak of continents, there were two. The whole mainland consisted of two continents, connected by a narrow seam, like America, but they looked more like an hourglass, lying flat. The space between the peripheral mountains and the continents was filled with sea, dotted with various islands and islets. In the very north was the Midnight Wood, and Oscar remembered from a book that midnight was an old name for the north. There were various other empires and kingdoms. On the right continent there was the Land of Unicorn, the Golden-land, the Rainbow Kingdom and the Dragon Empire and the Great Dragon Archipelago laid near to it. The connecting seam belonged to the Middle Kingdom, and the Little Dragon archipelago was just below it. A little more in the south was the largest island on the map - Great Tania.

"Where are we?" Lucy asked shyly.

Kevin sighed, evidently disgusted by her lack of knowledge and pointed his finger on the map. The Kingdom of Roses. That could have occurred to me, too, Lucy realized. It was located right next to Middle Kingdom, the narrow seam between the two continents and next to the Salty Kingdom. The border between the two kingdoms was natural – The Great Salt Lake, the Salty river originated in the lake and the enchanted castle stood near to it. So all the rivers were not salty in the fairy-tale world, Oscar thought. It was just a local peculiarity and salty rivers and streams have been scarce, they just all flowed exactly through the places that Oscar passed.

Kevin removed his finger from the map and Lucy with Oscar could see the rest of it. There was a Dwarf Cape, the Kingdom of Honey, the Empire of Fire and the Great Desert - a land of no one.

Oscar was just glad Philip didn't ask where the Land of Detention was. Though he knew that Oscar had come here in a rather strange way, and that both children were most probably mysterious Vanishing People, yet Oscar wasn't sure if the dwarf understood that they had come from a completely different world. And Lucy hadn't bothered to explain to Kevin where she'd come from, even though they seemed to be completely uneducated to him because of it.

They left the fortress. The Prince was in a hurry. Oscar and Lucy looked around, but it wasn't clear where the Prince might hide the dragon. The island was not too big. It was about half a kilometer from the lighthouse to the fortress and maybe some other two kilometers from the fortress to the other side of the sea. There were fields and pastures between the lighthouse, the fortress, and the coast, and there was a small farmhouse too.

"Twenty other people live here with me," the Prince said as he saw them looking around. "Some of them are former servants, and some of them are friends we met when traveling."

A young man with bright golden hair waited for them at the coast.

"The dragon is ready, Prince William," he called cheerfully.

"This is Matthew, the youngest son of King Goldhair and the grandson of the famous Goldilocks," William introduced the boy.

Oscar understood how the dragon could be prepared, the ability to communicate with animals was indeed hereditary, but he still could not see the dragon. Lucy punched into him and pointed to a few hills that peered out from the surface of the sea in a straight line. They glistened in the sun and moved.

"Is that a sea dragon?" Oscar was horrified.

As if on call, the monster poked its head out of the water, and Prince Will scratched it to Lucy's dismay. The dragon hissed something, and Matthew replied. The dragon then put its head on the shore and showed them that they could come. The dragon had two rows of thorns behind its head and Prince William climbed to a stone by the shore and jumped on the dragon and sat confidently among the thorns. Others followed him as well. The thorns were at least a meter high, and when they sat they couldn't be seen. They were also very dense, as such a natural railing.

"At least we won't fall when the dragon is swimming," Oscar said.

"It will be Swimming?" Prince William turned to him in amusement. "I hope you can swim!"

Only then did they realize what was going on here. The dragon began to raise its neck and they slowly began to slide down. Lucy roared. The back of the monster rippled and they found themselves on the biggest roller coaster imaginable. They rushed down the steep slopes of the dragon's back, and when it seemed they would be underwater in a moment, another part of the dragon's body suddenly rose up, and they were again on a massive hill. And down again. Occasionally the dragon dived more than usually and they ended up under the surface for a moment, but by the time they were out of breath they were flying up again, clinging to the dragon's body. The dragon did not swim at all. He just lay on the surface and waved. When they were just up, they could see the dragon's body, which was lost somewhere in the distance. And no dry land yet.

At times it was fun, but at times some of them were sick. Lucy was light green, the dwarf sputtered water, and Prince William seemed to enjoy it most of all. Oscar did not mind it but he thought they should have used a mat. Not that they would scuff, but the dragon was not only wet but also terribly slimy.

This crazy ride lasted nearly two hours. Oscar couldn't imagine how big the dragon was. Eventually a small island appeared in front of them. The dragon was no professional pilot to guarantee a smooth landing. It dropped them into the water, about a hundred meters from the beach. Maybe the dragon thought the water was closer but it dropped them six meters above surface and the roar was now coming from many mouths. The swimming skills had come in handy for all of them now, and the only one who thought the action was fun was the Prince. The dwarf, unwilling to say goodbye to his ax, was quite exhausted. It was also a rather unpleasant burden for swimming.

"Don't worry, you don't have to go through this again," William said.

Wet and exhausted they reached a small farm, and there Lucy and Oscar gazed. The dragons were closed in a corral next to the building. Prince William and Kevin went inside to talk to the dragon breeder about whether it would be possible to get some blooming dragon's agave somewhere, but the students remained outside to watch the dragons.

Most dragons were big as a turkey. These were still young. There were fifteen of them in the corral, and they were supervised by two adult animals, about the size of a sheep. All the dragons were greenish, four limbs, the front a little stunted, and small wings. Their aviation performance matched the skills of the hens. But it did not prevent the dragons from fooling around. A large charred tree trunk was laid in the corral. Dragons were hoping on the trunk and then flew down. Occasionally, one of them had found a forgotten thin twig that might burn, and spewed fire on it.

"Why do people breed these dragons?" Oscar asked the dwarf, who stayed with them.

"For meat," Philip replied. "It's quite a delicacy. Have you never eaten a roast dragon?"

Oscar just shook his head.

"Some people even eat dragon eggs," the dwarf said, "but I don't like them much. But such a dragon with herb stuffing... that's yummy."

Philip paused thoughtfully while Lucy looked disgusted, but said nothing. Another country, another habits. Some people eat dogs or cats, some guinea pigs, people here eat dragons.

"Sea dragons taste like eels," the dwarf added.

"How many kinds of dragons exist? How big are the smallest and how big are the biggest?" Lucy wanted to know.

"I hope the big ones live on the Big Dragon Archipelago, not here," Oscar said.

"Children, children," Philip shook his head. "You haven't really seen much yet. This is one of four breeding dragons. Three of those species are similarly large and are bred here in the Little Dragon Archipelago. It's basically one dragon farm next to the other. In the Dragon Empire and the Big Dragon Archipelago, people breed a bit larger dragons. They're as big as horses, they have stunted wings, and people ride them in the Dragon Empire, but it's more of a tradition. It's not very practical and comfortable. Those dragons don't have very good meat or even eggs, but their skin is especially popular among the nobility. Then I know about five kinds of sea dragons. They measure from one to three meters, and then of course there is the Terror of the Sea, that's the beast we have ridden. I heard there are three of them in all the seas around the world.

The really wild and big dragons and those with multiple heads live in uninhabited mountains at the end of the world. The mountains touch the Kingdom of Midnight Wood and it is separated from the mountains by wild rivers and a ten-meter high wall and patrols guard there day and night.

It is said that in the mountains there are monstrous giants who eat cattle and, when it comes to it, people. Most dragons are herbivores, sea dragons, of course, eat fish, but who knows what lives in those mountains. They are unexplored territories. It is said that there lives a giant bird Roc, flying horses, various lizards and simply all sorts of strange vermin."

"So the only place at the end of the world where people live is the Midnight Wood, right?" Oscar asked.

"Maybe some people survive in those mountains, it's hard to say. Criminals are exported there for punishment. If anything hasn't eaten them, they may be living there somehow. But otherwise, few people venture beyond the borders of the Midnight Wood. Of course, there are legends about the treasures that the mountains hide, and here and there it lures a poor man, but most of the time they won't come back."

"Was Prince William ever in the mountains?" Lucy asked.

"Why do you think he is referred to as the greatest hero of the present?" the dwarf replied with a question.

"Do you think that princess Anabel was there with him?" Oscar blurted.

"Why do you think I married her?" a voice answered behind his back. They were so engaged in the conversation that they did not even notice that William had returned.

"A girl in the mountains among giant dragons, wow," Oscar commented with acknowledgment.

Evidently Lucy had some witty answer at hand, but Prince William spoke first: "This is Mr. Dragonpunch, he will show you what dragon's agave looks like."

"Kevin and Philip told us that dragon's agave grew only in the mountains at the end of the world," Lucy said.

"It used to be so," the Prince replied. "We brought various rare plants from our expeditions around the world. Breeders of dragons found out that these agave are very tasty for their dragons and moreover they have also healing effects. They multiply very well via offshoots and Mr. Dragonpunch has a field of them."

That field was rather a large flowerbed, which was located behind the farm house. Dragon's agave looked like other plants of this type, but unlike common agave leaves these had a red color. What they needed, of course, was a blooming dragon's agave, and there wasn't any.

Prince William quickly introduced them to his plan. In the afternoon Graham was supposed to arrive with a balloon, and he was to bring a box with a red vitriol. They will let some small animal petrify and Kevin will try if the juice from the leaves of agave could help it, but they will not waste time and set off to look for a blooming agave.

There are eight islands in the Little Dragon Archipelago, and Prince William, on his way from his expeditions, donated several plants to the dragon breeders on each of them. The Prince was a collector, and his interests now gave them some hope. If they fail, they will have to explore the four islands of the Big Dragon or head to the mountains at the very end of the world. As for the Little Dragon Archipelago, there was one island that the Prince considered important to visit. Dragon breeders lived only on seven of the eight islets. The smallest one was uninhabited - only one person lived on it, but a very important one. A lady - botanist and scientist called Jasmine Bloom.

While Kevin began harvesting several plants to get the juice out of them, Matthew came to them and tried to talk to the dragons a little.

"They're completely stupid," he shook his head sadly. "It is said that the smaller the dragon is, the less intelligent it is and unfortunately it is probably true. Their expressive skills are at the level of a two-year-old child. I tried to ask the dragons about agave, and they answered: give me, yummy food, good stuff. There isn't any real conversation with them."

"Is there any animal you can really talk to?" Lucy wanted to know.

"Elephants," Matthew replied without hesitation. "We keep a few of them at the court, sometimes I play bowling with one of them and sometimes I read him books, he was quite interested in them. You can talk to an elephant like to a ten-year-old, that's the peak of what you can expect from animals. Of course, the great dragons are said to be very intelligent, but I haven't had a chance to verify it."

Their expedition was split for the first time. While Kevin remained on the island, the others divided to explore the other islands of the archipelago, on small sailboats, several of which rocked in the dock of a nearby village. They should travel in pairs. Each pair was supposed to visit two islets and in the evening they were supposed to meet at the furthest one where the botanist Jasmine Bloom lived. Kevin and Graham should arrive there in the balloon too.

They borrowed the boats with a two-man crew, local fishermen, so there were actually four people in each vessel. The dragon's breeder, Mr. Dragonpunch, offered to accompany them and joined Prince William. Lucy was quite excited to be with Matthew because she wanted to speak with him about animals. Oscar ended up somehow automatically with the dwarf Philip. They were a team.

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Philip and Oscar had to visit islands that were on the right side of the archipelago. Oscar was looking forward to their trip as to another adventure, but as soon as they left the lee of the island, he started to feel very cold in the open sea. The waves also tossed with the small boat and he started to feel seasick, so he soon stopped looking curiously at all sides, obeyed the fishermen and lay down on the bottom of the boat. The horizontal position calmed his stomach a little, and wind didn't bother him that much either. But he watched with concern the clouds overhead that started hiding the sun.

The first of the islands was really small, forty people lived on it, concentrated in three dragon farms and there were fields of various agave plants. Two plants bloomed here, but it was not the right kind. However, Oscar admired their flowers that were several meters high. Philip made Oscar happy by buying something warm to eat. But once they were at sea again, Oscar began to regret having lunch. It started to rain. Meanwhile, they were only small flying drops, no rainfall, but the wind was stronger and Oscar was still feeling very cold, even under a blanket the fishermen had lent him. Oscar regarded both men as kind helpers, but what a surprise it was when the men dropped them on another island and told them they were returning home quickly. They shrugged at Philip's persuasion. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction and they didn't want to cruise against it on the last island. Moreover they left Philip and Oscar on the largest island of the archipelago, where they can easily find another boat.

On the largest of the islands, there were to be twelve dragon farms that were miles apart. Philip had rented two ponies in the port town. Oscar wished he could ride a bigger horse, but he had no other choice. Given his height, Philip chose these small animals, which he found also safe, but unfortunately it meant they were quite slow. Fortunately, they did not have to travel from one farm to another. They had a list of five farms they should visit, those

to which the Prince gave the biggest plants. There was hope these could be old enough to bloom.

To the surprise of both the travelers right at the first farm they were told a great news - the dragon's agave has really recently blossomed on the island. But not on the farm they came to but at another farm, about two kilometers away. It seemed to be such an important and unprecedented event that farmers in the area knew about it. Philip wanted a clarification of what it was recently. He was told it happened three weeks ago. With hope they went to the neighboring farm and they were wondering what to expect there. Neither of them knew how long the agave blooms, whether and in what condition they will find the flower. The two of them hoped the dragon hadn't devoured the rarity.

"The dragon's agave blossom," the farmer nodded as they asked. "Yeah, we had it and we sold it expensively. We sent it to the alchemist Nicholas Fireball from the Middle Kingdom. He sent a letter to all local farmers a few months ago that he would be interested in agave's flower. The ship with the flower left three days ago."

It was good and bad news at the same time. Everyone would certainly prefer to have an agave flower at their disposal, but it could have been much worse - they also did not have to get any blooming agave at all. Agave wasn't going anywhere far. Middle Kingdom and the Kingdom of Roses were neighbors.

When they left the farm it started to rain even more and the wind was really unpleasant. There was another bad news in the harbor. The waves stormed the dock, and despite all of Philip's persuasion, they didn't find a fisherman willing to leave the island. Oscar didn't regret that much. He knew it was important to leave the island as soon as possible, but he felt sick from the prospect of a boat bouncing on the water.

"So we're not getting out of here today," Oscar said.

"Yes, we are," Philip said simply.

Oscar had no idea how the dwarf wanted to get away, and asked cautiously.

"We're lucky," the dwarf informed him, "we are on the largest island of the archipelago, so of course they have an airport."

Oscar had the feeling that the airport was a word that wouldn't fit in a fairy tale, and was even more surprised when the dwarf found a small house on the main street crammed between two other buildings. It was a building with a store on the ground floor, and above the shop window was a large inscription: AIRPORT. And behind the glass, Oscar saw rows of rolled up carpets.

It was raining now and Oscar was glad to be inside. They were welcomed by an elderly gentleman in an Arabic-looking clothes, and given the weather, he offered Philip a more expensive but unobtrusive carpet model. Oscar wouldn't even call it a carpet, because it looked more like a PVC flooring, but they still called it a carpet. Philip negotiated for a while, explained where they were heading, paid the price for renting the carpets, and even bought them raincoats. Fortunately, he had enough money from Prince William. Oscar had realized in horror now that there was talk of carpets in plural and that of course meant that he would fly on his own.

The house was small, but there was a really large garden behind it that looked pretty bizarre. In addition to the carpet knockers, there were a number of haystacks, and since one carpet had just arrived, Oscar soon understood why. The carpet thudded to the ground quite hard,

and the soaked passenger rolled into the hay swearing. But FCC (the Flying Carpet Company) provided its passengers first-class service. The swift hostess immediately dusted all the hay from the man and offered him that he can dry and refresh himself in the flight hall.

The carpets had a black talking box in front, which received the appropriate flight instructions. Philip and Oscar soon settled on their carpets. Oscar's box immediately greeted its passenger and urged him to buckle up . Oscar glanced at the dwarf and found that he had simply tied a rope attached to the carpet around his leg. Oscar was thinner than Philip, so he wrapped his rope around his waist.

The take off was relatively smooth , the carpet simply jumped into the air, so there was no need to use hay at least for this operation. They soon reached the level of the houses and both carpets set in motion in the rain. Oscar was watching the farm below, but forests and houses soon disappeared from his view and they found themselves above the sea.

"I apologize for the poor visibility, but it's not my fault," the carpet told him. "But I can sing you along the way or recite some poems."

"No, thank you," Oscar replied.

"I have in my memory over forty literary works," the carpet could not be dismissed. "And two encyclopedias."

"Do you have a name?" Oscar asked the carpet.

"They call me Stingray 737. I'm made of stingray skin," the carpet explained. "I also have an anti-reflective coating."

The carpet was disappointed that Oscar was unresponsive and began to explain, "That means that when the sun shines, I will make it reflect from me and not from you. By the way, one of those literary works is History of the Top Cover."

"What is the top cover?" Oscar asked.

Unlike Kevin, the carpet was not offended by Oscar's ignorance, and he replied enthusiastically: "I can tell you, but it's a definition from the Great Encyclopedia, not from the Top Cover History. Do you mind?"

Oscar reassured the carpet that he didn't mind, and Stingray 737 started. " The top cover is the top wrap of the Great Book of Fairy Tales. It was created by Johannes Gutenberg in 1462. Johannes said: Let's create a book, print letters on its paper and provide it by a cover. Let us provide the pages with complex pictures to make them look good. Let us make the landscape, the sea and the peripheral mountains on the top cover and make there people, animals, and every mythical figure and animal that can only be thought of to make sure that the book is alive. And it happened. Gutenberg also said: May good always prevail, evil is punished and everything will turn out well for children to enjoy the book. And it happened. There are disputes about the bottom of the Big Book and the inside. There are people like Gabriel Gal who think there is life on the bottom cover of the book, but most scientists refuse it and say that people would have fallen from there or that it would be too difficult for them to walk upside down. On the other hand, people mostly admit the life on its side. There is also controversy over what is actually under the surface. Some believe that life exists within the book, and that if it were not for the inside, there would be no life. But the famous Alexander Cope says that things should not be complicated. He came into the world on a sofa in the living room and not inside the book. If living creatures were born inside, they would be pressed and would not have air, so even though life inside is theoretically possible, it is

unlikely to be sustainable. In the Great Encyclopedia there is a map of the top. It's on page 358. If you want, I can describe it to you."

Oscar had already seen the map of this strange book world and thanked the carpet and changed the subject: "How many carpets are there in the airline? Is it possible to buy you or just to borrow?"

The carpet was pleased with Oscar's curiosity. "There are a thousand and one of us," he replied. "Eighty percent of the carpets are owned by three airlines, the largest of which is FCC, then there's Light Flights, which offers only basic services and Fly-let. They have really large carpets and offer luxury service such as flights for two or flights with stewardess and refreshments. Several carpets are owned by kings and carpet 1001 belongs to the Prison Transport Company. With its help, they throw the prisoners into the peripheral mountains. Carpets can be owned, but it is very expensive. They are usually rented. My services are prepaid for five days if you would like to take a trip somewhere with better weather."

"Not yet," Oscar thanked. "How far is it?"

"Three kilometers from here," the carpet said. "But I don't like the weather. I overheard the communication of two carpets, which are about half an hour away, and they have seen a great wind whirl."

Oscar paused, drenched to the bone, the wind began to toss the carpet more and more. The carpet apologized for the turbulence that had arisen, but it didn't help Oscar much. Philip was a little heavier than Oscar, and his carpet was about two hundred metres behind them. When Oscar turned around after a while, he found Philip's carpet turning sharply to the left. Philip waved at Oscar and showed him to move as well.

Oscar asked the carpet why it wasn't on the same route, but the carpet began to twitch as if it was being pulled to the right. Oscar suddenly found in horror that the wind vortex they had just discussed was now in sight.

"Do you see the whirlwind?" Oscar blurted. "Why didn't you turn to avoid it?"

"Of course I don't see it," the carpet replied. "I have no eyes. That's what you should tell me. I guess I won't do anything about it now, I can't change direction."

The tornado began to draw the carpet to itself. Oscar spotted Philip for a moment, watching him in horror. And then the carpet started to spin wildly.

20

It is difficult to describe what happened in the following minutes. The vortex hadn't sucked the carpet into its center, but had taken it on its wild road. The wind that surrounded the tornado grabbed the carpet, and they rotated around the tumbling center of the vortex.

"Don't worry," the carpet said. "Everything always turns well. Unless you're evil. Then you will either die or you will be punished fairly. That's how it goes."

Instead of answering, Oscar lay on his stomach and clung to the carpet with all his strength.

"Listen," the carpet asked after a moment, "do you think you are a good person? Do you think this flight will turn out well? I would not like to spend a few months being repaired."

Oscar wanted to reassure the carpet that he was on the right side and was trying to free the enchanted castle, but then he remembered that he was there because he was punished and preferred not to say anything. The carpet began to fidget nervously. As they passed the various debris that the wind vortex sucked in, they eventually crashed into a piece of shutter that the vortex tore out somewhere on its devastating road. Something cracked. The debris crashed directly into the black box. The carpet suddenly fell to the ground - which in this case fortunately meant the sea.

"Talk to me!" Oscar screamed at the carpet during the mad fall and quickly answered what the carpet had asked him before. "I'm not perfect, but right now I'm trying to do something really useful and good."

But the carpet was not silent because it would be offended. Something broke as Oscar realized, before he and Stingray 737 were splashing into the sea. Oscar sputtered the water and was glad that Stingray could at least swim when it was obviously useless. Oscar was sorry, he would love to talk to someone who has two encyclopedias in his database. The gloom that had been caused by the thunderstorm was now beginning to be replaced by evening sun. Oscar swayed on the waves all soaked, searching in vain for some land. The only positive thing about the whole situation was that the vortex had released him from its devastating grasp. But Oscar thought it was not much.

Oscar was awake most of the night, shivering with cold. It wasn't until the morning that he had fallen asleep for a moment. He woke with the first rays and realized with gratitude that the sun was shining. He wanted to look around a little, but the first thing he saw was a mermaid leaning against his carpet and watching him curiously.

"You look nice when you sleep," the girl said. She had large brown eyes, blond wavy hair, and wore a t-shirt sewn with tiny pearls. Shells were rocking on her ears. Oscar could see her tail underwater. She was tiny, more like a child.

"I brought you breakfast," she informed him, handing him a few fruits, blue, elongated and looking like large pods.

"You must open it," the mermaid prompted.

"What's your name?" Oscar asked, looking around. The sea calmed overnight, the sky brightened and the sun was shining. He had seen any land nowhere, but he had seen a ship on the horizon.

"So far, my name is Matilda," the girl replied, adding, "the ship crashed there last night."

"So far?" Oscar asked, cracking one of the fruits. Inside it looked like big peas balls, but they were also blue and tasted like lemon yogurt.

"I get a new name when I get married," Matilda explained. She smiled at Oscar and added, "I am single."

"You look very young," Oscar said, not knowing what to say. But the girl obviously took it as a compliment and blushed.

"I'm eleven," she informed him, reminding him he hadn't even introduced himself. Oscar told her his name and some information about himself.

"Do you have children?" the mermaid asked another question to find out if he had someone.

"No, I'm thirteen," Oscar wondered why she even asked.

"You're at your best age," Matilda said. "In our world, most people get married when they are about twelve."

Oscar finished his delicious breakfast and began to examine the black box of the carpet.

"I need a screwdriver," he muttered more to himself.

"Would you like one from that ship?" The mermaid pointed toward the wreck.

"Would you bring it to me?" Oscar asked gratefully.

"Don't you want to look for it yourself?" Matilda asked.

"I can't get there," Oscar said. "It's so far away."

The mermaid looked as if he had just offended her. She began to wiggle her tail and the carpet took the right direction. Surprisingly, she moved along the surface with him, lying on his stern like the most unusual outboard engine. Obviously, it didn't bother her particularly, for she was talking the whole way. She told him about her family, what fish they were breeding and what they were growing in their garden. How to properly care for pearl mussels, how to trade pearls and many other things, and she also managed to ask him a lot of information about him.

"I've never been to the mainland before," Matilda said embarrassed as they were only a short distance from the ship. "I'd love to go there sometime."

"Is it possible?" Oscar asked.

"If a man kisses me, I can walk on the ground all day," she informed him.

"Oh," was all Oscar could do.

"Would you like to take me there?" Matilda asked directly.

"Look, I feel like the two of us don't have much to say to each other," Oscar began.

"What have we been doing all the time?" the mermaid asked. "We've been talking for almost an hour and I liked it."

"You may see it a little differently than I do," Oscar said. "I don't want to offend you. Actually, I don't think much about such things yet. I have various friends of mine... "

Oscar wanted to explain to her that he was still a boy, and at his age he wasn't interested in anything more than friendship, but the mermaid took it personally.

"So you just don't like me," she said simply. "And you think of another one. Well, I won't bother you. I'm not like that. I come from a good family, I have the best schools, and I also have my own dolphin," she said proudly.

She looked at Oscar for a moment to see if he would change his mind, but he didn't know what to say to her, so he thanked her for her help. The mermaid just shook her head, obviously disappointed. When she saw that he was not going to reply, she sighed.

"Goodbye, Oscar," she said simply, pulling away from the carpet and disappearing under the

water.

The ship was wedged on the rock, and Oscar had first carefully pulled out the broken carpet to keep it from swimming. Then he climbed aboard. It was an acrobatic performance, because the ship was stuck between two rocks three meters above the sea and he had to climb the rocks and then somehow climb the holes in its side, but in the end he did manage it somehow. He tried to call for people, but the sailors apparently left the wreck in lifeboats. The only living creatures on board were small breeding dragons in wooden cages. The stern of the ship was wedged on the rock, and the bow sloped slightly and under the surface, making it really difficult to walk on the deck, as it was inclined to one side. Oscar eventually managed to find a toolbox and picked out a few pieces he could use. He put them aside, then set out to explore the deck below.

Of course he knew that a ship left the Little Dragon Archipelago a few days ago, so he had to at least find out if it's not this one. The dragons on board were a good sign. Oscar doubted that there was dense traffic, so there was hope that the rare agave flower could be hidden in the interior of the wreck. He descended into the bellow deck and searched the cabins scattered on either side of the corridor. Most of them were just simple hammock rooms where the crew slept, and he also discovered a cabin with nautical necessities such as various ropes, spare sails and a pantry. Unfortunately, it was partially flooded. Oscar just looked around to see what he would have if he couldn't repair the carpet. He hoped someone would be searching for the wreck or someone would find it by accident and save him.

The spacious stern room was the captain's cabin. His desk was fixed to the floor, so it did not overturn, but its contents, all sorts of papers, lay on the floor. Oscar had no choice but to gather them. Finally he came across a list of things the ship was carrying. The long documentary contained various items that the ship had carried on its journey from Great Tania. At their stop in the Little Dragon Archipelago, they only took on board three things - thirty breeding dragons in two large cages, a bag of mail, and a package for Mr. Fireball. Oscar cheered, and if the ship had not been so inclined, he might have danced a victory dance on the spot. All that was needed was to find the package. But he run out of enthusiasm soon. He had searched most of the cabins. If the package was not found somewhere on board, it means that it is somewhere in the flooded bow. Oscar preferred to leave this option as a last possibility and returned to the deck, where there were still a few enclosed spaces he could search.

But as he correctly assumed, he found only the galley and various everyday necessities. Then he realized that there was a trapdoor that led from the deck to the cargo area, and that he didn't have to try to reach the flooded part of the ship. That improved his mood. The hatch also glimpsed after a while, but the ship was so inclined that Oscar had decided to examine the black box of the flying carpet first.

He climbed back onto the rock and soon managed to remove the top of the wooden box. Unfortunately, it was not attached with screws, but with small nails, so it took some time, but he managed to get inside. There he saw another box, this time from metal. He expected to find some wires or something resembling an electric devise but there was just some kind of disc that was knocked out of the cone on which it should had rested. Oscar put the strange thing back on it and the disc began to turn slowly. Before Oscar closed the box, Stingray 737 started to speak," The Flying Carpet Company welcomes you, please sit down and buckle in."

"We crashed because of a tornado," Oscar informed the carpet, "do you know where we are?"

"The systems are under control," the carpet replied, adding after a moment, "I apologize on behalf of FCC for departing from a given course, but I really couldn't help the weather. The fly back to the Little Dragon Archipelago will take us about six hours. I can sing or recite poems during the journey. "

"First of all, I need to get over this ship's cargo space and pull something out of there, if it's there," Oscar said.

"You didn't pay for a luggage," the carpet said, "only for the transport of a person."

"It's just a flower," Oscar said, preferring not to mention its size.

"A flower for a girl?" the carpet asked.

"Yeah, sort of," Oscar nodded.

"All right," said the carpet, "tell me the coordinates."

Oscar had no coordinates, of course, but somehow he had navigated the carpet above the cargo space. Carpet grumbled a bit, but eventually Oscar managed to navigate it above the right spot, at least he could hold to the carpet when he opened the trap door. There was about a meter of water in the cargo compartment, a little more near the bow, but most of the packages were dry and Oscar saw a long object wrapped in canvas at the top. He jumped on one stable-looking box, which, however, only looked stable, it immediately fell and Oscar ended up in the water slamming his head. Angrily he jumped at some keg, which surprisingly endured this time and climbed to the package. He managed to get to it without further complications, except that he was frightened by a fish that had got to the cargo space and now jumped from water, landed on one of the crates and slapped there for a while before it managed to jump back into the water.

Oscar climbed up to a package with the name of Nicholas Fireball and just to be sure he opened it a little to see what was inside. The dragon's agave blossom was slightly withered, but it was it. It was not a single flower, but a few clusters of flowers that looked more like bristles.

"You look more like a brush," Oscar told the flower not very flattering compliment, "but I hope you are at least a miraculous brush."

It was not easy to climb the boxes with a heavy package in hand and Oscar had to proceed very carefully, but eventually he climbed onto the deck, laid the package on the carpet and climbed after it.

"It's a very big flower," the carpet said, "and quite heavy, too."

"It's for an important girl, too," Oscar said. "And we'll be happy to pay FCC if it's a problem."

"It will be two coins," the carpet replied. "Before you returned, I informed FCC about our trouble, and the Stingray 738 on which your friend flew got the information, so they know you're all right. They set out to look for you, but now they are returning to Rocky Island and waiting for you there."

Slowly the carpet soared over the wreck, then set in motion and asked, "Would you like to hear a poem now?"

"What literary works do you have in your memory?" Oscar asked, because the flight should

take six-hours.

"For example, all the important writings of William Pear," replied Stingray 737, "Most people want to listen to Romeo, Julia, and the Red Dwarf, but it's pretty boring. Would you like to listen to the Night Full of Fireflies?"

"Red dwarf?" Oscar wondered. "What was he doing there?"

"It's a classic, don't you know it?" the carpet replied. "Two young people in love, two hostile families. They get together, Romeo thinks Julia is dead and wants to kill himself, but fortunately a red dwarf appears and talks to him and she wakes up in the meantime. When parents find out that they are married, they are furious, but soon it becomes clear that Julie is pregnant. She will give birth to quadruplets, and each of the grandparents helps to watch one child, and as they have so much work, the hostility will eventually pass away. At the end Romeo's father invites Julia's father to play golf with him and their wives sit there, drink cappuccino and talk about their grandchildren. Romeo and Julia live happily together until a war separates them, but he eventually returns home after all the hardships, and then they live happily ever after. Could I narrate you the Night Full of Fireflies now?"

And while the carpet was talking and talking, Oscar fell asleep. He woke up only when they started landing on Rocky Island. Luckily, the Stingray 737 had not noticed it and descended to the ground with his passenger, satisfied that it could provide first- class service.

21

Everybody had been waiting for him on the island - Prince William, Kevin, Philip, Lucy, Graham, Matthew and the botanist Jasmine Bloom. And also an excellent late lunch that Oscar really appreciated, although for him it was very difficult to eat as it so everyone was asking him questions.

The dragon's agave blossom, of course, caused a stir. Prince William contacted the port where the alchemist Nicholas Fireball was supposed to arrive, but no one had ever dreamed that Oscar would return with the treasure that everyone was searching for.

Kevin had a fossilized rabbit on which he had been doing some experiments with agave juice before and now he had a great discussions with the botanist about how to use the agave. They tried to give the rabbit a bath, put it in its nose , they even tried to give it an injection, but the rabbit was obviously so stiff that they could not jab the needle in. Jasmine finally tried to hold a piece of the flower above a candle. A fragrance began to spread throughout the room, reminiscent of oranges and vanilla. After a while, the rabbit began to prune its ears and woke up after about two minutes. It took a moment before it recovered and tried to get off the table, but he was fine. Nicholas Fireball's theory was correct and unprecedented joy broke out in the room.

That day, a fleet of flying carpets flew from the Little Dragon Archipelago. They were carrying our travelers, a rare plant, and plenty of food - baskets of fish, seafood, smoked meat (Lucy supposed it was dragon's meat, but refused to admit it to herself, especially after she found out it tasted really well). And many carpets flew empty, after all there were many uninvited guests in the castle.

They landed early in the evening. Some might say - the castle woke up and everyone lived happily ever after , but in fact the awakening was quite a chaos. They made an incense from the rare plant. They put it in a censer and walked with it through the rooms. Of course, they

started with Princess Rose, her parents - the king and the queen and her fiance, and then they walked with the censer around the entire hall, through the adjoining rooms and corridors, and everywhere where people put the obstructive princes.

All the rescued felt as if they had woken up after many hours of sleep on an uncomfortable bed and were very confused. The king and queen were reluctant to believe that their son had aged ten years and that somewhere they had five-year-old grandchildren. Frederick and Rose had to escape and shut themselves in one of the chateau towers, because stubborn princes massively asked the princess to marry them and some even started to fight among themselves.

Their schoolmate David was among the first who had woken up and was willing to help calm the confusion and search the castle for any forgotten statue. Somewhere in the middle of his efforts, he simply disappeared and returned to a world that is round and has no end, bounded by high mountains full of dragons and other creatures.

Lucy and Oscar went out to the garden together. New and new carpets arrived there ordered from all the airlines as well as from private sources. Many people were leaving the castle as soon as possible. Some princes were horrified to find out that their younger brothers started to rule instead of them in the meantime and were eager to leave.

The servants who had awakened were doing their best to prepare at least some dinner for those who were not in a hurry, but the supplies that William had brought could feed a few hundred people, but not thousands. Some were angry because they found they had empty pockets, lacked jewelry, and they were missing also their horses. Although Prince William had sent a message to Robert Hood, he did not demand him to recover everything he had stolen from the crazy princes. But he made it very clear that he was expecting him to help with all the confusion in the next few days. As there were not enough carpets for everyone, Robert Hood helped with several carriages and he did not send them to the castle empty. They arrived full of wine, cheese, meat and various fruit and vegetable.

There was mess and dust everywhere in the castle, and somehow the guests withdrew automatically into the garden, where the servants grilled and served the food. The noble gentlemen sat on the stairs, on the fountain, and on the garden stones, chatting and eating with their hands pieces of meat, served on bread, without plates.

Somewhere in the midst of this chaos, a helpless-looking old woman appeared. Oscar and Lucy saw her and looked at each other. The old lady was familiar. They ran to her when they recognized their principal. Mrs. Blue smiled at them.

"You have shown a lot of courage and wit," she said. "You will therefore receive a special gift from me. Actually, three gifts to be exact. First, you can stay here with your friends for a while and say goodbye. I give you time until midnight. When the clock strikes midnight, you will return to school. People who return from here forget everything. They just feel like they've woken up from a strange nightmare, that they should watch out for me and do something useful. But for your bravery you will be allowed to remember everything. And my third gift is the possibility of going back. You can travel not only to this world, but also to its past and future." With those words, the old woman gave both of them a thick book in their hands and then they lost sight of her somewhere among the castle guests.

"We still have three hours to look around and say goodbye," Lucy said, looking at the castle clock.

Oscar looked at the book. Its name was "Live Like in a Fairy Tale". He flipped through it and found that the first of its stories was The Adventures of Black Arnold. He quickly found the

content and scanned it. He had to smile. Famous and unknown names popped up there, promising exciting and unconventional stories.

Curious about what Oscar was smirking at, Lucy also found content in her edition and began reading some of the titles aloud: "Nicholas Fireball's Mysterious Cellars, Kevin and the Basset Dog, Jasmine Bloom and the Mysterious Seed, Little Mermaid, To the End of the World and Back Again, Pirate and Princess, Nougat Cottage and so on..."

"The last story is called Awakening of Master Sherry," Oscar asked.

And while the castle woke, a long sleep waited for the alchemist. But he didn't know that yet. He devoured hungrily the roast, trying to figure out why there was suddenly such a racket in the castle, and he had no idea that at the bottom of the jug of red wine that the jailer had brought him was a stone taken from Rose's buckle. Master Sherry was supposed to sleep for a hundred years before his punishment passed and his statue in the castle garden was supposed to recall what happened here.

Lucy and Oscar joined their friends. Kevin was discussing something with Philip and both of them were eating some cheese and fruit.

"Why don't you take some food as well?" the dwarf asked. They obeyed him, Oscar offered gallantly to bring something for Lucy and then they sat down in the grass together. The grass was long but rumpled from the flying carpets which had already all left. Some people stood in line for the carpets that gradually began to return from the nearest locations during the evening. And most of them did not come back empty. Some brought journalists who began to compile a detailed report of what was happening for the morning paper. And also the first owners of the abandoned properties from the vicinity came. And of course the carpets brought back gifts from another castles where people rejoiced that their sons returned back home. They sent further baskets of food to help the chaos at the awakened castle.

"What are you going to do now?" Oscar asked Kevin and Philip.

"I plan to stay here till the morning but then I hope to fly away on a carpet too," Kevin replied, "I'm going home, I have to report everything to her Majesty and then I need to visit Nicholas Fireball, explain to him where his dragon's agave ended and give him at least a small sample that was left. I think he paid for the plant quite a large amount, so we owe him. But I don't want to hurry, there are people who are much more eager to travel right now" he said, gesturing towards the queue.

"And I will be one of the messengers who will inform the neighboring rulers of what has happened," Philip told them. "And when Prince William doesn't need me, I'm going to travel the world. Maybe I will head to the very end of it and back again if it turns out well. But I don't want to sit somewhere and just to read about the world any more. And what about you two?"

"We came to say goodbye," Lucy replied. "We must return to our country at midnight."

"Where is it?" Kevin asked, not realizing until now that he didn't know.

"It's complicated," Lucy replied, "but we'll see each other again. Wouldn't you rather dance instead of talking to me?"

Dozens of torches lit the garden and even music began to play. There were not many ladies, only about half of the three hundred guests who were turned to stone at that time, and some already flew away, but there were a few married couples, that like Kevin, didn't want to spoil the evening by rushing and those people were now dancing on the lawn. Craziest of the

princes have already left, so even Rose was able to come out and now she danced alternately with her fiancé, her brother and her father, the king. Graham brought William's family by the balloon, and while the prince danced with his wife in the garden, the king and queen could meet their grandchildren.

The engagement celebration that was interrupted for ten years continued in makeshift conditions and celebrating was the best thing to do. This night - after dealing with the first onslaught of confused people - was to be spent only by dancing, eating, drinking and long conversations.

Soon there will be time for gardeners and cleaners to put everything to order and life will come back not only to the castle but also its surroundings.

Rumors started that it would all be up to king William to take the lead. The king and the queen somewhat missed too much and they were very attracted by the prospect of moving to William's fortress and spending more time with their grandchildren. Prince Frederick wanted to take Rose for a trip to his country, and then they planned a small and unobtrusive wedding that they hoped would not turn to be a disaster.

There was one thing that people were not supposed to do this evening and night - and that was sleeping. The only ones who fell asleep before midnight were Leonardo and Raphael, the royal twins. And in the deepest cell also Master Sherry fell asleep for a hundred-years but as for those who slept in the past years, all they wanted to do was to stay awake and spend together the night after which many will have to say to each other their goodbye.

Lucy did not like saying goodbye and she liked doing it without words. They talked, yes for a long time, about the past, about their dreams and plans, but not about parting. Lucy danced that evening with Prince William and with each of her friends, and as a member of the rescue party, she was honored by the dance with the king himself.

Oscar was not so tempted to dance, but he did not refuse Lucy or Princess Rose. So they danced until the clocks began to approach twelve, and then said good-bye. Oscar picked up his backpack, they were both holding as treasure the books that were given to them by the fairy-tale grandmother, who was also their director and that should allow them to go back to the fairy tale again, and then headed to a remote corner of the garden. There was no light from the torches, and no curious people saw them there. There was no reason to attract attention. The two children were there for a while, standing under an old oak and then they were simply gone. The clock struck midnight and the music continued to play. The rescued princess, her friends and guests were spinning on the uncut lawn, and no one had spoiled this night with thoughts of something sad. Not even saying goodbye. After all, saying goodbye means that time is passing, the castle is not sleeping, that something else will happen tomorrow, and that we may meet again.

22

What else to say about this story? Oscar and Lucy returned home safely and while they had stayed for days in the fairy-tale world, only three hours had passed since the director had closed Oscar in the small study. Oscar returned back not only with the things he carried, but also with all his textbooks, which he kept hidden in the hollow of a tree on the beach. They were lying at his feet in a dusty bag.

Oscar didn't feel as if he was traveling on his way back. It was more as if someone had changed the scenery before his eyes. At one moment he looked at Lucy and the tree and

heard the sound of the clock, then suddenly everything changed, in a second he looked through the window at the school grounds, and heard the sound of cars.

People kept avoiding Mrs. Blue with a mixture of fears and a vague feeling that she had done something special to them and that it was frightening. They felt they should go to the museum or read a book rather than get in her way. Oscar smiled at her when she let him out of the library. He had never spoken to her about all this, but they both knew what had happened. Oscar felt that if he talked to her he would spoil something.

When Oscar came home that day, his parents went out to play tennis, so he didn't even have to explain his delay. Instead, he hurried to his room and carefully hid the book "Live Like in a Fairy Tale" among his greatest treasures.

The second day he saw Lucy at school. He found out that her surname was Corbyn and that she was also thirteen. He hadn't thought to ask her about these things before. It turned out that she was in detention a week ago and that all the schoolchildren had in some strange way met in the fairy tale at the same time.

They both knew there were other stories and somehow they could become a part of them. Oscar was very curious about the journey of Prince William as Black Arnold, and he would like to know what to expect from his other friends, Kevin and Philip. He and Lucy agreed to read the other stories together. I am sure they will do it one day and that there is another adventure waiting for them. I'm sure it will be very unusual, Good will overcome the Evil, Evil will be punished and all will turn out well.

And I just hope that you, who have read this story, had a good time and perhaps you will decide to accompany Oscar and Lucy during their further trips.