

U.G.Doehn
ARUNDLE & KIN
1.The Secrets of Laptopia

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Prelude:

The kiss of Helios first cut loose the limbs of Chronos –
 Confirmed with might their firmly settled bond.
 The ancient moment solves for once - freed from unending stretch
 Withdraws into a single point.
 Uplifted then into mightier chains of the projected –
 The clockwork of the world begins to tick.
 God meets within the time.

2

His ghost expels first forms of glowing blaze –
 Tiniest whirls combine to forces –
 Link widening slack heaps of gathered matter.
 The Universe gets orderly,
 According to the one and only power,
 As was forwarded and intended
 By the inherited immeasurable holy law.

3

Dying Star-Mothers giving birth to generations
 Billions of years can last such day of recreation
 Is never ending though – devour in fridgeration,
 And in reprimand repetition.
 At last it is the light of stars, called sunlight,
 Which raises life on the Virginian earth.
 Aware of God's commandment and verdict.

4

Would it be accidental though, that there is life

4

Becoming Man and Mankind after all –

Widening into history?

If so, we would not be and God was all alone.

That is why it should be:

God wants us here to understand creation

And to fulfil his gorgeous plan as such:

5

God wants us all to ripen towards destiny –

In deed and word, in wish and longing –

Shall Man proceed towards the Promised Land

Uniting closely in an ever lasting bond –

With Him Who has no start nor ending –

So that each tiny spark of every individual in brightness glows –

Never to diminish but endure, and mirrored as a whole.

1. The Magic Bow

Arundle was at home alone. Fierce it was, - the night gave her a scare – the weather so black and creepy all over. Flashes flashed from afar, but the rolling thunder came nearer. The wind howled like a mourning wolf down through the gate of the backyard. At least Arundle hoped it was the wind. Brave as she usually was, her heart failed her now.

Had there only been somebody, so that she had not been all alone up here behind the balcony door. Who could sleep in such a night? Mr. and Mrs. Waldschmitt, Arundle's parents, had left to the opera shortly before the weather. Richard Wagner, that could last for ages. "Don't wait for us. We will be late. There is Lohengrin tonight" – Mrs. Waldschmitt said, as they left, and gave her a wet kiss on the forehead. "You know, where everything is, and if anything happens, you ring up Mrs. Trock on the second floor."

The telly didn't please any more, as there was no one to bleat. Listlessly she zapped through the channels. Until the first, close thunder rolled. Then she turned off. It is said, that TV attracts flashes, she remembered, besides, there was only trash, anyway.

She tried to read, but then she stepped in front of the window and looked at the weather, what she could see of it, and felt lonesome.

The longing for a protector became overwhelmingly strong; and, as it happens, when little under-tens' wishes become strong, so it worked this time as well. An awesome blooming crash hit the ground, right on the balcony. Arundle shrieked, flew, and hid in the lavvy. Some time elapsed before she came out again. There she saw it. Something was lying on the balcony. She could see what it was and it comforted her. She felt no fear when she stepped out and grabbed for the thing which was glowing somewhat invitingly, as if it wanted to say. "I'm yours, just fetch me, my dear little girl." And so she did. The light had been the red eye of a magic bow, and that was now hers.

This was how little Arundle got to her magic bow long ago.

Arundle hated school, but even more was she afraid of the boarding school, her parents threatened her with, when she grew older. Her only glance of hope was her friend Florinna Hare then, like herself by now also just about going to be thirteen soon. With her, Arundle joined the same grade, since her parents moved back to the city some years ago. The nightmarish place faded, while she kept in mind only the miracle of how she got her magic bow.

So at last, she found a friend. Tears wanted to spring out of her eyes, as she thought of Florinna.

She had her problems with her mates, for sure. Arundle could well think of a reason. She just couldn't show interest for the things her mates were interested in. That was it. The schoolyard talks only bored her. So now, she did not even simulate interest any more. Nobody would have believed her anyway.

Her mates thought her as arrogant and boring, ever since she was a little girl. No matter how hard she tried to please. If only the teachers had been nicer. However, they made things even worse. Arundle crept into her nutshell and closed in.

During lessons, she was sitting absent-minded in the classroom, stared out of the window and was waiting that the school went by. Just at home, she threw her school stuff into a corner and didn't touch until the next morning.

Either she didn't make any homework, or she copied them in the breaks, if she found someone to let her copy.

While still in primary school, she managed to slip through quite well. She seemed to dig enough and her marks weren't that bad. Nevertheless, Mrs. Kurzius complained frequently about her at the teachers parents meetings, so that Arundle's mother refused to go there any more. She found Mrs. Kurzius an impossible person. "You wouldn't believe what she's talking about you. It's just incredible. She wants us to see a psychiatrist – all of us - not only you, but your poor parents, too."

Whereas Mrs. Kurzius was by far better than Mr. Schwertfeger was, whom her father argued with, two years later. What a start in the new school that was. If there hadn't been Florinna...

Of course, there were other teachers as well. Mr. Schwertfeger only taught Mathematics, Sports and Sciences. However, her train had left the station far too long ago. She'd failed to jump on one of the later wagons, so to speak.

Since Florinna was there, Arundle felt better. She was her first real friend. However, school didn't really change.

Now with Mr. Schwertfeger, Arundle noticed that Mrs. Kurzius hadn't been all that bad, and she felt sorry for her behaviour – too late.

Arundle knew who she was, and what kind of nasty thing she could be.

Even though, Florinna was quite different – they came together at once. Florinna was friendly to everyone, she listened and wanted to please and that was sometimes hard to bear – but otherwise...

What exactly it was, that drove them towards each other, was quite unknown to her for a long time. Perhaps it was, because Florinna looked so romantic with this thick long bluish black hair and the red dot on the forehead.

Florinna was Indian, more precisely, Semi-Senoi, as she put it. and, thereof she was very proud. Anyway, she loved her mother unspeakably much, perhaps because she was a Senoi.

Arundle was not able to find out, what it was all about with the Senois for a long time. She checked the dictionary, but in vain. –

Florinna had a sister. She was one year younger and was called Corinia. Corinia was likely to be even livelier than her sister, and had the same character as her mother anyway.

And if Arundle thought it right, she was much alike her own mother as well. That was by no means advantageous for her, she realized. And she wondered how Florinna and Corinia came along with her. However, it seemed, as if both of them enjoyed her company quite a lot. Why they did, she should soon find out.

In the first place, she thought the sisters were interested in her, because of the magic bow of hers. They, as Semi-Senoi, were magically gifted enough, to realize facts, she thought. Not that she hoped for that poor reason, of course. Anyway, she would find out the truth soon enough.

Arundle was happy to meet her friends in the empty flat on boring afternoons, as she was all alone there. Now that the Waldschmitts lived in the city for almost two years again, it was close to the Hares place, just two blocks away. That was why the sisters met Arundle's magic bow or vice versa, as the bow made him known to them quite spectacularly. Arundle never ever experienced such an excitement on his side. He let the string snarl. His red eye began to twinkle. Energy pulsed and made her grow pimples on her arms. And – look at that – Florinna and Corinia could read his thoughts. So to speak or otherwise – the bow could read theirs. They understood each other without words. (As good as understanding works, without words. Spoken words are to a certain extent far more precise.)

Perhaps her parents had indeed moved because of the psychiatrist, they feared. Arundle thought this quite well to be the case. On the other hand, travelling in a crowded suburban train every morning and evening was no fun either - despite the fact of all the time, they lost this way. However, the writing of the psychiatrist on the wall in big red letters had its effects too, even though, both of them would never have committed - definitely not before each other. (As it goes with disturbed people - they don't necessarily feel disturbed.)

How disturbed her parents were, Arundle found out in comparison with her friends' family, after she was acquainted with their parents as well. A childhood as hers had to cause severe problems in the long run.

Nevertheless, she had her magic bow at last. He was able to compensate quite a lot of her grief over the years. But at school he couldn't help either. Since her father had attacked Mr. Schwertfeger, school was almost unbearable. Schwertfeger was as disturbed as her parents were, and kept her in charge of their misbehaviour, as he saw it. He closed up on her frequently and she couldn't help but wished herself away. How silly he then looked! He couldn't say, whether she shirked once more.

By the means of the magic bow, disappearing was so easy and worked faster than an eye's wink or the thinking of a thought.

(Clear enough, you doubt your recognition, what else could you do? All of a sudden, you realize an empty seat. Was it empty all the time? Must be so, as it is empty now...)

Shortly before the end of the lesson, she sat back on her stool and looked quite innocent. What did she do here? She asked herself, as she was most confused. Switching from one world into another was quite an experience.

It was in their early days, when she didn't know her magic bow or just were acquainted to. Mr. Schwertfeger got mad about her, because of the new world map, somebody embroidered with a spray-tin. He immediately charged Arundle to be the culprit - who else.

Therefore, it occurred that the bow must have mixed something up. Because in order to disappear, you had to formulate a strong wish -

‘strong and clear’ – as the bow explained later. You had to say ‘up to the moon’ or ‘what about a trip to Tobago’ – clear things like that.

Obviously, there had been a slight misunderstanding, as Arundle found her all of a sudden in a peculiar environment; she couldn’t deal with at all. Besides - she still carried her school bag over the shoulder, and felt much smaller and younger as well. However, she had been quite sure to sit in class already. Obviously not!

She sat on a grey cloud instead and below her, she could see the shimmering walls of a castle or some kind of important building. As she looked on, she noticed, that she kept sliding. The cloud didn’t bear her weight. Just as she almost passed the bottom, her magic bow managed to pick her up. She fell off the clouds literally amidst a strange world with funny rotundas houses and walking laptops all over the place. The screens showed their faces and two thin legs were fitted to the core, while two hands – fixed on both sides - hammered like mad on the keyboard, as if they gave themselves orders in written form all the time.

They seemed to be very busy. However, they didn’t act very reasonably. They goofed back and forth without much sense. Should she try to get in touch with these creatures? She approached one of the busy secretaries and introduced herself – but no reaction. She tried it again. This time she stepped into the pace of a busy comrade. However, he just curved around her and continued on his route.

‘As if they were guided by a secret centre’ Arundle thought. Then she remembered Lappy, as she called her little laptop. It should be in her bag. She searched for a little while, and there she was, Lappy was there. She pulled it out, thought for a moment and switched on the international module. Lappy was in full command of six languages, that’s what the instructions said. Besides, it was equipped with loudspeakers, but used up a lot of energy for that device. Therefore, it was better to turn the speakers on only, when plugged in on a charger. However, here she couldn’t ask for a plug. Therefore, she tried with the battery. She hoped the battery was fully charged, but that was not the case, as she had played the settlers game in lesson yesterday and failed to repack for today.

She tried it anyway and turned the loudspeaker on. Lappy’s thin voice sounded in all its six languages. Arundle made it ask for the people ‘Where have all the people gone?’

But no reaction - busy and fixed to their routes, the little beings paced on. ‘Are these human artifacts?’ - Arundle wondered. It seemed so. Some of them slightly hesitated, while getting disturbed, but that was it. Lappy’s voice faded. The battery gave up. And a little while later,

Lappy was definitely dead. At least the artifacts thought. All of them stopped immediately as soon as Lappy's voice died. They circled Arundle, who tried to protect behind Lappy in vain. Arundle didn't understand, what the artifacts said, but she understood quite well, what they meant. And that was no good.

All of a sudden a militia came marching along - in front a General under a big golden cap on a mighty scull, followed by a little helmeted army. 'Finally a man' thought Arundle as the General approached. He looked quite different, not only because of the outfit, but also for the big red face under the cap and the fleshy belly. Yes, a human of flesh and blood, he was, she thought. And he spoke reasonably well German after all. "Gestatten, General Armyless" he snarled and saluted respectfully. "With whom do I have the honour, please?"

Intimidated the little Isnogood replied and introduced herself as good as she could. The high man bowed himself down to her and grabbed her hand to raise it towards his lips, but short before he touched it, stopped. "Kuess die Hand, Gnädigste," he snarled. "So we are more or less compatriots."

However, his friendly attitude led astray, as the troops surrounded Arundle rudely. The General obviously wasn't the boss in his own house, so to speak. He let things go its pace and shrugged, while the troop marched on.

Lappy was driven away by an ambulance and was brought to the 'Clinic for disabled Artifacts'. There the doctors noticed the lack of energy and recharged it to its full power. And that was it. Arundle and her magic bow disappeared and left the strange place as fast as they could.

Mr. Schwertfeger once more had to doubt his senses. He couldn't doubt on her. Arundle drove him into despair. However, this time she felt, she was right. She didn't even touch the stupid world map.

However, things were over now anyway. While Mr. Schwertfeger went mad, Florinna slipped out of the classroom and alarmed the Headmistress. Mr. Schwertfeger was afraid of Florinna, because Henry Hare, her father, was a real Professor, with international reputation and all that... and that she knew quite well. Besides Schwertfeger was as much a racist as was Arundle's own father. Therefore, Schwertfeger tried to be friendly and handled Florinna as if she was a raw egg. In a way Arundle liked the way he treated her better. Therefore, she pitied

Florinna for that and bullied her to disappear with her, but in vain. Florinna put on a little smile and replied, she had her own way of going places.

What she really meant, Arundle got to know later.

Right now the angry Headmistress posed in front of Schwertfeger and glance at him fiercely through her strong eyeglasses. “We meet after lesson. Right at the Head-office, Mr. Schwertfeger” - and addressing to the class she continued: “Does anyone want to say something?” However, she asked it in a way that nobody dared to stand up. Besides Schwertfeger was in class and except of Florinna, nobody dared to rebel openly. Not even the tall blokes, Florinna suspected strongly for the map.

“You wouldn’t believe, what happened to me” – Arundle started her tale on the way home. And as Corinia was now with them, both girls had to tell the whole story again, right from the start. Therefore, Arundle learned what happened in her absence in class.

Schwertfeger lost control and smashed the pointing stick to pieces over her seat. and, had she been still there, he would have harmed her severely.

“If you want to, he’ll be fired”, said Florinna. But Arundle shook her head. She didn’t want to go that far.

“We say, I covered under the table and while you left for the Headmistress, I slipped with you out of the door.” – Arundle declared. “Perhaps we let him worry a little, and give him a chance to change” –

“...or leave.”

Physical punishment was severely prohibited by now; and a case like this had become a court crime. The Headmistress had had to call the police, if things had gone the strict and proper way.

“The stick went to pieces, believe it or not. If he had hit you, I wonder...”

One thing Arundle managed, Florinna and Corinia became curious about Laptopia and artifacts and all that. The far country where Laptops ran around and hunted men for mishandling their property, started to raise their interest.

“Would you be able to find the way again”, they wanted to know. Arundle shrugged, “Don’t know, got to ask the bow”, she replied. And that’s what they did. He exclaimed that Arundle had given him quite clear instructions. “Probably a bit hasty then... - she ordered and I complied“, he said. “Something like far, far away...”

Professor Hare celebrated his birthday in the garden. Arundle was invited nevertheless and was happy about it, even though she was a bit scared amongst all these grown-ups. However, the mood was relaxed. Nobody blustered of exorbitant stock merges or swaggered of fast cars.

The women didn’t glue together and the men didn’t hit their thighs and stuck behind the grill with a chest of beer. The people were just unbelievably normal. But in a sense, that they didn’t ruffle their feathers or screamed of laughter.

Still they laughed a lot and heartily as well. And all talked to each other. The men grilled and drank beer. The women linked arms with each other with champagne glasses in hand and did a few paces. Still without force, perhaps a little too cool or even a bit highbrow – as per Arundle's father anyway, who would have mocked about such arrogant intellectuals.

Henry Hare, the person, celebrating his birthday, was an archaeologist and all his colleagues from the university had shown up. Amongst them, there was a man, who teased Arundle's curiosity, because he looked like the Laptopian General. She asked Florinna to introduce her.

“This man looks quite alike General Armyless. If I may say so – do you remember?” Corinia had joined them and looked a little bewildered, her sister shook her head. “You must remember the day, when I left, and Schwertfeger smashed his stick over me...” At least Florinna seemed to dig what she was about.

“Right – O, will you ever see him again?”

“Can’t you introduce me, I got to get to know the double” Arundle insisted.

“Scholasticus – this is Arundle, she knows you unknowingly, but that she may explain to you herself.” Florinna introduced Arundle.

“By the way, this is my wife”, replied the so addressed and grabbed the elbow of one of the most beautiful women Arundle ever had seen. She was so beautiful, that Arundle lost her voice. “This is

Dorothea, my wife, Lady of Griselgreif to Greifenklau–Slyboots” – you could hear the pride in his voice, while he said that.

Arundle had almost forgotten why she wanted to meet Scholasticus. As she was quite certain, that he was no figure of her imagination, but a human of flesh and blood, right here and now.

“O, such things interest me very much, dear child” (even the voice and the articulation was the same) Arundle was absolutely stunned.

“Grisella, come over here, please. We have here, it seems to me, a very interesting case of a *deja-vu* experience. Arundle, I would like to introduce you to my sister-in-law Professor Grisella, Lady of Griselgreif to Greifenklau-Slyboots. And this is my dear brother Amadeus, her husband. We are crossed over mixed and mingled double twins, you have to know. Generally spoken, people get quite confused, although things are quite simple, as a matter of fact.”

Simple they might be, but you have to sort them out first. Arundle glanced over to Amadeus and realized a certain familiarity between the two brothers. Everything was a bit finer and more attractive. Amadeus was without doubt a handsome man, while this could be said neither of General Armyless nor of Professor Scholasticus Slyboots.

“Come on, tell us. Our families can be talked over later, they aren’t really interesting” – came Grisella back to the point. Arundle reported what had happened that remarkable day when Schwertfeger broke his stick and Arundle met the strange world of Laptopia.

“The cloud was so thick, you could indeed sit upon?” inquired Scholasticus. He was quite alarmed, while Arundle confirmed.

“This can only mean one thing – Electronic Smog – the worst side effect, you can think of.” He said severely and looked quite horrified.

“And you don’t know, where you were, and how you got there, you said?”

Arundle nodded and looked bewildered. “But with the bow I manage to figure it out again. Is that all that important?”

“The General spoke German, did you say?” – Dorothea interfered.

“...And he looked like the Professor, Madam, isn’t that funny?”

“Call me Dorothea, dear child, if you may. And this is Amadeus, my brother-in-law, whom you know already, my sister Grisella, wife of Amadeus - brother of Scholasticus.” Dorothea pointed around; just to be sure, Arundle now knew who they all were. The addressed nodded friendly, stroke her over the head, or shook her hand.

Arundle was quite pleased, even though she still was a bit confused. Who was married with whom finally? Anyway, they all were

very kind. And that made Arundle unexplainably happy and gay and curious at the same time. As if a gate to a strange world had opened just for her and invited her to step in.

“What was it like again?” asked Dorothea – “General Armyless spoke not only German and the Laptocops Station was called ‘Hauptwache’, but the General performed a kind of ‘Viennese schmääh’ as is possessed only by the Frankenfurters, except for the Viennese of course...” Dorothea concluded her reflections after Arundle's report.

She listened to Arundle carefully. While she did, the portrait of the General was positively painted in the brightest colours, because she loved her husband, who seemed to be mirrored futuristically, so to speak.

“Yes, I think, I was here”, Arundle replied. “But not here, as it is today, and Lappy was treated like a precious antique piece of art, an artifact, as they call it. These walking laptops went almost mad, just because Lappy's battery weakened.”

She didn't want to say another word about the familiarity between the General and Scholasticus. She didn't like the idea of Scholasticus kissing her hand or banging the heels, as the General did. That might impress Dorothea, but she didn't like to tell her anyway. Dorothea had obviously a different opinion on ‘Viennese schmääh’.

In any case Arundle cared to return, and if it was only because of Lappy, which she didn't get back. However, that was partly her fault.

2. In Laptopia

“No grown-ups, that's for sure” – snarled Arundle's magic bow. He didn't oppose Florinna and even Corinia was allowed to join them. “That's it then” he concluded and started his calculations.

Arundle was somehow glad to get rid of such adult talk anyway. They asked her strange questions, and wanted to know more than what you knew by yourself.

The bow kept on calculating. “Just, a minute” he snarled. As if Arundle had said a word. At least not aloud.

“Shall we do anything?” Corinia wanted to know. “Shall we inform Mum and Dad?” However, Arundle shook her head „Won't be long anyway, just a few minutes“ - if she only had known.

At last, the magic bow ended with his calculations. “Laptopia” screamed the three of them; they grabbed their hands and disappeared faster than their voices faded.

And there they felt the gluey, damp clouds, just as Arundle had described them. They took great care not to sink and climbed up again and again. Busy as they were, they didn’t noticed what was going on. The battlements of the castle were close by, this time, right underneath their position. When they realized, they let themselves slip down. In fact, two soldiers or also kind of laptocops patrolled on their beat. Similarly equipped like the Police force, Arundle was arrested by.

She wondered whether they could inform the General. First, the watchmen gave infiltration alarm. All doors banged and shutters put up. The guards lowered their arms and clapped with their scissor hands. Arundle remembered these frightening instruments all too well. Now she knew what they were good for.

Just as she decided to return back home, General Armyless jumped out of a hidden gate. Again, he grabbed Arundle's hand and raised it towards his lips, without touching. Arundle introduced her friends and the General overdid once more, as he banged his heels repeatedly, while shouting excessively, quite meaningless. Florinna and her little sister Corinia didn’t know what this all was about, and giggled somehow bewildered. However, the General didn’t seem to care much, really.

“You wouldn’t believe, what a great honour such an unexpected visit indeed is. No, such a great honour, that I am happy to experience. No, I never dreamt, I ever was able to. Not in all my lifespan, as long as it might be.”

With an impatient gesture of his right, he waved away the laptocops. They dropped their arms and scissor hands, and stepped back on their beat. At last, they seemed to be under control, because they continued their duty, as if nothing had happened.

“Please, do come, my dear ladies – don’t you mind this little misunderstanding. They are not the brightest, even though they try hard and give their best.” He shook his head, while he followed them with his eyes. “May I take the lead, my ladies? His Majesty is already waiting. No, what an honour, that I was able to experience, not in this lifespan, I dare-say, O dear, O dear, my goodness...”

Therefore, he rushed on. The girls followed – curious as they were. Somehow, they trusted him after all, each of them thought by her. They understood themselves without words. In case of emergency they could rely on the magic bow, they said to themselves, without considering the fact, how easily they could be separated.

“His Regal Highness, Prince Watchalot” thundered General Armyless, and bowed in front of a huge throne, a tiny fat man jumped upon impatiently. The girls bowed as well and were introduced as ‘the twinkling Star-maids of the Advisor’.

“My favourite’s commencing any minute, and my wife is waiting. She can’t do without me.” Prince Watchalot complaint like a nasty child.

“His name is programme”, smiled the General and shrugged. “Anyway, what’s most important has been said. – What about a bite to eat, you must be hungry after your voyage.”

A sedan chair was brought in by two strong looking servant-artifacts and Prince Watchalot was carefully put into the soft cushions. His very short arms and legs could be noticed by the girls and made them pity this poor little creature. Impatiently Prince Watchalot made the servants to rush on. “Hurry up, you lazy useless nothings, rush, rush, my programme...”

“His TV set is just next door”, the General explained and shook his head.

“The Princess thought a TV didn’t fit into the Princely parlour. That’s the reason why.”

General Armyless shrank his forehead, rather annoyed. Then he pulled himself back:

“Princess Soshedoes avoids the public, because of her situation. It is said, that we are expecting regal new blood not far from now. It’s going to become a boy. So the dynasty is assured. But lets not hand the cow into the cooks hands, before the butcher did his job, as the saying goes, ha, ha!”

“General, we are still children, you are not supposed to talk in front of us that way.” The girls exclaimed blushing.

“Don’t mind, young ladies, From Child’s mouth wisdom arouse. Don’t argue on such bagatelles...”

“...and besides, don’t you call us ladies, we are children, and adults should behave properly. I am no lady, is that clear?” exclaimed Corinia quite definite and the General nodded irritated but firm. He seemed to have understood.

The little bite to eat, they better had skipped. The synthetic stuff tasted even worse, than it looked. At least Arundle got the chance to ask for Lappy.

“Your Lappy, as you call it, is **the** sensation amongst the artifacts. They arranged a special exhibition only to present it properly in the ‘Museum for Post humane Forms of Life’.

The artifacts come by thousands and we would risk riots, if we hijacked your little Lappy, I'm afraid. Even though you had the right to do so. The exhibitionists treat your Lappy as a missing link in post humane genesis, and are absolutely fascinated by each of its verbalisations. We humans of course know that it is only programmed and got to stick to the input of its creators. But the artifacts obviously see it different. Because they, themselves developed and emancipated, so that they stand on their own feet, so to speak. We have lost control, long time ago. While the production still follows the old standards and the first law never is offended, that says – No artifact may ever harm a human, but got to serve mankind without exception.”

The General talked himself into fierce rage and went polite again, as he seemed to be used to. However, human he was, there was no doubt about it. “Yes, that is our problem. Where have all the humans gone?”

It looked as if there was a race of displacement. The artifacts became more and better, the humans on the other hand sillier and fewer, at the same time.

‘No wonder, for the food they get’, thought the girls simultaneously. When it came to food, the artifacts were much better off, as they didn’t need any food at all. Except for a speck of oil now and then.

It was time now to leave, before the adults at home started to worry.

“Where have you been? We were looking for you everywhere. Your father worries to tears. And that on his birthday. Now really, what did come up to your minds, my goodness?” Vasantha Hare screamed quite upset. But then embraced her beloved, and had she had a third arm, she had grasped for Arundle as well.

Open-mindedness like that, Arundle was not used to, and the sisters didn’t know malevolent secrecy. Arundle realized that she had to change.

Overall, they hadn’t been away for more than an hour. Somehow, it became so quiet in the garden, after they left. Therefore, the inquiries and the big search started shortly after they disappeared. Lucky enough Vasantha had had an idea, what in fact was going on. As she understood the non-verbal stream of human communication and could, so to speak, read between the lines.

“If things like that happen to occur again, just leave a message or drop a note – especially you, Arundle – all right?”

The three of them nodded and blushed. Arundle felt guilty. It had been hers, who prevented Corinia from telling her mother. She had been afraid of complications. Once more, she noticed, that she couldn't compare Mr. and Mrs. Hare with her parents. That was something; she had to learn right away.

The mood of celebration had gone when the shade of secrecy fell on that merry day. The sun ended his route in the west and sank fast behind the houses opposite. It got chilly in the shade of the evening. Therefore, Vasantha asked her guests in. She smiled mysteriously and offered a surprise. She hoped to alter the course, to manage to turn around the rudder.

"The three little runaways want to give us a report", she said, as soon as everybody was in the house, except those who left for good. But they would have gone anyhow. The Slyboots' Clan stayed, and that was most important, Arundle thought, and so did Vasantha Hare.

Had she been hoping to enlighten her husband for the subjects of his colleagues, she had hoped in vain, as they lay miles apart. Astrophysics and Archaeology had nothing but the capital A in common.

Henry Hare was an Archaeologist by heart and guts. He and Grisella were colleagues in the Historical Seminar since the big change when the antique part of history was adopted and nominally integrated. In fact that didn't mean anything, except that now nobody knew any more, where the money went, that was dripping in, more or less regularly. Anyway, that was why they met occasionally, here and there and in the corridors, to exchange a brief 'hello' or a friendly nod.

For Grisella, history was a new field as well, while she was specialised on old languages. Anyway, that was why she got scientifically in touch with Henry Hare, who could need as much help as possible on this tricky field.

Instead of seating themselves around the big dining table, the guests preferred to stand in groups and converse. Vasantha wondered whether she should interfere, but then she decided for a change.

"Dear Henry, your daughters returned from their excursion with a present for you. And that they would like to perform right now. – Yes, dears, a little punishment you do deserve" she added when she saw the girls' faces.

By the way, Arundle is staying with us tonight. – Yes, I made everything clear with your mother, while you were away. – No objections. Tomorrow is Saturday and you can sleep late. Nobody's got to get up."

Arundle embraced Mrs. Hare spontaneously and thanked her by heart, while Florinna and Corinia jumped at her, so it looked, as if the golden goal was achieved at the final match of the World Championship.

Then the girls reported, what had happened in Laptopia, and, while they reported, they noticed all of a sudden, what they didn't realize before.

"I don't know, were exactly we were, but I know for sure, that nobody should long for such a future." The three of them were quite certain and agreed upon. Life seemed easy for humans, because they are pampered by their artifacts in any way. They became stupid and lazy that way. All work is done by those artifact-machines - as the General preferred to address them. The artifacts seem to be quite able to reproduce themselves and to improve without human assistance.

In fact, they don't need the humans any more. Still they pretend to serve, and all they do, they say, is done for their masters' best. However, that's of course nonsense. In reality, they cheat their masters and keep them under permanent control by television. They strangle their free will and prevent them from any kind of physical exercise. For any distance, they have them put into carriages or sedans. They have specially designed artifacts for that kind of labour. Because of that, humans grow crippled arms and legs, because they don't have to do anything. On the other hand, perhaps the genes altered. Schools are totally out and are closed by now. The artifacts spread the rumour, that humans know everything right from the start, because they are humans and no machines, which have to be programmed. That sounds logical. And, perhaps the artifacts themselves believe in that. Anyway, because of that, the brains of the humans atrophy."

"We got a prominent example for that", added Corinia to Arundle's report. The girls looked at each other and nodded.

"Yes, Prince Watchalot was kind of gaga anyway, at least he wasn't able to rule, definitely not" agreed Florinna.

"I've got to think over my attitude towards school," Arundle added with a heavy sigh. And this time Mrs. Hare nodded emphatically and smiled mysteriously. "That'll come, no doubt, soon you will see, my dear child."

Most of all the birthday celebrant was pleased by this 'sensational excavation from the depth of time', as he put it. Mr. Hare was so proud of his girls. They made him the nicest present he could think of, he exclaimed.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's 'Phenomenology of the Spirit' where this problem is due, did excite Grisella ever since. The philosopher demonstrated the complex system of dialectics in history by means of master and slave, and the change of roles that took place over the years. However, she was not allowed to say a word about that.

Such thoughts would lead astray the hostess proclaimed. Somehow, philosophy raised almost holy emotions, Grisella knew by experience. Even though, the basic thoughts were quite simple, however, what thoughts remain simple if you dig down to the bottom?

Arundle felt a new power rising inside. She didn't have a name for it. Nevertheless, it was a strong drive, she felt quite clearly, and it had – funny enough - to do with school. Not directly with the school, she knew, but with a kind of school, as was supposed to be. She wanted to understand – everything if possible. That school couldn't offer of course. Not the kind of school she was used to.

At school teachers were content, when they passed their time in peace, and things went its pace, as regulated by tradition. And everybody kept in line and played their roles, foremost of all the teachers themselves.

"If it comes to the point, that you lose control, it is time to give up." Maier, one of Schwertfeger's closer friends, declared. "You won't be able to get out of such burn-out-syndrome again" he went on and looked rather meaningful, like an eager butcher's dog, hoping for a juicy bone.

"You are fifty-eight now – clear enough – during the next seven years it will become a bit tight. But after all you are 'Oberstudienrat', you wouldn't mind a couple of hundred Pounds/Euros/Dollars."

"The term I'm going to end in any case. I won't admit publicly, how this nasty little thing has ruined my career." His final goal to become Headmaster had to be given up and that was bitter for Mr. Schwertfeger. After all, his friend Maier was right. Maier was his friend, as they met outside school as well, which was not common amongst their colleagues. They even were members in the same club.

They didn't breed pigeons or enjoyed gardening. Their club was not the usual kind of club where you could become member, just like that. Their club was a secret lodge. It was so secret, that nobody knew each other, because while they met, they wore masks. Maier as well, but because of his red thick fingers, Schwertfeger recognised him after all. -

They became friends, but they kept their little secret to the other members, whom they didn't know. Some even had a voice-disturber; perhaps they were well-known public speakers.

Schwertfeger offered Maier a pair of light white gloves, like the ones he wore. They looked rather nice and fulfilled their duty. Schwertfeger thought to notice other colleagues of them in the circle – called 'the Brotherhood of Infernalía' – the official name of the organisation. - Once you were in, there was no way out again.

It was May now. The summer holidays began at the end of July this year. If he gave notice this month, he would be a free man at the end of September. - If the doctor agreed, whom Schwertfeger suspected to be club member as well.

"Well, the burn-out. Eventually it gets all of us. The heavy load of responsibility we carry on our shoulders all our lifetime causes that. So, be glad to be in reasonably good shape. However, watch your blood pressure and keep your cholesterol level in proper limits. Take your pills regularly. In the morning the Lisinopril and in the evening one Simvastatin, and of course an ASS 100, best taken in the morning as well. Now you can hike as you wish and please. Ride your bike, and go swimming... Congratulations, by the way. O yes, I'm envious. I have to go for another three years at least. You know the Finca on Majorca. It's ours then – hopefully. We plan to spend there the rest of our life."

Schwertfeger's revenge was a big dirty lowest rating in Maths. Arundle's mother went almost mad. The boarding school now came into clear and close range. Arundle couldn't help but disappear to Laptopia.

3. The little Prince

Meanwhile, a Prince was born in Laptopia, and flags decorated the whole city. Trumpets and choirs sounded from the battlement of the castle. The little laptops hurried even busier and more frequent around and typed as mad on their bellies.

Quite a few carriages and sedan chairs indicated that humans were under-way to the palace in order to bring gifts and good wishes to the newly born Prince.

General Armyless informed Arundle about the details of the birth. She didn't really care much to know. Luckily, Corinia was not here, she thought. Because the General spoke about things not bound for the ears of children. He said that the birth was a complicated Caesarean-cut birth, and that Princess Soshedoes still struggled for her life. Nevertheless, the mood was excellent and the court was merry and gay. The Princess would survive in any case, went the rumour. The heir was in good shape. He was in good health and had the proper proportions of a human. That was most important. "His legs and arms are quite normal", the doctors said.

"It's a miracle", exclaimed the General repeatedly. "Finally a healthy human being, how lucky we are..."

The General sounded as if this was the big exception. However, to rehearse Arundle didn't have the time. The audience started, and this time no TV-programme pressed on. The Prince had made up his point and a TV set stood right in the regal parlour. While he greeted his guests mildly, he could watch into the goggle box. The courtiers and ministers pretended not to notice it. However, they knew, they preached to deaf ears. Such audiences had become a mere show. Everybody did as things pleased him. And the human ministers weren't master of their decisions either. What ever was printed went through the busy fingers of the artifacts. The laptop secretaries checked on everything and took notes, sometimes even notes of things never said. Later on, nobody remembered anyway, whether a decision had been on the agenda or not. The servants had their masters in a tight grip. However, in a way, they didn't realize, or if they did, they couldn't help it anyway.

Arundle came forward with her best wishes and presented her Lappy to the little Prince. A present, which impressed and even stunned the courtiers and artifacts, as their comrades continued to visit the almost sacred place, where Lappy was exhibited.

Things were quite strange between humans and artifacts, Arundle realized. The few people, Arundle had met, treated their artifacts like dirt. They gave them names, or threatened them to become evaporated or otherwise destructed. Still they depended heavily on them. Not the simplest actions were they able to perform on their own. The young lads boasted with illiteracy. To read and write was "artificial" as they put it (kind of womanish, though.)

“Life is too short to waste it with learning.” “Have fun, as long as you can.” Pick the rose before it fades.”

Such were the ads you could read on the walls (if you still could read.) Alternatively, you could hear and see on TV-sets one of which was definitely located close by.

The impression, she got at her last visit, became confirmed now, Arundle thought. The few humans, still left in Laptopia, were in the hands of their servants, without noticing it, and the servants spent their masters’ time just like that, in fact.

During her previous visit, Arundle had already recognized how fast the time elapsed. While they were one hour away at Mr. Hare’s birthday party, they spent hours in Laptopia. That was another reason why she desperately wanted to talk to General Armyless.

There were so many aspects to consider. But whenever she started to ask a question, something else happened: A visit at either the Prince’s parlour, or a parade or other ceremony, like the baptising of the little Prince in front of the cathedral.

Arundle had been asked to become his Godmother, and was quite charmed by the idea. Officially, she was referred to as the ‘Star maid of the Advisor’, which was some kind of official title. Everybody seemed to know, what this title meant, except Arundle.

How could they have known she was coming? She herself didn’t know some minutes ago. If her mother didn’t have started an argument about the bad mark in Maths, she would have stayed at home. Such a ceremony had to be prepared and arranged in the long run. So she wondered that she held the little Prince in her arms while the ceremony went on. She then was praised for her extraordinary gift. All artifacts bowed and even some of the human courtiers.

While she held the little creature in her arms, she promised by heart to keep an eye on him, when he grew up. His official name became Prince Watchalot II but she altered it into Watchanot. And that became his real name in the long run. Now no one even dreamt of how important such secret precautions might one day become.

She would have liked to stay but couldn’t and was very sorry, when she had to return. She escaped unnoticed, only said good-bye to the General, who understood quite well. He permanently ran out of time himself. If she figured it out correctly, she had been away now for eight hours. Her mother would wait in front of the cinema, where she had dropped her, despite the fact of the Maths mark.

Arundle didn't yet know how she would manage to come out in the crowd. Anyway, she wished her back and sank into her seat right at the end of the film. As if the bow had timed it for her. Frustrated as she had been, she hadn't cared much about his emotions. After all - the mark was not his. He was a kind of Maths genius anyway. Had he only started to train her a little earlier. However, perhaps his Maths was not the Maths of Mr. Schwertfeger, anyway.

The reason why she happened to be the Godmother had to do with Florinna and Corinia, the other 'Star maids of the Advisor'. After they had been in Laptopia together the two were now able to find their way without the assistance of the magic bow. "We can dream to any place, that we know", Florinna explained. Arundle was fascinated and enthusiastically asked them, how to join in on such a mystery.

"That is the art of the Senoi - it's called guided dreaming" Corinia added, and Florinna confirmed: "That's why we are so proud of our mother, she passed her gift on to us."

"So, you were in Laptopia behind my back and strolled around, while I was absent. I see. So it was one of you, they were expecting. And the General was only too polite to tell me right into the face. And took me as God-mother, because I was there..."

"...Or he thought, we had talked it over and made our decision..."

"...Be it as it may, finally the Prince became baptised and got the proper right secret name, that's most important anyway."

"So you are familiar with the time trouble", Arundle continued after a short pause, while they looked into each other's faces with a grin. The sisters nodded. "Quite so - factor four seems realistic." Florinna uttered flatly.

"But I think you are still the Star maid number one" she added and Arundle blushed.

"There you lie at home in your beds and... - so you decide were to go, that's the difference, I see..."

Something cut loose inside. Though, she had good reasons to think about, she thought.

"And how do you notice, when you are there? Do you step into another reality?"

"No, not really, we seem to be kind of astral bodies, weak by contour and hard to be seen, practically without weight."

"...Like angels, perhaps" Corinia added.

"For the Laptopians it suffices obviously."

“Just to let you know. I gave the Prince a secret name. I think we have to support him by any means. Therefore, I gave him the name Prince Watchanot.

Well, its not really brains taking, I know, but as there are names as programmes, I thought, I stick to the tradition and alter it a bit.”

“Yes, and have a look on the nurses. It’s a shame anyway, that there aren’t any humans around the baby. The poor little creature never comes in touch with...”

“...Except for the three of us...”

“Yeah, and that’s why we are most important...”

“Humane contacts spoil the dignity of the holy blood, or so, the General explained, not knowing things right either. The best would be, if we arranged a kind of duty roster to cover as much time as possible.”

They noticed, how important it was, to talk things over regularly, so they were all kept up to date.

“Let’s be good fairies then.” – Arundle exclaimed emphatically. They all nodded and grabbed their hands to whirl around and around, and around, till it seemed as if they lost contact with the solid ground, and became all green not only in their faces.

Grisella and Scholasticus seemed to be interested most in the girls’ adventures, and asked for reports occasionally.

“You got to talk the loss of time over with my presumed descendant, the General. He seems to be the only person who has an idea of what is really going on. The artifacts can’t grow older in our sense of meaning, but remain, what they are. Biologically spoken, only beings on organic base can be affected by the general loss of time, they grow older faster and therefore must die earlier.”

The girls understood the Professor all too well. Therefore, they rushed to General Armyless as soon as they arrived, and were lucky to find him at once. The General understood what they wanted to tell him, and had an idea too, how to stop the leakage.

“We must fill the holes in the cloud-carpet, so the time can’t escape any longer, to get uselessly lost in outer space, without any effect on nobody.

You seem to think, respectively your dear Professor seems to think, that the loss of time is a method by the artifacts to get rid of us human beings.

Very interesting, and sounds logical as well, don't you think so? Therefore, they won't be interested in stopping the changes. In the opposite, they seem to cause them. And I think I know, how they managed to do so. Alas, we'll stop that, once and for all."

"Yes, but how shall we fill the holes?" – Arundle asked.

"And how do we find them, first of all?" – Corinia wanted to know.

"They are very easy to be found. All you need to do is to walk over the cloud-carpet. and, wherever you feel pushed up, there is a leak. Besides you can see the holes if you look carefully. The holes are little round whirls, and in the middle, they are empty. We can fill these holes with compressed electronic smog, which we can gain at best by the filters of the laptop factories. Suitable containers we do have as well. We fill the cartridges of our guns with that condensed stuff, and the ammunition is ready. But the workers must wear masks, because in such high concentration, the smog is absolutely deadly."

"That'll be real suicide mission then" Arundle warned.

"We dreamers might not be concerned, as we don't show up in person, but somehow virtually. That makes the difference. On the other hand we might not be able to work anyhow in that shape."

"We've got to find out" opposed Corinia her sister, because she felt quite capable to work in her dreams as well.

"Anyway, you stay away, Arundle, we try alone, and let you know."

"The two of you won't suffice anyway. You would be still working in a hundred years, after all."

"Real years or Laptopia-years?"

"I think I have a better idea" the General interrupted. "We let such business up to the artifacts. They won't be harmed anyway. However, we must make sure; they don't realize what we have in mind. As we fill cartridges, it would be best, if we fired into the holes. That would be the best idea. We just fire into the holes and close them that way. What do you think of that? Right here, from the ground up into the clouds." And he pointed up, where the threatening grey bank sat and seemed to look at them.

"If you really want to help us, you could produce a kind of grid, where the holes are located, so that we aim better. We could produce a hole-map. I hope the holes won't change position that fast. – Then we follow the hole-map, and that's it. Nevertheless, beware, not to be shot down while up there, anyway. We've got to take care of the right angle, because the cartridges must find the holes at proper speed to get stuck

inside. If we fired too strong, we would cause greater damage than good and more time would elapse.”

General Armyless talked himself into rage and couldn't be stopped. He instructed his human officers, the few there were left. And tried to make them familiar with the situation in general as well, so that they understood, what it was all about. As they understood the weird intentions of the artifacts, they became upset, and stood behind their General like one man.

They became busier ever since, as the humans of Laptopia weren't used to any labour any more. In order to mislead the artifacts, the General spread the rumour, that he was preparing a big parade, to honour the little Prince, who became one year old these days. And, as the event was extraordinary, since there had been no such purpose for at least a generation, he just couldn't overdo with whatever he planned.

At least the General hoped, he could make the artifacts believe, what the rumour said. Everywhere in the city, guns became located, to salute such occasion frequently. Trains to abroad were under-way for the same purpose. Officially the whole country would become involved this time, as there had been complaints about the original birthday, when the countryside was forgotten. And that should this time be avoided. With the guns, instructors travelled, to guarantee the proper use, and they knew the real purpose.

As the outposts lay in deserted areas, no human wanted to be there, or if he was there, he cared to get away. That meant, that the outposts were manned by Robocops or Militia Laptocops, who didn't care, where they were. They didn't ask for aesthetics or happiness, or sense. They didn't need food or anything else like that. They needed practically nothing, except a speck of oil here and then, for the joints, or extra fine grease for the brain. They didn't need beds or books, neither toilets, nor bathtubs. For them no floor shows had to be arranged. A little TV did it quite well.

Robocops didn't drink or cause trouble. They never came home late. They were always dressed properly and never unshaven. They didn't know bad mood and didn't become overwhelmed by eagerness. – In short, artifacts were easy to handle and easy to be looked after, after they had come into existence, if you didn't figure the costs of production.

So it happened that even officer ranks were manned by artifacts these days. And they did their duty as bad and as good, as real humans could. - Not necessarily worse than their colleagues of flesh and blood, anyway. Provided, things went the straight way and nothing

extraordinary happened. As they then failed, and caused only confusion, until a real officer arrived, this was the case in less than an hour in most outposts. Usually that was time enough, to correct malfunctions and to avoid major catastrophes.

Scholasticus had his doubts about the peculiar action the General intended. However, he didn't utter a word. He didn't want to discourage either the General or his followers here and there. In any case, the General's arrangements proved him a capable organizer and an able strategist. All those cannons and shells to be placed tactically and in time, was a strategic masterpiece. In no time, the cannons stood ready in the whole land and in each outpost. No artifacts became suspicious, especially not in the outskirts or wasteland, but stuck to their orders. Nobody suspected the birthday salute for the little Prince to be in fact the beginning of a counter strategy of the humans to win back grounds. The few of them, those were left and still owned their brains, anyway.

However, his doubts troubled Scholasticus in any case. What came next, if the shooting turned out to be a fiasco? Where you able to dose the power when firing the canons? The cartridges had to find the hole precisely and then had to stop immediately. That meant its power had to be used up right at that moment, no wink earlier or later.

Such were his thoughts that punished him. The General was a man of war and well acquainted with weapons of all kinds, as was his job. Besides – did such an extensive shooting go along with a birthday-celebration of that kind?

Scholasticus uttered his doubts before the three girls – the Star maids of the Advisor – as they were called over there. They agreed and supported his doubts. Whereas Grisella didn't even want to think about cannons, shells, and all that military rubbish, as she put it. She didn't want to have anything to do with it.

“If it is only for to plug up the time-holes, I think, I have a better idea”, she uttered as they spoke things over. “It might even be a better idea. In any case, it won't be loud and much nicer to be looked at. We make a balloon action, like we did at my late birthday party, don't you remember? We fixed notes to the balloons and let them fly. And everybody could write good wishes on them.”

All looked stunned at Corinia. Arundle shouted, “That idea could as well have been mine...” and, Scholasticus patted her back

enthusiastically - probably a bit too strong. He understood at once all too well and calculated the probable success.

“Yes, and that is common after all” - agreed Florinna.

“Some even let pigeons fly, but that would be impossible in Laptopia by now. Besides, pigeons wouldn’t have the same effect as balloons.”

“And when it comes to the artifacts they won’t become suspicious anyway. How could they? – Harmless balloons...” assisted Arundle.

“We should spend a second thought on an everlasting kind of material and enough Helium to fill them up.” Scholasticus uttered.

“How much time is there left?”

“I’d say two, three of our own days”, figured Florinna, as she had been last to visit Laptopia.

“Because of the covers you shouldn’t worry. That job will be done by the magic bow, I’m quite certain. They would be as tough and long living as are the space covers, we travel with.” – Arundle added. - But for the Helium we might get into trouble.”

“Don’t worry – everything seems to be in our scientific vicinity, after all, won’t it, Grisella?” Grisella agreed.

“Perhaps it should be wise, to have the cannonade been done. And some hours later, the balloons as a highlight for the afternoon...”

“So the first birthday of the little Prince will become a noteworthy day in Laptopia’s history” – Arundle added.

“All we must do now is to convince General Armyless. However, he won’t be against the idea, I’m quite certain. Funny balloons in all colours of the rainbow rise towards the grey sky of Laptopia. As a sign of hope and glory...” uttered Grisella.

“And they will find their way on their own. All they need to do is to follow the draught of the escaping time”, nodded Florinna.

“If there is no draught, all the better, then the coloured specks stick to the sky just like that. That will surely look nice”, Corinia agreed, who was very pleased, how well her idea had been accepted.

“Let’s go, are you with me?” asked Arundle, and shouldered her magic bow. “I hope, the General has got time for us. There is a lot, to be explained to him that he has to agree with. Otherwise we do it anyway, because it must be done...”

It took them a while, until they made the General to change his mind. He feared that their action might turn out as ridiculous, and that, nobody wanted of course. Therefore, the Star maids had to put in all their power of conviction.

“We will make this quite clear in our action” declared Arundle – “but we’ve got to get so time for preparation and a little support. We can bring the covers, but some servant-laptops have to fill the balloons. We also need some larger stores for the balloons after they were filled. And they should be secret...”

“And after a prearranged sign, all balloons will be let free at once. That will look quite funny”, Corinia added.

And so it was done. Before the official luncheon, the cannons fired until the barrels glowed. After the smoke had gone, those who were informed meant to realize a slight difference. Time passed by slower. However, that could of course be a delusion. It could even well be, that the people got bored by the shooting and the noise. The only immediate effect was that people had put their fingers into their ears. Besides, the air became even worse than it usually was.

Later in the afternoon, while some thousands of quadruple storied birthday tarts were cut everywhere in the city and in the palace garden, the gates of the aircraft hangars were opened and millions of balloons escaped into the open and flew up into the narrow grey sky of Laptopia.

In the meantime, each human being was on their feet, so to speak – been carried around by their servants either in sedans, wheelchairs or coaches. All kinds of busy servants hasted around and tried to make their way through the crowded streets.

People sat in the street on long banquet-tables shovelling in large pieces of sticky cake and gulping them with dark liquid, supposed to be coffee or tea. As coffee beans or tea-leaves didn’t have the time to ripen in the short Laptopian year. And so it was with most other crops as well.

The little Prince didn’t participate actively on his day of honour. He lay peacefully in his little bed, as Florinna had come through the window and turned down the TV by cutting off the power line, so that the servant laptops weren’t able to fix it at once. Apart from that she caused the fire alarm and the little Prince was evacuated.

They always had to think of something, to get him out of the palace into the open, as the servant Laptop-maids avoided outdoor activities. They didn’t care for action anyway, although the little Prince was a clever guy. Not even one year old, he began to speak.

As the three Star maids had promised, they took good care about the little Prince and managed to help him to some kind of normal childhood, if that was at all possible under the circumstances he were closed in. At least human warmth and tenderness could be such experience that was quite something. and, the three of them always thought about strategies how to outrun the laptop nurses.

The Prince grew up fast, faster than any child they knew. On his second birthday, he already ran around and spoke in more or less clear sentences. And while he became three, he asked for pen and paper, and began to write.

TV he disliked. And he didn't care to show it, even though he offended his father by that. His father still wanted to have him corrected and didn't give up the hope, that he would one day become a real member of the regal family. All his measures he ordered didn't work, whether he had him put under a permanent screening from all sides, day and night. Or have him fixed into a special stool, where you couldn't turn the head any more. As soon the little Prince managed to escape, he turned back to his misbehaviour, as Prince Watchalot saw it. If the little Prince didn't see any other way out, he started to scream. and, his screaming either resulted in the appearance of one of the Star-maids or he was moved into a room, where there was no TV-set.

The little Prince developed much faster, than the speed of time increased. Especially though because the measures which had come into action, should slower the time-loss down somehow, and this was probably the case, but didn't effect the development of the little Prince, so nobody could explain either those who had an idea, what was going on, or those who didn't have such an idea, but lived their lives just like that.

As they talked it over with the General, he opposed them vigorously, as he still believed in the success of the cannonade a year ago. While the Star-maids meant this was all due to the balloons. Therefore, they didn't contradict in result but in the measure.

When it came to the little Prince, he altered his point of view, and thought him to be extraordinarily gifted and hailed by some mysterious force on his side. As nobody really wanted to contradict, things went on, and contradictions had to be endured by all of them, no matter the point of view or angel.

The General insisted on the positive development. First potatoes had been seen, went the rumour. Even horses showed up near the city, but became petrified statues after the rain and now stood around, just like that, wherever they had come from.

The petrification of the horses, caused by the poisonous rain that stem from the electronic smog clouds over the city, brought the barrel to overspill. Not only the General but also all other people blamed the Laptop factories responsible for the emission of the poisonous electronic

smog. Everybody was quite sure that nothing good came from these factories. The General took the petrification as a hint to get rid of the laptop factories. A gigantic programme started. The aim was to have all laptop factories distinguished from the face of the earth and resettled on the moon. As artifacts didn't need atmosphere to survive, this seemed to be an elegant solution for all sides, besides such a programme kept all sides busy and industrious. Means of transport had to become organised, shuttles and shuttle-ramps had to be built, not only here, but on the moon as well.

From the artifacts side, there was no contradiction or protest, first of all, but that's going to change soon. As it had to do with the first and primary instruction, all of them had internalised to protect and assist humans in any possible way and by all means. Anyway, the resettlement could begin.

For the poor horses, which stood around as witnesses of a misled policy, such measures came too late. They could be vaccinated, when somebody had taken this lot, as it was not easy and after all in vain, because after the next rain, things turned out to be the same again. Vaccination made only sense, when the horses were brought into another world after the awakening. They had to be brought into a world, with clearly different living-conditions. There was no doubt about that.

Arundle talked things over with her magic bow, but the bow referred to a new idol came up on the skies over Australia. He promised to open an ear for such rumours; perhaps there was a real chance to get the animals transformed into Australia, somehow. Therefore, the magic bow made Arundle to meet with a kangaroo named Walter and his little friend Pooty, a possum. They kept a magic stone from Uluru. This magical stone was well known amongst the esoteric world to own unimaginable strong forces.

After some back and forth because of the intergalactic General rule, which said, that no being was allowed to switch into another time at length, they finally managed to get the okay from higher sources. Therefore, the horses were awakened by means of a special vaccination-procedure, and then brought to the Australia of our days. Walter travelled on to Laptopia with Pooty and the magical stone from Uluru in order to play his part in the transaction, or was it better described as a transformation. Anyway the combined forces of the magic bow and the magical stone from Uluru succeeded at last, and the flock of ponies dashed through space and time as if it was the good old prairie back home in Idaho.

They themselves didn't trust their joint capability. Arundle and the other Star-maids were so happy that they arranged a bowling match up in the clouds of Laptopia. Pooty made the bowling ball and the bowling boy at the same time, and the bow asked his arrows to become the pins, while Florinna and Corinia took care of the ponies in their new environment. The transfer was only possible because of the fact, that the horses didn't have a faintest chance to survive in Laptopia.

"We can think about breeding cattle in Laptopia in ten years time, if at all." – it said in the permission, the magical stone presented. An action like that he wouldn't dare to risk on his own. In such dubious fields you got rid of your magical license sooner than a junkie got rid of his driving license, the magical stone boasted and the magic bow blushed, as he never have thought anything strange like that and still held his license for quite a couple of hundred years now. As to him, the intention was all that mattered. Weird and wicked things led to severe punishment that was clear to him. And such were the offences, that couldn't be tolerated.

"Well, the indentation of a license is no punishment" – the magical stone pointed out as he noticed what kind of trap he had opened. – "But it is a matter of protection. The world as a whole has to be balanced out at any time and everywhere. - Well, it might be best, to talk things over with the Advisor, whom he seems to meet here and then or once in a while." – proclaimed the magical stone prophetically in stentorian tone.

While he did so, he could quite as well clear things up with regard to the little Prince. - "Another battleground and field of solid action to solve basics..." He seemed to be lucky though – like the German Hans who stumbles through the world unharmed. "Quite astonishing, quite astonishing, indeed" the magical stone kicked on top, rather filthy, as was the bows impression.

Anyway, the contact worked first. The magic three from Australia came into the big game and had to play their part. However, his emphatic temper would cause Walter not only trouble but ruined his life in the end, if they only had known, but they didn't.

First, the ponies were safe and Florinna, who was fond of horses ever since, was the gladdest. While in her dreams she regularly visited them and took care of them as good as could be done in a dream, especially though, because she feared long run consequences of the latter petrification. However, that was not the case. Instead, she noticed in the end that the ponies weren't able to breed or mix with other local horses. Even though, they looked more or less the same, they didn't become

accepted in the outback amongst the hundreds of thousands of wild flock.

On his fourth birthday, Florinna put the little Prince on a horse back for the first time. Only in a dream, as she somehow managed to get into one of his dreams, and as it happens in a dream, he rode as if he had been riding ever since and jumped over the highest hurdles, as if he was a born rider.

In any case, Prince Watchanot had something miraculous at him. Not only was he supernaturally gifted; he also grew up incomparably fast. and, his true age didn't comply with his real lifespan. How could it happen, that he became a teenager in less than two years earth time? He seemed to be in negative correspondence with his father, who grew older as fast as the little Prince blossomed. To be correct, Prince Watchalot would have grown older, if the doctors had let him. However, they didn't. Prince Watchalot became updated instead and complied with the latest standards of medicine. What ever there was on innovations, bionic implantations, organ transplantations and the like – he caught it. His former crippled legs and arms had been replaced by regular and functional bionic replications. His destroyed heart replaced a pump. Lungs, arteries, kidneys – even vast part of the brain had been replaced. After all only an image of his former being had been left - inside he was totally reconstructed and restored.

His renovation didn't do him any good. His character changed from bad to worse. Had he been boiling with rage occasionally in former times, he now became a cruel tyrant. The whole court shivered and shook when he raced in wrath. and, that happened almost daily now.

Luckily, the little Prince was on his own by now, and able to avoid contact. In fact, he spent most time with his mother in the summer palace on the moon. Prince Watchalot didn't like the summer palace on the moon. He preferred to be with his mistresses on earth.

Except for Prince Watchanot, he was unable to produce proper semen any more, unfortunately, because of his lost identity. As most of his parts were now strange implementations, he had become genetically imbalanced. At least that was, what the doctors told him, as he realized his sterility after several months with his mistresses.

Up there to the moon, some of the ponies were let to train in the fast hall of fame and honour, where Prince Watchanot installed a kind of stable. Florinna taught him as best as she could - and, as the three Star-

maids continued to take care of him, he learned a lot from Arundle and her magic bow. However, time went on for the Star-maids too. In fact, much slower, but still, and brought about chances in their lives as well; and the visits became lesser and lesser.

The rescue programme the Star-maids had betted on, didn't comply with the expectations, at least not in the long run. Scholasticus Slyboots, the brain on this side doubted in the meantime publicly whether they had taken the right measures, especially though, if it came to long-term endurance. And he dared to question his descendant General Armyless, whether or not he had cheated them and hadn't told them the truth about the artifacts' motivation.

That was why Scholasticus had contacted Walter, the keeper of the magic stone, and asked whether he could help by looking at the situation with his own eyes. Walter, good-natured as he was, couldn't say no, and tried his best. Had he by then only known the consequences! However, nobody could even imagine the upcoming evil, and if, nobody would have taken such signs serious, - not as they were.

Had Scholasticus only foreseen, what he forced Walter to do, he wouldn't have touched the matter. But he couldn't see anything more important than the rescue-measures for the world of Laptopia. It was, after all, the world of theirs, the world of their descendants. Perhaps he would have looked for a less stony way, anyway, if he only had known. And the black shade of great evil might have been avoided, that arose and overshadowed Walter's existence from now on until doom, death and agony.

However, Scholasticus couldn't yet overcome his own nature. He was still a child of his time, as most human beings are. Only the least are sometimes blessed and chosen, like the Star-maids of the Advisor.

4. Bad news

The morning grew grey above the sea, while a feathered sky-messenger emerged on the horizon and aimed towards the far mainland. There the birds weren't up yet, to welcome the day with their choir. Even though most beings of the dark already lay lazy in their caves and nests and shelter, some well fed, others with aching guts but tired anyway from the nightly race.

That night had been different from others, and the flying messenger had to do with that. Walter, the giant kangaroo, spread the rumour of the Star-maid, who had come from great distance and had found her way, as she was familiar with animal-talk.

The news spread about like a bushfire in the outback. - Came by the wood-kangaroos to the possums. And Pooty, Walter's little friend, spread it amongst the whole giggling flock, as if there was some kind of misunderstanding, or giggled they, because they were always giggling, as it well could have been? Anyway, from here it somehow reached the dingoes and went further on to the tree bugs and cockatoos, and to others the like. The ponies from the stars passed the message gaily on to the wild camels, as they thought they knew the reason for that seldom gift and art, because a wild little Amazon with a longbow over her back once brought them here from their faraway cage into freedom. It was nobody but her, who came to visit them; they combined quite correctly, as they had space enough in their horse skulls to develop such complex ideas.

The sky-messenger was neither an overdue creature of the night, nor a bird welcoming the day. He hurried over the black sea – unimpressed, as he was no animal at all. However, without doubt he aimed for Australia, to be more precise, for New-South-Wales and there towards a holiday resort called Heavens Gate.

Many tourists spent their time there, as was season now – almost the whole year there was season, anyway. Most guests came from overseas - Americans, Europeans – even though, there was not much to be seen. However, the tourists didn't notice, as they were kept busy all day, either on the beach or in the disco later. If not one of the facultative excursions was due, to get them to a sad Aborigine village or a dusty sheep farm nearby.

Besides, the eager tour-guides cared for their flock, so, not the slightest appeal of boredom emerged. You wouldn't believe, what was all offered. Of course, there were the usual tennis lessons and daily physical exercises in- and out pool, ballroom dancing, and after tea bingo, horse riding or crazy gulf, and the like, you could think of. 'For all those, who wanted to experience their second honeymoon', as it said in the brochure - even yoga was to be found - 'to purge the system' - as it said.

Mr. and Mrs. Waldschmitt and their daughter Arundle were on their grand Australian round trip tour. At 'Heaven's Gate', a one-week rest was due, and was quite necessary, as they still suffered from the time change and jet-lag.

Arundle pretended not to suffer, as she was used to quite different distances, but had to admit some side effects as well. They didn't sleep well. They woke up in the middle of the night, or experienced sudden blackouts at daytime.

Arundle awoke early that specific morning, while the messenger approached. Some noise from outside woke her up. She just wanted to turn around, as it was still very early, when someone knocked at the windowpane. At once fully awake, Arundle jumped out of the bed and hushed to the window, leaned over and looked out, but couldn't see anything. It took a second to get used to the twilight outside. But then she saw it sticking right over the top with its lean body in the sand surrounding the bungalow, no nine feet away, and tried to free itself in vain by shaking and quaking fiercely its feathered glittering end, met by the first golden rays of the rising sun, and made Arundle to recognize.

Light-footed the lean girl with the waving dark blonde ponytail hushed downstairs and was in no time outside and behind the house, while she realized, that she were almost naked. However, nobody was there. A few paces, and she drew her friend out of its sandy prison.

A bit nose heavy as it was couldn't take the sill obviously, thought she and weighed the arrow in her hand, because that it was. A note had been fixed and added that little extra weight to pull its nose down, after all power was used up. "Poor little something" she uttered tenderly, "how careful he had been" – she meant, what she said.

"You can trust my arrows", a voice snarled close to her ear, and the magic bow hovered down nearby. His red eye glittered, while a sun ray hit it.

Had they not met on such a grey morning, Arundle wondered, but then shook her head. She had laid hands on him in the morning, but he had arrived at night because of a fierce flash of lightning. She remembered the scene, as if it was yesterday. While she hid in the bathroom, the bow had landed on the balcony. That was, what she noticed the next morning. Since then the magic bow became her true protector and best friend, and was no thing any more, but a living being of the miraculous kind, who guided her through the world of magic, and he made her understand the world, more so, living beings of all kind, as this came along with her emphatic talent.

"...Got to draw" the magic bow snarled, still hovering in front of her forehead. At last, she made it, and hushed back upstairs, where she

unfolded the message. Luckily, she hadn't been seen. As she was not allowed outside in the dark, while the boarding-school, her parents threatened her more openly with, then ever, hang over her head like Damocles' sword.

"We will relax together, like we used to. Do you remember?" Mrs. Waldschmitt exclaimed. Then, it had been too late, anyway. Mrs. Waldschmitt came right back from the travel agency, she went to, after her day in that barrister's office, she worked with. Just a fast booking for some ten thousands of Deutsch marks, Arundle said and shook her head with disgust.

"There's no way back now, your father tends to step back, when it becomes earnest. But this time he won't, I dare say. A vacation I deserve, God knows, and you too. Who knows whether it is our last, together, dear" and Mrs. Waldschmitt sighed heavily.

"But I wanted to go with my friends to Greece..." Arundle protested.

"So what, your friends - this time you come with us. Do you know where we are going to? You don't and you wouldn't believe it either."

Of course, Arundle didn't know, were they would be going to, how could she? And as she got to know it her heart jumped up a few centimetres.

"Right - O, this time we want to know it. We are going to Australia." Mrs. Waldschmitt grasped her fiercely and kissed her. Arundle weakly offended but surrendered in pity. Neither her mother nor she were used to such sudden tenderness. Mrs. Waldschmitt surprised herself with such uncommon emotional outbreak. She might have felt the low resistance, as she turned away and blushed.

The relationship between Arundle and her parents was quite tense, definitely not as relaxed as she experienced acquaintance in her friends' home. There, things were talked over in the open. and, often they came to surprising results, and never let anyone down helplessly, or ridiculed, as she was so used to. Why were her parents so ignorant? Yes, they tried, but couldn't slip out of their skin. Sometimes Arundle pitied them, even though, she suffered.

The sea rolled over the sandy, shimmering, shallow shores of the Australian South, as deep as the South could be, here deep down under, where Arundle and her parents spent their days at 'Heavens Gate'. The tiny bungalow suited their needs, as Arundle kept the roof-part all alone, while her parents settled on the ground floor, where temperatures didn't exceed bearable limits. The closeness didn't suit them at all. Mrs. Waldschmitt worried most and suffered worst, even worse than Arundle, although the heat on the ground by far didn't reach the heights Arundle had to endure under the roof. Mrs. Waldschmitt suffered most, but at the same time argued most as well.

Roundels friends and her parents were now in Greece. Henry Hare, a Professor of Archaeology was irresistibly drawn to the sites of ancient glory. Most likely they would camp and cook their food by themselves; Arundle imagined and envied her friends once more, although she was so much better off here down under in the land of her dreams. All the more so, as many Australians believed in the dreamland and longed to spend their lives on such faint shores of the human existence. Walter and Pooty lived there as well, besides she felt some strange draught and a peculiar longing the further she came.

'The arrow could have only been sent by Walter' she thought and couldn't think of anybody else. Lucky enough, she managed to slip back into her room under the roof. Only the bright giant kangaroo with the brain of a Professor and the ancient wisdom of the continent in the blood was able to send such a message, thought Arundle, while she unfolded the piece of material torn around the shaft. Most likely, it had been the extra weight up front, which made the arrow to tumble nose heavy to the ground, instead of jumping right into its mistress lap.

Arundle read in the light of the rising sun. The message really came from Walter and Pooty had printed his cute paw right under the text as well. Unfortunately, the arrow must have come through an area, where it had rained. Therefore, the ink was partly gone and the message couldn't be read properly.

Anyway, Arundle believed to understand, that there had been quite some confusion in Laptopia. Things went wrong lately, the goals couldn't be achieved. Therefore, the General had asked Professor Scholasticus Slyboots for help. As chef of the police, General Armyless was responsible for the exodus of the laptop factories to the moon. And he was responsible for the stuffing of the time leaks, caused by the laptop factories.

It looked, as if the directors of the factories refused to cooperate and didn't stick to the five-years-plan. First, it had been only a kind of slowdown strike, but now open violence made the situation unacceptable.

If things went on that way, the big earthen clock would soon run out of time. Laptopia was the earth of the future and lay exactly 114 years ahead (as to the bow's calculation, who wasn't sure about contemporary or Laptopian years). A good while ago Arundle and her friends managed to execute a promising programme. As they didn't hear from the General, they thought, things were all right. That seemed to be a terrible mistake.

Arundle scribbled a quick reply on the back of the note. She rolled it around the arrow; ask the magic bow to figure out the coordinates of Walter and Pooty's latest location. She also considered the indication error and the magnetic declination, just to be on the safe side. Then she shot the arrow out of the window. The arrow would find its way on its own, while it was under way en route. She hoped, nobody had observed her, as the eyes of an unauthorized spectator could spoil and weaken the magic power involved, considerably, or break it at all.

Her biggest problem right now was that she couldn't do anything for Laptopia, as long as she was under way with her parents on their tour. That was, what she had written on the back of the note. Furthermore, she let him know, where Corinia and Florinna were, and that they should be informed in any case. If Professor Slyboots hadn't been informed, this should be done right away. If that was not possible, she herself could inform them by telephone, quite conventional. On the other hand, if the magic stone from Uluru knew a better way, it would be all right with her.

It was such a pity that she couldn't involve her own parents, after all, as her friends could. They were really much better off. Their parents were open for practically everything, and the dream time was no problem for them either.

Mr. and Mrs. Waldschmitt never stepped aside the solid grounds of prejudice and common sense, not for an inch, and they were proud of it. Her mother seemed to feel the glimpse of fantasy, occasionally, but her father was a hopeless stone heart.

'Poor General', Arundle thought, as she lay separated from her parents on the white beach. Her parents had settled under a huge

umbrella, some ten feet away. However, the wind roared considerably today and the sea rushed, so nothing was heard from them, and as she had closed her eyes, she couldn't see them either. Therefore, she lay on her belly behind a dune as if she wasn't there at all. So she could hang on her thoughts unspoilt.

Walter's letter had brought the completely twisted matter up again. What had they not tried! Meeting after meeting had been arranged and in the meantime, they took their trips through space and time. While at home things went wrong as well. The changing of schools after all, while they moved back into the city; her father's severe argument with Mr. Schwertfeger, whom she hated and who had so much in common with her father. It was but now that she recognized it. At the age of thirteen you are no child any more and don't accept, what the adults say, just like that.

Arundle grinned, as she remembered the silly face of Mr. Schwertfeger, when she left his classroom right in the middle of a lesson, just because she wished her away. At least she was told by her friends, as she had been away and couldn't see his face anyway.

"He was so confused; he let us go five minutes early, and couldn't get his mouth shut, speechless as he was..."

What had really happened in Laptopia, Arundle wondered. Walter's letter didn't say much, as the ink had gone partly and some words couldn't be read at all. It said little more than that the General was in trouble and needed help.

What could she do? – Something must be done, right now. She needed at least half a day. That would be better than nothing. She could gather some information, and speak some words with the General, even though she disliked his behaviour. Fortunately, it had changed a little lately.

She thought thing over and shared her reflections with her magic bow right next to her in the sand. He seemed to be fond of the idea of heading towards the future a little. It would train his abilities, he uttered. 'For too long they hadn't been in use. One shot in the grey morning, was the only pleasure of the whole trip up to now.'

Nevertheless, Walter's reply they had to wait for, they thought, and whispered in their magic tongue, nobody understood, not even Florinna and Corinia.

"And if you don't go on the excursion to the sheep farm this afternoon? We had at least five hours that would do."

“...If Walter answered up till then...”

“...And if not, it would be no great harm either, I think.” The magic bow got used to the way Arundle talked, and Arundle wondered, whether she really spoke that way. He intended to read her thoughts and picked them from her lips.

Anyway - Walter's answer came in, in time, just before lunch. Mr. and Mrs. Waldschmitt held siesta and Arundle lay in her room and looked into the vast blue sky outside the window. All windows were open and the wind blew the sticky air under the roof away. The arrow swung in rather elegant this time and landed right on Arundle's lap.

“Don't act on your own stop far too dangerous stop I'm on the way with Pooty stop the revolution is on the march stop General Armyless and a forlorn few in distress stop I trust in you and your discretion stop.”

No signature, no greetings – that didn't really look like Walter. and, what was meant by 'discretion'?

“Somebody must have been in desperate hurry”, snarled the bow. Who could deal with a warfare operation like this, better than he did, he thought and his red eye glowed worryingly fierce while he said – “you shouldn't talk to anybody – that is what discretion means.”

“I see”, said Arundle flatly. As if she had spoken with her parents about such matters. She had to think about something for this afternoon. The best would be, to stick a finger into her throat and to dramatize still, she vomited on the carpet before the toilet. Hence, she wouldn't have to go to that sheep farm, for sure.

“But we have booked the excursion only for you”, Mrs. Waldschmitt complaint, when she saw, what had happened the more so, because Arundle looked awful and lay down on her bed as grey as the pillow.

“Do you really think we can leave you alone under these circumstances? I will inform the reception in any case, and have the doctor to look after you.”

“Never mind, mum I'm much better already. I think I ate something wrong - too much ice cream perhaps. You know my weak stomach...”

Mrs. Waldschmitt stroked her tenderly over the forehead. “If something happens, while we are away, I wouldn't endure for the rest of my lifetime.”

Arundle felt that she meant it and felt guilty. “Nothing will happen, I assure you. Take daddy's phone – ah yeah – doesn't work outside here... But the bus driver's got a mobile connection anyway, so the hotel could get in contact, in case something happened.”

Billy-Joe came up to her mind. He was porter in the hotel. He worked from dusk to dawn and was not even fifteen. His friendly face and open mind attracted Arundle right away. Besides, he could have been a brother of her friends with his raven black curls. As their mother, Vasantha was Indian. That was why her daughters inherited the dark skin and the wonderful black hair, they were envied for – although there also were others...

She could trust Billy-Joe. He would understand. However, would she not cause him trouble then?

On the other hand – discretion! Was she allowed to tell him, what she planned? So she thought about a kind of falsified truth, close to the truth, but not the truth, so that he wouldn't doubt her words, as he was an Aborigine and quite familiar with the magic world of Australia.

After all, that was one reason why she was fascinated, to her parent's disgust. When they realized, how she looked at him, and how they stuck their heads together, when they thought nobody was looking.

"You can't behave like that. Not in your age. You are going to become a woman, you know." Her mother said, and her father added: "You can't let someone like him touch you. Don't you realize the smell? - They all stink, that is well known and scientifically approved." Mr. Waldschmitt exclaimed fiercely, as he couldn't think of something reasonable to say. And what he really thought, he couldn't say at all.

Even Mrs. Waldschmitt tried to pull him down, when he became all too racist, after all. "That's his way of expressing of how much he loves you" she meant vaguely. Arundle didn't believe a word.

After her parents had entered the bus, Arundle sneaked out of the house and awaited Billy-Joe as he came back from a distant bungalow; whereto he had guided new guests. Sweat glistened on his nose and forehead under the curly hair that was covered by a cap. His white gloves were darkened by the moist. What had he given now for a change and strolled naked and barefooted through the savannah.

Arundle waved him aside and checked whether someone looked from the reception, as she knew that her father had spread his poison. Hastily she whispered into Billy-Joe's ear. The boy nodded and then continued his pace to collect new guests awaiting him already at the reception.

"Get going," she whispered "up, up and away to Laptopia," she screamed and off she went like a flash of lightning. As if the sun reflected in the windshield of a passing car. Arundle was gone. Nobody had realized anything.

Billy-Joe would say, she went to the beach, if someone asked him. He knew the receptionists came straight away to him, anyway. His knowledge made him feel somehow powerful, even though he suffered under the white folk. They were inexperienced in many ways but on the other hand, they were terribly superior. He didn't mean to understand them.

In the meantime, Arundle entered space. The bow covered her with a protective shield, that didn't let the cold in and gave way to the reproduction of breathable air. Besides, she had a remarkable round view.

Because of the enormous speed, the stars extended in length like tracer streams on the left and right of their way, and flashed in all colours of the rainbow, while the background was formed by the grandeur and majesty of the eternal space.

The trip passed some time slopes; and Arundle got the impression as if the magic bow resisted for a tiny moment. At last, they manoeuvred through the fourth dimension, so that even the magic bow ran into slight trouble.

Arundle felt uneasy. Had the bow lost orientation? She felt an angry knock in the back. She always forgot that the bow could read her thoughts or even think them before they came to her mind. Especially though, when she didn't like that at all, as it was right now.

"I'm sorry," she whispered "But I've got to be allowed to worry, am I not? We haven't got the whole day."

"We will be there right away, and you shouldn't worry about the time at all. As we just passed one hundred and fourteen years – well more or less 114 because of the indication error. There could have easily elapsed some more years – or of course less - that is the question, if there is a question at all. I only had to adopt the increasing loss in time that has changed to the disadvantage of the earth again. That seemed to set us back, while in reality only seconds passed."

Indeed, as the bow snarled his explanation, the cloudbanks of Laptopia arose ahead – grey and milky and somehow fierce. They covered the earth underneath with bad fumes and caused the time to drop off and trickle away into nought and nothingness.

"Condensed electronic smog" had Scholasticus once explained such phenomenon, his friend – by the way - called him Scholly. Such electronic smog became so thick, that you could sit on top of the cloudbanks. At least for a short time, while you started to sink unnoticed.

So it became a smooth landing, the magic bow was proud of. “Laptopia landing” he called it since he had been here to experience such a strange planet, that had once been the good old earth, before worldwide pandemics broke out to make all Laptopsians suffer.

Had they only known, but they didn’t. Most of them felt the happiest beings in the universe, as the eager artifacts made them believe, while their factories caused the diseases, after all.

With great care Arundle lowered and sank down through the clouds. The bow let her know, that he didn’t know how to proceed. He was happy to have come that far, he explained. Now he could tell her after all.

Therefore, her feelings had been right out there in space. At least he could admit some kind of mistake that was something anyway. Nevertheless, how should she proceed? She switched into the local visual flight mode and went along almost underneath the cloud-carpet. The glimmering grey walls of the city came into sight, as well as the palace on top. She glided along carefully in the mist of the latest layer. She wanted to avoid to be recognised by the wrong ones. She hoped, she would notice General Armyless’ big golden cap, he was so proud of.

Like back home everything seemed to be hatched in a siesta. Nevertheless, Arundle remembered it always to seem so. Things changed immediately if you did something wrong or if you only showed up, as had happened years ago, when she came here with Lappy her little laptop that went unserviceable because of the battery. They had treated her, as if she was a murderess. Never would she forget how she was arrested by the laptopops. Without General Armyless, she’d been in real trouble. At least he proved to be a man of flesh and blood, while he was a hopeless womaniser, who took any opportunity to flirt and overdo.

Again she felt uneasy and much younger, like most of the times she had come here. Carefully she curved around the castle’s battlements and still kept hidden in the last layer of the clouds. They seem to sit on top of the highest buildings anyway. A further building, she remembered, was the home of the general administration and coordination centre of all art factories and industries. While the ancient castle slowly fell to pieces, this building looked strong and proud and monstrous – the sign of an uprising new power.

All of a sudden, she realized the General’s cap, right underneath, close to one of the towers of the castle. A lonesome ray from the sun had broken through the cloud and somehow was reflected by the golden laces. “Alas, the General at last” she uttered gladly and let all caution aside. The bow turned and landed next to their aim in no time.

Just as Arundle prepared to endure that hand-kissing business of the General, the face under the cap raised, and she looked into the cruelly grinning eyes of Prince Watchalot. That was a bad surprise. On his command, heavy armoured lapto-cops rushed towards the poor girl. While the magic bow managed to escape, Arundle was caught. She felt the bowstring cut, while the bow disappeared. She heard him from the inside, but was too upset to recall. Something like „going and getting help“, she hoped to have understood. Sharp scissor hands caught her. They would have cut her to pieces, if she had tried to get loose.

The bow was gone, while she was handcuffed, and accelerated to highest speed. So he managed to arrive almost the same minute, they had left. Billy-Joe was still in the move and fear grabbed after his pagan soul, as the magic bow all of a sudden appeared alone – trembling with wrath and terror. No time slips or turbulences of any kind could slow down the rage he was in.

While in Laptopia time went by and while Arundle felt mistreated and brutally punished by the cruel Prince, the magic bow wanted to make himself understood by Billy-Joe. But that was not so easy. Besides, the boy was still very busy, because of the tourists from Sweden. Some twenty giggling blonde girls wanted to become guided to their bungalows by that smart local native with the cutest smile on his dark face, they had ever experienced by a man. This smile was part of his nature, or almost part of it, because this guiding business spoilt the character.

While he stuffed the very generous tip into his pocket, the bow managed to keep close to his back and whisper into his ear. However, Billy-Joe either wasn't in command of magic-talk or was unable to concentrate because of the girls. Therefore, it took the bow some precious minutes to elapse, until he managed to manoeuvre him aside and got him to disappear behind some eucalyptus trees. While Billy-Joe fixed the broken bowstring and got rid of his uniform, the magic bow prepared for an emergency operation. The boy seemed to have understood at last. While they both calmed down, the bow tried to communicate on a telepathic mode and was quite fond of what happened then. He started his explanation all over again, and this time he succeeded.

In the meantime Arundle was pushed downstairs. First down the narrow steep staircase of the tower on top of which she had been caught. The stairs had no end, but became even steeper and irregular in size. With her cuffed hands on her back, she couldn't prevent scratches and

blows, as the guards pushed her merciless downstairs. Laptopsians like the Prince or the Princess weren't able to overcome such stairs. They had their servants – especially designed staircase-carriers. Therefore, the Prince followed shortly behind and forced his servants to speed up on her as well. He was willing to interrogate the victim personally, and that could only be done deep down under the palace in the dungeons of terror.

Since they met last, Prince Watchalot had changed a lot. He almost was a different person now, Arundle wondered even though she had other things to worry about now, as the stairs became even steeper and glibber on top, and she hardly managed to keep on her feet. Impatient as her guards were, they had to take care of themselves now, and let her alone.

The servants with the Prince's sedan ran into trouble as the stool were stuck and couldn't be moved either forward or backwards. Therefore, the Prince had to get off and try on his own feet. His bionic legs seemed to do their duty well. Arundle heard his cruel voice approaching and went hastily on.

However, it was not the body alone, his whole attitude was different now. He was much taller now and his former silly face now exposed an air of maliciousness. He was definitely no longer the simple TV-addict, he used to be.

Even though he had to be quite old by now as to Laptopsian time anyway. Nevertheless, he looked younger than ever. His son, the little Prince Watchanot, was in her age now. Things accelerated a lot over here, she wondered. She well remembered the first birthday party, just about some three or four years ago. For the little Prince, it seemed, Laptopsian time went especially crazy.

Her thoughts at least took her away from the desperate state she was in. While she came back down to the real facts of existence, she noticed her aching legs and every step into the unknown caused her extra pain. The stairs became even steeper and more irregular than ever. The air became moist and dim, twilight glistened in the greyish liquid running down the wall. Arundle assumed they were now deep down under the surface and not far from the dungeons. So she could imagine even more closely, what lay ahead.

Arundle remembered the General's warning now and how difficult it was – even for him – to keep control over the artifactual forces. Where - the hack - was he? She needed him desperately and promised by heart to never ever keep bleating, no matter how strange he behaved.

Would he come in time to save her and protect her from torture and inquisition? and, the magic bow, would he be able to bring help? How stupid had she been, all alone after so many months of absence. The little Prince was now on his own. He was almost grown up, and didn't need the 'Star-maids of the Advisor' any longer.

Had she only taken Walter's warning as serious as had sounded. She stumbled into a clever trap, designed especially for her. Somebody seemed to know her very well. Either the message to Walter had been falsified or the message from Walter to her – probably both! That made sense. How tricky with fading ink – and the warning. Indeed very clever, somebody knew how she would react. She didn't notice a thing, didn't have the faintest idea, what was going on.

Therefore, her magic bow was her last hope now. What could he do? He didn't have more than a couple of minutes in actual time. Whom could he contact, would he come alone? However, without string he was helpless himself. As she imagined his problems panic overcame her and tears shot into her eyes.

Tear blind and sobbing she stumbled on. Deeper and deeper they went. Left and right there were dungeons now and suffering prisoners could be seen in the twilight. The bottom seemed to be reached. She was pushed forward now over slippery rocks. The air was full of terror and of the smell of pain and agony. Pleading hands reached through rusty iron bars. However, became torn back when the guards knocked them off. The screams of the punished followed them. Arundle could see now their faces behind the bars as the light increased.

The smell became unbearable. The liquid on the floor they had to wade through consisted of excrements. The end of the passage came in sight. Her heavy heartbeat must be heard, Arundle thought, while they stopped in front of a heavy iron door. The key turned and slowly the door swung open, behind which was hidden the underworld of aches and agony at its worst – the perverted brain of the dungeon.

5. The Hi-jacking

Professor Scholasticus Slyboots stepped out into the street. He was on his way to his seminar at the university. He was late as usual. His long black coat waved as the wind caught it. The Professor looked a little like a crow, bound to rise up into the air.

He still chewed on the last bites of his breakfast, while he knocked off some roll crumbs from his tie. He hesitated while he came to a jelly spot that couldn't be knocked off. He was too late to change the tie anyway.

He just wanted to heave himself into the saddle – his huge leather bag he had carelessly stuffed into the basket, fitted to the rear carrier – the bag was once more far too fat – his trouser legs being well bound with luminescent holders. Since his spectacular crash, when his trousers were stuck in the chain, he had become careful, after all.

Dorothea, his beloved wife, still stood in the doorway, as he had kissed her goodbye with a sticky kiss on the cheek. The neighbours' dog to the right barked as always and cared for the cat of the other neighbours to the left. Its mistress knocked fiercely at her kitchen window from the inside.

While Professor Slyboots realized a sudden air strike out of the nothingness that went right through the tyre of the bike's front wheel. Angry as he was Scholasticus tore the glittering stick off and identified it as one of Arundle's arrows. What a shame, he thought. That was it after all. He would never manage to be in time now.

While he waved Dorothea and shouted for a taxi at her, he examined the arrow after pulling it out of the flat tyre. What a phenomenon it came to his mind: A flash from nowhere. How could that happen? Not for a second he thought it might have been a prank by naughty boys around the corner.

While he placed the bike carefully to the gate, he tried to free the stick. He managed at last.

"Dorothea, look, what I have here", he shouted and lifted the golden arrow into the air. His wife hurried the few stairs down. "The cab will be here any minute", she screamed back as the autumn wind blew hard that morning.

"The tyre is flat", she said dully. "What a shame, just today, while you meet these strangers from abroad, you know who..."

Right, he had almost forgotten about the guests from overseas, from that island with the funny name, and his presentation. Professor Slyboots looked at his watch – ten to three, it said. Nonsense, that couldn't be. Something was wrong with the watch.

“Dorothea, my watch shows ten to three, look at that” he shouted and lifted his arm in front of her face, while he rushed back into the house. Dorothea raised the telephone leaver for him. “Show me”, she said. He pulled the watch off and gave it to her. “Got to turn it round, see? - Scholasticus - always up and away with his thoughts, while with the feet on the ground. What would you do without me?”

At last, he had some minutes. By taxi it would take him only half the time, at least he hoped. Just to be on the safe side he called the caretaker’s office. Nobody answered, as usual. Nervous as he was, he sat on the toilet while the cab arrived. What a shame, after all.

Dorothea handed the heavy bag inside through the lowered window that Scholasticus almost had forgotten on the tray of his bike. She tried as well to get away the sticky spot of marmalade, kissed him goodbye and wished him good luck.

“You will make it, dear” she screamed, while the cab pulled off.

As she stepped back into the hall, she stumbled over the golden stick and wondered whether this was one of Scholasticus’ Chinese sticks he enjoyed eating with. However, it was not that kind of stick, but an arrow, that the Professor had dropped by accident, while he came back in.

She turned the arrow thoughtfully in her fingers. What did this stick remind her of? She wondered. Just as she wanted to put it aside, she noticed the slip of something fixed to its shaft.

Carefully she got it loose and flattened the parchment or what it was. Strange it was in any case. She couldn’t remember such material anyway. So she went to the kitchen, while she started to read, but stopped alerted after a few steps. “Good heavens” she exclaimed.

“Grisella, Dummy, are you at home?” she shouted then. Her sister’s family lived upstairs on the first floor. Instead of her sister, a child’s voice answered, that belonged to Intellectus, her twin sister’s little son. Like them, Dummy and Scholasticus were also twins, but they were as well as different, as their wives were. Both twin pairs were in a way as different as they just could be. That was very strange and confused the entire world. How could nature split its gifts in such a manner? Nobody understood and the twins themselves the least.

Scholasticus and Grisella were intelligent, while Dorothea and Amadeus were extremely good-looking. and, as oppositions attract each other – Scholasticus had fallen in love with Dorothea, same as Grisella with Amadeus and vice versa. Their happiness lasted for years and there was no end in sight.

“Intelleetus, aren’t your parents at home?” asked Dorothea and Intelleetus replied with one of his ‘bon mots’ – he was known for: “Not at home, they aren’t.”

“Are they at home, yes or no, you little rascal, you quite well got, what I mean... I haven’t got time for your strange jokes, anyway.”

“Mum, aunt Doro wants to talk to you, right away.”

Grisella’s face appeared upstairs. She yawned. Dorothea flew up the stairs and waved the parchment or what it was in her hand. “Look what just came in. You’ve got to see that... God knows what’s going on again, over there.”

Grisella rubbed her eyes and yawned once more. Obviously, she was not fully awake yet. Like many intellectuals, she was a night worker and loved to sleep late in the mornings.

She was a philosopher that made her differ on a large scale with Scholasticus. However, it did not mean, that she was less intelligent. Perhaps even more than her brother-in-law, who disliked her way of life, or if not disliked, disagreed with it. Whatever the reason was, they hadn’t found out yet after all these years.

“What can be all that important, to wake me up in the middle of the night?” she asked.

“Read this, and you’ll understand” Dorothea answered and opened her beautiful eyes wide with fear.

Grisella read. “Someone’s pulling your leg, I’m afraid” she replied. While Intelleetus tore her arm down and grabbed for the parchment:

“Earthly being revocate! or you won’t see Arundle again. Revocate if you care for her life. Leave our world alone. This is our last warning. Show up immediately and accept the public tribunal of Laptopia.

His Majesty, Watchalot, Prince of Laptopia by agreement and acceptance of all crown-councillors and advisers.”

The signature was grammalogued and countersigned, and looked very professional even without a date, as Intelleetus mentioned. He was the first to notice.

“The letter came by arrow, just as Scholasticus wanted to leave” and Dorothea waved the arrow in front of Grisella’s nose. “What shall we do now? Scholasticus didn’t read the letter; he was far too late already. You know he’s meeting this morning with those islanders. First, we thought it one of Arundle’s pranks as the arrow stuck in the front tyre of his bike. Then later when he had gone, I realized what it was all about. So I came right here up to you.”

Grisella looked quite alarmed now; even Intellectus recognized how she changed.

“We’ve got to give him a call, right now, he’s got to know, what’s going on, and we must call an assembly. All time travellers, who got involved in the salvation of Laptopia, got to meet right away... by what ever possible means”, she added after a thoughtful pause. “That’s too much for one alone, even for someone like my brother-in-law, and that means a lot.”

“We need a strategy“, Intellectus agreed. “Strategies and tactics...”

“First we must get uncle Scholly home, then we’ll see”, his mother said.

“I’ll call up the institute, as soon as there is a break, I want to get him personally on the line”, Dorothea exclaimed decisively.

“And I try to reach the others, before I’ve got to leave myself for that hearing stuff because of that ‘School of In-between’. They seem to want me as well”, she said and you could hear the satisfaction in her voice.

“O damn it, the Hare-family is still on vacation till the end of the month. Well, in any case, we could involve the Australians...”

In the evening of the same day, about eight hours after the hi-jacking note, the little staff met to consider the crisis and to plot the degree of threat.

Lucky enough, just a few minutes had then passed in Australia, after Arundle’s disappearance as to the Central Standard European Time anyway. Because of the time change, Europe was way behind Australia. However, the lag could be overcome and compensated by the time travellers easily.

Walter had come with little Pooty in his front bag and brought some space shirts to overcome the distress of the outer space. While the magical stone from Uluru^x calculated the proper course, of how to get to Laptopia. As he had some experience by now. Therefore, he assured the party to manage without the help of the magic bow now.

For that purpose the magical stone absolved a couple of training units, as he had little practise in the outer space, all the more though he didn’t dare to leave solid grounds without special permission. However, as such, time-travelling business had little to do with real flying, but was some kind of transmutation, his power sufficed, at least the magical bow hoped. Therefore, the stone wasn’t certain at all, whether or not he managed the emergency trip, all the more so, as the bow took an

^x Uluru is the Aborigine name for the Australian Ayers Rock

opposing viewpoint whenever it came to the crucial point – the legal aspect. They would never come to a conclusion here.

While the magic bow stuck to the latest astrophysical viewpoint, the magical stone reflected on mystics and secrecy, and didn't care about absolute speed, or speed at all to relate to cosmological relations.

“Could there be anything faster than a thought?” That was the question they didn't come along with or came to an agreement.

“It is not the question of whether a thought must be thought, but how it must be thought, in order to move quantum,” insisted the magic bow, as he knew that quantum lay under the grounds of all matter.

“Even we magicians got to obey the behaviour of quantum. That's a fact.”

Nobody was able to follow their magic talk, perhaps not even they themselves. Therefore, they sat obviously uninterested in the circle of the staff and whispered.

The magic bow had come with the Australians, and came, like the arrow, right from nowhere. Walter, the giant kangaroo, didn't try to understand, what was going on between them, and was happy to accept their assistance.

So, Walter, Pooty, the magical stone and the magic bow gathered in the Slyboots' home. Grisella and Scholasticus were back by now and were present, as were their spouses Amadeus and Dorothea. Intellectus was due to go to bed by now.

The Australians had brought a new face – a human being, as they specified, and was viewed curiously by the family members, whenever they thought he wouldn't notice. The magic bow had brought him along. However, he became acquainted with Walter and Pooty right away. The stranger was nobody but Billy-Joe Karora, Arundle's new friend, the porter of the 'Heavens Gate' deep down under in New-South-Wales, were Arundle vacated with her parents.

Billy-Joe, explained the magic bow, wasn't here in reality, and the so addressed nodded and smiled his convincing little smile, nobody could resist. “It's a question of mutation”, the bow explained. However, as the questions of transmutation weren't the main topic on today's agenda, the subject was dropped immediately.

Scholasticus would have liked to switch to such a scientific subject, but the salvation of Laptopia and even more, the salvation of Arundle proclaimed highest priority. Scientifically spoken they had to lower to a far simpler level of reflection.

Up to now, nothing but the exodus to the moon had occurred. Now nobody was certain anymore, whether or not, the fabrication of the

artifacts was responsible for the smog and for the time loss at all. The stuffing of the time holes, nevertheless, by means of either shells or balloons, hadn't been more but a momentary provision, and didn't alter the course in the end.

After discussing back and forth how genuine this alarming letter was, they tried to answer the question how the letter managed to get hold at the arrow, as they couldn't make up their minds, one way or the other. However, as a majority tended to take the letter serious, immediate action had to be taken. The magic bow seemed to have ended discussing general matters of space travelling and time slips after all. Arundle came back to his mind now, as she was the endangered person right now. Billy-Joe didn't really understand what he wanted to tell him, so he tried Walter and succeeded in getting a new string at last. He was the only one who had an idea, of what was going on with Arundle, or could at least imagine, because he had just escaped to reappear now over here at the Slyboots' place.

So the tour was settled, after all. The magical stone was more or less convinced and agreed to certain extend. All obstacles were somehow removed. The Professor now caused the only uncertainty, whether it would be too risky to have him aboard, as the letter meant him as the head of the time travellers' team.

Walter had never sent a paper to Arundle that became clear now. The letter, Arundle received, came from the future; she was tempted into a trap. Billy-Joe reported. Before she left, she asked Billy-Joe for a favour to help her out with an alibi. That was shortly before the bow appeared with a broken string and completely out of mind, while Arundle disappeared and didn't show up, until now.

"First things first" uttered the bow who came back to his mind. Things were straightened out with the magical stone anyway, and if the humans and other beings made up their minds, they could start right away.

"I'm very sorry," said Grisella, "but I'm terribly afraid of any air travel. You can delete me from your list, right away."

"...So you better do with Scholasticus as well," Dorothea added. However, Scholasticus contradicted, as he felt responsible for the situation. He said he couldn't let those greenhorns do the trip, without knowing anything. That was not an argument, as neither Walter, nor Pooty or Billy-Joe had any experience, what so ever, when it came to Laptopia.

On the other hand, shouldn't they avoid risks? And it seemed obvious, that Scholasticus was blackmailed to come and free Arundle.

“If we only knew, who was the brain in the background? There is a devilish force involved, that’s for sure. The Prince, as I know him, is a good-natured dummy in the hands of the crown council. The General is member of the crown council as well; we should always keep in mind. I think no one would blame him of such trickery. While the Prince were stuck behind his tellies and minded mainly telenovelas and series of all kind, when I met him. I wonder, what has changed, after all. Nevertheless, I have to take the risk. Let’s go then, and no more hesitation. Arundle needs our help right away.”

Before they left, Billy-Joe wanted to make sure, that they all understood, or at least got an idea of what was going on in the air, and what kind of messages were underway.

Walter didn’t know of any letter he had sent, either this way or another.

“May I sum up then”, Dorothea said. “I’m not the fastest up here, you know” – they all shook their heads but Dorothea continued. “Arundle got informed about the revolution in Laptopia. The provisions to save the planet were sabotaged. General Armyless and his troops become isolated. He asked for help, while the ink has partly faded and the message couldn’t be read properly. Arundle answers on the back of his note and sends it to Walter, close by in Australia. Walter gets this letter and shows up here, while Arundle is heading towards Laptopia, where she gets caught, as her magic bow just reported.”

“Yes, a completely renewed Prince Watchalot appears under the General’s cap,” added the magic bow to Dorothea’s report. “While I managed to escape, Arundle got caught. So I returned for help: Without string I couldn’t do any better.”

”Yes, and either at the same time or shortly after, or before, Scholasticus received that blackmail the same way by arrow.”

“I think, it was the same arrow all the time. The first question then is how the Laptopians manage to travel into the past with one of our own arrows” – Scholasticus interfered.

It might be helpful, if we examined this arrow sorely”, added Amadeus, who opened his mouth for the first time.

“... We should get the magic bow to interrogate it, after all, the arrow is supposed to be his.” Scholasticus agreed and his brother blushed, as he was proud because of his brother’s reaction.

Billy-Joe tried to translate what the bow said, but as he had no command of magic talk, he was bound to fail. Grisella interfered and the magical stone offered his help. The bow didn’t seem to be certain either,

whether or not this arrow was one of his own, or a clever falsification, after all.

On the other hand, there had been some activity up on top of the clouds. Even Walter and Pooty recalled now. “Yes, and the arrows acted as pins, while we had our bowling match on top of the clouds. That was fun, wasn’t it” exclaimed Pooty. “We might have lost one or two pins” nodded Walter.

That seemed clearer now, had the bow not intervened. “No arrow flies on its own. You got to have my reputation to get them into the air and send them, where you wish to.” However, the magical stone contradicted. “I’m sorry, but that’s just not true. All you’ve got to do is throw an arrow into the air and tell it, where you want it to go. That’s it – simple as that...”

Before this argument took up speed and accelerated, Scholasticus finished the assembly and said, “...as we all agreed, it would be best, if a scouting patrol would depart for Laptopia right away.” That suggestion was accepted as they all nodded. Only Grisella hesitated. However, Scholasticus found volunteers enough and could make his choice. Therefore, he decided to take his brother with him, and Billy-Joe’s image, as well as Walter and his wife. Pooty insisted not to stay behind, without Walter. Therefore, they let him go as well. While the magic bow and the magical stone calculated the course, everybody got ready and said farewell to those who stayed behind.

This was quite a load. However, neither the bow nor the stone dared to admit. Heavy forces had to become overcome. Could it be done?

Billy-Joe’s image shouldered the magic bow. Pooty got hold of the magic stone up front in Walter’s kangaroo-bag (a kind of anatomic wonder). All travellers slipped into space fitted suits; Walter drew out of his belly bag. The bow snarled in disgust and refused to accept such device as he got his own – “much more effective” as he uttered.

Scholasticus thought it a good idea to end such quarrels as soon as possible. Now was not the time to interfere. As long as they did their job, it would be okay with him.

Arundle needed help that had the highest priority now. Laptopia was threatened by disaster, and uncertainty awaited him, probably the most dangerous adventure of all his life. Never before had he acted as the key figure in a high jacking drama.

For those who did the trip for the first time, it was quite an experience. Dorothea was overwhelmed and couldn’t stop exclaiming

all kinds of Ahs and Ohs, while she continuously talked to her husband, who was next to her, but couldn't understand a word of what she said, because of the separating suits. He tried to read lips and to interpret her gestures. While he looked at her, he would have loved to crawl into her space suit. However, that was of course impossible, even more so while in flight.

The stars went by like flare signals and tracer streams. The magic bow didn't allow the faintest hesitation this time. Even more so as he had to prove to the magical stone, how right he was. So the breath-taking journey through eternity ended after a few seconds, becoming stretched like chewing gum under the impact of more than one hundred years.

Even the travellers seemed to stretch for a moment, - to accumulate again shortly before the aim. Laptopia came in sight. It was Dorothea again, whose amazement dazzled most. At last, she saw the grey cloudbanks of Laptopia with her own eyes, she had heard of so much. She discovered the coloured balloons, supposed to stick in the time holes. Nevertheless, from far you could hear the guns firing, as somebody wanted to get rid of such reminders. Each hit caused a little explosion before another balloon disappeared.

Such gunfire made the patrol hesitate and keep distance. Whether or not they could be seen from the ground, some crossfire could do them harm anyway. Scholasticus gave signs to win height and the party went around the scenery to get an overall view. Until they came to a quieter corner, where they lowered and settled on the clouds. Now they could open their helmets. The air was breathable and talking was much easier.

Dorothea was able to spy through the gaps between the solid cloudbanks, and what she saw extended any description or image, as precise as they were. "You will never get this sharp on a photo" she uttered and Scholasticus nodded. "Yes, you always see only grey banks and deserted land or grey walls."

What she saw was so strange, so very different from everything she had ever seen or felt. Because it was the peculiar atmosphere of the planet, that got at her. "Grandiose dreariness" she exclaimed - "horrible beauty - that's it then, what our good old earth became, isn't it sad?"

"Don't give up, nothing is lost for good though yet. We're here at last." - Walter replied, while Scholasticus translated. Dorothea gave him a bewildered glance. Did he think she was unable to grab, what Walter said? However, she didn't comment that.

Far away the shimmering city now appeared. The sky scraping buildings glistened when a seldom ray hit the glass fronts, and managed

through the clouds to reach the surface. Little by little, they had a heating-up effect. The rest was then done by the Laptop industries. “The electronic smog not only serves as a time eater but also as a heat reflector. The cloudbanks imprison what ever is emitting from the surface. Mathematically spoken, all you have to do is to solve the Einstein energy formula on the time side, that is enclosed in the acceleration and you come to the horrible result, you can see right in front of us now.” – Nobody understood, what Scholasticus was saying. What was it good to calculate such facts? First of all the obstinacies against the rescue provisions had to be stopped. Though it seemed, as if the opponent party ran the show. It didn’t look at all any good for Laptopia.

Therefore, the time travellers kept on gliding on their cloud. They took good care not to sink, so nobody could spot them from the ground, or someone fell down altogether.

What should be done? The big question was. Theoretical discussions in any case, didn’t help at all. Therefore, Dorothea managed to bring her husband back on solid grounds.

“Does anyone have an idea?” Amadeus asked and looked around.

“By the way, where is Billy-Joe and the magic bow?” he asked. They all looked up alarmed and gave each other astounding looks. In fact, Billy-Joe had disappeared together with the magic bow.

6. On Investigation

Just as Arundle was to be pushed into the dungeon, she felt two strong arms around her body, which came right from no-where. She felt Billy-Joes curly hair tickling in her nose, before she realized, who he was, because in the next moment she found herself back on the battlements of the castle. She couldn’t help but give him a tender kiss. For a moment, she was clinging to his muscular breast and felt his heartbeat under the warm velvet-like skin. For an instant it was, as if she smelt the natural perfume of the width and the sun of distant Australia. Then she freed herself. In the background, she heard now the well-known voice of General Armyless. He interrupted his speech and gave her a hearty welcome. Then he introduced her to his audience; he was addressing to, in order to keep up the morale.

Arundle looked at the old guardians of Lapto-cops. They surrounded the General's lodge, where she was now standing as well together with Billy-Joe and the magic bow, which Billy-Joe raised in triumph. Around them, she could see a huge crowd. They all seemed to be in favour of the General and what he said.

The new blood that had just dropped in out of no-where was most welcome, as the General ran out of pushing vocabulary. As he knew, what the overall situation was like, optimism was required, but hard to solicit.

The bow felt quite well with his new string and enjoyed his master for the time being, while Arundle wondered whether he had all forgotten about her, as it seemed. She wondered whether she had ever seen him as happy as he now was: Totally in harmony with Billy-Joe's magic and the feeling of a handmade Australian string. How he had missed such a feeling. He felt like having returned to the fields of youth and the early days.

However, there was no time for extravagant feelings, as the General now stressed on the helpers and hopelessly overdid when mentioning what they could achieve.

Billy-Joe had got rid of the porter's suit and was wearing nothing but a loincloth and a medicine bag around his neck, wherein he stored all kinds of secrets. Secrets he had forgotten about, but still kept them as holy and necessary as they had been, when they found their way to him.

No wonder Arundle felt a slight spell of jealousy. Would the magic bow find his way back to her? She wondered. However, there was no time for such sad feelings now. She recalled how she just had been rescued from evil, death and torture, and thankfulness flooded back into her troubled heart.

The General just explained to his followers how important Arundle's task in the past had been. Therefore, the crowd hailed at her and demanded her to speak. That brought her back to the ground. Nevertheless, the magic bow helped her and whispered the words into her ear, she only had to utter. And while she felt his tight wooden strength in the back, her backbone straightened as well, and she grew out of her limits like the heroine she actually was, without really being aware yet.

As soon as the never-ending applause finally ended, even though it took some minutes. The General picked the ball up and pointed out that help was underway, that they were not alone and lost. "After a phase of peace, the time has now come to raise the sword. Take it as a sign. Our saviour has returned, right now in the dark hour, where the enemy stood

up in unforeseen strength and number. Is that no wonder? Yes, it is a miracle - our saviour has returned. To the arms then, brave men and women, to the arms. Our right cause must win, we will overcome our enemies, and we will outnumber them. Go tell it on the mountains, over the hills and everywhere, our saviour has returned.”

Arundle couldn't bear listening, and Billy-Joe raised his eyes to the invisible sky. “Let's look for the others”, he whispered. “What others?” she asked back. “I'll explain later”, he answered and grabbed her by the sleeve.

The magic bow covered them with an invisible coat and transported them up above the clouds. From afar, they could hear the threatening thunder of the canons from the distant front. Warfare was in due course, no doubt.

The magic bow managed to meet the flock quite easily. The patrol just had realized Billy-Joe's disappearing and prepared to take action, but hadn't come to a conclusion yet.

Now they all surrounded Arundle congratulating her for her wonderful and somehow marvellous rescue, and thanked Billy-Joe for his clever action, while Arundle had to give them details.

The facts were told in no time as well as the reflections of the patrol group. Nobody felt much wiser afterwards. As nobody understood, what the matter with Laptopia really was. Perhaps they even didn't have but an idea, of what the crisis was really about.

“What do we really know, after all?” Scholasticus asked and gave himself the answer right away immediately.

“Prince Watchalot is leading the counterrevolution against our Laptopia-project. General Armyless and his troops lost grounds, while the enemy gained in number and territory, it seems. The balloons are shot down from heaven faster than they can be raised up there. Therefore, time gets lost almost uncontrolled. The exodus of the industries to the moon has come to a halt. I was asked to publicly confess my errors about the time loss, in order to set you free, Arundle...”

Scholasticus was interrupted rudely. While all were listening, nobody noticed what was going on around them. Perhaps the militiamen had been too fast for them anyway. In fact, they were surrounded and caught in no time by the Prince's personal elite guard of semi-human artifact-warriors. Bionic reconstructions, quite similar to the product the Prince was himself.

As “fighters and defenders of true progress”, so it said on their banners, such troops went from victory to victory. The rare free humans

were fleeing into the forbidden zones, where the General's army was also hiding and preparing the counter strike.

The patrol from earth was overwhelmed in no time. Defence was not possible. They didn't even have weapons on them, except for the magic bow, but he was gone like a flash of lightning anyway together with Arundle and Billy-Joe, as if they fainted, while steel whips tied up the others.

The magic bow returned to Billy-Joe during Arundle's little speech, as he felt save here, or for some other reason. Perhaps he saw the upcoming evil. Anyway, Billy-Joe held Arundle in his arms, while they disappeared; otherwise, they had been caught as well.

Arundle felt quite shaky and looked rather pale, while Billy-Joe still held her close and tight in his arms.

"You can let me go now," she whispered after a while. However, Billy-Joe seemed not to listen. Therefore, she took his hands apart and escaped from his grip. He looked as if he came back from far away. Then he handed the magic bow back to her without a single word.

Where were they? As far as Arundle remembered the magic bow had taken them straight upwards, just away into nowhere land, as he confirmed, while she was thinking such thoughts. She pulled the string and felt the answer right in her head.

To be on the safe side, he'd pushed them a little aside in time, but a small window was still open, so they could look downwards to see what was going on down there.

"You got to understand the connections," the bow uttered. Arundle didn't understand anything.

She poked Billy-Joe in the ribs and tried to awaken him out of the dreamtime: "Wake up, Billy-Joe, I need you awake" she screamed with fear in her voice. "That's their way", the magic bow snarled, as Billy-Joe showed no intention to wake up. However, Arundle didn't give in. She felt creepy alone and didn't dare to look through the time loop, as she feared the worst for their friends.

Finally, Billy-Joe seemed to return as he grumbled, so she looked down and saw the prisoners being taken away. They were all tied up down to the legs and were pushed down the same passage Arundle remembered all too well, as she had been pushed that way as well, some time ago.

Even Pooty wore steel-ties. They were far too heavy for the little creature. He stumbled hard and almost couldn't keep on his feet, last in the row. The guards teased him and made him stumble by stepping on his tail. His screams could hardly be heard under the guard's laughter.

Somehow, those artifacts seemed to have become more human, while only in a negative sense, as they employed the same cruelties that are common to torturers of all times. Probably they were semi-artifacts by now, half human still and therefore even more dangerous, Arundle thought. Her magic bow agreed.

The General didn't show up, but his spies recognized what was going on. They couldn't do anything for the forlorn group of patrollers from afar. Prince Watchalot led the transport himself again. He seemed to know of the importance of the earthlings for the ongoing turmoil. Fit as the Prince now was, he stepped ahead on his own feet this time. His bionic transformation seemed to have ended.

Arundle had met him once at a time; he had been unable to move from one room to another without help. She had been honoured then with the highest order of the state for presenting him a remote control. The medal had ended up in Mr. Schwertfeger's locker, long time ago.

Scholasticus and Walter tried to carry the burden of capture with dignity. That was not easy, all the more Walter had to stand the screams of terror Pooty uttered once in a while. Arundle meant to see his pelt rising, while he tightened his enormous muscles underneath. His guards had not the faintest idea of his strength, especially of the strength of his legs; otherwise, they wouldn't have left them untied. Walter would run away at the first suitable opportunity, but surely not without Pooty, Arundle meant to become aware even from the distance she spied on in.

Slowly, Billy-Joe came back to reality. He yawned, stretched, and started to talk about his dream right away, although Arundle didn't want to let him take the word. She forced him to look through the time loop as well. He did so with little interest. He shrugged and said: "Little can be done right now, I'm afraid." Arundle was somehow shocked, and bewildered. How could he be so ignorant?

Billy-Joe smiled his ever-friendly smile and Arundle asked herself at that moment if it came from heart.

"For Australians dreams are no less real than reality" the magic bow reminded her, who read Billy-Joes thoughts, while Billy-Joe seemed to do the same, as he also nodded.

"We won't have the power for the whole lot," explained the magic bow, as Arundle thought of quick help.

"All right then, we get Pooty, before the dungeon. But I still hope for Walter, all the more though he still holds the magical stone."

"Most likely the stone disappeared in the depth of Walters belly bag", Arundle added. She felt a little better now.

“Walter seems to be kind of phenomenon”, the magic bow giggled, while Billy-Joe became upset by now, as nobody seemed to be interested in his all important dream, he wanted to get rid of. Therefore, the bow shut up in excuse.

Arundle lowered her eyes and felt guilty as well, as she had also forgotten about Billy-Joes other reality. Therefore, they listened to his report all the more attentive:

“I was flying over the blue sea and over shining islands. I saw all kinds of temples and statues over soft hills, and golden fruits grew on bushy trees. Merry people were picking little green nuts. While I came to a halt, I met two sisters. They spoke about you and their dreams, and wanted to know how they could help, as they understood you needed their assistance.”

“That were Florinna and Corinia, who are staying with their parents in Greece, right now”, interrupted Arundle, but Billy-Joe only shrugged, as he didn’t know the sisters.

“Do you care, what they said, or not?” he asked. He understood his tale as a kind of gift, he was presenting to her and it seemed as if she still didn’t really care.

“I’m sorry”, Arundle turned in. “What did they say?”

“As you can’t wait, I tell you right away, what they intended to do. They want to come to Laptopia, as soon as the night is coming. They have received your cry for help and became quite alert and uneasy. They also received an arrow, but weren’t able to understand what it meant either. Same as what happened to you, I suppose...”

“Let’s hope, they will be more careful than we were” Arundle exclaimed. “Do you know when they will arrive?”

“But that’s what I was going to tell you all the time. They are here already. And if you hadn’t interrupted and looked down to the captured, you’d know, what I’m talking about.”

Florinna and Corinia indeed were sitting on a cloudbank smiling and waving, while Arundle looked at them at last.

“Come on, have us moved over there”, Arundle asked the magic bow.

As the situation was quite tense, they reduced their welcome, although they hadn’t met for quite a while, not even in their dreams, as they all had been busy otherwise.

Arundle informed them of what was going on. Then they began to discuss a strategy, how they could help the prisoners, probably with the Advisor’s help, as they were the three Star-maids of the Advisor.

Pooty had to be rescued first, if Walter and the magical stone had no other idea, but that they couldn't find out from the distance. Pooty's situation became more desperate any minute. Therefore, something had to happen, regardless the fact that the Prince would be warned. As he was warned anyway since Arundle had escaped a second time.

All three girls wanted to become Pooty's saviours, regardless of the danger. Therefore, they asked the magic bow to decide, whom he wanted to go with him best. "As you ask me at all", he snarled, "I'd best go alone, as I then have all the power available and can control the lift-off effects and acceleration best, and might be able to threefold the speed. You know Einstein's formula, whereas the mass to be moved equals the radix of the required energy divided by the quantum factor of..."

"All right, all right, we are convinced" the girls screamed, while Billy-Joe didn't even know the name of the famous physicist. Trigonometry and stuff like that, he hadn't heard of yet.

"Alas, get off then" Arundle shouted and lifted the string to get out of the bow's back. The magic bow disappeared at once.

"I wonder, where he's got all that energy from" Arundle uttered thoughtfully and didn't notice that she spoke now about the same things the bow had just explained to her. She of course meant a different kind of energy; at least she thought it was of a different kind. However, was there really a difference?

Not two thoughts passed by, when Pooty appeared. He held the bowstring in his little paws in front of his breast and pressed the bow to his back. While descending, he screamed for fun:

"Dui die Dui die Oyo, what a flight. I've got to tell Walter."

However, Walter wasn't here, he recalled, and his eyes filled with tears. Without Walter, he felt left alone in this world. The girls felt moved by his sight and switch to his grief, as fast as they had enjoyed his excitement seconds ago. Now tears glittered in their eyes as well.

Then Arundle introduced the sisters to Billy-Joe and raised confusion on both sides. Neither the boy nor the girls believed their eyes, and whenever they thought the others weren't looking, they gave their opposite a thoughtful glance.

The sisters couldn't speak up in front of Billy-Joe. But as it was in the dreamland, they made themselves understood without words, and didn't realize the boy's emphatic ability, as he could read their thoughts quite clearly. They saw him grin, then understood and blushed under their dark skin and turned their almond eyes down.

“That’s right” Arundle tried to get rid of the tension “to me you also looked quite the same, as if you were brother and sisters, somehow. Well, not really totally alike, but surprisingly alike...”

But enough with that, we’ve got work to do, what’s next, anyway?”

As quite uncommon with sisters, Florinna and Corinia suggested a patrol flight around the scene. “We’ve got to find the General. He must be hiding somewhere with his troops. Perhaps he is able to lay siege to the castle to cause Prince Watchalot to give in.”

“A little while ago we met the General, while he addressed to his followers. Nevertheless, they didn’t look, as if they were ready to fight at all. I think we’ve got to be realistic.” Arundle answered.

Pooty pointed out the desolate condition the captivated were in. “Dorothea suffered most”; he said and should be freed next. She should have been freed first anyway. “I’d have endured the torture for hours, if I had been asked” he said.

“They are preparing for Scholasticus’ public revocation, I presume”, Arundle pointed down.

“The regime is stressing on legitimacy. Perhaps the throne of Prince Watchalot isn’t all that stable and set, as the forces we met, make us believe. As soon as the human beings realize, what he is after, the General will regain grounds again”, said Pooty, as he had had the chance to overhear some of the guards’ talks.

“Never underestimate your opponent,” the magic bow snarled thoughtfully.

“Right, that’s the worst mistake of a worrier”, Billy-Joe agreed.

As if his words needed approval, a huge flying dog approached all of a sudden, right from nowhere it seemed. Its fangs were kept wide open and the threatening long teeth were sparkling in the light of the gaping hole the animal had torn into the cloudbank.

The little patrol team dropped like one man and hid in the clouds, and the gaping yaws just missed them, as they almost lost hold in the clouds. Without the bow’s warning, they would have dropped right down to the ground and amidst the raging semi-artifact forces of the fierce Prince.

As they climbed up again the next attack came right away. Billy-Joe gave signs to the others to remain unseen, while he jumped up ready to fight. Billy-Joe got hold of the magic bow and in no time, an arrow flew right into the wide-open throat. The poor creature yowled and fled, however, not for long.

In the meantime, Florinna began to lose contour, a sign that she was in due course of waking up. Corinia followed soon, as she felt terribly alone without her sister over here in the nightmarish Laptopian dreamland, while Billy-Joe shouted, whether she and her nice sister could think of a way of coming back as soon as possible.

Just as the remainders breathed up and relaxed, another flying hound dog approached. This time Arundle did the fighting and successfully chased the attacker away.

Now the hound dogs came from all sides, the more they chased them off, and they needed all their cleverness to stand the attacks. It seemed as if the hound dogs multiplied, so Billy-Joe now tried another strategy and had them crash together, while he slipped through their fangs. That worked out fine, but he couldn't avoid bruises and scratches here and there, and after a while, he felt his power to weaken. This Torero-like business required the highest concentration. After all, he had to get rid of the debris that followed such collisions, which wasn't always possible. He felt the steam of rage in his face and the sharp claws scratching his back more than once.

In no time, he was bleeding. Arundle couldn't help but take over his position instead, until she got exhausted as well. While she shot arrow after arrow and no end came in sight, desperation stretched greedy claws at her and her mate.

"Pooty, what could be done? Think of something or we are done..." Their situation was hopeless and became more hopeless any minute.

Billy-Joe's movements became slower and weaker; he almost didn't manage to pull aside. The flying dogs ran deep scratches into his bleeding back.

At last, the magic bow recalled his abilities, even though Arundle neglected to call out a clear order. While she shouldered the bow and pulled her arms around the boy's bleeding body and Pooty clung to her arm. The magic bow accelerated and disappeared flash-like.

"Retreat is the best defence," Pooty screamed, as he was fond of such fast flights.

As soon as they arrived at their aim, Arundle wondered that the scratches had gone from Billy-Joe's back, as well as her own. Not even scars were left.

"We didn't retreat in space, but in time", snarled the magic bow and Arundle noticed the satisfaction in his utterance. She nodded even though she only partly dug what he meant.

“Well, well we dropped back behind the line of time. The attack lies now in front of you, but you can make things a bit easier for you. You can’t alter the course of time altogether. Never try to alter the future.”

“Let’s put on Billy-Joe’s space shirt then”, suggested Pooty. He offered to go back to captivity in order to get one of the stone’s devices out of Walters belly bag.

The bow shifted them back a little more and after some minutes, Pooty appeared with a small packet. Billy-Joe tried it on. A bit tight it was, but what was good against the dangers of the outer space should as well do against the claws and fangs of bionic hound dogs. So, they hoped, while Florinna and Corinia appeared. Their father had made them familiar with the dog of the underworld. This knowledge might help against the hound dogs as well. After all - dogs are dogs, no matter where they were.

They awoke too early anyway and went back to sleep after a short breakfast with their father, who used to get up quite early, anyway.

They got up as they heard him rumour about in the kitchen downstairs. They told him their nightmare and where they had been, while the time loop appeared as a nightmarish vision.

Thanks to their father, they now knew what to do. “We need a mirror”, they said as soon as they arrived back again. They weren’t afraid at all anymore as soon as the attacks started, and they returned into the time slip. The whole procedure started all over again. First Billy-Joe did this Torero-like business after having shot some arrows. However, this time the few rays of the weak sun were caught in the shimmering space shirt of Billy-Joe’s. It acted like a big mirror, even more so, while Billy-Joe stiffened and stood straight.

As soon as the hound dog looked into their image in the mirror, something strange happened. They lost their entire wrath and became tame and peaceful. They started wagging their tails and rolled up their mighty wings, and looked much smaller thereafter.

They gathered around Billy-Joe, whom they accepted as their master. He walked around between them and patted their heads, while they tried to lick his hand. Some even lifted the leg to piss against a cloudbank, and a slight yellow rain fell down to earth.

To their hidden foes such development didn’t remain unnoticed, the little flock realized after a short while, as canon balls flew around their ears and grenades exploded close by.

“Mind you, would they be strong enough to carry us away?” screamed Pooty and jumped on one of the smaller dogs, while Billy-Joe,

who got him straight away, looked for the strongest and biggest of the beasts; so did the three Star-maids and off they went - afraid or not. "What, if the dogs went nasty again" - Arundle thought, but the bow calmed her down. "Trust in Billy-Joe's daily mirror" he snarled giggling, as she didn't quite understand, what he meant by daily mirror. Billy-Joe's hound unfolded its wings and let go and so the others unfolded their wings the like.

"Up, up and away" Billy-Joe commanded and up they went, away from bullets and fierce attacks of misguided creatures. However, their main task, how to free the prisoners, they didn't come closer. They rounded the palace still looking for General Armyless and his followers, but in vain.

Pooty raised the question again whether the magic bow could at least free Dorothea, but he denied. "Too heavy", he snarled. Perhaps this was the true reason.

Again, they circled the palace. They dared to get closer now, as the nearby shooting had stopped. While from far you still could hear the thunder of the canons to remind them what happened to their balloons, they had managed to get up into the time holes, some years ago.

"The artillery is making fun of our balloons" Arundle shouted with anger in her voice. "So much effort and all in vain now, it's a real shame..." added Florinna and Corinia went on "How can people be so stupid and simple minded? How can it be, that they don't realize, what they do to themselves?"

"General Armyless once explained it to me like that" Arundle answered: "Their humaneness declines, while being dependent on their artifacts. The Laptopians are getting increasingly dependent, or the other way round, less and lesser independent. All their humane abilities stagger and fade, physical and spiritual. Since long the artifacts took over and run the show, pretending to be servants of their masters, but in fact the masters became prisoners in the hands of their servants."

"But what's going on down there right now, doesn't seem to fit into such pattern, I'd say." The bow snarled. Arundle nodded thoughtfully. We don't understand, what's going on down there. The whole atmosphere is quite different, somehow loaded, I don't know, I feel something horrible creeping up, something we don't understand, that's for sure..."

"...And probably hasn't got anything to do with our sorrows and worries", Billy-Joe interrupted.

"What about such resoluteness all of a sudden, you should have known Prince Watchalot some years ago" Arundle added.

“Perhaps you didn’t know Laptopia, as it really is” Florinna suggested. “The dogs were new, that’s for sure”, Corinia assisted her sister. “...kind of strange, how they got created; a very strange and awful mix of all kinds of technical devices to a body of flesh and blood - poor creatures, that’s what they are; the way they are fitted together must hurt, I can’t imagine anything else...”

A closer look at the hound dogs proved them quite different from each other. Their reconstructed bodies belonged to individuals of all races and colours, and the mighty wings functioned like the wings of giant bats, consisting of a strange fabric. “I wonder how these wings became connected with the muscular system as a whole...”

“Some of them are overall covered by fur and look therefore quite complete and doglike, except for the wings, as the bionic connections and mechatronic devices are covered and hidden. Others are different. My dog’s a sickly poor creature hardly able to pull itself up into the air.” Pooty nodded, while they halted for a break again.

They circled the palace three times, without success. General Armyless and his troops seemed as if the earth had swallowed them.

“Someone is out there who masters the game better than I do”, the magic bow snarled. How could such a mass of people disappear without a sign? Someone fiddled around with a time loop and managed to keep them out of sight.

So the patrol landed finally in a deserted little courtyard, hopefully unnoticed. They left the flying dogs behind and entered the palace. Arundle had once been in the palace, but that was long ago. She remembered the endless passages and corridors. Here and there, she recalled, or she thought she recalled, but then they rounded a corner and everything looked strange again. Things might have changed in the meantime. She remembered the kind of stairs, but they seemed to be the same everywhere - steep and irregular - the more though she had experienced such stairs while captured by the old Prince’s guard not long ago.

Pooty confirmed as he recalled such stairs even better. Climbing up was a problem but descending an even bigger one, and while they had to descend once more, Pooty started complaining and after a while he resisted at all. Until Billy-Joe picked him up and carried him, while Pooty examined Billy-Joes Medicine pouch fixed around his neck and all of a sudden disappeared inside.

Finally, they made the base and their way led them on flat grounds. After a short while, they came to a large crisscross crossing and had the choice between at least six pathways. They felt like in a maze, and

couldn't make up their minds, even more so, as they had almost forgotten, what they were looking for. Yes, of course the dungeon, where they hoped to find their comrades. However, were they still down here?

Billy-Joe seemed to be quite certain. Like a sniffing dog, he breezed heavily and hurried then on. The others followed. What else could they do?

While they walked on, the passage grew tighter and led slightly downwards. Billy-Joe's broad shoulders could hardly make it between the narrowing walls. However, the others noticed them as well, as you could hear awes and aches now and then. As not only the sides but also the ceiling came closer, the further they went on. In the dim light of the bow's red eye they couldn't see much, even more so, as they followed Billy-Joe who kept the lead, still sniffing and gaping like a hound dog, as if he was imitating those attackers, they experienced a while ago.

Only Pooty seemed to be all right. His gay voice made his comrades smile, despite the tightness of their passage. It couldn't go on like that forever, they thought, while Billy-Joe asked Pooty to shut up. Their enemies could be close now. Just as Billy-Joe was almost stuck, the passage widened and the raw rock disappeared all of a sudden. The patrol found themselves in a kind of dome. Dim mysterious light was shimmering from the ceiling and the walls. A somehow sacred appeal overwhelmed the marchers, who came to a halt. For no reason, but perhaps the kind of special atmosphere herein, they didn't even dare to whisper. This was definitely not the entrance to the dungeon, they were looking for.

Right in the middle of the dome there was a basin, filled with blue water. Coloured mosaics shimmered from the ground. Beautiful statues like guardians surrounded it. In the middle of the basin, there was an oval star flashing up occasionally. Such splendour invited the patrollers to take a refreshing bath after the frustrating journey through the underworld of the castle.

Pooty was the first to jump in, the others followed right away. Later on, nobody remembered who the signal gave, and Pooty was certain, that he only followed an advising voice - whose it had been, he couldn't say. Anyway, in no time the whole group paddled around the little pool. Their mission had to wait. While the magic bow, when leaning against one of the statues, uttered his disagreement.

Unwillingly the five of them accepted his reminder and crawled out to put their clothes back on again.

Refreshed and merry they examined the hall, still impressed by the liveliness of the statues. How could they look so natural and alive? While they strolled around, their limbs seemed to stiffen and breathing became difficult as well; and while they still wondered why the figures didn't show faces, they began to realize, how dangerous the water over here could be. Not long ago the Star-maids freed a flock of petrified ponies to transmute them right away to deep down under.

Could these statues be petrified humans? While she tried to get in contact with her mates, Arundle felt the stiffening to get even further and reached her throat. Her words dried in her mouth and faded as if the wind had taken them away. That was it then. How could they dare to bath in such strange liquid? - She thought, while she realized her comrades to stiffen. In no time, they all filled the gaps between the statues and stood now by themselves around the basin, as if they had been there for ages. Only the fresh expressions on their faces showed the difference, as the faces of the other statues were almost gone.

Pooty was caught while he tried to hide under Billy-Joe's armpit. Billy-Joe's mouth stood wide open. He petrified while he wanted to point out on something of great importance.

Was that the end? What could the magic bow do all alone? The whole planet was in turmoil. General Armyless had disappeared with his followers - probably defeated and discouraged. Destructive forces seemed to rule the Laptopsians and forced them into despair and destruction. Nothing, it seemed, could stop the time-loss. Faster and faster, the time elapsed and disappeared, as if a huge vampire sucked the planet's blood, so to speak, and the Laptopsians didn't seem to realize, or if they did, they disappeared.

These five petrified figures could still think and communicate in a way by reading each other's thoughts. So the magic bow suggested the sisters should awake right away, if it was not too late already. Therefore, it was. Without the secret serum out of the secret strong room, the General once brought to Arundle's attention; they'd be lost for good. Therefore, Arundle tried to recall the exact location and the way they took.

Pooty once managed to steal the serum they needed to awaken the petrified ponies and prepare for their flight via the star bridge.

Was the serum still at its place? On the other hand, had the semi-human hordes of the Prince destructed this last device of humane recovery?

Such were the last thoughts Arundle was able to think, before the doom of stone took over to govern her state of being. 'Artifacts won't

need such serum. If they really want to destruct organic life, as it seemed, they weren't interested in such means of recovery.

On the other hand, was there the first law that demanded them to serve their masters. Something terrible must have happened as now it looked, as if this basic rule was none-existent any more. -

"We don't understand, what's really going on in Laptopia, that's it. We haven't found out about the forces that are pulling the trigger and run the show.'

This was Arundle's final thought and she felt sorrier for that, than for being petrified.

7. The Revocation

How did the captured do meanwhile? Dorothea suffered from a nervous breakdown. To stop her screaming, she was put in the same closet as her husband. That had been her intention and she calmed down, more or less. Whenever they became separated, she started all over again; until her husband's final tribunal was due, when she remained quite calm and decisive. Perhaps her nervous breakdown was nothing but a show to make him care for her and forget his own queries.

They both knew why Scholasticus was endangered most, and what their tormentors expected from him – the public revocation.

Scholasticus had thought over all possible alternatives, and had stored their possible courses like a computer. So he went out not unprepared, at least he thought. However, reality differed to a far greater extent his expectations, he had himself prepared for.

He didn't have the dirty old sack amongst his expectations that was drawn over his head, so that he could hardly breeze, while being pushed forward up and down endless corridors. So he got an idea, what pains he had to stand ahead. He almost lost control while he was humiliated that way; and that was nothing, but the starter. After a while, he lost any control of the elapsing time or the direction he was led. Sweat was running into his eyes and made them burn. He couldn't breeze and felt like suffocating any minute. He stumbled with aching limbs, but was merciless pushed, whenever he fell.

Then they finally reached the surface, he realized, as a little air came at him, while daylight was shimmering through the fabric covering

his eyes. The noises of the city came to his ears. In the background, he heard desperate cries and gunfire and the rough laughter of the troopers and militiamen.

Only hearing, but not seeing what was going on, made things even worse. However, there was no time for reflections, as he was pushed into some kind of vehicle, and pressed into an uncomfortable seat, that was prepared for to charge those laptops or lapto-cops on the beat. So Arundle had told him, he recalled.

The vehicle accelerated and lost contact with the solid ground. Where were they going? Where was he taken? The glider seemed to speed up again and rushed through the air rather smooth. That was new. Arundle hadn't told him. Nevertheless, her visits lay years back. Quite likely, progress had changed the mode of transportation by the time. Her captivity took only minutes then, anyway.

While his guards pressed themselves quite comfortably into their seats, he couldn't stand the steel pins any longer being pressed into his back from his own weight. In vain, he tried to change position to alter the pressure.

As the guards left him alone now, he managed to find a hole in the sack over his head to spy out of the window to his right. He could see some kind of wings attached to the carriage underneath – some kind of hybrid system obviously.

Despite his aching back, he felt better now and realized how hungry he was. His wife came back to his mind and his worries about her renewed. Where might she be now? What did they do to her? Hadn't he better left her right at home, as his first intention had been. They all had underestimated the dangers and perils of the fierce dehumanised planet, earth became. - Her beloved body in the hands of such torturers - he didn't dare to imagine.

Did she know anything of value for these creatures? She wouldn't stand the torture. On the other hand, did he underrate her? While kissing him goodbye some minutes ago, he had felt some kind of unexpected strength wavering over from her to him. While he had been busy, worrying about his own matters, she had changed under pressure and something had come up on to the outside, having been hidden deep down inside her, perhaps so deeply hidden, that she didn't know herself.

The glider was landing helicopter-like. Below he managed to see a huge platform surrounded by tall buildings – a kind of square it was, as the crowd gathered. Obedient servants brought all kinds of sedan chairs along. The healthier Laptopsians sat on the backs of their hippo tops – a hybrid horse like variety of a domestic animal.

Scholasticus just wondered how weak and helpless these people were, without noticing by themselves or being aware of.

The crowd was guided and directed by laptocops and militia-troopers of the semi-human type. They seemed to be quite alike the legal police force under the command of the General. Could it be that they had deserted? Had they switched sides? Who stood for the legal side anyway?

Artifacts weren't able to harm human beings, that was quite clear, but what about those semi-human bionic reconstructed 'time-exchange-account-converters'? Perhaps they were still human enough, to slaughter their own kind.

Right in the middle of the square stood a gallows rounded by a pile of wood. As the sack had been taken away from his head, he had gained back unhindered sight, but what a sight it was!

While being led up the stairs to meet his judges and their knights and aids, the crowd gasped in rage, as he could be seen now from all sides.

His judges formed a row; all dressed in red gowns and feathered berets on their heads. Their appearance claimed respectfulness but was in fact ridiculous, and reminded him on eager cocks amidst their backyard flock.

That was their idea of the revocation: Public confession under torture and public burning thereafter. If his friends had no idea at hand and worked on a plan of rescue, his life would be done soon and under horrible circumstances.

Had there not been all those lamps and lights and spots or the sedans and bionic creatures amidst the crowd, he would have felt like being victim of a medieval inquisition court, as if he was going to be burnt like those so-called heretics.

Scholasticus Slyboots firmly decided to behave like one of his great shining examples. and, Galileo Galileo's famous last words came to his mind: "Eppur si muove."

While this sentence didn't quite fit his situation, it still sounded great to his own ears, and had it not been such a cruel departure, he'd have liked the idea as such, of departing from this world with his own voice in his ears, just uttering these famous words. As in his case, nobody really doubted the fact of the universal rotation as such, while people still were kept in the bonds of mental simplicity by purpose.

The projection of his upcoming martyr's death moved him to tears. However, he was too far ahead in time. Right now, he was forced up

front, and his legs and feet became fixed to the ground, right in front of a bunch of microphones.

From the left and from the right strange figures approached. They wore purple robes of the inquisitors, as they used to in ancient times. Little servant artifacts swarmed about them and lifted their robes before they were caught by the rough wood of the gallows's base. As they came to a halt, more servants approached with armchairs and cushions. More servants came with large umbrellas; they unfolded as soon as the inquisitors settled on their chairs.

The inquiry could start. The questions rolled like thunder over the heads of the crowd. The crowd gave a roar of wrath, while the first question was read:

“Is it true, that you, earthly being, dared to intervene into the course of the dignified world of Laptopia?”

What could Scholasticus answer? If he said the truth, they would see this as an offensive criminal act, and if he denied, they could easily prove, that he was lying. Of course had they intervened in the course of the world, but why did they do it? That was the real question.

He decided to stick to the truth. He had little hope, that he was allowed more than a Yes, or a No. Therefore, he gurgled out some kind of utterance faintly familiar with a Yes.

“We have not understood, earthly being” one inquisitor on the right shouted.

“Louder” another confirmed. Scholasticus didn't understand his shaky voice himself. Perhaps the microphones were manipulated to make him sound odd and weak.

“The earthly being confirms, he made himself guilty of sorcery and witchcraft, while he tried to manipulate the course of the world of Laptopia, whereby great confusion came over the Laptopian people” another of his inquisitors added on the right.

“Yes, but...” tried the so addressed, when his voice was cut.

“The defendant confirms the crime he committed, with his Yes.” The Great Inquisitor declared.

“Is it correct” another picked up the thread “that you, earthly being, form the head of a conspiracy against his Mighty Majesty, Watchalot, Prince of Laptopia?”

Scholasticus knew, that he was only allowed to say yes again. Though he tried to utter a whole sentence, but in vain. The technicians took good care and after his second ‘wrong’ word, they cut off the energy, and mixed in the fierce roar of the crowd instead. They didn't even notice, how they once more was manipulated.

“The accused confesses his guilt” the prosecutor summed the enquiry up.

That was too much for Scholasticus. He roared with rage. He jumped up and down like a rubber ball in his ties. He screamed and raged against the panel of courtiers. He managed to get a microphone somehow and gave them names. The technicians were obviously confused, as they didn't cut him off.

Guards came from the sides and lifted him up, to carry him away, but couldn't, as he was fixed to the ground by steel ties. The key couldn't be found and Scholasticus continued addressing to the people, to those amongst them, who still had left a piece of brain in their empty heads.

While they tried to keep his mouth shut, the Laptocops realized that their scissor hands didn't fit for such a difficult operation, and failed. Others tried to cut the microphone out of his hands, but he had grabbed a wireless one, that had no string to be cut off.

His voice sounded clear and precise over the square. The crowd went silent all of a sudden. As if everybody realized something, extraordinary was going to happen.

and, such were the words, Scholasticus brought forward:

“We want to save your world. Do believe me. Your world is losing time, day by day. Soon it will be too late, and you will run out of time. We tried to stuff the time holes by means of air balloons, but the army is shooting them to pieces. Our plan to evacuate the factories to the moon was sabotaged, so the deadly electronic smog gets thicker day-by-day. We are certain and can prove that the smog is responsible for the time holes in the atmosphere. Our provisions had been taken in favour of you - human beings. We came out of the past, to rescue our future. Be reminded of your humanity. Don't let the artifacts erase you from this planet. You are still humane deep inside. I plead to you from human to human...”

Scholasticus Slyboots' voice clearly sounded over the vast site. The crowd grew stiff. Even the prosecutors and inquisitors stood the mouth open and didn't utter a word. The technicians still didn't know what to do. They were even more confused than ever before.

Slyboots' speech didn't take but a minute or so, but with enormous effect. The crowd swaggered, Scholasticus realized, being well familiar with lectures in front of a student multitude at the big universities.

If he now managed to find the right words, he had them on his side.

“Don’t let them steal your lifetime. You have a right to a long and fulfilled human life. Get back your freedom and self-determination. What has come up to our beautiful blue planet? Look at those deserts everywhere. You have the right to claim a beautiful, blossoming world. Go and get it...”

His last words almost faded, while the crowd roared in agreement this time. Cripples and Grannies jumped off the backs of their carriers and out of the cushions of their sedans and danced about:

“We want freedom.

We want long life.

We want green water,

1. We want blue meadows...”

Semi-human troopers closed in on the crowd, and forced them to give in with electro shockers and high voltage-whips.

The crowd was split, and a platoon marched right up to the gallows to safeguard the frightened officials, still sitting on their easy chairs, flattered by servants of all kind. While the loudmouths were caught and arrested, the crowd dissembled through the gateways, where they were registered and screened. While the prosecutors noticed, who led the troopers, they went pale. It was no one else but Prince Watchalot himself. He steamed in wrath. “Swarm out, get hold of them, all of them, the whole lot. They are all arrested. There the last word hasn’t been spoken; fools, that you are. I’ve never ever experienced such a mess of incompetence...”

And all the judges, prosecutors, inquisitors, technicians, and human aids, complete or in part, who had been responsible for the public revocation, got jammed into a transporters and taken away to the dungeons “for further investigation” – as was mentioned by their guards.

Just as the Prince turned to Scholasticus Slyboots, who stood there quite unattended still in his bonds, from the other side a slim figure climbed up the gallows. Prince Watchalot shrugged in dismay, as the young man stepped in his way. It was nobody else but former Prince Watchalot II, who officially renamed himself to Prince Watchanot, after he learnt; this was the name he had been baptised with, by his godmother Arundle.

The difference between father and son was obvious. Prince Watchanot smiled at Professor Slyboots with an air of excuse. While Prince Watchalot roared with wrath, his semi-human appearance made him look a bit like one of his soldiers had there not been an air of distinctiveness and grandeur that had been added to the bionic prototype his make up was based upon.

While the young Prince was of medium height, Prince Watchalot was almost seven feet tall now, while he once was a dwarf with crippled limbs. That was before the big change.

The young man held his protecting hand over the Professor, who could still not escape because of the ties on his feet. The young Prince's father was superior with physical strength, no doubt, though he didn't dare to attack his son. That would have passed on the entirely wrong signal, as he still hoped his son changed sides.

Fearless he stood there, in front of his father and gave him a glance of dismay. Right from the start, the young Prince never took his parent's side. While they enjoyed their TV-programmes the little boy longed for nature and natural items like flowers or leaves of grass, and didn't give in until they let him his will. Day by day, he extorted the whole court with such extravagance. At the age of six, he officially changed his name and made it quite clear, that he would never step into the footprints of his father.

Since then, their course led apart. The young Prince Watchanot's rebellion against his father, also affected Princess Soshedoes, though she never let the thread being cut between herself and her son. When she died early enough, the whole court blamed the young man and made him feel guilty, even though there was no point in it. In fact, it was her husband who made her scare, when he began to alter his appearance and character.

Princess Soshedoes' smoothening influence on father and son came to an abrupt halt. Depressive as she had already been for a long time, Princess Soshedoes couldn't stand her husband's behaviour, his fooling around with mistresses and all that sex business that came to his mind, with the new body of his. That was just too much for her.

The happy years lay far behind, where they enjoyed peaceful hours together in front of the TV-set. Both still enjoyed TV, but their taste differed. Princess Soshedoes enjoyed her daily soaps, romances and love stories; while for the Prince there was nothing but sex and crime anymore, and all these operations.

First, he didn't bother her with, but the more he changed, the more he demanded of her. Therefore, the Princess fled to the summer palace on the moon, where the young Prince accompanied her.

After countless operations, Prince Watchalot didn't know himself anymore. He had a slim tall figure, and kept his neck stiff and his head up proud. His weak flesh had been replaced by all kinds of bionic parts. Even his brain had been altered to improve his eyes, he was told, but after the operation, he not even saw better, but felt different altogether.

Somehow, he became greedy and power-mad, tyrannical and cruel. He still enjoyed his TV-programmes, but only such brutal hardcore stuff, nobody else could stand.

While father and son drifted apart, thing worsened in Laptopia. and, the circumstances were not in favour of Prince Watchalot. He feared the revolution and blamed his son to be their head. The more artificial he became, the less human he was. That was his tragedy. He didn't realize any more what really was going on. All he wanted was to stay in power, by any means available, as long as the power was his or on his side. Had he had a son of his kind, eager for power, greedy to govern, ruthless and mean!

As it became clearer and clearer, that his son collaborated with these fools from the past, things ran out of control. All kinds of rebellious bands marooned through the lands. His own general collaborated with the enemy.

That was the situation like. He and his side had held the final victory almost in hands, and now this disaster. Nevertheless, he knew his forces and he could trust in their unconditional loyalty, - could he?

The crowd was like grass in the wind that waved from one side to the other. That was today's bitter lesson. For the time being it would be best to give in and fraternize with the aims of his son and those earthly beings. His time would come again. First, he didn't give his power away, whether it looked as if he had done so, or not; and that was, what really mattered.

Therefore, he ostentatiously embraced his son, who addressed to the crowd, while they returned as soon as the troopers stopped arresting by the orders of both Princes. The late captured were released and the dungeons opened, so the crowd was told.

The young Prince Watchanot repeated more or less in his own words, what he just had heard, and that was, what the crowd longed to hear.

Meanwhile, the Professor was cut loose and stepped up front to join father and son. His message now became official, as the representatives of the state picked his words up. The guards and troops retreated.

As they had gone, some humans began to turn against their servants. Some of which tore off their own limbs depending on the state of humaneness they had achieved, while the humans cheered and hailed the poor innocent creatures. As most of the so-called humans were themselves almost alike, self-destruction seemed obvious to the more

sensible ones, but they were a minority. Pitying the victims was dangerous.

The young Prince Watchanot and Professor Slyboots looked at each other in dismay and in great sorrow. ‘Agents Provocateurs’ heated up the tense atmosphere. The mob ran out of control. If only the general had been here. The general’s experience and strategic genius would find the right answer.

The troublemakers overdid, Prince Watchalot realized, probably too late. He himself had to fear for his life now. He tried to hide behind the uneven pair next to him.

As if he had heard the outcry of desperation, General Armyless appeared with his forces – selected all-human youngsters just recruited from apart and eager to prove their worthiness.

They arranged a corridor for the fire brigade to get to the fire underneath the gallows, some hotheads had enlightened already. Thick black smoke made those on top cough, but faded soon enough away.

The key finally appeared to open the locks around the earthly being’s legs, but turned out to be of no vital value anymore as he had been cut loose. Anyway, he got rid of the steeled stuff.

It was the General himself who managed to unlock the cuffs by means of a special picklock device, a present from the past that turned out to be of great help.

While doctors and nurses swarmed about, and cared for the prominent victims of such senseless outbreak of violence, the flames were extinguished, and the crowd went silent and thoughtful as far as they were still able to. In fact, nobody had intended to harm his or her leaders, no natives anyway. Who were those troublemakers, who continuously put oil into the flames of terror? For the moment, they were forced to retreat.

While the young Prince noticed the likeness of the Professor and the General, they met for the first time. “You’re supposed to be some kind of six folds great-grandson of mine” Scholasticus uttered with satisfaction in his voice, as he was quite attracted by his future image. Probably a little too much alike his brother Amadeus, but otherwise, almost the same, as if he looked into a mirror.

While the service staff disappeared and the crowd dissembled, General Armyless was all too happy to lead his guests back to the palace nearby, as they noticed. While they still wondered how this could be, some passer-bys thru tomatoes and rotten vegetables as well as eggs against the governing head of the state. While the general’s private eyes swarmed out to capture one of them to find out whether they were still

the troublemakers or just annoyed citizens, the party hid in a doorway close to the palace. Surrounded by the General's special guard of selected youngsters, they finally managed to enter the palace more or less unharmed.

As soon as they calmed down, Scholasticus asked for the other members of the earth patrol, most of all for his dear wife. The General smiled and confirmed that Dorothea was all right. "Still a bit shaky but so far unharmed," he said. "It was all my pleasure to get acquainted with the charming young lady, I'm so closely connected with" he went on, still smiling somehow irritatingly. "While the circumstances were even more than unpleasant," he added thoughtfully.

"We have won just a battle, but by no means all the war, I'm afraid. Anyway, there is no reason to stick the heads into the sand or stray ashes on our heads, just the opposite." The General now spoke up after Prince Watchalot retired into his private chambers, shortly before the captured were said to arrive.

The General knew all too well, how weak his position was. He wasn't sure, how far he could trust his own troops, but that seemed to be the problem of the opposing leaders as well.

There was time now to report about what was going on since the outbreak of the riots. Nevertheless, it was little enough the young Prince and the General knew to report. Nobody knew where the troublemakers came from, who mingled and mixed up the crowd, whenever they saw a chance.

Rumours spread out of nowhere. People started talking about the old values and the glorious tradition.

"Whatever the earthly beings intend, it is bound to fail" so the tale read. "Our hail lays in the advanced technology only our brave artifacts guarantee. We've got to keep our standard of living on a high scale. If we step back, just a iota, we'll soon be done."

Yes, the agitators knew their dirty business. They cheated and lied whenever they opened their mouths, only a few Laptopsians resisted by reasoning.

Today's victory seemed astonishing enough and surprised the ruling class all the more though.

The General offered to his latter descendent to have the captured picked up right from where they'd been taken.

So it was done. After a short ride by glider, Professor Slyboots was able to embrace his beloved spouse, as well as his brother, as they came out of the doom of the dungeons.

What about the rest of the patrol-mission, those petrified statues round that subsoil pool? Well, the magic bow managed to find the serum without any help. He even got Pooty vaccinated, and Pooty after a short recovery gave the serum on to the other four.

As soon as they felt a little better and overcame the stiffness of their limbs, the magic bow suggested not wasting more time than they had lost already. While he had been away, he had contacted the magical stone, and learnt of Walter's petrification as well.

Walter had been separated from the captured, for being an animal. While the humans were put into prison, his lot had even been worse. He was put into the open and got as well petrified after a heavy rain shower. He still stood somewhere nearby, his comrades suggested, but weren't sure where.

Meanwhile Billy-Joe and Pooty had shown up in the castle, to check, what was going on. By means of the magic bow, Billy-Joe managed to locate Walter in no time.

The Prince allowed Pooty to fetch a bottle of de-petrifying serum, for his beloved Walter, as he seemed to know the way to the secret lockers. He was back in a few minutes as the bow accompanied him, and Prince Watchanot himself rubbed Walters back to prepare for the injection.

It took Walter just seconds to recover. While he did, the guests from the earlier earth wondered for a moment, whether to leave right away. However, Dorothea and Walter resisted. "We've got to wait for Arundle and the other Star-maids", they said, and all the others agreed, even more the Prince; - as he had a very special kind of relation with the Star-maids.

"They're right up above" Pooty explained and Billy-Joe asked the magic bow, whether he'd be willing to fetch them as well. Since there was no danger any more around that place, he agreed at last and in no time Arundle embraced the rescued and so did her mates. Happy, as they were, they didn't care the queries, of whether or not to leave for good right away.

As they all spoke at the same time, nobody was able to understand a word. All had so much to tell and wanted to know at the same time, the other's tales.

Scholasticus was all in favour of remaining, as he wasn't happy at all, with what they had found out so far. Who were those troublemakers

and agitators? Where did they come from? How could it happen, that the first law of artificial life seemed to be invalidated?

While the semi-human hybrids explained the situation to a certain extent, the fact remained, that wholly artifact troopers filled the ranks of the regular army that had attacked the crowd some hours ago, without any signs of hesitation.

Who, but the artifacts, were vitally interested in the loss of time? Where did the time go? Did it leave this hemisphere at all? - Who took advantage of the situation, if not the artifacts? Who didn't care about time and organic life?

Scholasticus raised these questions in his mind. He'd be delighted, if he'd been able to share them with the others, even more with the General and the young Prince.

As it now looked, they all were the losers. Each and every organic form of life was endangered and suffered from the loss of time as well as from the effects of the electronic smog. Without protection, in the uncovered plain open, organic life of the more advanced type was bound to petrify. There was that serum and it was still available, but for how long and who could get hold of it?

Was the serum the price for the loss in time? Many questions and no answers - without sound knowledge it was almost impossible to influence or direct the course of the tumbling planet.

8. The Secret of the Subsoil Trails

Amadeus was feeling awfully forlorn. He was homesick already, and was desperately longing for his family. He missed his beloved spouse. He wasn't used to be alone in distress at all. He felt unable to decide for himself and on his own. He was just afraid, and didn't understand his brother, who seemed more or less untouched from what had happened to them. All that danger and peril, they had just overcome. However, he didn't want to be the only one, who wished to depart right away. So he didn't even mention it, and stayed, that is - had to stay, because neither the magical stone, nor the magic bow offered any other choice. They could have said, for example, 'those who can't stand the pressure any more should utter quite frankly their desire to leave this unpleasant scenery right away'; but they didn't.

Sure enough, the young Prince and the General, and all the poor human beings needed their help. Nevertheless, as he didn't know, what was really going on, he couldn't see, what he could do, and therefore he felt useless in a way. This was at least, what he told himself.

Further, more he didn't like the General, or, more precisely, he didn't understand him and his motivation. What was he after? Was it the power to govern or did he really care, as he said, for these desperate people?

While his brother was all in favour of the General, he couldn't get rid of certain uneasiness.

What, if Scholasticus made a big mistake, by hopelessly overestimating that man?

Amadeus intended to have a word with his sister-in-law, as he was well acquainted with the excessive extend of influence she had on Scholasticus. Unfortunately, she seemed to be not scared at all, but enjoyed the excursion again already, having just overcome a tiring trip from tedious tears to the turmoil of terror.

For him it was too late now to join another party. That is to say, while everybody seemed to follow Scholasticus' line, Billy-Joe and the magic bow couldn't overcome their mistrust as well. They managed to convince Arundle, who was quite split up. As the young Prince's godmother, she'd have loved to follow the official line pointing into - a kind of - very special direction.

So they disappeared right away, to find out more and by their own way, what they thought was really going on over here in Laptopia.

While Scholasticus figured out with the General how to proceed in order to overcome the threat of war by gathering manpower and influence, the fearless pair dived into the Laptopian abyss, that was easy enough to find, but hard to stand, as they soon found out.

Finally, after all Amadeus managed to have a more private and personal word with his sister-in-law; he had almost convinced her. Then bad news spoilt everything. and, the immediate departure was gone with the wind and couldn't be thought of at all any more.

While the General all too soon arranged with great effort a worldwide web of spies and counterspies to get hold of any information concerning the whereabouts of the a newly missing members of the patrol-team, Scholasticus quitted, as he just got hold of Walter before disappearing himself.

As animals still weren't allowed in the castle, Walter and Pooty made their choice as well and followed him on the heel, sneaking downwards again.

Arundle with her magic bow and Billy-Joe by then were over the seven hills already – so to speak, that is, they plodded through weirdness and woe, digging for what they thought to be the real facts, instead of the General's false fiction.

Dorothea and Amadeus came to an agreement. She promised to have a serious word with her spouse. Therefore, they didn't let Scholasticus get away with Walter, but threatened to join the party even though their way was leading downwards again. However, as they weren't much better equipped, they didn't feel any better as well. After all the castle turned out to be a good place to stay, and that was what they did.

Walter and Pooty took the lead, as they were the keepers of the magical stone from Uluru. That was very helpful in the maze down here.

The Professor was in his element, and so was Walter. Together they discovered very special formed stones and all kinds of layers or fancy grown stalagmites and stalactites. Both of them were in command of a bright brain and their passion belonged to the sciences.

From the outside, the difference between them couldn't be greater. And Walter, as a kangaroo had the disadvantages on his side, while Scholasticus was buried under a pile of duty and reputation. Nevertheless, all that didn't matter or bother them now. All the more as Professor Slyboots suffered under the burden and envied Walter for his academic freedom. He hadn't to care about the commitments a university demanded. He could search at his heart's desire, where and when and what so ever.

Right now they had come to most interesting sediment that had been sunken only years ago - What ever the reason had been. Some water bulb could have caused it. Some indices pointed that way, they agreed.

"It seems to me, we are looking into our own epoch's geological face, that is, in fact, their ass, ha, ha, ha", Scholasticus just exclaimed, while Walter was pressing ahead, because the slot was quite narrow they tried both looking through into the inside.

Walter's huge, intelligent-looking eyes behind strong glasses always seemed to expressing scientific curiosity. Professor Slyboots considered him one of the most interested and able students, he had ever met. Had he known how old Walter was, he'd seen him in a different light. Perhaps he'd even been ashamed, had he also known some of the facts, Walter had experienced in his long life.

He pushed instead, until Walter let him pass, polite as he was. "... Looks indeed like compressed garbage" he then exclaimed. "Look at those clear cut lines; and this is clay, good old water-resistant and impermeable clay. In the seventies of the twentieth century, such cavities were filled with garbage. People didn't even care for an impermeable layer of clay below and above - Quite different from here." He pointed with his finger to a line running above their heads. "That looks like a clay layer brought in from outside - Under the pressure of time and the weight of the buildings above, things became pressed. The outcome you can see right here."

The Professor pointed at a broad band of coloured matter, you could even recognize original items therein.

"We better close the crevice right away again, because of the smell. The gas might even be poisonous" the Professor exclaimed, who felt somehow dizzy already.

They pulled their heads back just in time, as behind their back strange things happened. While they were busy investigating the pit, little creatures hushed about. Green eye pairs gloomed and appeared, then disappeared again.

While Walter and the Professor turned around, dizzy as they were, the spook faded more or less unseen. While the scientists piled rocks and stones into the hole, they crawled about the rocky rough ground in order to find proper material. In the end, they smeared a moist paste of clay over the surface to close it up tight, and marked the spot by a blue cross and a yellow skull of warning. The Professor managed to find some chalk in his pockets, being stuffed with all kinds of useful things.

Just as they turned to leave the site, they all of a sudden were attacked from all sides. In no time, they fell to the ground, and felt their limbs bound, while Walter pushed with his strong legs and made the attackers jump like rubber balls from wall to wall, until he was almost overwhelmed as well. There were just too many. Somehow, he managed to keep up, and to fetch one of the creatures. That ended the combat. The attackers retreated, while Walter tried to get hold of the captured, which went on struggling, while in Walters stretched out hands.

The Professor approached, curious, as he was, as soon as he recovered. He addressed the creature in all the languages he had a more or less fluent command in – and there were quite a few. He had a more or less command, stressing on less, indeed, but the creature didn't react, even though it looked like a human being. The fur he was covered with turned out to be a kind of suit. Underneath there was a little human being, no doubt, about four to five feet tall. Belly and legs were shimmering white under the cloak.

While Walter put his captive carefully to the ground, Scholasticus continued with his investigation. "Mit Deutsch ist wohl auch nix, was?" He asked. „What about English then. Speak you little English, hey?"

He went on with Greek and Turkish, Japanese, Swedish and several African tongues.

Walter looked quite amazed, if not amused, as the Professor often only had a very faint idea of what he meant a language was.

"How many languages do you speak?" the kangaroo wanted to know by his usual telepathic means.

"Only very few - You should hear Grisella, my sister-in-law" Scholasticus humbly replied. "She knows languages, you've not even heard of" he replied. Had he tried French, yet? He did now, but it was all in vain. The creature didn't react.

Walter followed the Professor's multi-language-show with great respect, although he realized some smaller or bigger shortcomings there in.

He was only in command of all kinds of beast talk, consisting of telepathy by ninety percent. While he also had studied ancient Australian tongues well and a little English as well.

With those Europeans, he generally communicated via gestures or thoughts, that most of them didn't realize telepaths or not. While Scholasticus tried hard to find a mode of communication, Walter logged into the brain world of the capture, - not very deep yet, but still - Therefore, he realized that the foxy dwarf pulled the Professor's leg.

While the Professor finally tried his very limited French, the both of them couldn't help but fell into a spell of laughter while they heard: "Francais ne parlez-vous aussi pas – ou?"

"No, not such French, anyway" the little creature uttered empathetically, after all.

"So the wily lad knew quite well, what I was after."

Walter nodded and grinned, and so did the little one. The ice seemed broken, and the captured was released, as Walter followed the

right track. After all, they had entered the world of the dwarfs down here.

“Let me go on”, Walter asked and Scholasticus hesitated, impatient as he was; but managed to produce a friendly smile on his face, that could hardly be seen in the dim light anyway.

It didn't take long until Walter found out about the cave dwellers. They were the last free humans, who went into the underground some two hundred years ago, while the artifacts began to dominate the surface. As time passed by, they became smaller and smaller. Perhaps due to the living conditions down here, between wastes and desert - Life became very hard and a permanent struggle. Right now, things had changed to the better, for some of them.

“Most of us are small, but we grow very old”, said the little Churinga, as that was the name, they used for themselves.

“Others can't stay. Not since you see those artifacts all about, and you see them everywhere these days...”

His name was Feodor, Walter learned, and Feodor himself was over a hundred years old.

The Churingas were experts in mining, Scholasticus noticed right away. Feodor explained to him, why he and Walter had been attacked. It was mainly because of the poisonous fumes they had released, while opening that crevice in the wall. “We figured you were spies, sent out by the Prince or his General to do us harm.” Feodor explained. After the ice was broken, Feodor turned out to be rather confiding.

“We couldn't trust you, because of the Professor's likeliness with the General.”

“Yes, I do look quite the same. Well in fact it is vice versa, but that's another story...” Scholasticus interrupted.

Carefully Scholasticus tried to improve the General's reputation; but the prejudices settled deep inside. They even risked their new friend's sympathy, they had just achieved. Therefore, they dropped the subject. There was much more of interest to be discovered.

“Look, at that”, Walter exclaimed “A full load of magical stones.” However, they turned out to be worthless imitations. At least the magical stone insisted. “With those not even the great Merlin could practise magic art” the stone declared.

Nevertheless, Scholasticus put some into his pocket. The magical stone's comments didn't convince him.

“Where are we going to, anyway?” he asked, mainly to hide his secrecy. Walter passed his question on to Feodor, who never addressed

directly towards Scholasticus, but always looked rather shy in his direction, when ever he assumed Scholasticus to be inattentive.

“Feodor is leading us to their village. It’s the nicest of all Churinga villages, he told me. And he’s very proud of it...”

“Tell him, I’m respectfully looking forward rather curiously.” Scholasticus uttered who’s just discovered something new and made them stop again. Rather alert he fumbled about a shiny substance. “Looks like melted lava” he exclaimed “As if a stream of lava had passed by. Do you notice or must I mistrust my senses? To me it seems, as if it is becoming warmer.”

Walter denied for himself, he didn’t feel anything. In order to do him a favour, he nodded rather uncertain. “Could well be, on the other hand...”

He didn’t focus on geological reflections of that kind right now. He was far more interested in the Churingas. In the dim light down here, you couldn’t see a thing; but sometimes his ears seemed to spot a secret whisper or the patting of naked feet on rough rocky grounds; all the more while they had to manage a narrow passage.

The Professor’s discovery alarmed their guide. The reason was quite different; no stream of lava had passed by. “Hurry up now”, Feodor exclaimed. “Such traces belong to a terrible creature, called ‘the Guardian of the Cleft’ he declared.

“We’ve got to get up and away from here as soon as possible. We wouldn’t have dared to go subsoil, if we hadn’t been told that ‘the Guardian of the Cleft’ was miles away. That was only three days ago. I don’t understand how he came here so fast...”

A cracking noise of stone made the Churinga to shut up. Now Walter noticed the increasing temperature as well. Then he saw the lightning. The earth was shaking under heavy footsteps, while the glowing fire was blazing through the adits.

The Churingas ran for their lives, and so did Walter and his human comrades. The adit grew narrower and turned slightly up, until they came to a chimney, inside which steep stairs led upstairs.

The climbing was rather hard. They all breezed heavily, but rushed on, as fast as they could, as ‘the Guardian of the Cleft’ rumoured nearby and once in a while sent a heavy spell of fire after them.

Would they manage - or would they all be melted to stone-squash in no time?

9. The Shaman of the Churingas

Arundle noticed the same feeling again. Her limbs turned stiff and her back and neck felt like deep-frozen, while little creatures approached right from nowhere out of the depths of the adits. How did she and her comrade manage to step into such a primitive trap again? They should have known by then, to avoid the liquids down here and jump in no pool again.

In fact, they hadn't moved at all. Her magic bow was leaning at the statue quite the same and hadn't moved for the de-petrifying potion. Billy-Joe stood next to her, with Pooty under his armpit. The whole band was standing about now who had jumped into that shining water pool.

Nevertheless, why had they witnessed Scholasticus' rescue and the liberation of the captives? Whatever the reason was, a doubling on the fate's scale or the like: here they were standing, without doubt. Solid and firm, while their images or whatever made their way and did their thing, that is to say somehow hustled about in the unknown parallel depth of time somewhere.

Anyway, Arundle recalled, that she had returned in that other reality together with Billy-Joe to search for what they considered the truth of what was really going on in Laptopia.

Here they stood stiff, stony, and little figures, coated with fur - approached from behind. As they came nearer carefully, Arundle intended to shout but only a crackly stony scratching came out of her mouth, and sounded as if someone tried to pull a heavy sack of coal over the rough ground of some ancient cellar.

In any case drew her trial to speak the attention of the fury beings towards her. As they noticed that Arundles eyes were still alive, they exhaled sounds of astonishment. Arundle didn't understand their words, but that she needn't, because she could read thoughts.

"Help us", she thought as intensively as she could. "We've just been petrified."

“You surely were in the basin of petrification, you aren’t allowed to. All Churingas are strongly forbidden to bath in the pool.”

“Yes, we have. We didn’t know of the prohibition. The water was shimmering so invitingly. We couldn’t resist”, Arundle thought more or less clearly in her strange native tongue that twisted her words about. The Churingas nodded anyway. They seemed to understand.

“Well, then we shall de-petrify you” she received as an answer.

Arundle could feel how merry the little beings were. They formed a circle and were concentrating all their emotional power towards her. Arundle felt as if she had pins and needles in her limbs, while the feeling slowly returned into her body.

Their joint strain seemed to exhaust the little lads, as they stretched on the floor, closed their eyes, and seemed to fall asleep right away.

Awake and alert as she was, Arundle could hardly keep her questions to her. First, she wanted to know, whether the friendly helpers could also help her friends right here.

It didn’t look the like. Arundle stretched and spread and made her joints crack, until she was convinced everything was functioning properly again.

Who were those Churingas anyway? Where did they come from? What did they do, down here? They seemed to be dwarves, as the tallest didn’t reach her shoulder. Somehow, they reminded her of Pooty, perhaps because of the fur-suits they wore.

Only a short while elapsed. More Churingas appeared round the pool, perhaps being called by her liberators, so she thought.

Agreement flooded towards her from all sides. She smiled and tried to keep her brain clean. The questions, which had gone through her head, hadn’t been answered. Perhaps she asked too much at the same time.

With her magic bow, she has had the same experience. He only understood clear and singular thoughts. Where was he anyway? When she saw him last, he leaned at a pillar. Well, he couldn’t be far. He’d soon return to her or Billy-Joe.

While she thought of Billy-Joe, she felt an itch. She didn’t know whether she was envious because of the bow, or whether she was confused, because he mixed up her emotions.

She called her back and tightened the lead. Those Churingas shouldn’t read her feelings – too late, she heard them giggling. Her saviours seemed to wake up. Perhaps they exercised their telepathic abilities, or something; or they called each other.

While she still struggled for a clear brain, her comrades were circled as well. The Churingas grabbed each other by the hands grumbling a kind of chant, and in no time, her mates - one after the other - awoke. The girls stretched and yawned, Pooty jumped obviously too early to the ground as he screamed with pain, and asked for Walter, who was here, leading the other band of patrollers from earth, as if they had had an appointment down here.

Pooty shouldn't have jumped.

Florinna and Corinia had to hurry. For them it was high time to wake up, as they dwelled in the dreamland. Their petrification they had experienced as a sound deep phase of sleep.

"Not that our parents worry if they can't wake us up", they meant, and thanked their saviours and said good-bye to Arundle and the others, as the flock of patrollers finally met.

"By the way, your bow is leaning right over there" Corinia shouted as she began to fade. "Don't fall in, while you fetch him..."

They both faded away like candles in the mist. It would take quite a while until they returned. A long day on earth lay ahead of them, that was almost half a week over here in Laptopia, figured Arundle, but the magic bow wasn't quite sure, whether his calculation was correct.

Arundle pressed him tenderly close to her face and felt the cool clear cut of wood, as she hadn't for quite a long time, then kissed his glowing red eye unnoticed by the others.

Billy-Joe stopped in pace and turned aside, as if he had intended something else. He welcomed Walter und Scholasticus instead as they managed to crawl out of the hidden cleft into the open of another dome.

While Arundle felt that strange warm feeling, the Churingas pressed on as the fierce roar came closer now, perhaps only three or four adits away. Arundle's doubts concerning her emotions had gone, if not with the wind, but with the fierce glow of the beast and dragon, known as 'the Guardian of the Cleft'.

Soon the humans felt their aching limbs. The adit they were following now led still upwards. The ceiling was far too narrow, so they had to pull in their heads and bow their necks, while Pooty made himself comfortable on the back of a Churinga. He conquered their hearts in no time.

Repeatedly the Gentlemen called for a break to comfort their females - this was what they said, as they themselves gasped for air desperately.

However, the Churingas signalled to all of them now to hurry up. This narrow passage was no good place to stay. The exit to their village, they let them know, lay nearby.

The chimney got closer, closer, and very ahead, you could see the shimmering daylight. Irregular stairs led upstairs. While the Churingas, now climbed up like trained monkeys the humans suffered from exhaustion. Billy-Joe got almost stuck because of his broad shoulders.

Arundle followed him on the heel. Pooty cried from above with delight. The scenery on the surface was overwhelming, he exclaimed.

Then it happened. Billy-Joe was stuck, and this time there was no way out. Arundle tried in vain from below and pressed as hard as she could.

They had to find another way out for him. Therefore, they had to go back again. Some of the Churingas passed by, others led them astray.

“And if we cut off that rocky nose that I couldn’t pass? He asked as he settled close to Arundle and the little ones.

They asked to magic bow that came back with an answer after seconds. He’d stretch Billy-Joe in time, he said, until he was long and slim enough.

“Don’t worry, that won’t harm you at all” the bow tried to calm him down, as Billy-Joe by now became quite upset. The roar of the beast was heard nearby.

They tried the slot once more and succeeded at last. Once on the surface Billy-Joe still felt rather stretched, at least four inches he figured, but Arundle said to him, that there was almost no difference. She was not really convincing.

The views outside made him forget his queries. The cleft ended amidst a stony field bordering a blossoming valley, surrounded by a natural barrier. Amidst lay a flock of cute dwellings and formed a little village.

Arundle gasped and grabbed for Billy-Joe’s hand, while she pressed with the other her magic bow. Between green trees and juicy meadows, you could see neat short grown cattle and sheep, while Churingas strolled about up and down the main street. Peace settled alike the dawn above the scenery, except for the guesthouse, as the landlord had put all furniture up front, while a merry dozen villagers gathered after a day’s hard work.

Soon the human patrol from earth, now almost complete, except for the two Star-maids, gathered here as well. Feodor invited and introduced them, as they felt hungry by now. None had yet had a single bite to eat over here at all.

The waitress served dark ale and a platter full of maize cobs and roasted potatoes. They ate and drank on and on and couldn't stop, as they had really starved - Until Walter asked the Professor, whether he'd be able to settle the bill over here, as he had a practical mind.

"Don't worry" said Arundle on the Professor's behalf, and Walter nodded in agreement. "That'll be settled in silver and gold by magic, I daresay."

Quite likely fed up, their curiosity took over. There was so much they wanted to know, While most of their questions couldn't find an answer here. For the Churingas things were, as they were. The dale of theirs was a late discovery and Feodor was hailed for it. He had found the hidden passage one day and led his people there, right from the desert into the Promised Land.

How could there be such an isle of fertility amidst this deserted planet? That was a question the Professor was able to answer. As they thought of him, he stepped out of a barn, followed by Walter, and rubbed the sleep out of their eyes. Pooty hadn't left poor Billy-Joe alone down there in the cleft; saw his master again for the first time. For whatever reason he stayed with Billy-Joe, while Walter accompanied the Professor. Later there had been no time, as 'the Guardian of the Cleft' had been after them.

Like a madman, Pooty rushed through the seated Churingas and overran the poor waitress, who came out of the doorway balancing a tablet full of filled jugs. The falling jugs couldn't stop him. Walter stretched his arms out, while he, at the same time assisted the waitress by the means of the magical stone. Walter put her back on her feet, and managed to have her hold the tablet as she had just done, as if nothing had happened, and pressed Pooty, his little friend, tenderly to his heart. Pooty's whimpering of delight.

The Churingas uttered respect and even admiration for what Walter just had achieved, but didn't get upset or something. – Such magic seemed to be somewhat normal. Arundle also welcomed the Professor. They were together at last and could go on with the investigation on their own. The discovery of the fertile vale and the little creatures was definitely one step ahead. Things were far more difficult over here than had been brought to their knowledge.

Pooty excused himself for his misbehaviour. The waitress didn't mind, and while they exchanged their experiences, they had luckily overcome; Walter gave Arundle a warning glance not to refer to the Professor's appearance.

Then Walter reported of ‘his heroic deed’, as the Professor enjoyed to refer to. While on the way up and ahead after Billy-Joe got stuck in that narrow chimney, they were attacked by ‘the Guardian of the Cleft’. Thanks to Walter’s protective shield that he had at hand at the right time, the dragon’s glow could be defeated. No one got hurt and the whole party managed to reach the surface unharmed. While Arundle and Billy-Joe underwent that time stretching procedure, that took some minutes, to help Billy-Joe out of the cleft as well. By then the beast had left in hurry and dismay as its own glow backfired on it by reflection from the shield.

“Without Walter you could meet us down there melted and burnt in stone” concluded the Professor. All went silent as they imagined the catastrophe.

“After all, things straightened out to the good for all of us and for these little lads. Amazing how they managed to free you just by the power of their will. Quite amazing – great, great, great...”

“Perhaps it was more the power of feelings, I’d figure”, said Arundle and gave their saviours a warm glance, she couldn’t by now distinguish anymore as the site filled while the night sank. A fire was lit. Both sides seemed to be eager to become acquainted with each other.

While Scholasticus reported of the provisions and actions taken by the Laptopian officials, the Churingas stiffened and went silent. An almost hostile air came up. The General was not their friend, nor the troops, he was in command of. Having them check down there in the maze, was the least the Churingas wanted.

However, Arundle had too many questions, too many, to bother and pay attention to such faint feelings.

“How come, Professor, this valley is green and fertile, while all around there is nothing but desert?”

“First of all, we don’t know if this is true. Is there nothing but the desert out there? However, I have two equally valid answers to your question, and I’m ready to present them to you, if the audience agrees. But perhaps they know the answers already” - Scholasticus replied and looked around, hoping to see curiosity shining up in the faces faintly lit by the fire and the stars from above. Deep inside he appreciated the formal mode, Arundle was addressing him in, and he turned to her at best he could. He said: “One of these answers you may know already, and you as well” he waved around to where the little ones were sitting. “Think of deserts and oases. Sure enough have you asked yourself, how such green spots can exist.”

“Of course, things are growing where there is a fountain head. Water is the answer, quite clear.” Arundle replied.

“Very right, young lady - It’s as easy as that. And water have we also seen around here, down there in the abyss. Somehow, our hosts managed to use it for their purposes. And then we also know, what they do down there, and risk their lives.” Scholasticus looked around again and so did Walter, who was very ahead when it came to telepathatic matters. The Churingas listened very carefully. So Walter nodded and waved the Professor to continue, who was all too glad to do so.

“I still tend to a different explanation” he went on. “It might sound more difficult but would explain why this dale never has been discovered from the air or from the outside in general, as our hosts confirmed.” Walter nodded again. None of those so-called Laptopians or any of their so-called artifacts had ever set a foot into the free and blessed land of the plenty.

“As you noticed, the valley is surrounded by a chain of steep mountains, which almost reach the low Laptopian sky, where the clouds dwell deep and filter the sunlight like a lens. That almost hermetically closes in the dale. That led to a kind of inner climatic zone, quite different from the climate outside.”

“Right”, the girl answered, “I once had such a closed-in terrarium that didn’t need anything from the outside...”

Scholasticus agreed. “That’s it, that’s exactly how things work here as well on a larger scale of course. You have all you need inside that makes the circle of life go round.”

Some raindrops fell to prove the thesis, but didn’t worry the small folks.

“The question is how the sun still manages to get through, or where the comparable source of light is hidden. Without sunlight or an equivalent, there is no life, you all know. Green things won’t grow without this energy. So there are but two answers to this problem, either the cloud-layer is permeable, and serves like a prisms, or there is a different source of light and energy inside the dome.”

The rain now splashed down. The little ones jumped to their feet. Only some looked for shelter but most of them remained outside, where the light almost faded. A pale early full moon looked once in a while right through and down and her dim light shone over the rain-dancers, as they lifted their arms, bowed and stretched, jumped up or circled – young women, children and the like. While Billy-Joe witnessed the scene from inside the pub, he couldn’t resist, but joined the dancers, immediately familiar with the rites and the mode of motion. As if it was one of the dances, he was used to, since he was a child himself.

After some minutes the rain ended and he returned and put the clothes back on, that he had torn off. He looked so happy now and the little folks circled him merrily. No doubt, he was one of them regardless the fact of his height.

Even his native tongue he uttered, more or less accidentally, seemed to make sense to them. Therefore, he tried to converse a little, and while he noticed that his talk had obviously a rather outdated appeal, he never the less made him understood. That was quite something.

Therefore, he tried to remember some of the questions, Arundle had in mind. The answers he got were most surprising and threw a new and wholly different light on the facts, as they had been since then presented to them.

Would he be able to lift the veil over the secrets of the time? Somehow, the dwellers in their promised land seemed not to be harmed by the negative effects of the loss in time or of any petrifying rain. Their plants and beasts were growing undisturbed, so it seemed. How could that be?

It was late and the Churingas left one after the other. Arundle and Scholasticus had gone to bed, as well as Walter and Pooty. Therefore, he looked for a nice spot in the open, as he was used to, and covered with his cloak.

Early next morning the Professor was up and asked him for help, as he figured he'd have received all the answers to their questions. By means of his watch the Professor wanted to find out, whether the vale circled as fast as the rest of the planet, or in other words, whether the time elapsed as fast as elsewhere in here. and, unbelievably, there was a tremendous difference.

First of all the Professor wanted to check, whether the sun was rising in the east, Then, by means of his little compass, Scholasticus tried to figure out the exact position and the proper angle at a certain hour. He repeated the procedure in sequences and fixed the angle as well as the distance from the horizon – as he knew a relative relation, because of the high rim, he was unable to determine from the inside.

His aim was to fix the loss of time, and here he experienced a fascinating surprise. Global speed of rotation and elapsing time weren't as closely connected, as he had expected. There was a different force involved.

He reconfirmed his assumptions – 'if the energy equals the mass times acceleration in square, then the square of the acceleration equals the energy divided by the mass. And then the acceleration equals the radix of the energy divided by the mass.'

At that point, he still hadn't laid a hand on the offspring that is the factor the acceleration relates to. As to the law of Einstein, the acceleration leads towards an increasing speed of rotation with tremendous consequences, as far as they could be overlooked at all. But at that time all life on the planet would have become extinct. All, what mattered was to undergo that development.

Scholasticus was now sure: Such and not otherwise, things had to behave. The rotation of the earth, the rotating speed about its axe increased, and if they didn't find the reason for that, the loss in time was unavoidable, and of minor importance.

Tomorrow he'd measure the sun circle. He hoped, his chronometer wouldn't cheat him. Then he knew at least the relation, he had to deal with. The faster the globe rotated, the shorter the time of sunshine became.

Walter and Arundle fetched the Professor out of his deep thoughts. Outside the rays of the ascending sun broke in the prism of the sky dome and a rainbow span over the middle of the village, intense, as the Professor never ever experienced in his life. A stubborn scientist he was, he knew, but tears dropped from his eyes, which had never viewed such beauty.

The strangers were standing in front of the guesthouse. Feodor and some of the other Churingas stood there with them, while they all stared up into the sky, when a fierce voice threatened them. Out of the nowhere a scary figure appeared. Dreadlocks to both sides of his head and still two heads taller than the tallest of the Churingas despite the bended head and shoulders, Eyes like glowing charcoal gazed with dismay at the invaders from afar. All kinds of strange items were rattling with each step. "That is our Shaman" Feodor explained, and gave him a devote gaze.

The air seemed to change, where there had been merry easiness, fierce threat swaggered now about the scene, as the Shaman raised his stick in front of the strangers.

He must have been old – very old, much older than the eldest of the Churingas was who now bowed on their knees to show their respect. Only the invaders dared to look him into his eyes, - but not for long, as the hypnotic gaze seemed to burn holes into their pupils.

The magic bow behaved quite different. He had never been upset like that, Arundle noticed. His red eye sparkled like an activated alarm system.

"Strong magic" he snarled – "the strongest, I've ever witnessed."

The ends of the rainbow seemed to become attracted and sucked in by the Shaman, while a gust of the wind all of a sudden closed a curtain in front of the sun, and darkness fell upon the scene. The howling increased, while coming closer. The Churingas whined and whimpered, while crawling for shelter.

The magic bow also made the strangers to step back into the guesthouse. The peace was gone; no waitress appeared to wait the guests.

Billy-Joe tried to get hold of Walter, as he had to discuss something of importance with him. The Shaman of the Churingas brought back long forgotten early memories. Perhaps the kangaroo could help him to sort them out.

Arundle interrogated her magic bow, as she suspected him to know more about that scary magician. However, the bow denied, still quite upset, and referred to privacy, he had a right in. After all, he was just a present and no property.

Arundle noticed of course, that the bow tried to get away with that. "You wouldn't talk like that with Billy-Joe," she moaned. The bow turned in. However, the truth –at least what Arundle suggested to be the truth - he still couldn't tell her. "That would be too much for a young child of Man", he snarled.

Arundle also noticed that the end of the rainbow disappeared in the inside of that Shaman. Well, perhaps her eyes had cheated her.

If the bow didn't want to talk to her, she could still try the Professor, all the more so, as Billy-Joe seemed to be out of order, and made her feel uneasy in his presence.

Therefore, she sneaked into the other room, where she expected Scholasticus, but no one answered. She knocked repeatedly – in vain. Nobody was at home.

Therefore, she returned to her own room and reported to the magic bow, which became at once alerted. "I'm certain that we have to do with forces that want to get our Professor out of the way. Someone wants to undergo his experiments and time-checks he is absolving. There is no time to lose; we've got to go..."

The bow got on her back and forced her out into the dark - out of the open window. Arundle felt rather strange, but the bow calmed her down, and promised to take good care of her.

"We've got to find the Professor, if it is not too late already, and he's trapped in."

While Arundle and her magic bow went after the Professor, things turned upside down next-door. Billy-Joe, who's feeling strange all the time since he awoke from petrification, experienced a kind of epileptic attack, with foam on his lips and shaking limbs and all that. Walter, who still was with him, got hold of him, while Pooty patted his forehead with a wet cloth, and managed to quieten him down and made him fall asleep into a death-like slumber, As his breathing seemed to fade, Walter practiced a rather professional resuscitation, while Pooty tried again with that wet cloth on the forehead.

They succeeded. Billy-Joe came back. He looked around bewildered and when he realized, who was with him, he reported what had happened. He had been in a cave full of chalk drawings on the walls, a well-known cave it was. However, he still didn't recall where it was located or when he had been there – must have been a long, long time ago. Perhaps the memory was just a dream, and he'd been in the mere dreamtime.

While passing through some rituals to become grown-up the young men, have to go through several levels, and on each level, the realities tend to mix. As Billy-Joe reported as precisely as he could, he had to realize that neither Walter nor Pooty understood what he talked about. They couldn't help him. The cave he referred to didn't mean anything to them. Therefore, Billy-Joe had to sort things out by himself.

He had to go back the track of his vision, step by step, no matter how weak he felt under the effects of the epileptic attack, he had experienced. So he cross-legged and straightened his back and imagined himself back into the cave, right to the beginning at the entrance – that big black hole, and felt a power that hindered him to proceed and provoked him to overcome. He could feel the fear again as he finally managed to step into the unknown. 'The first steps are the heaviest' – came to his mind, as he stepped on.

In order to prevent himself, he stretched out his arms, as he couldn't see a thing. However, after a while, he got used to the dim light from afar and the deep blackness turned into a shady grey, while along the walls shadows appeared, forming into pictures as he stepped on. All kinds of animals seemed to be moving next to him, as he stepped on - messages to followers from those who had come this way, long ago.

Then he stepped in front of a picture and knew that he had arrived, as he recognised the scene. It was almost the same as the one he just had experienced. There was the Shaman again, tall but bent and bowed, with those dreadlocks over the face and shining eyes. A hand stretched out and pointed into the darkening sky that all of a sudden could be seen,

down here in that cave. Now Billy-Joe recognized quite clearly that the end of the rainbow disappeared into this stretched out hand. Heavenly energy was sucked into that bony figure, and he felt like experiencing the picture alive again, while the figure straightened, and became stronger and livelier.

While he still wondered, the picture faded. The cave disappeared and he himself returned into the room with Walter and Pooty watching him with great interest as if they had participated in his vision, and while Billy-Joe glanced over to them, they nodded and confirmed – they had seen, what he had seen.

What did Billy-Joe's vision mean? They asked themselves. It was one of the ancient predictions of the aborigines, they assumed. However, what did it mean? There was but one way to find out. They had to return back home into their own Australia. Right there they had to find that cave again, and someone who understood the paintings and chalk-drawings, Walter suggested, and the others couldn't do otherwise, but agree.

"We've got to show up at home anyway. Otherwise I lose my job and Arundle gets in trouble with her parents" Billy-Joe said. Down there, a whole day had gone by and Arundles parents would already be back from their facultative excursion to that sheep farm.

Pooty alarmed all the others and knocked at each door, but in vain. The Professor wasn't there. But where was he?

Billy-Joe's vision seemed to be of great importance and shone a new light on their problems, while the Shaman overshadowed the idyllic scenery of the Churinga-dale.

Could the Shaman be as well in touch with the other dark forces somehow connected with that bad Prince Watchalot and his artifacts? Were they inseparably combined with those leaks or time holes?

Could that fierce old man be the secret head of the dark forces? Nowhere else had they experienced such a strong magic. Compared with the Shaman the Prince looked like a helpless orphan despite of all his forces and armour.

Pooty couldn't find Arundle either. Walter discussed the matter with the magical stone, who seemed to know something.

"Arundle and the magic bow are somewhere out there. They want to rescue the Professor, as the magician had trapped him again this time. I'd say that is quite an overloaded and overburdened task for one, as the magic involved is very strong. So we better try and find out, what can be done."

While Walter was still reporting the magical stone drove him down the stairs and out of the house. The others followed without reasoning. Their departure back to their own earth had to be postponed again once more. "Hurry up, quick, quick, that way please, right up to the rocks and into the cleft. We've got to get back to the underworld, as the great magician's calling..."

Billy-Joe stretched voluntarily this time, almost like an earthworm and disappeared right away. Walter had to stretch as well. He grabbed Billy-Joe by his feet. They came to a sudden halt. The magical stone shone and his light was all they had. They hardly noticed the shadows accompanying them on both sides, as the passage allowed it. Bats passed close by and huge spiders span their webs here and there.

Then Billy-Joe thought to see Arundle closely ahead. He pointed at her and Walter agreed. They didn't pay attention then and didn't watch out for the perils of the passage, when 'the Guardian of the Cleft' spit fire over their heads. Lucky enough the passage was wide right there, so they jumped aside without being roasted. Walter reacted immediately and produced some kind of defender. "You've got to fight fire with fire," he uttered. Billy-Joe didn't quite understand until he experienced the way this weapon worked.

Pooty pointed the barrel of that sort of shotgun straight ahead and fired at the same time as the dragon spit its load of flames. The dragon's head busted under the impact of the double load. - However, a second head appeared and that one was now all the more furious. They managed to hide behind a pile of rocks and fired back right into the heart of the beast. That was it, the beast was done. The dragon collapsed and little clouds puffed out of its nostrils, while the rescue team shyly passed by. Pooty almost felt pity for that creature. Then he thought of Arundle and the Professor and he pulled himself back. Nevertheless, he couldn't resist striking the beast's belly while they passed.

They reached Arundle shortly before petrification. The dragon seemed to have let her pass, as well as the Professor, only to attack them from behind. The Professor had already jumped into the water. 'Better stiff than roasted', he seemed to utter. His statue stood between the others. "Without the potions I dare not awake him", the magical stone exclaimed. "The magic is too strong, what if I make a mistake?"

Arundle's petrified toe was disenchanting right away, and while the magic bow rushed off to fetch that potion from the secret chamber in the castle, she carefully tried to step on her foot.

To the magical stone petrification was a very natural state of existence. "I for my part feel very well that way."

Arundle didn't feel like jokes, as her toe still hurt badly. The bow returned with bad news, he couldn't find the serum anymore. Had it been sipped into a hidden loop of time? Someone manipulated around, thereabout he had himself ascertained. "Strong magic" he snarled "strong magic."

Disenchanting a petrified toe was quite something. While the procedure was in due course, you could hear all kinds of strange noises waving through the dome. Finally, Arundle defeated the aches and her toe began to feel almost as usual.

They didn't have time to lose. If there was help at all, then it could be found in the past. That was why they had to return as soon as possible. They all knew what this meant for the poor Professor. As to the Laptopian timescale that could mean weeks, if not months, all alone locked up in a stony prison. - Unable to move or do anything. At least he was save there and needn't fear the strong magic of the Shaman.

The least they could do was to inform his spouse and twin brother, who stayed still with the General and the young Prince right back in the castle. "If Scholasticus can't leave, I stay here too", Dorothea said. That was a heroic gesture, because she and her brother-in-law, who was with her, didn't feel well at all, partly because of the food, which was terrible.

Amadeus, who would have been the first to leave, now hesitated and wondered whether he could leave his sister-in-law all alone. However, Arundle confirmed that the Star-maids - who were the young Prince's godmothers - would show up every night. They suggested to bring along a kind of Ariadne's thread, for the save return, as they were quite convinced to be able to show her the way to the dome, where her petrified husband was standing about. "That might help, anyway" all three agreed.

"Please, Amadeus go, Grisella is waiting and so is Intellectus..." Dorothea pleaded. Arundle promised to give Grisella a call, as soon as she was back down there in the resort. Whether or not she did Grisella a favour, seemed to her rather doubtful - For the time being there was little else to be done, even more though, as they would aim for Australia and not to Germany.

Scholasticus' fate had turned from worst to worse, so to speak. He was at least safe now instead of being threatened by a horrible death in flames.

If they wanted to find out about the Shaman, they had to investigate in the past - to be exact - in Billy-Joe's past, and find that cave he visualized after his first encounter with that Shaman.

What was the kind of power, he was in command of? Friend or foe - that was the question now.

“It is high time to leave” the magic bow suggested, back in the castle, where the whole flock finally gathered. The two magicians – bow and stone - whispered and stuck their heads together (or what was supposed to be their heads) and off the party went.

10. Lost in Space

The return trip into their own world would be overshadowed by Scholasticus’ fate, no doubt about that. Would they ever be able to free him? What, if the charm remained and proved to be all too strong for them and their means?

Such were their musings while they prepared for take-off and were putting on their space-shirts. The shirts didn’t want to fit any more; they broke while they pressed in. They’d never experienced similar problems before. Walter’s stock of protective gear wasn’t endless either.

While calculating the course back home the magical stone and magic bow got lost in a fierce argument, and ended up in their separation, as each party meant to know that the other side would send its load somewhere to the moon or even worse into the open space. Fact was that the mode of calculation became less certain any minute. Nobody knew the acceleration, which the loss in time had taken up. Both of them had to estimate on the base of likeliness. That was the problem.

“Could it be that each group is turning in on their own way?” asked the missing Professor, who was right here all of a sudden - while shaking his head thoughtfully - “One group’s heading for Germany and one for Australia?”

What happened? Why was Scholasticus with them and not only the Professor alone, but also his wife as well and his twin brother?

It was Dorothea, who had made up her mind and stayed behind with her petrified husband, because she had something else in mind. As there had been other successful de-petrifications, she couldn’t accept, why this shouldn’t work with Scholasticus as well. She had a scientifically trained mind by now.

‘Science says, something is true, if it can be repeated again and again’. By that or was it by her female charms she convinced the

General that the potion had to be found, and while that was done by wondrous connections, down there in the dome a similar procedure went on, as had freed the patrollers group before.

Dorothea's desire was so strong, that the Churingas couldn't resist. "Love is the greatest of all powers in the universe", Scholasticus recited later, while being safe and rescued in his wife's arms.

Right here the little ones were needed once more. They weren't happy with that job and resisted at first, as the Shaman forbade their assistance. Only after the patrollers passed on the firm decision to depart right away and never to bring 'that man' back here, they decided to help once more. Meanwhile the patrollers left for the castle to pick up those, who'd stayed behind.

While a strong 'forget-about-what's-been-going-on-charm' was laid about the earthlings by the Shaman himself, and ascertained the little ones. None of their guests could ever lead anyone to their dale.

The Professor still didn't understand the resentments against the General. Walter tried in vain to explain "As an animal you know what it's like to be chased by superior aggressive beings. Those Laptocops treat them like animals, you know, and the General is in command."

"Yes, and fact is, you look like him" Pooty added.

"We do know that the General has changed, at least we hope" Billy-Joe agreed.

At last the Professor turned in. but his experimental results and the phenomenal aspects of the secret dale where his, even though he'd been unable to find back to the place. He knew it was there and that was of the greatest importance.

Their magicians stilled fiddled around with their courses. By now, they tried once more a joint venture, but failed. They rechecked with the Professor but he waved them off after staring for a while into their sheets.

"Let's get going", suggested the magic bow and left together with Billy-Joe on their own, as the other Star-maids had otherwise departed already.

A second later the heavy load followed. Walter was up front with the stone in hands, and then came the Professor and his wife, followed by Arundle and Amadeus, who had Pooty between them. That is - they formed an even triangle.

In no time, they entered the unknown in between. Glittering garlands followed their pace, and showed off as landmarks of the Milky Way – that's what Scholasticus figured anyway. The magical stone in

Walter's hands illuminated. Light floated alongside the edges of that triangle, they were in. Pure energy it was, that kept them together.

They didn't dare to move or lift their helmets, they had put on, just in case, while extra long space shirts covered their bodies, they wore against the enormous cold out there in space.

Everybody seemed somehow turned to the inside and didn't really care for the grandiose scenery passing by. They all expected the worst to happen in the upcoming time loops; they'd have to get through. They couldn't do anything, but their concentration might help the magical stone to get along a little better.

Billy-Joe and the magic bow had disappeared. They were somewhere out there. They could be very close or thousands of miles away.

While the magical stone headed in for the second time loop, the accident occurred, when least expected. Just as the concentration reached its climax, his tender emotions overwhelmed Pooty for Walter. How nice would it be to sit in Walter's belly bag, he thought. He let go the hands of his companions and crawled up alongside the outer edge of that triangle. However, as he grabbed for Scholasticus shirt, he missed the cloth right at the crucial moment, when the loop sucked them into a sharp bent. Pooty lost halt and off he whirled, while the spacecraft headed away on its course.

Walter tried to get him by a tractor ray but failed. Off he went - nothing could be done. Walter had no command over the craft. Had he changed the course, they'd all been lost.

Pooty grew smaller and smaller and finally disappeared. They were deeply shocked. Dorothea sobbed and so did Amadeus, while the Professor's brain worked like a computer. He still wasn't willing to give in and let go the last hope.

Things went out of control anyway, as they got sucked into the orbit of a strange planet and were forced into an emergency landing. Walter and the magical stone operated like madmen. There was no time for grief, said Walter to himself. The stone kept him busy. There was strong magic involved the stone reconsidered, but he was not all that harmless either, and prepared for a power play, and that meant he postponed their eve of destruction by overcoming the spell.

Was that the deed of the Shaman again? Was he still upset and not satisfied with what he'd taken?

Did he want to hinder them getting back to the roots of his power?

However, they still had an Ace in the sleeve. Billy-Joe and the bow surely made their way, and Billy-Joe was the one, who could find out, what was going on. He was the key to the secret of the past. If he found out the entire Shaman's whereabouts, he might be able to alter the course.

Such were the thoughts Arundle had, while she had their death before the eyes. The craft they formed was not built for such operations. This was no shuttle or ferry made of concrete material.

If they survived the landing, what did they expect? Where were they anyway? Was there breathable air? Would they find food? And most important, could they ever leave again?

Had she only the magic bow on her. He'd have known a way home. Walter put up everything, that was available, protecting them against the tremendous amount of heat such a landing developed, pure energy or sound material – was all the same, when it came to that. The bad news was, the protective devices turned out to be insufficient. The good news was; there was some kind of atmosphere down there.

They had to turn around the globe several times in order to get rid of the enormous speed they still had. Then Walter touched down rather smoothly. For the last meters they used their legs, as there was of course no undercarriage, until they came to a final halt.

All of them seemed to be unharmed. They embraced each other and congratulated Walter, who sat aside quietly with big sad eyes. Pooty was not among them.

However, there was no time for grief. Scholasticus was the first to turn to the real facts. He checked the atmosphere and considered the air quite breathable. "There's no difference to our own air – more or less..." How could they find out, where they were?

Was this the earth, after all?

"If we aren't able to continue or flight, I'd suggest to investigate that place" the Professor suggested, as Walter shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. The magical stone couldn't help right now. "Seems to be kind of mixed up" the Professor nodded with a sorrowful gaze at him.

Therefore, the twin-brother went off after a short briefing. Walter was no typical representative, if it came to an encounter with natives. Arundle had quite some objections but then gave in as all others came to a different conclusion, and stayed behind with Dorothea and Walter.

"Take care" Dorothea exclaimed, while the two brothers took their heels into the hands and soon disappeared behind some trees. Scholasticus was holding his little compass in his hands, while Amadeus

went ahead to clear the passage, as far as possible. Up in the air thing looked quite different. Somewhere up north, there was a kind of hamlet, they recalled, not big, but hopefully big enough to find help. First, they had to overcome one hill after the other, while following their course way up north. Scholasticus felt his weight almost double and figured that had to do with the gravitation. However, Amadeus denied and said he'd feel quite normal. Scholasticus should keep an eye on his weight, - do a little more exercises.

The Professor pretended not to have heard what his brother said and fixed his eyes on the compass needle.

Whenever they happened to be alone the twins started teasing each other like pupils, they didn't mean it of course, and today they weren't really in the mood, as they didn't get Pooty out of mind.

After a brisk march, they stood up on a hill and gazed around. Almost half an hour had passed. They decided to return if they didn't find any sign of a human settlement.

Therefore, they went on and came into a valley opening an idyllic site. As they got nearer, they discovered a hidden rivulet with clear fresh water. Was that water as drinkable as the air could be breathed?

"Let's have it a trial" Amadeus suggested and bent down already. "Tastes great, here, try yourself" he exclaimed and scooped a handful to bring it to Scholasticus, who carefully tried himself. Then nodded "We won't die with thirst" he said and turned to leave. They tried another hillside, and then decided to return. At least had they found water? So they went back to fetch the others.

Walter seemed to be the thirstiest, perhaps because of all the tears he had wept. Having drunken they felt hungry. However, food was there not, At least any they could identify as eatable. They strolled on anyway, somehow relaxed and indeed came after a short while to a small town that looked quite inviting; still they decided to be careful.

Walter and the magical stone were leading the party. The stone put up a safety-screen that only was partly safe, as it didn't protect from behind. That had to do with the amount of people, "which makes it hard to manoeuvre anyway" he exclaimed as he noticed the silent obstinacy still brooding about. Whatever had happened, his fault was it not. And he wanted to get that straightened out once and for all.

"We'd have never landed over here."- He pointed out.

"Would Pooty have got lost in any case?" Dorothea wanted to know, and upset the magical stone and Walter as well. "That God alone knows" the kangaroo murmured. "What might he be like" Dorothea sobbed and didn't notice Walters anger. Her tears floated unhindered

now as there was no shortcoming on the waterfront neither on her nor on Walter's side, who even had managed to fill an extra bottle down there in that rivulet.

The first houses of that village came in sight. Cautiously they came nearer. Up to now, they hadn't met any of the inhabitants. However, that could be mere accident. Here as well the night lowered down like in Laptopia. No one doubted anymore, that they were on earth. However, what earth? That fertile green didn't indicate Laptopia. "Most likely we fell into a gap in between" suggested Scholasticus. He was right. They were in the twenty-second century, about seventy years away from their own world. This was what they learned while passing by a filling station. Some guys fuelled their gliders, and the serviceman whom they asked for the time, pointed inside the shop, where they not only saw a clock but a calendar as well. In the red marked square they learnt today's date, it was the twenty-third of July 2069. They had left home by the twenty-second.

One of the rare calendars in the castle way back in Laptopia had also shown the twenty-third but the year had been 2131.

While they looked around in the shop the hunger came back, water was no food after all. The young men took what they wanted without paying, they realized.

"You ain't from right here, ain't you? The serviceman asked and gazed over to Walter. "We belong to the circus on the march. Won't stay, too small a place, that is, isn't it?" Scholasticus explained. The serviceman nodded.

"Put your finger right in here – that's it, don't be shy..." while Dorothea attacked the beauty section. "Unlimited credit..." the man added and grinned. "Go ahead Mister" and he addressed to Amadeus who couldn't make up his mind.

Like Dorothea before, Amadeus felt a kind of prickle-tickle in his finger, but that was it. "It's gonna be charged on your account, quite easily, isn't it? Now there is no arguing any longer as there used to be in former times. Who's willing to be charged, anyway? Time isn't money after all, am I right? Nobody likes it, none of the ordinary people we are. - May be different when your father is a time-director or some other kind of time-manager.

On the other hand, life is so much nicer now, short but hearty, that's what I always say. 'Enjoy the day' as it says 'Carpe diem' – that's Latin, kind of queer language anyway. It's easy to tell, but try it, if you're fixed down here to the gas hose, but I don't complain. I think

there is enough free time still left. – Your beast’s gotta stay out, understand, no animals allowed in here...”

Walter understood and Arundle stayed with him.

“What, if they check on us and realize that we are not from here?” Dorothea wanted to know.

“I think they have what they wanted. I hope you get along anyway, you’re still young, aren’t you?” Scholasticus whispered and rubbed an itching finger. “Let’s discuss later and do our shopping, and then let’s get away as soon as possible. Walter signalled, the magical stone found a way to somehow get away...”

That’s good news as I presume we won’t find any help, not down here anyway...”

“Such a nice man” Dorothea exclaimed. “Yes, he’s not responsible for the system he stands for,” agreed Amadeus.

“But that doesn’t make it any better...”

“Do you really think they are paying with lifetime instead of money over here? - And how does this work?”

Scholasticus nodded “don’t know either” he answered.

“Somehow it’s gonna work” Dorothea assisted her husband.

“I reckon it’s like blood donation” Arundle interfered. “There are those bloody blood banks all over the place.” Ah, and the difference now is, they charge you time instead of blood” Amadeus agreed.

“Sounds crazy, I know... In case of blood you’ve got something in the bag at last...”

And if there are now bags for time, bags containing time more like bank accounts or so... I mean your money in the bank isn’t right there even though it is there and you can pick it up any time. That could it be perhaps...”

Nobody objected while they settled for a brief lunch and unpacked the neat colourful packages. Soon they realized that taste had obviously changed. They heartily bit into the sandwiches but stopped after the first bite. The bread tasted like sawdust and the sausage like a mix of smashed underwear and cat food. The rare fruits they had found, tasted just like nothing.

“If I’d known, I hadn’t spent a single second of my life”, Arundle, who hadn’t put her finger into the slot machine, anyway, was grumbling. “Nor had we, if we had known. But we couldn’t open the packages to try, could we?” Dorothea replied.

Therefore, they better starved, at least the women. Walter ate one apple after the other. “Kind of fills your belly anyway”, he murmured. If he’d been, alone he’d have tried the grass as well.

The magical stone made him known again by pulsating in Walter's belly bag. He'd been alert before already, but Arundle made him stop and keep quiet while the young folks were still around.

The magical stone was full of life. Impatient as he was, he presented Walter with one menu after the other. He calculated all kinds of courses and ways to here and there, coordinates back and forth, right back or all the way home, as if this was just peanuts. It seemed, as if their visit to that filling station had cut something loose.

"Well then, we won't be asked twice, let's get going" Scholasticus commanded and his brother agreed "Go Johnny go..." They felt quite like the boys, still hiding in their insides. Such a merry turning of their fate was indeed a big surprise. Amadeus never managed to overcome his homesickness.

Pooty came to their minds and calmed them down. Again a triangle was formed. The space cloak expended and the helmets were fastened, while Walter ran through the checklist, a last knob of the imaginary cockpit was pressed, and off they went into the mysterious darkness of space.

Without any more complications, they arrived back home. Walter even managed a stopover in Frankfurt, Germany, that took no longer than ten seconds and in no time; he deposited Arundle in front of the bungalow she was staying. Billy-Joe had arrived a short while before. and, he didn't come alone!

What had happened? Like a punching ball, a something shot up right into his arms. Billy-Joe recalled. He'd have only to stretch his arms out and open his hands - As easy as that. Lucky enough he did, as he by then didn't know what he was catching. "Well, yes it was Pooty, who came there alongside, as if this was predicted. Kind of confused and frightened to death he was, believe me."

"Well to me it was the end. Lost in space, what can you expect?" Pooty answered.

He put his little paws around Walter and Walter was sobbing again, until he was blind of tears and his glasses needed another proper cleansing. They strolled off into the bush and promised to wait for Billy-Joe and Arundle who had both to check the state and mood his master and her parents were in.

11. In the Cave of the Shaman

Billy-Joe turned in last minute. He managed to slip into his porter's uniform, and then rushed to the reception desk, where the manager stood awaiting him.

Arundle pretended to come back from the beach, by then dark as the night had fallen in. She'd fallen asleep she said, while she rushed into their parents apartment. They were tired after a long tiring day amongst sheep, and sheep, and sheep. They had raised an argument but forgot who started it, again once more about her – what else?

Therefore, her appearance was highly appreciated as she took the referee's part in that sad lifelong bitter match without ending.

She stayed until her father began to snore and figured they were sound asleep then. She heard Billy-Joe whistling nearby. The magic bow snarled impatiently, while Walter and Pooty were seating merrily right together. They'd have to be very careful out there in the outback, as the drunken white hunters manoeuvred about in their rattling vehicles, shooting anything animal like that came before their headlights.

The moon was standing high in the sky, and was shining pale and mysteriously down into the wild bush land that began right behind the settlement. Dark was it not, but Arundle tumbled anyway over roots and twigs, like a hungry earth pig on the beat, as Billy-Joe put it giggling. Therefore, she grabbed for Billy-Joe's arm and then it went better. Billy-Joe must have had cat's eyes.

Occasionally Walter chased ahead with Pooty in his belly bag, and then waited until the two humans caught up. Had he been alone Billy-Joe had picked up that fast trot he was used to and could keep going for hours. He couldn't carry her and for Walter's belly bag, she was too big. So they figured, they would hardly manage, before daybreak, Billy-Joe figured as he intended to start the search right back at home with his old mentor, the medicine man Kaúua Bereróo.

Sure enough, Kaúua Bereróo could help him understand his vision. He might even help to find the cave, he'd been in. Billy-Joe knew, he had once been in there. Repeatedly the image of the magician flashed up inside him, as if he carried a photo right in his soul.

While they rushed on, Arundle felt that she came to the end of the flagstaff, so to speak. All that happened in these condensed hours of fear and hope down there in Laptopia, their horror trip through the naught and now such unusual nightly operation – yes, that was just too much.

Please, leave me behind" she begged. Her head was in turmoil and her legs felt like lead. The late de-petrified toe hurt. She was limping and softly moaning, while Billy-Joe tried to support her as well as he could.

Pooty came by occasionally to look after her, and managed to draw a little smile from her.

‘Enough’s enough’ she thought, when Walter, who took the lead, halted. The village lay right ahead, still in deep slumber, although the bush drums had advertised their coming.

However, Billy-Joe wasn’t sure, whether to postman whom he had phoned, managed to forward the message correctly. It was the only telephone around here anyway. Perhaps he’d passed on everything right, but nobody cared. After all, what was so important to spoil the dreamtime?

Arundle fell asleep right away, while Billy-Joe met his mentor Kaúua Bereróo, who’s been waiting for him. He sat smoking a long pipe and seemed to be dreaming with empty open eyes. However, he answered immediately when Billy-Joe addressed to him. He’d been waiting for him, he said. The bush drums had done its job all right.

Billy-Joe reported, what had happened, and while he did, he noticed, what a crazy tale that was. He didn’t trust his own ears. When he came to the part of that vision of his, at the end in that dome or what ever, Kaúua Bereróo broke into fits of laughter. He’s laughing and laughing until the tears came running over his filthy wrinkled cheeks.

Billy-Joe stopped bewildered. As the time had gone on, he decided to leave right away; he’d have better things to do than being pulled by his leg by a lousy old fool. He’d best wake up Arundle and return to the resort, all the more so, as Walter and Pooty had left right away. They didn’t like those Aborigines either, and didn’t care to get in touch with them. They had their experiences with those humans. “Humans are all the same. and, exceptions prove the rule - had Walter let them know - right away and right from the start of their friendship.

His mentor was still laughing, while Billy-Joe got up. ‘He’s not even able to say good-bye the proper way’ he thought and looked down with dismay at his former teacher. It could be the age, or drugs damaged his brain. However, Kaúua waved him to stay. He tried to keep those fits of laughter under control. “If you knew,” he sighed. “Get your friend and whistle for that sly kangaroo. I’m going to lead you to that cave, right away. It’s not far...”

The night still lay upon the dale, while Kaúua guided them down the valley to the end. Some twigs hid the entrance. Everybody would have passed by without noticing.

He bent the green apart and said “Here you are. This is your cave” - Then began to laugh again.

Billy-Joe looked at Arundle and turned his eyes upside. He'd been ashamed of his teacher, whom he had spoken of with the greatest respect, for such disgusting behaviour.

"No, I don't come with you. The only one, who can help, is you, you alone..." the former mentor said and broke out into another fits of laughter.

"You can take, whom you like. It won't help. Or perhaps it will" he gazed into Arundle's grey eyes. "She seems to have the clear view..." he said and started laughing again.

Kaúua's hearty laughter affected the girl; the old man's twinkling was all that impish. O no, he was not at all senile. His brain still worked better than ever, Arundle thought. She got an idea of what was really going on, and the more she thought about it, the better she liked the idea. Well, they had been far astray his laughter seemed to confirm.

That way it had to be, it couldn't be otherwise. They had to beg for the old Shaman's forgiveness.

However, they still had no proof or evidence. Therefore, she stepped ahead in front of Billy-Joe - brave and curious at once. Walter managed to conjure some torches out of his belly bag, so the magic bow could save his precious eyesight, which Arundle held ready for action in her hands, an unnumbered amount of arrows being available all the time.

Her eyes seemed to flash even in that dim light and her thick hair waved while she stepped on firmly.

"What a girl" came it to Billy-Joe's mind, while he trotted behind Walter and Pooty in the belly bag, as he'd have led the gang. They were in his cave at last.

On the walls, you could see now the first drawings – animals and black little men aiming all kinds of arms at them. Walter spit horror-struck when he saw those drawings and so did Pooty. "Just disgusting" he murmured. "Murderers" Pooty replied, while Billy-Joe overcame that silly fits of laughter that always comes at the wrong time. Still he felt some kind of pride. "That is many thousand year ago", he explained.

"Nevertheless" grumbled Walter - "simply obscene such slaughter. They aren't much further these days, I'm afraid" he went on in a sad air - Billy-Joe's giggling still in his ears.

Arundle came to a crossing and didn't know which way to chose. "Someone else got to take the lead", she shouted and stepped aside to let Billy-Joe pass by. That she shouldn't have done.

Billy-Joe tried to get hold of her, but too late. All he had in hand was a tuft of her hair, while she's sliding down a steep slot - screaming.

Walter, Pooty and Billy-Joe were standing about like petrified, unable to raise a thought. Arundle's cry faded, while she departed deeper and deeper. Finally, there was silence after all.

Was she still alive? Did she lie there in the abyss, limbs smashed – unconscious? Dark nothingness wavered up from below. Any sound or sign? They strained their ears – in vain. The opening was just wide enough for a small person like Arundle. Neither Billy-Joe nor Walter would fit in.

“What could be done” the boy moaned and looked at the companions. “Hadn't I left her lead, by all means...”

“Don't blame yourself unnecessarily. I think I do have an idea. Come on, let's try, how about that?”

“Do you mean to go down?” Billy-Joe asked full of hope and doubt.

“Well, yes, of course. Who else is there anyway? Walter, could you make me a fine, light, unbreakable rope?”

Walter nodded. He didn't quite get what Pooty was after.

“Well, I go down and see what's going on down there, simple as that.”

In fact, Pooty was the only one to do the job. That offer meant a lot for him, as he was not the bravest, as far as narrow black deep holes were concerned. Besides, he hadn't yet overcome his space adventure, not at all.

Billy-Joe looked meaningful over Pooty's head at Walter. Had they the choice?

“If you could do that”, Walter then said to his little friend “you're going to get the Golden Rescue Order GRO by the AFA , I can ascertain you here and now, and your name...”

What his name became diminished as Pooty screamed with a mix of horror and delight when slowly sliding down the slot.

“What's the AFA then?” - Asked Billy-Joe while already busy to letting Pooty down hand over hand.

“That's an organisation – Animals for Animals – a subdivision of the UNESCO” Walter explained, while Pooty cried “Let go, let go, it's a kind of slide anyway...”

Walter did as he was commanded. For safety, reasons the rope ran over his mighty back, and Billy-Joe safeguarded from the other side. Just in case. The rope went down – fifty feet, a hundred and fifty feet – three hundred feet...

Walter put his foot on the rope as more and more rope went through.

“Slow down now, slow down a bit – can’t be that far” Billy-Joe uttered as mark twain passed by – that is the 200 yards mark, or used it to be in the old days.

‘What was that? Yes, it is the sign – two short one long – now get going – up again... - regular hand over hand, - a hell of a job.’ There was more weight on the rope than just Pooty.

“I need a break,” Billy-Joe groaned. “Tell you what we do. I take the rope over the shoulder and pull all the way down that corridor. At the end, I let you know and come back to go on the same way, understand?”

The sly kangaroo nodded out of breath and in no time Pooty’s face appeared followed by Arundle – unconscious. “It’s the air down there – you can’t breathe.”

Billy-Joe tried a respiration and after a short while succeeded indeed, as the girl opened her eyes and when she saw who took care of her she smiled and blushed.

Thanks to the magic bow, Arundle had suffered no greater harm, as the bow had functioned as a kind of surfboard.

The magic bow retreated for a temporary repair, while Arundle got back on her feet.

“What a ghastly gruesome hole that was” Pooty prattled; he seemed to be fit like a gym shoe, as goes the saying. “See, what a fancy cap I found down there” he went on. Walter looked, but Pooty had disappeared.

“Hey, what do I look like” he heard Pooty’s voice right from nowhere.

“Look, Pooty’s invisible” Walter exclaimed in surprise, when Pooty tore off the cap and appeared. That looks a kind of strange.

“Let me see” Arundle said and jumped up. She felt quite shaky still. Pooty tried his cap back on and disappeared again.

“That is a magic hood,” the bow snarled. “...Belongs to dwarves and trolls.”

“We may once use it well,” Walter said. “Keep it in a safe place, at best right in your own little belly bag, if it fits.”

Would it be wise to continue their search? Was it all that important, that Billy-Joe found out about his past and future?

As there was still enough time left, they decided to go on.

Just in case, they tied them together. Billy-Joe was leading this time and the magic bow - regenerated as he was by now - sent his light shining bright ahead.

Billy-Joe stepped on and on. He seemed very certain, so nobody dared to disturb him. "Visionaries you shouldn't bother" Pooty whispered. Just as Walter, who went last, intended to interrogate the magical stone.

The exterior changed. The corridor opened into something that seemed to be vast.

Arundle could feel the strain Billy-Joe overcame - She knew, they had arrived. Billy-Joe chased along the phosphorescent walls. Stopped, went on and stopped again. The others - still being tied together - had to follow.

At last, he found, what he was looking for. He stopped in front of a man's high stone statue. Walter got the magical stone out, as this was a matter of his concern. The stone added his bluish light to the light of the bow and to the green of the phosphorescent walls, resulting in a strange kind of mixture of almost white light.

Billy-Joe murmured nervously, stepped back and forth, stood still, got closer, and then back again. Finally, he nodded. That was it. With better light, he'd been surer, no doubt.

What did he see? Arundle couldn't see much. Was it, what she expected him to see? A dark figure, most likely a man, bent forward, the head somehow vague, supported by a stick. The mass of a man, perhaps...

"More light" she screamed. Then she remembered her camera. It had a flash. Such sly little thing could even develop the pictures right away. She had hidden it under the arrows in the invisible quiver, and hadn't used it for ages.

She shook out the arrows hastily to the bow's mistrust, but finally got it, deep down below. "First the arrows back" the bow commanded. "You do that" turned Arundle on to Billy-Joe. After all, she did all that for him. "Hurry up, and could somebody cut me loose from that blooming rope?"

Walter took care of the rope, while Billy-Joe collected the arrows back into the quiver.

How many shots were there, and what was the battery still like? She couldn't see anything through the seeker, so she tried her best.

'Now or never' she thought. The flash flashed once and that was it. No more power was left.

As if of pure gold, Arundle was holding the developing copy between her fingers and softly waved it. Here it was far too dark to see the outcome, while the photo went in shape slowly.

Billy-Joe stood as if nailed to the ground in front of the original. In his vision, things had been clearer. Still he was almost certain to be at the right place. However, when he had hoped to find out the truth about that Shaman over there in Laptopia, he became disappointed once more.

That statue, was it related to that Shaman? If so, what did that mean? Why had they been so sure, to find out about the last secrets of that mighty mean magician? Up to now, what had they found but dead stone?

At best, he'd rush out and get some firewood. If he only could see more, and the way wasn't all that long! Didn't find Pooty a magic hood? That was a clear sign; magic was involved, questionable magic as well, if you listened to the magic bow, who should know. What came from gnomes and trolls should be questioned after all.

Whether he could ask Pooty to lend him the hood? It is said you could see better with a magic hood on. Pooty, instead of handing the hood over to Billy-Joe tried that out himself. "You're right, much better" he said. "I think, I see something now! – That can't be, now I understand, that's why they were laughing."

When Billy-Joe put the hood over his bushy hair, he still didn't dig a thing. Well, he saw a little better, but what he saw didn't provoke him to laugh.

Did he overlook something? What did the others see, but he didn't. "More light" he pleaded desperately. "There shall be more light..."

Through the dome went a whisper and red flakes shone up. "You have called us, young master?" a strange voice asked. Billy-Joe and Walter became afraid, as they didn't see anyone, while the statue became alive all of a sudden. It extended into the room and filled the space in its vicinity.

They seemed to stand no longer before the sculpture, but right in it. Around himself, Billy-Joe not only saw Walter, Arundle and Pooty with that magic hood in the hands, as he just dived to the surface. He also discovered Arundles friends, the so-called 'Star-maids of the Advisor'. They seemed to have returned in the dreamtime.

However, not only those Billy-Joe could see – in the background, he noticed an endless number of little figures. The dome was filled with them and they all turned towards him in respect.

'Seems to be a vision though' he said to himself, to quieten him down, as he really was scared now. As if it had mattered if something was real or fictitious – not in his Home World of Inbetween, where there were many realities.

Those respectful little faces in the rear made him uneasy somehow. While Walter gazed at him quite amused. Finally, Walter also understood what Billy-Joe's teacher knew and Arundle suspected.

Her photo might help. It had to be ready by now. He asked Arundle, and she gave it to him. It was a good photo, as good as Polaroid pictures can be. Clear and sharp – it had but one disadvantage. The head was cut off.

Still, what did the rest remind him of? Somehow, he felt acquainted with this headless statue. He tried hard to remember, harder than ever and felt the headache coming.

“Sorry, I’ve promised” Arundle shook her head in excuse. “Gotta keep that secret - There are things one has to find out by oneself.”

The Star-maids whispered mysteriously. “...Things between heaven and earth...” – “...all in one and one in all...” – faint whispers reached his ear, but still no answer.

Pooty still played around with the magic hood, he now claimed his personal property. Had that anything to do with him?

His fruitless thoughts seemed to chase those little ones away, as they disappeared. Light, that had shone into his eyes diminished. Things went back to normal again in the dim light as before.

Was there anything left to be done or tried? As far as he was concerned, the cave turned out to be a complete failure. Neither about the black magic, nor about the Shaman's person did he get any sound discernment. And the trip to Laptopia was a failure too. The world out there was as strange and locked up as it had ever been; - after all, it was the future. So what can you expect?

Right now in that cave of his, the figure seemed to show that Shaman, or showed at least similarities. But had Billy-Joe expected to learn about the source of his power (or his connections with the fading time, the leaks in the sky and all that), he got terribly disappointed. They didn't find the roots of the Shaman's power, instead they found an old dirty hood – all right, magic as it was, it was no ordinary hood, but still...

The statue didn't show up in clear light, a headless picture was all they had in hands. Billy-Joe couldn't say whether he was the Shaman of the later Churingas, besides, what it mattered, if he was. Did it change anything? The answer was no, a clear and straight forward - No.

Much younger that statue was, well, they were back in time over a hundred years, so that seemed quite natural. A young tall man he was, broad in his shoulders, so that headless photograph proved. Without head, Arundle's photograph was of minor importance.

While the magic hood indicated magic. Had he himself influenced the scene? Was that magic his after all? Billy-Joe insisted that he was no magician at all. His headache grew stronger the more he kept brooding. He was no ponderer by profession.

12. Back to the Roots

Corinia and Florinna accompanied the explorers back to the exit and then to the village. There, Billy-Joe sent a message via that only telephone in the vicinity, saying that he stayed sick with his family in the bush.

The receptionist called back and wanted to know, whether he knew anything about that German girl that had disappeared again. The manager had been quite upset, when Billy-Joe didn't show up this morning. "You know that old racist, don't you" she said, - she was considered as 'none-white' as well, that was why her heart was beating with the aborigines.

Arundle learned that way, that the local Search and Rescue scheme had been activated because of her, with all kinds of helicopters and land rovers manoeuvring all over the territory, and so did the coastguard along the seaside and the coastal area as well.

Arundle had no choice; the magic bow had to be brought to action once more. "This is a genuine emergency," she declared. "How many wishes do I have still free?" she asked her bow. However, he snarled some unidentifiable figure that could as well read thirteen or thirty or thirteen something like thousand or so.

The bow had probably invented a limit in order to keep her on the ground – that is, to certain extend to the ground, anyway. As lift-offs belonged to their joint procedure!

He brought her right back to the beach in front of the hotel. She pretended to have just awoken, while she strolled towards the young men, who stood there gazing way out into the broiling sea. They looked at her, as if she was a ghost or something the like.

The operation was cut and cancelled. Mrs. Waldschmitt couldn't make up her mind whether she should be angry or glad. Thus, her shrill voice expressed both at the same time. Her father on the other hand was

a great surprise. Never had she seen him so plainly happy as in that moment when he dearly embraced her.

They spent lunch together and Arundle learnt what had happened while she had been away. The boarding school seemed to become a real factor in her future life, her parents made quite clear, and sounded very decisive.

However, she didn't argue this time, but put that thought aside, tired as she was after a long night. Had she spoken about those things, that had happened, while she had been away, she'd have risked being handcuffed or jailed, most likely. Her parents even threatened her to smash that bow of hers to pieces. To tell them the truth didn't make the slightest sense, what so ever.

She retired with some sort of excuse that was meant to spill oil on the waves, but didn't really succeed. She had an appointment with the other Star-maids and was looking forward to share some secrecy with them, while away – this time only in the dreamland.

She had to let them know right away, what the outlook was on several levels. They needed to know more about those things down there in that cave. While she considered this, the Professor came to her mind and of course Dorothea his wife and Amadeus as well. She scribbled a quick note on a piece of parchment-like material and fixed it to an arrow.

'The Churingas including their Shaman are most likely allies in the fight against the hidden dark forces in the background. More details will follow. The excursion into Billy-Joe's cave was a great success. However, he hasn't found out yet. Love, Arundle'

"Via star express, please" she said while she wished the arrow away.

"Will be on the breakfast table yesterday morning" the bow snarled and giggled as he usually did, when he meant to have made a joke.

She then fell asleep, up woke up only minutes later, as she didn't return to the village, where she intended to meet Corinia and Florinna, who were sitting in front of the men-house, talking with Kaúua Bereróo, but met the horrible Mr. Schwertfeger, her teacher, who was after her.

That nightmare scared her so much, that she couldn't fall asleep again. Therefore, she had to ask the magic bow again to take her to the meeting-point, as it was bespoken while they dissembled early that morning.

Kaúua just had explained to the sisters Billy-Joe's where about.

“If he knew” they exclaimed, as Arundle stepped into the circle. She nodded and settled and relaxed. Meeting her friends again calmed her down.

“While waiting till Billy-Joe recovers, we could have a look at Laptopia” Corinia suggested. She hadn’t been on that horror-trip lately.

“Our lot is Laptopia,” she and her sister shouted. “What are we still doing over here?” Arundle assisted, while the magic bow agreed with excitement. Bravery it was, what he liked.

And as easy and light as a thought is thought they became transferred and found themselves sitting on top of those heavy damp clouds, as were so typical for Laptopia covering up over the capital.

They looked down to the ground, but what they saw, didn’t make them happy. Quite the opposite! The poor Laptopians were gathered in hundreds, who had dared to agree with Scholasticus. They had been filmed by video cameras, while they listened and applauded his little speech. Now they were torn out of their houses and gathered in the central stadium, as the dungeons were overfilled already.

In that stadium they had to camp in the open, without food and drink. While the visitors from the past gazed down, they realized that they were unable to help.

“I can’t help it, but to me, the General’s a kind of trickster, fooling around as soon as we are out of site.” Arundle wondered. “Something could have been done to protect those poor dumb things. Why didn’t they hide or run away, as would have been likely under such circumstances?”

“After all the young Prince is on our side, I’m sure” Corinia replied. “But is he in command of the forces?” her sister said thoughtfully.

“Well, his influence seemed to be limited. That’s true.”

“But at least he managed to bring forward a phial of that precious liquid you need for de-petrification” The young Prince had indeed come along with the serum, while the Professor got de-petrified already by the combined mental forces of a group of Churingas.

“As we now know the real identity of that old Shaman, we can at least him delete from the list of suspects, can’t we?”

“But if he wasn’t responsible for all those mishaps and boo-boos on your return trip – who else?”

“Could well be, that you have been sent by purpose into the wrong century.”

“...Don’t forget about Pooty. You can’t say he’s gone lost purposely.”

“Can’t you?”

“You mean that was no accident either.”

“That’s what we gotta find out right now.”

Arundle visualized poor Pooty’s gaze while he drifted apart helplessly.

“I don’t know. Up to now, I’d always seen a connection between both occurrences. Hadn’t Pooty gone lost, we’d stayed in our track and hadn’t run out of control, as was the case. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have stranded in the wrong time.

You see, the Professor once explained it like that. Imagine this is the earth as it is today.” Arundle stuck an arrow into a cloudbank. “And this is Laptopia.” She drew a circle around the cloud and stuck a second arrow right from the other side into the bank, so that the arrows pointed head to head towards each other. “Now we push right through here” and she pointed at the two arrowheads. “While the time meanwhile is turning all around the long way of that whole cloud...

Determinisms govern the universe. We can see today, what happened millions of years ago. We know that, - it’s been proved. All the same, we’ve got to see what’s coming up. What lies behind, also lies ahead.”

Florinna and Corinia waved her off. They were not in the mood for such heavy stuff. “We’ve got better things to do, or do you want us to wake up?”

“Would you seriously deny that there are living beings who can look at the same time in more than one direction? Not all are as limited as the humans” Arundle murmured rather defiant. “Many insects are able to do that.”

“But that isn’t the same as looking into the past and into the future at the same time” Corinia objected, while being partly convinced already.

Arundle accepted that they didn’t come here to discuss the miracles of the universe, but to cure the definite problems of Laptopia. However, she thought, that they had hopelessly manoeuvred around - until now. The real cause remained hidden in the dark.

“We don’t know who’s pulling the wires, can’t you see that? ‘Qui bono’, that is to say, who is winning? Our first answer might be too simple. The artifacts aren’t necessarily winning by the ruin of our world. I still doubt, that the destruction of the human world is their final aim; after all, they need some kind of home base as well.

People don’t spoil their existence. So why should they destroy them? No, it doesn’t make sense to me. Even if it was true, that the

factories, where those artifacts are produced, were responsible for the smog that probably led to those time-holes the time was escaping through, this didn't mean necessarily, that they wanted it that way. After all, their existence is basing on time as well – without time there were no existence, what so ever.

Take that strange scene where we landed by accident. We came right into the beginning of a new system of values. Instead of money, it was then lifetime that governed the economy. That is an entirely different approach. Does it lead astray, as we considered, or is it leading right into the heart of the secret reason, behind all that?"

The sisters couldn't intimidate Arundle by threatening her with their withdrawal.

"...Tell you what, while we are here. We have to get into the inside. We understand just not enough. We still see things from the outside, that's why we don't know what the matter is."

Arundle was all too right. However, it was a matter of fact that they were sitting on top of that cloud talking and talking. In a couple of hours, they would wake up and nothing was achieved.

They already began to think like the grown-ups, they realized, who always hurried, and made others to hurry the like, without noticing, why things went to pieces that way.

"I'd like to meet the little Prince, now that he is grown-up. He's quite different, don't you think so?" Florinna said.

Corinia was interested in the Shaman of the Churingas most. Getting there was no problem in the dreamtime. That had nothing to do with the forget-about-charm.

"And I think, I'll see the General, and find out which side he is on."

Splitting up over here was always a risk, they knew, but that way they could tackle three challenges at once, and their time tended to become precious as well.

The sisters were gone anyway. Arundle tried to transmit her worries via telepathy, but didn't get an answer. It was perhaps the distance.

13. New Danger

Arundle made up her mind and followed Florinna, because she had no idea were to look for the General. He might as well be with the young Prince in the castle.

At the same time, Corinia made it. She was safe, as she moved in the dreamtime. Therefore, her approach was hard to be noticed and normally couldn't be attacked, if not affected by a special charm. She didn't need crawling subsoil, but was right there in the village.

Arundle couldn't find Florinna, or the Prince, as she didn't travel in the dreamtime. That clearly was a disadvantage, she realized. Therefore, she entered the castle unprotected so far. Now she'd needed the magic hood Pooty found in the abyss.

Well, her magic bow safeguarded her and affirmed his presence by pressing her back.

He read her thoughts. "Invisibility belongs to the basics of witchcraft and sorcery. You don't need a filthy old hood for that" he snarled.

"Is that so? Well then, would you mind, if I became invisible right now?"

"Here you are" the bow answered. "Now you are invisible but not inaudible. So take care and shut up, if I may say so..."

They kept silence at the right time, as they passed a pair of guardians, who strolled about everywhere it seemed. The Princely family seemed to be scared of assassins, from what side ever. The liberation front seemed to be still active and alive, and so was the state-department of defence with the regular troops.

First she had to find Florinna. If she found her, she'd also found the Prince and even the General, hopefully, if things were, as she expected them to be.

Searching was hard for the magic bow, while under the cloak of invisibility. They had to follow the corridors and passages and couldn't slip right through the walls. X-raying was also difficult, that is in fact impossible.

"He is not here," snarled the bow after a strenuous stroll under the cloak.

"What now?"

"Well, let's try at the Churingas... the fast way please" Arundle asked. "At least we'll meet Corinia. I wouldn't know where to look for the Prince and Florinna anyway," she thought extra strong for the bow to have him read her thoughts. They were still hiding under the cloak of invisibility, although they hadn't met any guardians lately.

The magic bow led her down again, the hard way. That forget-about-charm seemed not to affect him and Arundle recalled as well at least that dome, where they still saw these statues standing about.

Could they be of help? She asked, but the bow denied. He'd be unable without the de-petrification-potion or the spiritual power of the dwarves. Arundle should have known already, but perhaps that was now the effect of the forget-about-charm: She'd just forgotten. Therefore, Arundle decided to free those poor creatures as soon as possible. You don't feel much, she recalled, practically nothing, to be precise, it was, as if you fell into a deep sleep, dreamless and deathlike, very strange anyway.

The beast down here, she had as well forgotten about, and the bow didn't remind her, as it seemed to be far away or still not in the mood, because of the heavy injuries obtained during the last big battle.

They found and managed the slot to the hidden exit. While Arundle climbed up, the dragon made itself recognized. "You better be prepared" the bow snarled and tossed the quiver in position, while he jumped right into her hand. Just at the right time. 'The Guardian of the Cleft' had been waiting round the corner, but couldn't keep its deadly glow with it long enough. As soon as Arundle saw the mouth opening, she shot and hit right into it. The poor beast retreated, and Arundle hurried up as fast as she could.

The daylight was still out of sight. Now in that steep staircase, another attack would be deadly.

"What about a protective screen or something. We become roasted if the beast comes back."

"T'was about time, dear," the bow said. "By now you should know how to deal with me. Without wishful thinking nothing goes." He began to sing:

"Take your heels into the hands
Get up to the promised lands
Little girlie hurry up!"

The bow was singing. Arundle was so perplexed, that she forgot to crawl on. He'd never ever sung in her life.

However, it seemed to work, as the heat from below didn't grow mortal, while the beast roared after them in vain.

Arundle could see the daylight now ahead. She climbed on as fast as she could, while the bow kept singing his song all over repeatedly, and that's what she did. She put her heels in the hands and climbed as fast as she never had climbed any ladder or stairs. Some last desperate

steps and there she was, and with her magic bow, who proved once more how worthy and miraculous he indeed was.

The glow shot up high in the air. That beast roared and could be heard all over the peaceful dale like a volcano's eruption.

"That was definitely not the fast way" she complaint as she crawled out into the open.

"No, right you are... wanted to check my memories, that charm you know, well didn't really affect us after all, did it?"

Arundle checked her shoes "Won't do any longer, but otherwise, you are right. "Thanks anyway, for that song and all that... I think, I'll never forget."

Those cautious Churingas didn't rely on the 'Guardian of the Cleft' alone but Watchmen strolled about the place on their beat. They overlooked the flank Arundle had appeared, and had of course noticed what was going on. The villagers assembled, while Arundle was captured. In vain, she looked out for Feodor.

The magic bow was hiding behind Arundles back and she raised her hands, hoping that sign was still common. The Churingas looked quite different now. They were armed with modern firearms and hand grenades, or energy-swords and protective devices, that made them look like hero turtles, as they wore them on the back for the time being.

Some of the comrades recognized her after all, so she was released and guided down to the village, where she met not only Florinna, but Corinia as well, and young Prince Watchanot chatting with the old Shaman. Not only the villagers had changed, but also so had the old Shaman. His eyes still had that sharp glance but less fierce now. He seemed to be a real wag, while he looked right into her eyes, but still not addressing towards her.

Was it wishful thinking, as she thought she knew now, who he really was, or had he really changed? Perhaps he changed, because he also understood now, what was going on? He might in the meantime have become aware of the role he'd have to play in that open-end-drama, where everybody has to play his or her role. But he was one of the chosen few, who knew their part, way ahead.

Something happened to the people over here. Was it an encounter, a revelation, some kind of brainwashing? Arundle decided to remain careful and to withhold herself from any kind of approach. Should that

Shaman do otherwise, she could somehow let him know, that she knew about his identity.

Florinna adored her Prince in an embarrassing way; even more, because she had been one of his godmothers and a kind of aunt, though. While he grew up unnaturally fast, he was in due course to overtake.

A crazy world that was! Corinia made signs to stop her and to calm down, while the Prince seemed to enjoy the situation and was turning in on her offer. He seemed to have forgotten about her role as his nurse only months ago, that is to say years in terms of Laptopia, where the time elapsed four times as fast.

They conversed intensely about the changing of fashion and its mode of returning in circles. All too seldom, something new happened.

“True beauty can’t be forced or hindered” the Prince said with a winning smile. Florinna smiled back.

Arundle thought it high time to interfere and asked whether they had talked about ‘the problem’.

The Prince blushed and turned in on her air. “Well, I’m here to support the Churingas, as they joined our forces. So they have access to our material now and are well equipped, as you can see – Laser rifles, guns and swords, as well as shields of the best material ever. Every man who’s passed the initiation is going to be trained in the use of chasers of the latest kind. Those are self-freeloaders, developed for the police forces. You can see, we trust in our new allies. Those managers down there in the factories wouldn’t believe their eyes, if they knew where their products have gone.”

Prince Watchanot then reported what happened after the tribunal. First, he had been lured in with all kinds of verbal concessions. However, the more reputation his father won back, the harsher the tone became, until one day he was forbidden to enter the senate.

That was it then. He had lost his seat in the crown council. That was the final sign for him to fly out here into the forbidden zone. While the General kept on for some time to undermine the rude revenge of the Prince.

Therefore, he managed to find volunteers by the thousands, willing to “give their lives for freedom, justice, and blue meadows”, and the like.

“Without my true General Armyless we’d stand right there unarmed and helpless, with the back to the wall, so to speak. He’s doing a wonderful job - organizing the opposition, and most important he has access to the depots and the weaponry of the former forces. If we

manage to organize the ostracized tribes, we'll make it. No doubt about that. The victory will then be ours.”

While speaking such meaningful words, the young Prince turned to the folks around, raised his voice and spread his arms, as if he intended to embrace them all.

“If it must be, then son stand against father and brother against brother. The future of us all is on the brink. No sacrifice can be too grand. I shall go ahead as a wide-shining herald of the plights and duties of us all. My poor misguided old father is the figurehead of our enemies - the so-called artifacts. With disgust and horror, I foresee the moment, when we stand against each other in weapons. However, I shall not hesitate one tiny single second to do my holy duty for the fatherland. As it will be done for the sake of the world, of us all. - Should it come to the last, be it - as it is for our just and righteous cause.“

The crowd extended jubilant cries. The Prince waved graciously. The three Star-maids became silent and thoughtful. Things were out of control in a kind of strenuous rather strange manner.

The Churingas hailed and cheered the Prince. He became ‘Our Prince’ now. Too long, had they suffered, and were now all eager to fight. They had been hiding for generations, subsoil and in the underground, chased by horrible semi-organic creatures and brutal agents of a pitiless state.

Arundle searched with her eyes for the Shaman, while the Prince spoke. However, she couldn’t find out whether he listened at all. He was sitting near the fire that burnt right in the middle of the main cross-road, he was chewing some sort of tobacco or else, deeply turned inside, meditating.

The Churingas had lit a big fire. Some of them prepared for a feast, while the others were singing and dancing already; quite similar to the way they did, when Billy-Joe joined them in the rain.

Was there any connection between the Aborigines and the Churingas? Arundle asked the Prince, what he had actually meant, while mentioning the so-called ‘ostracized tribes’.

The young Prince was all too happy to show himself informative: “Laptopia is in fact a kind of fiction. Right from the start my family ruled a very limited world – that is to say the people of power in the background, as a matter of fact. The vast wastelands outside the metropolis were of no interest what so ever. While there still people were dwelling somehow. Nobody cared.

The regime never bothered or cared with these kinds of subhuman beings, as they were regarded at by the metropolitan nobilities.”

The Prince sighed thoughtfully while he went on: “Although I can’t be blamed personally, I am deeply concerned. Nobody knows how many people there are outside. The rumours say they live in kinds of tribes, similar to the Churingas, and some managed to arrange some sort of worthwhile life. Whereas I’m very surprised, how well the Churingas mastered their fate. I must admit this is my first visit to a tribe.

As far as we know, those tribes fight each other more or less regularly for fertile soil and things like that. If they stood together, they would become a mighty force. That at least is the General’s point of view, as he knows those tribes best, having been in charge of the laptopcop police forces responsible for controlling the wastelands out there.

All those tribes are the enemies of Laptopia, as they all suffer the same treatment by the metropolis.

The General was busy lately to combine and armour the tribes under his command. It looks very likely, that he’s in due course to succeed. All kinds of treatises had to be absolved, arranged and formulated. The proper persons had to be found and the like. It is a hell of a job, believe me. Not all are so kind and open-minded as the little folks down here, who are, so far the littlest of them all, but bravest when it comes to heart and guts, I daresay.”

Arundle overcame a swimming of the head, while she realized the dimension of the conflict. No less than a World War was threatening before the big clock came to an end in the doom of destruction: the time ran literally out. For the last time in history, the weapons would speak their cruel bloody speech that allowed no misunderstandings. Was that it? Was that, what they had fought for? Was that, what they wanted? Was there really no other way? Was there no way out?

Things had started so harmless. With that funny balloon action for example – more like a child’s birthday party it had actually been, when they in fact celebrated the little Prince’s first birthday.

Before the Great War really broke out, each alternative trace had to be tested, every likely possibility had to be considered and taken into account. Everything had to be done, to slow the process down, and to hinder the war or to avoid the outbreak. The last straw should be grasped for, in order to give peace a chance.

For the three Star-maids war was worst. However it seemed now, that a peaceful solution was very unlikely. The fronts were set and hardened at any day. Both sides came forward with a perfect solution, that wasn’t perfect at all. While the Freedom Fighters cared to hinder

creeping doom and final disaster, the Government claimed to stand for progress and continuity, neglecting of course the effects of the loss in time, which they denied at all.

Therefore, the girls decided to go back to their world, as they couldn't help it: - things where not longer under their control. They awoke from their nightmare, and Arundle, who had had to divert into wishful travelling because of Mr. Schwertfeger, went by 'bow-craft', so to speak and came right back in time.

The old Shaman of the Churingas had reached his aim, when he diverted the earthly beings. The one now on the way seemed to have understood, so he let her go unhindered.

14. A peculiar Disease

Well, in fact Arundle was not in time, as she thought first. Her parents didn't let her cheat them anymore, she realized, when she ended her trip back in bed this time.

"Aha, as I thought. - I knew, I was right. That is your daughter, Roland" Mrs. Waldschmitt raged with anger and was totally upset.

"We had agreed, you'd care for that sorcery stuff and the like. You take away this bow, right away" Mrs. Waldschmitt screamed.

However, when Mr. Waldschmitt tried to grab the magic bow, he jumped out of the window.

Her parents continued uttering all kinds of threats. There was of course that blooming boarding school again. Otherwise, she had learnt not to listen anymore. Most of the stuff they uttered was not to be listening to anyway. The longer they jelled and shouted the more helpless and confused they became.

Both sides knew that the door was closed between them, closed in fact from both sides. Arundle had departed and had left the kinder-land of childhood.

Sad it was, but so it was. Mrs. Waldschmitt retreated sobbing and Mr. Waldschmitt rubbed his eyes in dismay. While Arundle's impertinent yawning had led to a final furioso.

Once more, it had been too late to look the facts into the face. Mrs. Waldschmitt felt ashamed for her behaviour.

“Roland, you could have stopped me. You know how little it takes me to lose my nerve.” Mr. Waldschmitt only shrugged and looked for his paper, back at the breakfast table.

Any word was too much now. If his wife was in that mood, he knew, he could only make mistakes.

“I see, if the paper’s come,” he murmured heading for the counter. His papers followed him daily as he was a computer specialist and had ordered to have them all sent at him all along the journey.

As soon as she was alone, Arundle fell asleep again. She knew her bow in the right hands. The bow had returned to Billy-Joe, he let her know via thought-hotline.

She had intended to having sent a message to the sisters in Greece, but as the bow had gone and she was asleep, she tried in the dream world, and invited them to a meeting with the Professor in Frankfurt. The threatening civil war in Laptopia was worthwhile discussing.

While she was sleeping, she had a quite different dream. She was in a hall full of people, who were sitting or standing face to face. In the first row, she discovered her father, next to Mr. Schwertfeger. They talked intensely together, and as per the looks they threw towards her, they were talking about her. In vain she tried to eavesdrop on them. When a large ear came at help. She grabbed for it and put it to her own ear. Thus, she managed to understand parts of their conversation. “...As you know, the director is quite upset” she heard Mr. Schwertfeger.

“...You are responsible for the orderly procedure, no failure can be accepted. We can’t risk any more mistakesfor the time being... you are responsible, that Arundle under no circumstances understands... **before the time has come...**”

Mr. Waldschmitt listened rather uneasy. His responses incited Mr. Schwertfeger, so she was lucky as he raised his voice.

Then Arundle noticed even Mrs. Kurzius, who spoke to her mother, and here they dealt with threats and warnings and things like that. Mrs. Kurzius didn’t look at all nice and soft, as Arundle got her to know. Quite opposite she looked in an air Arundle had never noticed before.

The way her mother answered was much more aggressive then her father had been.

She yelled: “Your Mr Director can kiss my backside. What have I to do with the twenty-second century, I have enough to handle in the one I’m in, understand?”

Mrs. Kurzius grew pale and looked quite deranged and upset, and looked around nervously, to check if anybody was listening.

“We do our best, have tried everything” Arundle’s mother went on. “Shall we jail our child? Why make you not sure this sorcery ends? You all pass the Ass card only on, so to speak. You make it easy for you. You cannot load everything on the poor parents...”

Arundle noticed that Mrs. Kurzius grabbed her mother’s arm, but Mrs. Waldschmitt shook the hand off. Arundle almost felt pride for her.

Unfortunately, she didn’t understand what Mrs. Kurzius whispered in reply. First, her mother wrinkled her forehead, but smoothed as Mrs. Kurzius went on, and listened the longer the more attentive, until she produced a kind of nodding after all.

Here Arundle’s dream ended as sudden as it started. While she awoke, her heart was beating and she was sweating. She didn’t manage to understand her dream as anything else but the accomplishment of her latter argument with her parents.

What on earth had Mr. Schwertfeger to do with her father, and after all Mrs. Kurzius with her mother?

While Arundle suffered under Mr. Schwertfeger Mrs. Kurzius had become a symbol of freedom and understanding. Mrs. Kurzius never lost her temper; she knew always the right answer and was there to listen to the sorrows and needs of her pupils. You felt well taken care. Not all the less Arundle understood her role in her dream now.

Did she go too far in her denial of the grown-up world? Mrs. Kurzius hadn’t been perfect anyway. Why did she slip into such a negative role in her dream? Was she on the way to become as unjust and self-reliant as her mother?

Something else made her feel even uneasy about her dream. The adults cared most to prevent her from finding out something that was obviously of great importance to them and consequently to her as well, as she should under no circumstances find out what it was.

Why did that director fear she could find out ‘before the time’? Who was that director anyway? Neither Mr. Schwertfeger nor Mrs. Kurzius had referred to an existing director of their school; they’d never have looked so reverential.

Arundle decided to talk about her dream during the upcoming meeting; she’d intended to visit in the dream world. However, sleep stayed away from her, the more she was waiting for. Florinna and Corinia were by now there already. She hoped they’d started without her. The sisters knew all the important facts anyway.

When she finally arrived at last, they had a wholly different theme. Dorothea lay in bed sick and Amadeus was shortly before. Scholasticus suffered as well, but didn't want to show. Dorothea's disease had started with her forefinger. Two days after their return from Laptopia, she awoke in the morning with a thick forefinger. Neither fomentations nor cataplasms did any good. The finger kept on aching and got almost black. Their doctor couldn't help. At night, she couldn't sleep. She awoke after four to five hours and had to wait half a day until she fell asleep again. She had been a good sleeper. Ten hours she overslept easily as a rule.

Amadeus experienced the same symptoms, and he couldn't be helped either. Scholasticus' forefinger swell as well, but he slept as usual, as he needed not more than four hours a night.

He said, he'd never sleep more than three to four hours and the swollen finger didn't change the routine. However, he felt uneasy as well.

As soon as Arundle arrived, she was overwhelmed by all kinds of suggestions. They all had their versions available. Amadeus suspected the petrifying water, they had been in contact with in Laptopia, while Grisella pointed out the negative effects of the poisonous air over there. Scholasticus believed he had hurt while fighting the dragon. "Could well be the dragon's poison..." but he knew of course, that his spouse hadn't had any access to that scene, nor had Amadeus. Therefore, they only shook their heads. Nobody found the answer.

Arundle wanted to change the subject. As the civil war seemed unavoidable, and required immediate action. Why were those Laptopians all of a sudden ready to fight, - with all kind of armour and nuclear bombs and all that? Arundle couldn't even mention such facts.

"If my finger keeps on swelling" Dorothea complaint "an amputation might become necessary" - she made a dramatic pause and looked around to see the plain horror in the girl's eyes, as the others knew already, what she was afraid of.

Amadeus was waving his swollen finger and said that he could hardly stand the pain. While Scholasticus still tried to present a manly air. However, you noticed his worries as well.

"Have they all gone mad", the Star-maids whispered. "You just can't talk with them..."

"And if we try to find the cause of the disease? Arundle, you were there all the time, don't you remember an incident the three of them were concerned. Or is your finger swollen as well?" Corinia was asking and grabbed for her hand but couldn't find anything wrong with it.

“Scholasticus was either alone underway or with Walter. He was very fond of the stones down there, though. Dorothea and Amadeus shadowed the General, whom they didn’t really trust, while we stood petrified down there at that pool until the Churingas came to free us, as they did with the Professor and Walter before. After that, we stayed with the Churingas and their mysterious Shaman. That was it, I’d say... Well, yes, our fiasco in space. Pooty got lost but was rescued by Billy-Joe and the magic bow while we stranded in the wrong decade... Well, and finally we returned home safe and well, that’s about it, isn’t it?”

“Watch it, not so fast. The wrong decade interests me” interrupted Florinna. “Perhaps something happened, while you were there, something, only the three of them experienced.”

Arundle shook her head thinking... “Well, we stayed together all the time more or less, except when Amadeus and Scholasticus found out about that village. However, Dorothea stayed behind as I did. Later, after the two scouts returned we went all together to that village and found a filling station. Ah, yes before we drank water out of a clear creek. – We all drank, I’m sure.”

“You drank as well, are you sure?” Corinia insisted.

“Well, yes, we all were thirsty. Scholasticus tried and okayed the water, so we drank, simple as that. Well, I won’t swear I drank. Walter didn’t drink, I think. As an animal of the bush, he is more or less independent. Billy-Joe didn’t drink, as he wasn’t with us. Therefore, I’m the only one left. Did I drink or didn’t I, that is the question now...”

“Suppose you didn’t drink, then we probably found the answer and the cause of the disease. Our three poor patients over there” - she waved at them pitifully - “became infected by the water they drank. That could be the solution then.”

“We should analyse the water, that would bring light into the matter, and we knew what shouldn’t be in there” assisted Florinna to her sister’s thoughts.

“The question is how to get such water. I’m here without the magic bow”, Arundle added. She agreed with her friends’ ideas, as she still couldn’t think of any circumstance only the three of them had experienced.

“But how can we get this water?” Scholasticus asked.

“That’s the problem. Without our magical helpers, we are lost. Dreamtime travel doesn’t help, as you can’t take anything with you.”

Grisella wasn’t all that sure “What, if the water isn’t the culprit? Could there be no other causes? Think twice, before you eventually go wrong.”

“I can’t risk anything anymore, my parents are totally upset already. So I got to play the dear daughter for the rest of our journey, I’m afraid.” Arundle explained.

“There is only Walter,” mentioned Scholasticus. He knew by now how difficult Arundle’s parents were.

“I can send him a note as soon as I get back. The quiver is with the bow and the bow with Billy-Joe – I hope.” Arundle explained.

She was the only one of the three girls left. Her friends were gone. In your dreams, you were not the only master of the show. A moment of boredom and that was it. There is so much to be dreamed of.

They’d solve the problem somehow, they hoped.

Arundle felt alike, being still somehow disappointed, as nobody had cared about that bloody civil war coming up over there.

It hadn’t been the water, although the analysis took as long as the acquisition. Scholasticus kept Walter’s telephone number amongst his papers. When he finally got it, the phone was either busy or nobody answered. Thereafter the magical stone couldn’t find that blooming July in 2069, when the water was first taken. However, Scholasticus insisted. At least the month had to be the right one. Their emergency landing had been on the 23rd of July 2069, they had found out in that filling station.

The stone made it at last, but in vain, as the water was okay. Ordinary average H₂O, including some minerals and good-natured micro organisms, that was all. Scholasticus counterchecked again at home, just to be on the safe side.

Those three forefingers still grew on - in size and colour. Dorothea and Amadeus stayed at home or in bed. They couldn’t sleep any more. Grisella was in despair and didn’t know what to do.

No one took care of Intellectus after school, while she held lectures at the university.

Scholasticus tried to overcome such malaise by work, but he wasn’t himself either. All day long, he was acting somehow dispersed and fickle. This was only caused by his worries about his dear wife, he insisted.

He couldn’t stop thinking what the real cause had been. He tortured his brain. There must be something only the three of them experienced. The calendar in the shop of the filling station turned out to be the key to the proper solution. They had been shopping. Instead of paying their bill, the serviceman asked them to put their forefingers into a little box called ‘Time-Exchange-Account-Converter’ beside the exit –

or was it the entrance? He didn't recall that. That was it. They shopped while Walter had to stay outside, as an animal. Arundle stayed with him to make him feel not so bad.

While they did, they'd felt that strange tingling for the first time. That was it, the cause was found. However, did that really matter?

That same night he and Grisella brooded over the answer to the question, what could be done now. Right up to dawn, they puzzled and searched for the answer, why they reacted that way. Their reaction could never be normal, but had surely to do with the fact, that they came from abroad, that they didn't belong into that time.

The serviceman had explained to them how this - 'Time-Exchange-Account-Converter' (TEAC) worked. By registering you became connected with your lifetime-account, and you were charged in seconds and minutes, or even hours instead of the common currency.

Time had become the currency and money was useless. "Things have been straightened and brought back to the roots. Life-time is in fact the only realistic equivalent to everything, you could think of."

Strange that had been, indeed!

"You put your finger into some kind of slot and your lifetime is sucked out."

"Reminds me of a vampire – life-time instead of blood" Grisella resumed thoughtfully.

Their registry exposed them as forgers – that was it. Their swollen fingers were some kind of allergic reaction, or the revenge of system. They had been the wrong people as they had been non-existent, that was the answer – simple as that.

While being there, they didn't think much, but felt hungry and thirsty and of course had they been curious as well, especially Dorothea, who plundered the beauty-shelves. While his own brain had had a break. Scholasticus shook his head and wondered.

What could be done? They had to cancel the booking, in order to balance the system back to normal, and delete their subtraction. Only then, they had a chance to get back their sound fingers and the attempt was cancelled.

"Best would be, if we went back there and initiate the storno function right there in the original 'Time-Exchange-Account-Converter'. It's only three days ago. I mean things like that do happen as well in the future. People don't change that much, I'd say." Scholasticus nodded. This seemed to be an excellent idea, he thought. Grisella was of great help, even though, she hadn't been out there.

They informed the other members of the original patrol team. Walter and Pooty agreed wholeheartedly. “We lend that thing and bring it right here, and then back again. What the hell, do I have that magic hood for?” Pooty exclaimed.

Scholasticus took a little while to make up his mind, then agreed. This procedure would be much more comfortable for Dorothea and Amadeus then to go there again. You never knew whether they were arrested and so forth, because if they were trapped, as he was trapped in Laptopia, things would turn from bad to worse.

With that hood, Pooty should be rather safe. The ‘Time-Exchange-Account-Converter’ was no big affair, so he’d be very able to carry it, to where Walter was waiting, and in no time, they were here. Probably it would even be wise to return the registrar back again afterwards. “Well, it all depends whether it’s got a WLAN connection or just a LAN. In any case he’d better take some tools and familiarize himself with such devices in general.”

Once more, the two true friends headed towards the unknown, - way ahead in the twenty-first century.

15. Operation Forefinger

Had they thought, - a smaller party made things easier for the magical stone they’d have failed. In fact, the stone experienced the greatest troubles straightening the line and keep the course. The deviation was incalculable; he’d transmitted right into Walter’s brain. His registration system had by accident copied all those false data, so he was able to get hold of them right now. If things had worked out the proper way, this data had been deleted, and they’d have most likely gone lost again.

They altered the course to Laptopia, and tried to utilise the turbulences in the second time loop – this time the other way – and managed to get into the orbit. Astronomically spoken that meant a deviation by half of the way to Laptopia. However, the shorter the distances, the greater became the risk of a sound deviation. To steer towards an exact point in time, like the twenty-third of July 2069, was almost impossible.

“Plus or minus 300 hours is the minimum range, I’ve got to be entitled to” the magical stone let them know, when Pooty asked how sharp they would hit the target.

“Then our journey could well be in vain, as I got to get the time-exchange-account-converter shortly after the use by our candidates, Pooty exclaimed. Scholasticus had given him very precise instruction. The ‘Time-Exchange-Account-Converter’ without the fingerprints was as useless as with their fingerprints buried under thousands of others. ‘We need the exact repetition of the case’ had he concluded. Pooty only repeated what he was told. As his job was it to pinch the thing under his magical hood, then take it back to the present time, have the three candidates put their fingers back in and then press the storno function. That should be it, so far. They hadn’t made up their minds, whether it was necessary to return the ‘Time-Exchange-Account-Converter’ back to where it came from or not.

If they failed, which was not very unlikely, there was a second option. Amadeus raised it. His idea was, to go back to the scene and leave before the transaction occurred.

Scholasticus thought that a splendid idea, although he saw a serious problem connected therewith. ‘But that’s gotta be discussed, as soon as this nightmare is over’ he said, and patted his brother’s shoulder benevolently.

‘The ‘Time-Exchange-Account-Converter’ we need in any case. If possible from the twenty-third of July 2069 at noon or shortly before...’

So they went away carried on the wings of all their friends’ best wishes, which might have been the final extra little portion of luck required on a trip into the unknown.

The magical stone managed a landing right at the same spot, close to that rivulet, they’d drunk of. Everything looked the same, but that didn’t mean much. So, they headed for that village, while Walter avoided the open. Not far from the place of action, they separated and Pooty put the magical hood on. They didn’t know yet the date or time, though it looked like noon anyway.

“Have a look at the calendar before you start cutting the wires or pull any plug. And cut them one by one, if necessary.” Walter admonished him like a father, he’d best gone with him, but that wasn’t possible.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back in thirty minutes. Let’s hope that thing isn’t too heavy. – Good Lord is that hood hot, I die of that heat.”

Pooty’s moaning faded while he withdrew. Hopefully he went silent and didn’t make any noise.’ His little friend wasn’t all that careless, he went on thinking, while he couldn’t get rid of his anxiety.

What had he given, if he had been on the way himself instead. Unfortunately, he was too big to fit under the magical hood. Besides, he’d have hardly been able to move in that crammed shop. Being invisible didn’t mean you needed no space. With his tail, he’d easily have cleared the shelves by accident.

Pooty approached the village. He was sweating like mad and the hood slid him over the eyes. It was too late now to roll up and fix the rim, besides he didn't know if you had seen the pin or the like.

He found the filling station. "Biomethane" it said on the board. The guys in their gliders were about. The attendant was standing in front of his shop.

What was that? Along the street a strange flock of miserable creatures appeared. Pooty suppressed a giggle. Here they came: Up front Scholasticus, followed by Dorothea, supported by Amadeus, then Walter with Arundle. He couldn't see himself, as he was lost in space then.

How sad Walter looked! Pooty's eyes went moist with empathy. Had been kind of strange feeling, tumbling through space all alone...

Right here everything worked fine. Pooty waited until the three humans put their fingers into that slot machine. He grabbed for that little pair of nippers in his tool bag. He would need it right away, but in vain, there were no tongs. Could he do without?

He had, but one chance, or perhaps two. However, the second alternative was dangerous.

He ran out of time. Dorothea just put her finger in.

"Ouch, what a scurry," she uttered. Amadeus and Scholasticus followed soon after, the attendant asked them very politely but rather sound to waste no more time.

It was too late to run back for the nippers, but as a possum, you had sharp teeth. He uncovered the first wire then cut it with a mighty bite. Then he took the second. The plastic tasted horrible. He took great care not to eventually shortcut the circuit. Again, things turned out to be fine.

While he just wanted to grab the time-account-exchange-converter, the attendant came in. Luckily, he spoke with Scholasticus and Dorothea. They just explained to him that they belonged to that itinerant circus down there at the brook.

As they turned for the door, Pooty saw he chance and slipped away together with them through the open door, the heavy TEAC ['Time-Exchange-Account-Converter'] under the arm, and rushed as fast as he could to the hiding place.

"I've got the damned thing" - he gasped from afar. "Well then, let's go" Walter shouted and off they went, and fast as a thought.

Things went almost too easy, beside the missing tongs. While still in flight, Pooty reported how it went and Walter hummed with agreement. "That's kind of talented improvisation, you came about", while Pooty mentioned the missing tongs.

However, there was no time to tell the tale, as they landed right in front of the house, where the Slyboots' lived. They met the whole family and the other members of the meeting as they had just left them. "That was fast, wasn't it" Dorothea said with surprise. Scholasticus looked at her enchanted. How nice it was, that she enjoyed the little things in every day life. He felt drawn towards her, but suppressed the notion of going over to her and taking her in his arms.

Pooty came upstairs still the heavy 'TAEC' under his arm. He didn't let Walter help him, as he wanted to hand the prey over by himself.

"Off we go into the laboratory", Scholasticus exclaimed and hastily grabbed for the 'Time-Account-Exchange-Converter'. "The two of you do come best along right away. We connect the thing with our central calculator and then, so I hope, we find the reverse code. That's our only chance" - (he lifted his thick fore-finger) - "to get rid of that. - Well we could have cut it off, of course" he added - "Let's hope that won't be necessary."

Grisella, the only healthy, who'd come along with them, offered to take the patients to the lab and as well back home after the transaction.

"You stay and relax, and play with Intellectus, if he cares" but he didn't. Walter wasn't all that unhappy about it. Pooty had settled already in Walters belly-bag, now feeling the tension, and Walter felt tired as well.

For the girls there had been no space in Grisella's car. Therefore, they went away, back home where they belonged. Arundle returned into Billy-Joe's village. When all of a sudden the awful Mr Schwertfeger appeared. She couldn't get rid of him. What the hell did he wander about her dreams like a ghost?

Billy-Joe was still somewhere in the taboo-zone, where no female was allowed, that was why she couldn't see him right away. In other words she couldn't do anything right here, so she felt overlapped by nightmarish attempts, although there were still holidays.

In her dream, she was quite upset. The whole board of teachers appeared now. "But we are free in our vacations", she heard her shouting, and she shouted so loud, that she woke up, as it sometimes happens in a dream.

In the lab, Scholasticus explained meanwhile the theory of determination. Nobody understood much, but that much got at him or her: you can't change the past uncharged. Either the consequences fetch you up, or the future bring trouble, you'd better avoid.

"We had to put our fingers into this TEAC-device. We didn't have the choice." That was the mere truth. Pooty confirmed as he witnessed the scene

under his hood a second time. What the Professor said was true. The attendant hadn't let them leave.

Everything was arranged in the lab. Scholasticus had checked and rechecked the parameters. Everything was ready. The TEAC had been reversed and was functioning quite orderly. The manoeuvre was not easy to understand. The same amount of life span had to be readjusted into the device in order to have the future system rebalanced. Of course, they had to bring the TEAC right back the same day and reconnect it with the general system. Only then, they'd most likely be able to minimize the risk of the three probationers.

"Sorry for that, but it is essential and necessary", Scholasticus said as soon as the operation was done. They left the laboratory and returned home where they found Walter and Pooty sound asleep on the central couch of their joint parlour.

The first step was a great success. The forefingers immediately grew normal after having been fitted back into the TEAC. The storno function got set in reverse action and a receipt confirmed the operation, coming out of the slot.

The patients hailed and patted the brave time-travellers. However, their job was only done half. As they had to return the device, and fix it back to the future system. "If possible before midnight, as that is usually the time when the bookings are transmitted to the central main mother account server. It is essential that we don't appear, or remain recorded in the mother-server." Scholasticus explained.

He seemed to know, what he was talking. Happy as they were, they had to accept, that the threat still wasn't all over. First Pooty and Walter had to bring back the device.

Arundle, who wasn't able to fall asleep again after Mr Schwertfeger's interference, eventually made it and was right back to enjoy such miraculous healing.

"Imagine – without fore-finger," Dorothea said. "Unthinkable" Arundle agreed. "I'm so happy, I just can't tell", Dorothea stretched her fingers, and then folded her forefinger. "Awful" she exclaimed and quickly stretched it again.

"What does determinism mean?" asked Amadeus his brother. He shouldn't have asked that, as a detailed lecture of almost half an hour was initiated. Nobody except Grisella was able to understand, and of course Walter.

Arundle tried to listen for a good while and understood that determinism was another word for fate. In other words, nobody was allowed

to leave the track of life once chosen. If he did, the consequences were incalculable.

“I think we are lifting the secret of these new type of accounts,” the Professor just mentioned. “The charging process is as simple as that, and somehow just great in its simplicity. However, what this does mean for the afflicted can’t be overlooked. Neither for the individual, nor for a whole society” he thoughtfully concluded. “That’s a subject for you, Grisella” he went on. “That is your field of action.”

“We still don’t know, who could draw advantage from the system” she proceeded. Scholasticus replied, the answer was not very difficult to be found, and he smiled.

“Do you remember the debate about added-value, we undertook in the first half of the 21st century at all major universities, and not for the first time?”

Of course Grisella remembered. Angrily she lifted a brow. It seemed to her as if someone had asked her for the colour of snow.

Added value meant that a certain portion of the values the workers produced, was taken away by the factory-owner. Expressed in working hours that meant nothing else but that the workers worked a certain part of the day without pay.

“To give an example” he went on “they work four hours for their wages and another four hours to increase the wealth of the proprietor. Whose wealth was growing by the time, if there was no one, who managed to cheat some of that wealth away somehow. Hundreds of strategies had been developed for that purpose - the stock exchange was invented.

Scholasticus intended to point out, that by means of the TEAC-system a method had been found to get to the time without any diversion via wages and benefits. Scholasticus’ thought seemed logical to her, still somehow eccentric. She didn’t understand enough of the huge new servers to figure out, whether such ideas could be converted into reality, as he seemed to be convinced of.

She now should think about some kind of model and consider the consequences in reality, based on a system of time as principal value.

While he took off to spot the usufructuaries. He probably imagined that those, who had access to the lifetime accounts of the multitude, had found a method of prolonging their own span of life therewith.

Grisella was not sure at all, if she would enjoy her part, all the more as she thought it a spooky and absurd idea. She still hoped things would turn out differently.

Arundle got her out of her thoughts. As they all were all right again, it would be high time now to talk about the threatening civil war in Laptopia.

“We’ve got to think about our role again and what we can do to give peace a chance.”

All agreed - philosophical reflections had to be postponed. Even though they led right away and straight - just into the centre of the whole spooky matter, and was the malignant super-key to all the worries they employed.

Yet, they didn’t know. Therefore, they jumped on that train while that means of transport was in due course to become superfluous, so to speak.

Arundle’s report indeed employed their attention to an unforeseen extend, and blocked out, what had been inflicted by the finger-malady, they so luckily managed to overcome, as Walter and Pooty succeeded in returning that TEAC-device without any further complication.

16. A brilliant Idea

They came back on to the ground of the real reality that mattered, as far as Arundle was concerned. She disliked such funky self-reliance and egocentricity, while the world was breaking apart.

Well, it was not their own world but still a world, whether really real or just an approximation to what reality meant, who could tell?

Thanks to Walter and Pooty’s dedication, the threatening civil war in Laptopia caught the attention of the former patrol into the forlorn land at the final end ahead of time. Had they not overcome the disease, no one had returned to the matter. They had been stuck in their own tiny reality.

Long enough had it taken and time enough had been wasted, as Laptopia ran out of time, both in real and literally. Highly armoured opponents were standing against each other. One spark sufficed and the powder-keg blew up, so to speak; - as in reality the weaponry was monstrous and disastrous, so the world as a whole would fall apart and go to pieces, and no life, at least no humane life worth while living, would be possible any more.

For many years, the conflict had been put aside. Now, all of a sudden, it seemed too late to stop or even slow it down at all. For the first time the explorers acted and discussed the legitimate stuff in the proper attitude. No more complaining about swollen fingers, and sleepless nights, no egocentric malady! No less than a threatening future overshadowed mankind and entangled - way ahead - the weary hearts of the chosen few, who knew.

Florinna and Corinia popped in, as it was common in the dreamtime, and the three Star-maids told their tale of desperation and disaster:

The troops of the young Prince and his experienced General Armyless consisted of runaways and fuzzy-heads from the metropolise on the one hand and on the other hand, of volunteers, they recruited right in the forbidden zones among the free tribes. Those were wild and forceful fighters, who, after lifelong residence in the underground, finally saw the day of reckoning with the system right ahead.

In great hurry, the volunteers had to be made familiar with modern weaponry of all kind. They needed discipline and endurance, while their virtues weren't always and in any case needed. Long distance bombardments for example, required a cool heart and a sure hand. While fury and bravery helped a lot in the infight.

However, the General employed his core of experienced troopers and made them become officers in charge of the basic training of the volunteers. That didn't always and everywhere work perfectly well, but in average he came along with it, as such troopers were more or less human as well.

The degree of humaneness was after all the most important category to be employed, if it came to judge, which side someone was on.

On the opposite side things seemed to be exactly the other way round, as far as the Star-maids allowed themselves to believe in the reports of the spies, flooding the enemy.

Under the command of Prince Watchalot (the young Prince's father) stood the platoons and regiments of the artifacts like one man. Never in history, had there been a similar army. Equipped with an arsenal of the most terrible weapons the world had ever seen. Moral considerations were non-existent amongst them. They were practically inhuman, even though - for practical reasons - they still employed a fair amount of genuine human spare parts, not the least of which the brain was.

The war, if it came to that, would be led by all means and without considerations of any kind or respect at all. Thus were the facts.

The wars of mankind had long been forgotten and there were no witnesses left, who could bring about the horrors of warfare. What did the righteous cause matter, the opponents claimed for their aims? Both sides reclaimed the higher right to be on their side. Nobody could imagine, what the world would look like afterwards, or if they did, they might conclude, that it couldn't look much worse than it looked already.

As the patrollers from a former earth knew - either by own memory or by vivid recall what it was like, those Laptopsians didn't seem to have any idea of what came really about them, if they went on as they did.

The young Prince could only see the bloodthirsty vampires sucking the life stream out of the people, defending a system of injustice and exploitation that had been established and hailed as the answer to the exploitation of the past, when the money-system finally became obsolete and was overthrown at last. The money-system, that maltreated and threatened mankind for thousands of years.

However, the world didn't become the promised paradise, not for those outside, and not for the descendants of the early generations of the Laptopian usufructaries of the first hour, because the artifacts entered the stage of the world and began to play their ambiguous role.

The young Prince stood up against his father, but without the true General Armyless, he'd stand no chance. The General on the other hand wouldn't have changed sides without those visitors from the past, (and so hadn't the little Prince without his Godmothers – the Star-maids.)

And that was now the burden Arundle and Scholasticus felt on their shoulders, and so felt their friends and relatives with them - more or less.

If it came to the worst, there was no difference any more, whether the cause was righteous, because the means to overcome the opponent didn't fit with the cause at all. The General was probably the only one who could imagine, what a war was really like. He knew that some of the weapons, if they were used, would cause irreversible damage to the world and led to the bitter end of mankind.

However, even he wasn't quite able to imagine the horror of destruction on doomsday. Having not witnessed the heaps and piles of corpses, or the screams of terror, the unimaginable pain of the tortured, the General didn't share his ancestor's point of view even though he was much alike and could have been his twin by appearance.

“War is the worst”, Grisella concluded and all nodded in agreement.

“To imagine we have initiated a war, drives me crazy” Arundle uttered in disgust.

What could be done? How should they go on? How could they alter the course?

Scholasticus now felt every single word of his inflaming speech burn in his soul, he addressed the crowd with in front of the tribunal. His little triumph tasted stale and bitter now. Had they burnt him instead, he'd feel better now!

They all had only stirred up the rebellion. No word of mediation had come from their side. Nobody raised the question of the philosophical dimension of the time- quest.

Was a lengthy life on earth really most important? If it came to the question of to be or not to be, you grabbed for the tiniest straw and might

end up with the conclusion – better a short happy life, than a long life in agony and distress.

The philosophical school of hedonism was dedicated to such kind of questions, Grisella declared to the astounded audience, as was again assembled. The desire to live on and the longing for happiness contradicted more than once, she pointed out. She stunned her listeners and made them realize their narrow boundaries of their thoughts. All too obvious they related to their own mode of living. They couldn't even imagine that there were other kinds as well. They had judged the objective facts and had made decisions, as they thought them obvious and self-evident. They had influenced social systems and eventually changed their course. As a consequence the Laptopians were threatened by total destruction and the end of all life what so ever by warfare of the worst kind.

“What we've started, we got to stop, no matter whether this means our defeat. If we manage to cause our side to put down the weapons, we might be able to avoid the war” Arundle suggested.

She had to run away once more, if she took over this task (as she didn't doubt for one second.)

Her parents would turn upside down and put her into a boarding school right to the coming up term. “Be it as it may,“ she murmured defiantly. The contingency of the world was, Lord knows, worthwhile the sacrifice. After all, the boarding school wasn't as awful as she feared, while she still felt that strange itch in her belly. “All to its time” she tried to cheer herself up. Right now Laptopia was on her mind.

Grisella's philosophical explanation made them feel helpless in a way. What could be down? None had an idea. It was too late anyway, things had gone too far, and a decision seemed unavoidable.

So they all looked up, when Grisella took the word again and asked, whether they knew the story of David and Goliath. A kind of hesitant nodding made her doubt, whether they all knew the tale as was written down in the book of Samuel. Therefore, she told the tale of the great war King Saul and the Israelites fought against mighty invaders. Little David overcame gigantic Goliath and the war came to a halt, as the Philistines retreated to the coastal area, and let the Israelites alone. Saul went mad and David made himself king by the help of God and united the twelve tribes in one kingdom.

The reason why she told the tale was the fact, that war faring had been avoided by the brave deed of little David, who managed to overcome the giant by means of a sorely placed sling-shot to the forehead.

“In other words” Arundle took over “we should try to tease our enemy and make it a question of honour and have the righteous cause win. Two chosen leaders on behalf of the mass - that sounds good to me...”

“That’s exactly what I had in mind” Grisella replied. She looked around again. Scholasticus Slyboots didn’t seem to favour her suggestion. He didn’t believe in simple solutions to difficult problems. “Reality unfortunately is more complex than the myths of the peoples.”

Dorothea eventually assisted her sister. “As far as I’m concerned, I like Grisella’s idea.”

“Can you imagine the young Prince fighting his own father? - I’d say it’s kind of nightmarish to set son against father” Amadeus objected and supported his brother in a way.

“The young Prince needn’t necessarily step into the footprints of young David. What about the General?” Dorothea suggested, “of course he’d have to volunteer,” she added quickly, as she realized what she demanded.

“Who knows, perhaps there is a totally different challenger amongst the tribes” Amadeus brought forward. “Someone who can handle the sling as perfect as young David did.”

“I think, I’d know someone” Arundle exclaimed. “He might not be familiar with ancient slings but with the boomerang. A dangerous weapon in the hands of someone who understands to handle it.”

“You don’t think of Billy-Joe, do you?” asked Florinna while she knew that Arundle had no one else in mind.

“What has he to do with the whole affair?” Dorothea asked. “I thought it was a matter of the local opponents, so some sort of local leaders had to handle that case.”

“Perhaps Billy-Joe has more to do with the inner affairs of Laptopia, than we foresee”, Arundle answered and gave Florinna a bewildered glance.

“That, you should explain to us” Scholasticus interfered.

“I’m not all that sure, so I better keep my mouth shut. Anyway might it be a good idea to pass Grisella’s suggestion not only to the young Prince and the General, but to the old Shaman of the Churingas as well.”

“- And of course to Billy-Joe” Florinna supported her friend Arundle. Both of them smiled meaningfully.

“I even believe that Prince Watchalot only accepts the challenge, if he can be sure to win; and, against his own son he would probably look not so good, not to speak of the General. We’ve got to find someone he is not at all afraid of, that’s very important”, Arundle explained. No one objected.

“Are there other propositions?” Scholasticus wanted to know. Grisella’s idea still met not his full acceptance. “In the end we favour an idea we’ve not the capacity to fulfil.”

Again silence settled, while deep thoughts swaggered the room. No other idea came in sight. Of course, the war could be avoided until it broke

out. Theoretically, you could imagine that one party stretched their weapons and gave in without resistance. However, the consequences of such step were no less imponderable than the war itself. What, if the winning side didn't grant mercy and slaughter the defeated?

The duel as such, seemed to be at least a vague chance to unprime the conflict – but only then, when David won. However, what happened, if the duel didn't end with 'David's victory? The free tribes couldn't expect mercy. Prince Watchalot had their villages burnt down and their people diminished. Their way of living had no future then. Thus was the conviction the future-explorers all shared.

If they weren't able to surprise the vast majority of the enemy, they shouldn't dare the duel at all. A primitive naked savage, the relict of ancient times, was exactly what they needed as a surprise. Now it seemed most important, to get him into the match in the most unsuspected mode.

"Let me do that" said Arundle with an air of conviction. "I'm sure it will work." The first step was to have Billy Joe become accepted by the Churingas. If they did, the other tribes would follow without further objections, as the Churingas seemed to play an important role among them.

The mousier the challenger was, the easier he'd be accepted by the Prince. A victory without bloodshed and greater military effort was exactly what orthodox Laptopsians required, to demonstrate the righteousness of their cause. All the more for that sordid secret source hidden somewhere in the depth of space and time.

Arundle just tried to make herself clear when Corinia, who'd been silent for a good while began to flicker. Florinna followed a minute later and she felt the same notion shortly before awakening.

"Your way of travelling is a great gift, and an ancient secret technique of the Senoi, who are Malaysian Austroids, coming over the Pacific" a voice from outside broke in. "Your mother descends on her mother's side in direct line from the Senoi, you should know."

The voice belonged to Henry Hare, the father of the two and caught them, while waking up, so that Arundle still could hear it.

"Participating to the life of others in the dreamtime is really the utmost you can achieve" Mr Hare continued (he had learned from his wife, as his own talents with regard to dreams were poor.)

"Don't forget" Arundles voice was heard. ! I'll be right on the way to Billy-Joe and have him understand what's needed. I'm sure; I'll be able to convince him. So we'll meet again in Laptopsia as soon as possible..."

Corinia and Florinna faded. Arundle saw them nod, so she disappeared herself and found her back under the roof of that bungalow they resided in on vacation at 'the Heaven's Gate'.

‘Well, let’s hope things came over as clear as they got to be’ she wondered as she rubbed her eyes. ‘Had been kind of mess again over there...’ Mechanically she grabbed for the magic bow, while she remembered that he had gone with Billy-Joe, flying her father’s wrath.

If she disappeared again that day, she’d be done and her parents sent her to that blooming boarding school right after the holidays. Well, she’d have to take that risk. She might get away with it somehow. Florinna and Corinia were much better off. They could talk about everything, she thought, while she stretched and yawned. ‘They can turn to the other side and make them be right back in Laptopia, lucky ones...’

She jumped out of bed, grabbed her swimsuit and blanket and rushed down the stairs.

Her father was sitting in the lobby smoking, but as he wasn’t allowed to smoke by the doctor, he had to smoke secretly. Therefore, when Arundle came downstairs, he stuffed the cigarette hastily into a jar of marmalade.

He looked at her and pressed his forefinger against his lips. Arundle sighted back gaily and whispered while she slipped out of the front door, “That’ll be our little secret.” She made a sign of smoking with her fingers. “I’m out - down at the beach, will be back by five or six o’clock...”

Before Mr Waldschmitt was able the protest, she had gone and was flying towards the beach and on further to Billy-Joe’s village. In the meantime, she knew the way. So much luck made her happy for the day.

The morning was still young and the air was still fresh. She got along pretty fast, much faster than in the dark, and so she arrived all of a sudden. The shags and cabins amongst some dry sad wigs, that had once been a kind of cope, arose out of the rising sun it seemed, till she found herself standing at the centre court, looking in vain for somebody, whom she could have asked to get Billy-Joe out of the Men’s House she still thought him to be in.

She finally met him not far away, not in the Men’s House but with his old teacher Kaúua Bereóo. Billy-Joe sat at his feet attentive listening to some serious teachings. So she kept herself hidden for a good while, a kind of holy shyness made her stay away.

A small fire burnt between the two men. Kaúua threw some herbs into the flames from time to time and the fire was glowing in the nicest colours.

As she stared into the flames she noticed a kind of trance approaching. However, she didn’t allow it, as she had to stay awake. Laptopia was waiting and they had an important task to fulfil.

Her strong will gained grounds. However, some minutes elapsed until she got a chance to raise her voice and speak with her friend. After all, she didn’t have the whole day.

As Kaúua noticed her mood, he friendly stopped and signalled her to take over.

Arundle felt ashamed. Most likely Billy-Joe experienced some important initiation. In fact, Kaúua told the tale of the distant liberator who'd come from the stars and freed his people and led them to the promised land – something like that; perhaps also to save them out of great dangers and perils, or both.

Kaúuas language wasn't all that clear, although she had picked up some vocabulary and structures of Billy-Joe's native tongue already. She hoped more than she knew that Kaúua transmitted the appropriate message.

Had she needed a confirmation – here it was. Billy-Joe's multiple identity became clearer and clearer. She didn't doubt anymore as she still had, while on the way out here. The instruction ended. Arundle noticed the magic bow hiding in the felts the mattress covering the entrance to Kaúua's cabin.

The sun was up now. Time was precious not only here but even more over there, in Laptopia, as she wanted to be back by five o'clock. That gave them some thirty Laptopian hours – more or less, if they proceeded right away.

She didn't know, how much time it would take to convince all the parties involved, beginning with Billy-Joe, who eventually knew by now, what stood in the stars for him.

Finally, the duel had to be fought and won – quite a big bit in so little a time, indeed!

She felt somewhat dizzy as she imagined what was lying ahead and felt rather uneasy while the palaver seemed to find no end. In fact, the villagers now formed a circle around the scene; quite alike that scene over there in that vale the Churingas claimed their property. Hadn't there been the difference in height, everything was almost the same. Arundle felt strongly reminded of the Churinga village.

No wonder, she said to herself that Billy-Joe now belonged to them. As she thought that, Billy-Joe jumped to his feet smiled at her his winning smile, (that smile he smiled while they first met, and conquered her heart right away.) He caught the magic bow and invited her to leave right away. "Here, your bow", he said and shoved the bow down to her. Arundle tried to hide her embarrassment. She fell into some kind of exaggerating activity with the arrangements for departure.

Billy-Joe seemed to have understood the role he was going to play. Indeed, he liked it. "Yes, we've got to hinder that war, right you are" he confirmed, while she was summing up what had been talked over by the

chosen few over there at the Slyboots' place recently, and what they had finally agreed upon.

First, he had to convince to Churingas. He'd have to make quite clear, that he was one of them, and that this was no ambitious fiction but sound fact. Therefore, they had to accept him as their chief, and be it only for an interim period, until the job was done.

"Since I at last know as well who I am, things won't be so difficult any more, I'd say" – he agreed. Arundle nodded, still somehow confused, as she tried to imply some data to the bow, she thought were necessary for him.

"As long as the old Shaman of the Churingas can be kept on our side, we have a good chance to make it" Billy-Joe confirmed.

The magic bow kept on calculating. Arundle checked repeatedly and hammered on the virtual keyboard the bow had extended for that purpose. "Kind of Learning by doing method, isn't it?" he snarled. "Not all that bad – but – how often did we make the tour?"

He produced a second extended version of the protective space shirt of his – extra large for Billy-Joe – and moaned, "nobody cares, how much effort it takes me to do all that for you, nobody even notices it..."

Then things went straight and smooth. Out in space you could see those coloured streams and stripes again as the stars stretched while they chased through those time loops, and risked to be driven out of their proper course. The higher their weight was, the stronger the forces grabbed at them. It still was some kind of great adventure anyway; no matter how often you'd have experienced it. Arundle knew for sure, she'd never become tired of such trips.

Without a hitch, they landed on top of the thick dark clouds of Laptopia right above Laptopia-City. They circled above the pinnacles of the palace and took care to stay away from the mighty towers of the miraculous Laptop-factories. Not even General Armyless was able to give information, what was going on in there. "It's essential, you stay away" was all she got to know.

While Pooty once almost went lost, while checking for that mysterious potion, she now knew that there was obviously something in it. Pooty was lost in the endless corridors, and finally managed to return – but without the potion this time. Pooty had, as it seemed mixed the floors up and found himself all of a sudden in a most strange kind of dome, that reminded him of a slaughterhouse, as there were all kinds of body-parts hanging from the ceiling – mostly human, but not only. Since then, he didn't dare to go there anymore. That de-petrifying potion seemed to have gone anyway.

"Who ever disappears in there, will never be seen. This truly is the house of no return," he acclaimed in disgust, whenever the topic came up.

Therefore, Arundle stuck to the General's advice and never tried to explore the forbidden area any more.

"Some kind of bionic studies had been practised, and were still going on - with those organic 'spare parts'" she learnt from the young Prince the other day.

"You won't find anyone without replacements."- He'd then said. "We all acquire an able hand of the surgeon once in a while. It all began with ruined organs, like lungs or kidneys or livers. It was a good thing, though. Unfortunately, we didn't stick to that stage. As progress went on, each and every thing became replaced. Some hidden force in the background – a name – Malicious Marduk – appeared out of the no-where, it seemed. Since then research grew fiercer and greedier any day. All kinds of horrid experiments were undertaken, the result of which you had fought with in the clouds and subsoil as well. – Yes, the dragon is such a creature, as are the flying hounds."

Arundle and Billy-Joe remembered all too well those attacks; they only managed to overcome by magical means.

17. Who is Billy-Joe?

Arundle and Billy-Joe were looking for the General and the young Prince and of course for their troops. They couldn't be seen, as they were not here – and that was for good reason.

However, they found something else - something that made them scare. Laptopia-city looked like one single huge army camp. In almost every house, troopers had taken quarter. Through the streets soldiers marched, as well as supply trains and brigades of small weaponry. The heavy arms were too big for the streets between the tiny town houses.

In the field outside the city, brigades and platoons formatted to flanks accompanied by tanks and howitzers. Huge towers arose into the sky and almost met the narrow cloudbanks, filled with all kinds of weaponry and manpower to operate them. Movable fortresses they were, and unbeatable they seemed.

Steel flashed; one soldier was like the other hardly less than seven feet. Big grey helmets covered the heads; a harness made of steel stripes protected the broad chest. The limbs, as far as they still consisted of flesh and blood,

stuck in tin-covers. Each man wore a shield of steel as well in the left, while the right hand carried a horrid laser-chaser.

Those standing about in the ranks knocked with their handguns against their shields occasionally, while their throats produced a fierce uproar, and made Arundle and Billy-Joe almost freeze their blood in their vessels. - It was the kind of opening, the old Prince Watchalot demanded for his daily address to the troop.

Arundle and Billy-Joe obviously had just popped in.

The rough voice of the Prince spread wide over the vast field, as soon as the troopers' uproar faded.

'What had become of Prince Watchalot' Arundle thought. She still kept in mind his childish behaviour from the days when the little Prince was born. 'They might have exchanged his vocal chord by strings of steel' she wondered.

"Titan, surely titan" the magic bow made himself clear. "Adorable is such a technology in a way but also horrible" Arundle committed, while Billy-Joe nodded unwillingly.

How should he - in front of such troops - challenge the Prince to a duel? How should he even dare to think he had a chance to win? Was that not pure hypocrisy? Right now, he felt the lack of imagination.

His hand reached for the boomerang with hard grip. Billy-Joe was left-handed – perhaps a little advantage.

He looked down his naked breast, his loincloth and the white legs. He reassured himself of the stripes of yellow okra on both sides of his nose. Then he grabbed for the chain of mussels around his neck and the plug through his lip. At last, he felt the medicine bag full of secret magic around his neck.

Prepared he was, thereof at least he doubted not, whether his armour was sufficient, was another question. While he imagined his opponent, doubts got hold of him.

"Let's get away" Arundle heard him whisper. She nodded. They could be discovered any minute up here so close. The bow carried them out into the deserted open land. Thereto, where they expected the army of their friends. Concentrations of troops as they just had experienced, didn't remain unanswered in times like this. Sure enough their people stood nearby, no less decisive and ready for action all the like.

So it was - behind a low chain of hills no twenty miles away from Laptopia-City, they found their friends' camp. They were looking all but threatening. Gay was the scene – more like a fair than warfare, and reminded Arundle to an ancient painting, she once had seen in the National Gallery of Amsterdam. For Billy-Joe, who wasn't familiar with things like that, they

looked like fans of the late champion, just having returned from the final match. All over the place, happy faces could be seen and old acquaintance would be met here and there, occasionally.

Colourful tents stood all about, while armed people strolled through the passages, and everybody seemed at their ease. No harsh commands, no rattling of heavy equipment and banging of steeled shields and the like. Those spies from the other side, who surely spied about, had to report only the favourite and desired.

Billy-Joe fitted into such a troop, like a hand into the glove, sure enough. However, that might become their advantage. If they managed to lull in the Prince and his Generals, they stood a realistic chance to challenge the leader and have him risk a duel, as it seemed little risk.

Of course, they'd have to point out the historical dimensions of such duels in order to stimulate the delusion of grandeur, as nurtured by dark forces in those misguided minds.

That could become Grisella's task, Arundle decided, while hers was the proposal as such. Grisella was in command of facts and consequences and knew the arguments from all sides – if she only overcame her fear of flying.

Grisella had never travelled by air. Not even on vacation, not to mention the empty space. The idea alone made her dizzy. She'd never have given her over to Walter, no matter whether he was equipped with a magical stone; as it would be Walter's part to take the whole band along again, no doubt about that. Only Florinna and Corinia were able to travel alone up into Laptopia in their dreams.

Scholasticus Slyboots admired them for that, he was totally disabled in this regard – this was his conviction anyway, true or not...

"Perhaps because I'm no girl!" he suggested to the giggling teens, as they proposed, he'd come with them this time and not wait for Walter.

The Scholasticus they dreamed of wasn't even able to let the awoken Scholasticus know such proposal. "You've got to imagine" Florinna reported while shaking her head. "As if we had proposed something impossible" Corinia assisted. "Blocks us simply off, how could he..."

So Florinna and Corinia were already there, right in the middle of the camp at the young Prince's tent, Arundle noticed, while she landed with Billy-Joe and her magic bow right next to them.

- No, they didn't know about the others, whether Grisella was able to overcome her fear this time. Scholasticus would come definitely – with Walter and Pooty that seemed to be certain. "But we weren't able to get

through to him” Florinna complaint. “He’s totally disabled,” Corinia confirmed. “It’s not his fault, is it?” Arundle answered. “Nobody is perfect.”

“Walter will do” Billy-Joe stepped in. He couldn’t quite overcome his uneasiness, all the more, he saw himself surrounded by that merry camp-life, contradicting sharply the burden of the task waiting for him.

“Do you know, what it looks like over there?” he asked the young Prince after an almost formal welcome. His voice sounded rough from anger or strain. Arundle noticed how deeply he was involved in that role of his already. That wasn’t at all helpful. Perhaps the Shaman of the Churingas knew a way out and stood by with advice and assistance.

The young Prince waved Billy-Joe’s objections away. We have our own spies as well. The tins rattling brainless monsters don’t threaten us at all.”

“The morals of the troop can’t be better” his true General assisted, who just stepped in from a meeting with the Chiefs and Shamans of the tribes. They had held over a strategic reconstruction of the likely battlefield. Satisfied as they all looked, the meeting seemed to have been rather successful, the Star-maids noticed, while Billy-Joe still was too occupied to oversee the total whole.

Was there something the girls didn’t see and Billy-Joe all the more so?

“Do you have a secret weapon?” Arundle asked the young Prince right away, who looked over to his General questioningly and slightly waved his head and shrugged, while he said “Wait, and see.”

Time went on and nothing was heard of the Slyboots.

“And if we go ahead because of Billy-Joe?” the girls wondered. But the Prince and the General were busy all the time. Officers came and went. Scouts and secret grey shadows, their spies and secret agents, hushed in and out, more or less unseen. There you couldn’t think of a quiet talk the girls noticed and felt quite superfluous and disturbing.

“You see what’s going on here” the young Prince sighed and looked passionately at Florinna. “Look around outside, if you may, please...” the General suggested as well, as the secret reports he’d just got handed in, weren’t meant for unauthorized ears.

Therefore, the Star-maids followed Billy-Joe who had gone to look for the Churingas that is to say for the Shaman to be precise.

While they strolled through the rows of tents, they noticed how difficult it was to find anyone special. Those tribe folks looked much alike, although the Churingas were of smaller size, and didn’t settle separately, partly because they now really cared hard to overcome notions of separatism, which overshadowed the relations between the individual tribes in a sometimes almost disastrous manner.

While now, an air of alikeness freed the minds and blew stubbornness and conceit away, giving way to a broader kind of general brotherhood.

Not too long ago, it did well happen, that arguments extended and precious blood was spilled, not only with those Laptocops and militia-men under the General's command, but amongst their own kind, for ridiculous reasons.

For reasons - if not ridiculous at all, could have been sorted out peacefully, if those young hotheads hadn't been, who were all the more important now, as they turned out to become the backbone of the freedom-forces.

The girls, while strolling on, looked into friendly faces wherever they came. Even enthusiasm arose, where they and their deeds were known.

First of all Arundle had set her footprint into fertile grounds, so to speak. Everybody seemed to know her, and all kinds of myths had been woven around her deeds and person already.

With her the conflict in Laptopia hadn't only got new fuel and spread about, but became sound and clear after all. The General probably wouldn't have tried to win the tribes for his cause, and the young Prince hadn't separated from his father, while the tribes understood the righteousness of their cause.

They did not only bother for their small and poor freedoms, as was the right to roam and settle. Now new and a new and horrid outlook – the doom of total destruction threatened the world, and they were the only force to stop the total ruin. The reign of Laptopia ran the world into disaster and destruction. If the forces of freedom didn't succeed in breaking the evil ban, it would be it, once and for all.

The many variegated tents of the vast camp didn't stand in rows and ranks but crisscross all over the place, except for a few straight alleys in any direction. Otherwise, things had developed their own way. Almost natural had they developed rounding of all kinds quite similar to the habits at home. Central or sub central openings were used for a variety of purposes. Artists presented their art as well as acrobats or wizards close to sunset or shortly after.

The women cooked there at noon and the young men as well as a growing number of girls trained in weapons in the afternoon.

Since Arundle had come to them with her magic bow, quite a few remembered this ancient art of warfare now, and asked the smiths to have bows of steel made for them, because no wood was available any more. The youths kept Arundle and Billy-Joe busy in the afternoon, showing them how

to use it. They didn't have magic arrows, which hit the target in any case, thus aiming was a frustrating exercise for most of them.

While the golden arrows of the magic bow operated somehow kind of independent, and never missed a target once programmed. However, the steeled arrows, if they hit, were much more powerful and cut right through the thickest armour.

Time passed by in no time. The girls weren't used to the short Laptopian days, and before they got fully aware, the night fell down on them.

All over the camp bonfires flamed. This was the time for tales. Therefore, the Star-maids went from fire to fire and told the tale of David, who overwhelmed Goliath, more or less with bare hands. While gigantic Goliath was heavily armoured, David fought with bare hands and had no other weapon but a slingshot. God was with him, and the Philistines were defeated.

Repeatedly they told that tale and went from fire to fire.

As the light of the day faded, thoughtfulness took over. Never, as far as they recalled, had the tribes ever succeeded against Laptopia. In fact, they had been chased and forced to move further and further out into the desert to get rid of the grip and the arbitrary rule of the Laptopian authorities.

So, they knew about the strength and superiority of the artifacts and semi-artifact troopers. Those who knew what lay ahead weren't optimistic at all. Therefore, the idea, that one out of their ranks stood up to challenge some kind of Goliath, found open ears.

The seed was laid. The idea was born, and a question kept their minds busy, who the chosen one might be.

Many brave-hearted young men spent the night brooding over this idea. Who would not like to become a hero? To stand up in front of everything, adored and hailed by friends and feared by foes?

The night went by. The new day arose and straightened up reality. In the light of the day, no one dared to step into David's footprints. The dream was one thing, reality something else.

What about the girl from abroad, the girl with the magic bow? Well, no! One out of their ranks should it well be...

Meanwhile, Billy-Joe and the old Shaman of the Churingas debated on the subject. Subsoil they went for their oneness, and rebirthing procedure. Billy-Joe recalled some of the rites the Shaman initiated, as if they were his. Did he himself not light the fire once upon a time?

The Shaman produced all the common deeds and gifts, and sang along the common way, thus referring to the same origin, Billy-Joe doubted not.

The language, the friendly mood and attitude were leading to the only possible conclusion – the Churingas were descendants of the same offspring as his own kind. What they lacked in size, they had picked up in decisiveness and bravery.

Thus came the hour of truth. Billy-Joe could feel it. He was due to step into the world of final secrets and wonders. Long hidden discernments opened up and light fell in from the divine. He didn't know yet, but felt some sort of vague notion of what was to come. Unimaginable it was and intangible all the same – senseless quests of faint desires and longing impatience, who he was and what he'd do.

The heavy weight upon his shoulders he felt divided into less than half – yeah, thus he felt: he wasn't alone, while he - arising for the multitude - stood up. He'd only be the lens through which such forceful rays proceeded. A kind of eye he was a kind of outer surface, whilst from inside the combined forces of oppression amalgamated with the wisdom and the knowledge of all true divinity. The lust he felt and lightness of the other kind, right due to be reborn down here subsoil in darkness and dismay – the dialectic strategy of the unknown, and earthworm-like he twisted and sought shelter, while outside crude realities obeyed. Necessity was the one, but sacrifice the other – the true and binding fate of his, guessed he unknowingly.

So, was it wasting of time down here amongst intangible necessities, should he not train his physical appearance? Combine thus both the spirit and the flesh to wishful thought and likewise thoughtful strong desire? Safe sat he here subsoil, and yet was well connected, and overheard and overlooked the scene up there, an agent and his guider – the hound dog on the lead – of the invisible.

It was time to say good-bye, Billy-Joe decided, and made his way out into the open, and found himself right in between on future battlegrounds. The spot was chosen all too well.

While he returned, he set up a plan for his training and started on the way. Since he worked in that hotel, he didn't have time for such basics. Without a daily exercise of at least two hours, things developed into the opposite direction, as every true artist well knows. Such a boomerang was a terrible weapon in the hands of a true expert. These days - it was still used for hunting. However, in former times, men used it against each other, and you could easily behead someone with it.

He walked on steadily as the camp lay some miles away. The chosen meeting point lay in between almost half ways. It was essential though, to fix it here, thus was the secret strategy.

He needn't concentrate while he walked on and had his arms and hands work hard on the boomerang. The thoughts went back to where he came from. He still not knew all what had happened. He saw the Shaman with the inner eye. He saw him straighten up and clear his body to a convenient shape. Hair and wrinkles seemed to flatten, while Billy-Joe realized a sense of humour in his eyes.

A kind of mirror had he been, he fearfully admitted. However, while he wanted to ascertain him, the image disappeared again. An old man sat there murmuring and serving the fire with all kinds of ingredients, and lifted his left arm in a kind of helpless gesture, so it seemed.

As he had wondered over such an unfitting appeal, his concentration lacked, when something happened that he didn't get, occurring outside of the range of sight. He'd understood, but didn't recall what. Important had it been. He felt attracted all too much. The Shaman's image was it not but something else. Angry he was, and well delighted at the same time. The Shaman was old and weak, and limited, but still produced a wholly different behaviour, or was it the sight that fixed him in hypnotic gaze? While that went on, it seemed, as if he faded and returned in oneness of the strangest kind.

"What's wrong with you, Billy-Joe" he heard himself say. His own voice sounded strange, as if from the outside, and met his ears right from outside. "That's caused by echoes of the cave" he explained to himself again, but shook his head as he said it. Even his thoughts didn't obey the command of his will. He felt them strange and peculiar between his ears rumouring, as if he was miles away and not himself. Had it the fire been? The strange ingredients had made him cough.

One last sign. "For once, let me look right into that mirror, and for all" - he heard him scream. "Then I shall recognize the me I am." Smilingly the Shaman shook his head, stroked his hair out of the forehead, and sank down.

"I'm tired to death," a voice whispered, and it was Billy-Joe, as if he spoke these words himself. He felt and thought and was alike that sunken figure there, pressed down by heavy weights of endless years. Indeed he felt, as if he was inside, and while inside, he felt outside as well.

Had a drug while subsoil at that cave influenced him? While he thought back, he recalled the laughter. The old Shaman laughed on and on without reason. Was he the cause of such Homeric laughter? What was so funny about him? Had he not better things to do? Thus had he thought, while time was pressing.

The Shaman's Song

Of little help was what he found beneath.

*He cared for preparation, not release.
 Some spooky fits of nothing real:
 A lot of the unseen was here presented,
 Unspeakables were heard and represented:*

*At last, those tiny ones he sought to win.
 Their Shaman was he, and their kin.
 He couldn't stand the evil foe,
 Without the help of Billy-Joe.
 You know now who we are?
 I am but you, and stand not far:
 We are but one - do fight for me,
 Mine is the other outer world - united shall we be.
 I lead your arm, I guide your ear, with eyes of yours I see.*

While smoke spread about, he now realized why. He should learn but not too much. He should understand but only what was relevant, and most of all, he shouldn't bother what he saw and live his life right on, as if nothing had happened.

A full century lay still ahead, if the prediction fitted well his lifespan. What ever he did, what ever happened tomorrow and ahead, he somehow knew, he would live on, no matter what he did.

Therefore, he had such difficulties. His mates and friends all understood what was about to happen. He now understood, what it really meant for him and for the outcome of the duel. He understood the sacrifice, and that made him feel very sad and sorry.

His life appeared as if a river, with bents and curves, and knots and loops of the unknown ahead, but without end, as that was somehow still unknown, but still lay on beyond all so-called certainties.

The past he knew on the one end, and now he knew the future on the other. He didn't want to know and tried to overlook the discernment. The idea alone made him dizzy: a full century ahead and more than that, his lifespan spread. Yet could he be certain to return or had he to stay on?

The phantom of the old Shaman then shook his head and grinned some kind of bitter smile. "We care to get off thee" he said, "You don't belong to me."

15. The Tournament of the little Warriors

Walter came spinning in after all with the full load again. There had been problems while crossing those loops, he reported, “no wonder with such a cargo” - but otherwise thing went all right so far. He pointed at the payload and sighed. Both Slyboots-families had been aboard. “One lively pert child and four adults, one of them hysterical” he added and shook his head. Grisella blushed, but didn’t say anything.

Arundle reported what was going on. Things seemed even worse then expected, while the idea was well spread and so far accepted. She suggested that they all should go on to further spread the tale of David versus Goliath.

While approaching, they had a chance to have a look at the other army. Therefore, they were utterly stunned as they met now the freedom fighters’ camp, that hadn’t changed its appeal at all. All the more important did it seem to them to have things settled peacefully.

Intelleetus proceeded to the orphans, to tell them David’s tale. The poor little ones had lost their parents already even though the war was not declared. Fact was the soldiers of the state hunted those natives down like prey and slaughtered them, regardless of sex or age. The rumour went that hunting parties organized safaris through bush and desert just for that one and only purpose.

The story of David therefore fell on fertile grounds. Intelleetus arose an unexpected uproar amongst the orphans, and the elder ones, those more or less of the same age as Billy-Joe, wanted to volunteer right away and gathered in the morning before the head commanders tent to register.

What could be done? General Armyless thought for a moment, while he looked at the youngsters. Easiest and best would probably have been to discourage them and have them sent away, but that would have been the wrong signal. When it came to the worst, every single man could help and foremost those with the right spirit.

“What about some sort of contest?” he considered, and raised the question with his officers. A public contest would spread the idea even further, and demonstrate the eager will to fight. Some sort of public tournament he had in mind. The best and bravest of all young men could register.

When it came to the question of arms, things turned out to be not that easy any more. Nobody wanted the little warriors to get hurt, while fighting for the first position. On the other hand, the fighting had to be somehow serious.

Scholasticus suggested a kind of chivalrous joust with blunt arms, to minimize the danger of injuries, while the show-effect would be enormously.

All officers agreed at once, as Grisella was able to describe quite lively, what such a tournament was like. All kinds of medieval armour were required, as well as horses and saddles and the like. So, the magicians got busy once more. Horses and other mammals became extinct nearby, because of the poisonous rain. Therefore, it wasn't all that easy to get them here.

The preparations kept the youngsters busy and made them feel important. Arundle promised to care for the missing items, and came about with wooden swords and shields, as well as helmets and harnesses and lances for the joust. After all the magic bow performed his masterpiece: a flock of ponies fully equipped and ready for to go.

The youngsters were excited. Most of them knew how to ride a horse. Sword and shield weren't unknown either. Only the art of jousting proved to be difficult.

The boys began to fight right away and kept the referees busy the whole morning. When the spectators increased in number, the official jousting could begin.

"Oh, Billy-Joe, where have you been" Florinna asked: "You can't imagine what's going on right here. We're going to have genuine medieval tournaments. All the little ones have registered, and want to win the contest to challenge you. While we thought everything was under control."

"Our idea was a great success. The David-tale's going to make history over here. We only had to mention your name..." Corinia added.

"Funny enough, nobody objected" Arundle agreed with a little smile on her lips.

"Well, until Intellectus stirred up the orphans. Each of them wanted to become the final challenger at once" Florinna explained. "Thus the idea was born for such an contest."

"Scholasticus had the idea..." Grisella said.

"You might as well be challenged in the end," added one of the girls.

Billy-Joe had just returned and still was in deep thoughts. The old Shaman was on his mind. Somehow, he seemed to accompany him still. Billy-Joe got things straightened out and had decided to regard that old man as a kind of 'alter ego'. Present and absent at the same time, but still a kind of burden, though exhausted.

'No wonder' Billy-Joe thought, who knew him near to death. However, death he didn't fear. Death promised him a century to live on; or was he mistaken? Was his life done and over, while he was here? Was there no guarantee? 'Calm down, old boy' he heard himself addressing, 'how could you die, before you came to me?'

Billy-Joe looked into the face of his 'alter ego' a last time. He knew now, they wouldn't meet again. No advice would be given, no hint and

question raised. While Billy-Joe was filled up to the top with unanswered request. He'd have at best known everything and didn't, at the same time. He didn't even dare to ask about what's coming next. He had wasted his time with useless quests about his identity. While everybody seemed to know the truth. Hints had there been all over the place and from all sides; only he had been unable to understanding. They had all better known, then he himself.

Did he really see the old Shaman's figure disappearing? Was he a limping ghost there at the tents? He still had the chance to run after him, to hold him tight, and let him not escape. However, his legs felt like fixed and planted in the soil he stood upon. The old Shaman, his 'alter ego' faded, and while he realized, the telepathic connection cut, he learned about, when it was far too late.

He had been connected, his life had he had in hands. With poor results compared to such a lengthy distance. And, most frustrating after all - he still didn't know what was coming next. Had he only been more attentive, while his mentor taught him, back down in that cave, so full of hidden traces on their own earth in the past. All kinds of hints and signs had there been and tales had been told but met him inattentive or even upset, because of the horrid laughter, he still had in his ears. Making fun of him seemed to be the old man's privilege.

He'd well been able to grab for the truth right there already, amongst his ancestors, those paintings on the wall. Blindfold had he been, and concerned with the wrong questions. Whatever there was swaggering about him, from now on his life would never be the same, no matter of the outcome in that tournament.

It was high time for him to get started and become aware of the hidden gifts, slumbering in his self.

The boy sighed in desperation. The coming up burden pressed him down, and the fading image of his 'alter ego' made him sad. He saw his end in him. No matter how far away it was, so was it but his end.

There was no time to pity his self. He pulled himself back on to the grounds and turned to the exited girls.

Again, he'd only listened half. He had to ask and had things explained once more, the way they had developed.

Those knights' tournaments arose his curiosity. As they opened an entirely different view on the near future. He wouldn't be sad, if another took over and carried on the cross, but he knew this couldn't be. He was the chosen one. A merry deep warm feeling flooded through his body, as he thought of all the brave young men, who were prepared to give their lives.

So, he fully agreed with the idea. While the chosen form didn't quite meet his expectations. Better ways came to his mind, at least five different

ones, to proving strength and bravery, as well as strategic guts and cleverness.

As soon as he saw, what was going on in the field of action, he changed his mind. Had there been other than those fancy dresses, the competition would have met his wholehearted agreement. – One more peculiarity of those white folks, he thought and smiled. For the unity of the tribes, such contest was indeed a good thing.

“For real such make-up would be far too fancy,” he wondered. Even Scholasticus agreed. The little ones didn’t look frightening but rather ridiculous in their harnesses and helmets and all that brightly coloured waving stuff at them.

The afternoon came and the tension was growing. The mighty voice of General Armyless rolled like thunder over the heads of the assembly. A lot of folk had come to see the spectacle. The General was in his element and his words fell on fertile grounds.

He spoke about courage and bravery, decisiveness and the spirit of sacrifice in general and in specific, and mentioned the little warriors standing down there in the arena prepared and all eager to fight. He addressed them as ‘heroes of liberty’, worthy to be mentioned in one with the freedom fighters, who lost their lives for their righteous cause.

He also mentioned his role as ‘Chef de Police’ he had been for many years. He apologized for what had happened in his name and under his responsibility, while he pointed out that he had never failed personally. He’d never accepted injustice and despotism or acts of inhuman cruelties. His only real offence had it been not to have changed sides and organised resistance and opposed the regime actively until the earthly beings, most of all, Arundle, had opened his eyes and had made him see the wrong intentions of the secret forces behind the Prince and his family.

“To be more precise in fact, the clear will on the artifacts side to have mankind in general become extinct. Those are the true forces”, he said, “who lead the fate of Laptopia right into doom and destruction. Mankind run out of time and that’s what they intend. The poor misguided Prince over there” - he vaguely pointed towards the enemy’s camp - “and the few officers and men still human, are the puppets on the string of the secret hidden leader. The system of exploitation must be broken, and the time thieves discovered.”

“All time to the public – Same time for all” the crowd scanned. The tournament could begin. The first pair got prepared. Both knights lowered the lances and raised the shields, then let their ponies go. The small hooves thundered over the hard ground. The lances shook frighteningly, although their tips had been blunted, the appeal was still the same.

The riders met in the middle of the course. The lances crashed, both youngsters fell to the ground, but stood up in no time and drew their wooden swords, and began thrashing at each other. After some minutes, the referee stopped the fight and declared them both to winners.

“We took the best of course,” the General explained to his guests from the earths, being seated in the regal lodge, hastily set up for the purpose.

“Those, who didn’t make it to the tournament, were of course very disappointed, so I raised them into petty officers ranks amongst the Special Forces.

If we had them all down here to fight, we would sit here until the next morning...”

While the eve settled down all too soon, some kind of winner crystallised, and the question was, whether he and Billy-Joe should go for a last combat.

Billy-Joe stood up. He tried to explain to the tribes, what he and his alter ego just had experienced, while standing here, another part of his was struggling more or less with death. He in fact was the would-be-Shaman of the Churingas in the future, he declared. The future was in fact the presence – not so much for him, but for them. “Well, quite confusing that is, but none the less true.”

He’d come over here to fulfil his future task anyway, but as the image, that stood right here in front of them. The immediate task ahead was a kind of precognition of what lay in the future fate’s hands. He hadn’t asked for that role, in contrary – for a long time he had been unwilling to accept such duty. Until finally he gave in.

“What ever I do“, he exclaimed excitedly “I’m convinced, that my death is lying a century ahead. A century doesn’t mean a thing for eternity but a lot for us humans, namely a great gift and a heap of wisdom and responsibility.”

Nobody understood, what the tall dark boy up front tried to make clear, and that was good, because the spies of the enemy were surely amongst the crowd.

The General had instantly the same idea. He raised his finger to a warning - “Pssst, spies...”

Billy-Joe understood at once and gave his speech a turning. “Although, I know for sure, that death will get me tomorrow” he thundered over the crowds heads “I also know, that victory is ours at last. Yes, I will die tomorrow. That is certain, but my death will not be in vain, quite the opposite. My death will bring freedom to the people and peace to me, when I return to the forefathers of my people. You shall know that I come back one

day, to be precise, the day after tomorrow, to fulfil my duty in this world, like I do today and tomorrow.”

Things now became very unclear, not only for the spies, as was meant, but also for the crowd.

So it often is in times of war, - the greatest nonsense does a good job, if presented in the right mood and spirit as was done by Billy-Joe. It didn't matter, that he mixed up the time-levels a bit. In fact, he wanted to point out, that it was his duty to represent the combined army of all tribes and Laptopian humans, and was bound to survive, which could only mean, that the victory was his as well.

The idea of his sacrifice and victory on the battlefield had come to him either because he followed the advice of the General, who thought it necessary to confuse the spies, or was it because the old Shaman took over again, who was steering their joint vessel to the mount of their river of life.

His speech would serve the purpose, and the spies had no other news to tell, then the message of his early death. If Prince Watchalot could be convinced of that, he wouldn't hesitate to risk the duel, because the effect would be fabulous, if he won. Therefore, it had to be certain, that he won.

General Armyless hit Billy-Joe's shoulder in excitement, when they heard the crowd's agreement. “War is by ninety percent psychology. In times of war many things are decided on other grounds than on the battlefield and in open slaughter.”

Down there, on the field of action and honour the last two opponents laid their weapons down, while listening to Billy-Joe's words. The General promoted them to be lieutenants and set them in charge of two mounted battalions.

The crowd hailed again. The shadow of death had passed by and faded. The tournament was over. Tomorrow the death-bound stranger-of-their-kin would lead the army to a glorious victory.

It was a restless night to come. The tranquillity of the previous night was gone. Nobody told tales at bonfires. Everybody was busy instead. Parts of the army were on the march already. “Up to the front” the heroes of the tournament exclaimed, who went ahead as officers in command.

In the meantime, under the personal guidance of the General, the secret weapons became excavated. They had been well hidden under the tents. Many workers raised their hands in order to dig the huge machines out. In

the darkness nobody was able to notice, what they looked like and what kind of weapon they were.

As the camp was cleared finally, the so-called 'Dirty Harries' - as their service crew used to affectionately call them - began to move. Slowly first, but then after a while they warmed up, and gained quite some speed. Therefore, they managed to pick up with the army on the march at length. The troops opened by the zipper principle and let the machines pass through. They should take the lead by the General's will.

Furthermore, it became high time to have the wings swarm out and to form the 'triple tongue flanks' (one of the General's strategic masterpieces.) The Headmen - that is Headwomen (as there were quite a few women amongst the officers) knew the orders, and had their troops do, what had to be done. Therefore, the manoeuvre worked out fine.

As the morning dawned, the troops had reached their positions. The furthest flanks couldn't be seen from the city, they hid behind low hills.

Surprise would be the General's main tool, because he had to hinder the use of biological and nuclear weapons under all circumstances, because they did little harm to the more or less artificial troopers of the enemy. For that reason it was essential to get the 'Dirty Harries' unnoticed by the enemy, and as close as possible into the proper positions.

"The right distance is all what matters. If we manage to have them in our range, we'll just dust them in, I daresay" the General said with a kind of ambiguous smile, while he was due to man the central Headquarters with his staff, that had been prepared right in the centre, and opposite the crucial spot, where the duel was to be executed that was arranged and agreed upon by the two High Commanders in command of the opposing armies.

"Mind the distance. The best results will be achieved at an average maximal distance of five hundred and ninety-nine feet. Therefore, it is essential to adjust our metres most accurately, and mind the curtain-fire and the bound flank-fire in exact intervals. Make sure no one hits the sack. And now the last watch-check, ladies and gentlemen. The show may begin any time on my command."

The earthly beings were sitting in the glider parked nearby, pale and disturbed and out of their minds, while the General gave his last orders.

Did they really believe the machinery of warfare could be stopped again? Once the decisions were made and the orders given, to be executed any minute, as per necessity?

Billy-Joe and Arundle didn't stay with them. They had gone with the Chieftains of the flanks to get as close to the crucial zone as possible. The first option still was to challenge the enemy's leader for that representative

duel and to negotiate for an ultimate seize-fire, if you may say so - a conditional surrender of both sides.

Only if the other side wouldn't accept the seize-fire, the secret weapons would become activated. "You can only wish them, that they accept our suggestions" the General uttered most self-assured. Where did he take this certainty from? The scared earthlings asked themselves. Pooty just came back from a tour to the enemy and appeared from under his magic hood, to report what was going on over there, and what a terrible fate the enemy had arranged for them.

"They are going to vaporize us with their nuclear grenades and have us then changed into some kind of cannibal seaweed, to give us the rest." Thus, he had heard the Prince boasting in front of his officers.

"Under no circumstances we should get closer than two hundred yards" Pooty said while turning to the General, who just came in to have a look after his guests. "This is the critical distance for their nuclear power guns."

"Well, then let's hope it won't come to that," the young Prince murmured. He was not as convinced as his General and looked more like the little boy, he in fact still was, thought Corinia, who had a clearer look on him than her sister.

Laptopia-city came in sight when the morning mist faded. The General gave the sign to hide and so did the whole troop as if one man. They were just outside the critical range of the enemy's nuclear power guns, at least the main body of their troops, while the flanks had to get a little closer for their own secret plan of action with the 'Dirty Harries'.

Not the sharpest eye spied the giants behind the hills. "They'd have to have x-ray eyes, to see our 'Dirty Harries'" the General snarled between his teeth and nodded satisfied, while he put the spyglass off, with which he had checked the horizon on both sides.

He sent messages to the commanders of the flanks to let them know, how satisfied he was with what they had achieved. Again he stressed on the strict order to have the 'Dirty Harries' kept on stand-by, and have them under no circumstances put in action, without notification, by the ultimate sign or by secret order.

The magic bow's arrows sent orders. You needn't necessarily have them operated by him personally. So the commander-in-chief held a bundle of them on stock to use them as required. You'd only have to throw the arrow into the air and utter the aim. The rest was done by itself.

"While in the interim channels of time some arrows have lately been manipulated, things seem to be safe in one zone, as is here the case"- the bow confirmed the other day, while this matter had been discussed with the

General and his staff. That was the reason why arrows now served as messengers again.

On the way to Australia at least one of the General's messages had been caught and falsified. Not even the magic bow had been able to find out, how this could have happened.

While they had met to discuss that messengers' problem, the General used the time as well, to explain the function of the secret weapon – the so-called 'Dirty Harry'. The guests from Earth wanted to know all about it, mainly because of the General's stunning self-confidence.

"Yes, well, I think it's about high time to explain to you what a horrible weapon that is" the General just started, when Arundle stepped in to the headquarters, reporting that Billy-Joe had just left with the negotiators to meet the other side in the neutral zone.

So the focus of course changed, and everybody cared for more details, but there were none so the General went on:

"I didn't want to raise a false euphoria because - first of all - the undercarriage is still in the proving pHase. Never before, we managed to move such weight over soft grounds. A totally new construction was therefore necessary, in order to achieve that. Failures had there been quite a few, I must admit. However, in the end we succeeded.

- Well, in fact, I wanted to explain the principle as such, as to how the 'Dirty Harry' operates. We didn't chose the name accidentally, as you can imagine..."

"How much does such a machine weigh, after all?" Scholasticus wanted to know, and arose the others' temper, who wanted to know at last, what the mysterious machine actually did.

"I'd say some two thousand tons. On solid grounds, transportation is no problem, but in the loose sand, things turn out to be quite different, and sand is, what we need. Sand is the Alpha and the Omega, if I may say so" the General giggled.

"But what are you actually doing with the sand?" asked Amadeus.

"To that I come in a minute, let's go on step by step. First of all the question of transport. As I said, we are still testing. When we started, we tried with heavy transporters as they are used for heavy transports. We strained the axes and when we noticed that this didn't suffice we, added more axes. On solid grounds, we then managed quite well. However, our problem wasn't solved, as we needed sand - a lot of sand for the operation, or at least soft ground to become vaporized to sand.

Finally we found the solution. We based our thoughts on another principle, namely that of a heavy-duty-glider, as are used for the mass-

transportation of people and cargo. Thus reduced costs and increased mobility. Any site could be reached..."

"Much to the pity of the folks out there in the forbidden zones." Florinna threw in, but the General shook his head. "Oh no, we wouldn't try that, there is no reason, we didn't bother about the forlorn outskirts of civilisation anyway. However, that's a different story and has to do with the atmosphere. If the geological conditions are given, you find almost invisible spots all over the planet. Some kind of bubbles they are. They arise out of no-where and seem to create a very favourable climate inside."

"The General was in due train to explain the functioning of these mysterious devices called 'Dirty Harry'" Scholasticus interrupted.

"Right, our secret weapon. Where did I stop? Ah, yes, the question of transportation, indeed our biggest problem. As I said, our streets are in poor shape, because we don't use them anymore, and except for the landing, we don't need solid grounds either. So we are independent from the street system."

"How about the cargo transport? There must be a hell of a lot of goods transported all over the globe, as so few things still grow, and most of the people do live in the centres, or am I mistaken?" Scholasticus asked and gave the General another opportunity to wander astray.

"Right, the cargo, the cargo is transported by air as far as possible, the remainder goes by rail, mainly from centre to centre as our rail-system is rather small and limited to the major routes.

Unfortunately, the rail is also of no use to our secret weapons, for the given reasons, no sand and no flexibility, as I mentioned before.

Well then, to shorten this brief summary, dare I say, that I'm not only a gifted tactician and remarkable strategist, but also a remarkable inventor." The General sighted around, but didn't meet the eyes of any earthly being, because they weren't used to such frankness in ones own behalf.

"Yes, I myself had the brilliant idea of an airbag transporters system, that meets the most extreme requirements, while functioning undisturbed, as we may see soon. For loads of such dimensions, the principle of buoyancy won't suffice any more that can easily be proven. Say, you wanted to lift a load of two thousand tons by means of buoyancy, you'd require such a huge wingspan and such an enormous acceleration, that you would erase the landing port just like that. You wouldn't be able to operate near the ground, in other words. But as you have to operate on the ground, (otherwise the machine won't do the job), you can forget about buoyancy. This principle won't work."

Amadeus and Dorothea yawned; they had obviously problems following the General's sermon, while the Star-maids still tried to listen.

Only Scholasticus was following and gave the General an awakening glance to have him continue.

The duties of his position forced the General to deal with other questions. In front of the headquarter the guides and messengers were waiting with piles of arrows in their hands, all wanted to be read and answered.

“I’m afraid, I have to disturb you, my dear friends. It seems to be impossible in such weird times to finish just one thought. The plight calls. – Well, I hope we won’t ever see these horrible ‘Dirty Harries’ at work.”

With such final statement, he turned to his business. While the others began sorting the arrows by urgency and arrival time, and awaited the answers, as soon as they were written to wind them about the shafts and have the arrows leave towards the given destination.

Soon the preliminary headquarter hummed like a beehive. The General’s poor elucidations were soon forgotten, even though nobody knew, how the so-called ‘Dirty Harries’ worked. Nevertheless had they learnt, how difficult it was to transport them and that they needed sand or the like to operate.

The furthest front reported the direct contact with the enemy. Soon after the message arrived, that the messengers and Billy-Joe had returned safe, after they had passed on the challenger’s conditions.

“The trick had been successful” the report said: “When the Prince looked at his challenger and saw, what he saw, he burst out into laughter, and was even more self-assured when he was allowed to chose the weapons for the duel. Thus, the Prince agreed right away, still laughing.

The seize-fire declaration was signed simultaneously. All conditions had been accepted. Billy-Joe signed the declaration of defiance as well, which said that all traitors had to be handed over to the authorities before the tribes’ deportation, and all arms had to be laid down immediately. A list handed over with this declaration contained the names of the General, the young Prince, and most officers.

The Prince-regent declared ‘generously’ – as he put it -, he’d grant the tribes free retreat and no further reprisals in case of his ‘very unlikely’ defeat, while the ‘poor misguided citizens of Laptopia’ could return to their homes unharmed.”

“Now everything is up to Billy-Joe” Florinna whispered, rather scared, as she read on. However, the General gave it a malevolent wave and grinned impishly –“paper is patient” he murmured unheard.

Should those earthly beings believe what they wanted. He, for his person, was certain, that he wouldn’t give in to the Prince regent. Same as

the tribes, by the way. They wouldn't lay their weapons down – under no circumstances. He was absolutely sure about that. The Prince regent's so called 'generous offer', was in fact a farce and impudence.

The General trusted in strength. He knew that acceptance stood and fell with power. Those, who took the other point of view, were bound to lose.

19. A peculiar Duel

The last preparations for the duel ended. In the no-man's land between both armies, the site was fixed for the two opponents.

Although it was early in the morning, there was quite some action on both sides. The troops got ready to accompany the show. A good dozen of aids and servants swarmed about the Prince regent and assisted in replacing limbs and other parts, he laid off at night, because they were too heavy to sleep with.

"Watch out, you silly bump" the Prince screamed, while the harness touched his head. The hand with the whip twitched and one of the semi-human assistants rubbed his cheek, and whimpered.

The Prince was somewhat nervous now. Had his decision to accept the challenge been all too hasty? Still it was not too late. Perhaps it would be wise to send a double, than to take the risk.

Then he imagined the frantic exultation of the crowd after his victory over that creature – after all nothing but a naked savage – and his determination returned. Such a bath in the crowd he didn't want to miss. Like all despots, he was greedy for acceptance.

Once more, the pale Laptopian sun arose at the eastern horizon and was shining right into Billy-Joe's eyes on his lonesome trail.

He'd have to take care to get out of the sun as soon as he arrived.

He was too early. He had left the uproar of the camp. He needed the solitude, to meditate and to get in contact with the secret air of power making him strong inside. Furthermore, he contacted the strange ground, that wasn't so strange after all, as the sand was sand of their own. Still some rotten twigs were standing between solitary rocks as it most likely had been already over a hundred years ago.

In the left, he kept the neatly polished boomerang. The evening he had spent to sharpen the inner edge and harden it over the fire.

Such an insignificant piece of wood became a terrible weapon in the hand of an able warrior. With a little magic, you could achieve unbelievable things.

He lacked of experience. He knew most techniques but he hadn't practised them. Well, soon he'd have the opportunity.

To be on the safe side, Billy-Joe made himself invisible, by squatting down into a shallow trough, and then covered himself with a little sand. Nobody had seen him thus, not even while standing right next to him.

His opponent he couldn't see yet, but he heard the noise from over there, where the enemy's camp was, carried by the wind. The black spots disappeared before his eyes. That reminded him of the sun and to make sure he wouldn't have to look at him again unprotected. His sight was clear and sharp and he felt much safer. Although, the heavy load of responsibility pressed him down.

If he lost, he'd hand the tribes over to the hands of their tormentors. The Prince regent's revenge would be terrible.

Billy-Joe searched for the inner balance and tried to turn such unnecessary reflections down. Instead, he made himself aware of the ground he lay upon, the coolness of the early morning was still evaporating from subsoil, and combining with the muscular tension and the flow of blood and energy in his body.

His breath calmed down. All senses opened wide, and noticed everything around him – much more than usual. Every sound, every vibration, he became aware of, not the slightest movement passed unnoticed.

His hiding-place was well chosen, right next to the battleground. He'd be in position with only one quick jump. From both sides the troopers pressed in up to the fixed lines on both sides. The duel was set to start at eight o'clock. Although Billy-Joe had no watch, and Laptopian time was pretty odd to him, he became aware, that the time had come.

Both sides were allowed to get as close as two hundred yards towards each other. That meant they'd have to keep at least a distance of one hundred yards to the site of the duel.

During such a crucial state, no arms were allowed either to be moved or carried or shown. A general disarmament for the time of the duel couldn't be agreed upon.

Such rules were valid for all. Thus, the Prince regent had to leave his followers behind and walk the last one hundred yards alone. His aids handed his guns, pistols, grenades, and cartridge belts to him as well as the laser-sword and the enormous shield.

He tottered and swayed under that load, but then marched on with slow heavy steps, while all the stuff jingled and rattled about him. If Billy-Joe had fallen asleep here, the alarm clock now came.

However, he wasn't asleep at all. The walking fortress was not able to move fast. But his weapons were faster than fast and were able to hit a fly's eye in flight. Therefore, Billy-Joe had no illusions. He could only hope that he was even faster - both, physically and mentally.

The Prince regent had almost reached the site of action. From his side hails and hollows accompanied him and turned sardonic as nothing happened on the other side. So the Prince lifted his Tommy gun and strewed a fierce circle in the round, leaving a black trace behind.

For Billy-Joe, who didn't let him out of his eyes, this was the signal - his time had come. With the elegance and the power of sand viper he jumped out of the hollow, he'd hidden in. The boomerang's whirling about his body likes a rotor, and made the rays of the laser gun the Prince fired at him splash towards all sides. They splashed even more while the Prince increased the frequency, by that it happened that some of the rays became reflected in a way that they came back to the origin. Thus, the barrel exploded and the Prince let the gun go with a fierce cry of anger and pain.

A disappointed murmur went through the rows on his side, but became suffocated by the exultation of the others. The General and the Professor nodded at each other with an air of pride. 'What a devil of a fellow that is. We knew it, didn't we?'

Pooty and Walter jumped about in a kind of mad-mannish dance. The Star-maids kept laughing and Grisella and Dorothea embraced each other, while Amadeus had tears in his eyes. His hand was holding the hand of his son very tight, who knocked him softly on the back to have him calm down, while he overlooked the scenery from his seat in the General's lodge.

Those who couldn't see or hadn't watch Billy Joe's manoeuvre, asked others, who had seen, about the whereabouts and details, this seemed to be a kind of wonder as a matter of fact.

Right from no-where their hero had come, had had his boomerang whirling and his mental energy floating, thus a laser gun believe or not - broke, as if it was a toy. Such the world had not yet experienced.

The Prince looked bewildered and stunned at the useless thing in his aching hand, and then threw it away. With his still good left hand, he ripped a grenade from his girdle and threw it at the enemy, that is, where he had just seen the enemy.

Billy-Joe reacted flash like. He threw the boomerang and hit the tiny black iron ball right in its trace, so that it turned up and disappeared in the grey clouds of the Laptopian sky. With a flash and a fierce bang the grenade

exploded in the air and opened the sky for a shower of sunrays to come raining down on earth. Glowing drops spread about in the no-mans-land between the fronts. Just like a New Year's firework.

The boomerang sailed comfortably back to its master, who eventually caught it, just like that.

The Prince was now completely stunned. The troopers at his support moaned. While the other side broke out into frenetic exultation. The General knocked Scholasticus' shoulder a little too fast. Grisella kissed and hugged her sister. Intellectus boxed his father on the nose by accident. The Starmaids formed a circle and whirled about. All over the place, people hugged and jumped and screamed full of enthusiasm.

The Prince tore another grenade from his girdle and threw it away. It was just in the air when he drew his laser pistol and fired wildly about.

Billy-Joe managed to hit the grenade and send it up again, where it exploded and rained down in glooming drops. The boomerang travel on and turned back to where it had come from. However, Billy-Joe was jumping in the meantime like a rubber ball back and forth, to get away from the laser rays. The Prince's fire was unspecific but still fire, and the hot rays felt as if glowing needles passed by his unprotected body far too close.

He couldn't take care of the boomerang, and noticed it too late. In his head, a flash exploded, when the hard wood hit his skull. Blood splashed. Billy-Joe went to the ground like a fallen tree.

The shock of his followers could hardly be described. They didn't believe their eyes while they stared at the spot where their hero just had been seen standing straight and upright or whirling about like a madman. That was it then.

Frenetic jubilee on the other side made the heavy loaded Prince stagger at his fallen opponent to give him the rest, if he wasn't done yet. He tore his laser sword. The earth shook under his heavy steps, while his troops jammed their harnesses and stepped with their own feet the same stumbling rhythm that made Billy-Joe's followers freeze their blood in their vessels.

Scholasticus shook his head, he couldn't believe what just had happened, and gave the General a fearful glance who couldn't believe his eyes either.

Florinna and Corinia woke up by accident, so they disappeared from the scene. Arundle rushed over to Grisella and Dorothea, when she found herself standing all alone all of a sudden. Intellectus looked for shelter, and so did Pooty, who jumped into Walter's belly bag.

All over, pale and horrified faces were to be seen. However, the paralysis was not complete, the 'Dirty Harries' slowly, inch by inch moved towards the busy jubilant followers. The ranks and files knew their plight,

and the ideal distance came into range. In no time, they'd be ready for action.

The young Prince made himself the greatest accusations. Why had he let the youngster go on his behalf? Now the poor boy was lying in his blood. Too late it was.

The Prince was busy with such thoughts and didn't notice what was going on around him, while the troops still moved on gradually in order to have the machines pass by.

"Stop it", he heard himself screaming, when he noticed what was going on. "Stop it right away, back with the things. We agreed to absolute and total surrender in such a case."

Yes, he was willing to stick to the given word. The General was not willing, nor were the tribes and the Laptopian rebels as they could well imagine what their fate would be.

The Prince thought of other more divine things like his reputation in the face of history and things like that. If doom was their fate, they had to carry it with dignity such was his opinion. Unfortunately or fortunately he stood alone, or almost alone with that.

The General did as if he hadn't noticed the Prince or what he wanted. He shrugged and pointed at his ears to indicate that he didn't understand. The noise was indeed tremendous. The Dirty Harries stopped anyway - they were in position.

On the other side, the jubilant troopers still howled and growled in frenzy. The young Prince screamed again more or less unheard

"We surrender and lay down our weapons. We stick to the treaty - word by word and without conditions."

The General shook his head; the young man didn't seem to know what he was saying, and while troopers piled their arms to visible heaps, he had the Dirty Harries secretly loaded.

Arundle couldn't stand the uncertainty, nor could the magic bow, who brought her to Billy-Joe. Pooty also ran at him invisible under his magic hood. He'd been diving only into Walter's belly bag to get the hood, he later explained.

In the meantime, deep down subsoil, right there where Billy-Joe had fallen - hit by his own boomerang, something very strange went on. The old Shaman still awaiting his death to come, prepared himself for the next world. Only the decision of his youngster held him tight over here, - he knew, he'd be still needed. Something to come made his presence necessary - for one last time his art was required.

He concentrated all his power and might on what was going on above. Thus, the boomerang hit him almost physically and tore him off his mental feet, so to speak.

Now he felt his weakening life stream flooding back and forth and up and down, conveying thus his abilities to the bleeding body in the sand. First, they met the boy's muscular reflexes when his hand stretched out for the boomerang, which after it hit the skull jumped off, and up again, only to come now down the same instant when this hand stretched out for it. That was quite something.

The hand grabbed the wood with unconscious grip. The arm extended, guided by a strange force, and hit the Prince, when he bent down to stab the boy to death, right in the neck, precisely at the slot, where the helmet normally meets the harness, but due to the Prince's bent, didn't cover at that very moment.

Arundle and Pooty stared bewildered and totally confused at what was going on, and while the boomerang cut through the uncovered neck, Billy-Joe came to his feet in triumph.

The Prince's head fell first, the body followed right away. The head rolled on, so it seemed, but in fact, Pooty under his magic hood tore it.

Down subsoil in the cave, the Shaman sank to the ground instead, while Billy-Joe arose. His soul said good-bye. His work was done. So he finally went to bed for a long, long rest.

Billy-Joe's recovery didn't last long, he was still bleeding like mad. Therefore, Arundle practised first aid that helped for the moment. Again, the brave boy tried to get on his feet, but failed and sat swaying on his back.

However, the fact that he was sitting, was enough for his followers: Their hero was alive, and that was all that counted.

The Prince regent had lost his head and so had the whole army. As it is in authoritarian structures, so it was here as well. You cut off the head and the body falls apart.

The chaos was indescribable. Troopers fled in desperation. Vehicles chased about, tanks over-rolled whole platoons still awaiting in order the commands of the chief-in-command who had lost his head literally.

While the one side hailed their victor, the other saw him fall and vice versa. The defiance turned into victory. The heavy weapons on both sides were brought into position. Both sides had the head seen falling, but their conclusion was different, as far as artifacts were able to differentiate.

Their stubbornness made them stick to the course and the semi-humans amongst the officers couldn't get a foot on the ground. Such was the limiting factor that caused the whole army to collapse.

Nobody could make up the official opinion whether or not the victory was theirs. No B-plan was there in the backhand, but straightforwardness made them jump from left to right and back again.

The question was indeed, whether the rescue action complied with the regulations or not. Thus were the questions the young Prince and the General had to discuss. Right now, they - who just were more or less helpless - witnessed an army in dissolution.

The turmoil reached the summit when one of the mighty battle-towers caught fire and after some minutes crashed into the troops killing hundreds.

The fire spread even further and another tower crashed only minutes later. Help didn't seem to be in sight. Therefore, the young Prince decided to send help, while the General took care of the orderly retreat back to the position of the day before, where the camp still waited and a flying hospital that came into use now, but for the enemy.

"Well, humans are humans" the doctors smiled "even if they're only semi-human."

Billy-Joe still staggered about the battleground and couldn't believe what had happened. Just to be sure, he grabbed the Prince's head and moved with it back home to his people. Occasionally he lifted it – the crowd thought it was in triumph, and hailed but in fact, it was for a different reason.

Billy-Joe seemed to be out of his mind as he murmured and conversed with an invisible companion. - No, it was not Pooty under the hood:

"We're going to find a suitable body for your Majesty" Arundle heard him say. "But at first I better take you to your son, if I may suggest."

"Who are you talking to" Arundle exclaimed quite confused., Billy-Joe didn't listen and went on, heading right to the former headquarter, where the General and the young Prince were standing to coordinate the rescue operations.

Carefully he lifted the head up to them. The young Prince screamed in horror, and went pale and almost lost consciousness.

The General asked for a glass of water and supported the young Prince who swaggered, and almost fell, while the head began to speak. That was too much for the young Prince. It took some minutes to get him back.

"Always was somewhat shaky the son of mine" the head uttered with a smile. Arundle, who had followed Billy-Joe on his strange walk through the lines, seemed to notice the same old voice she was used to in former times. She came closer curious and so did Pooty, followed by the Slyboots.

The young Prince recovered, all the more his father declared he felt excellent. "I'm so glad to be rid of the heap of tin, the doctors have put on me," he said. "On the other hand I can't do without body in the long run."

“We’ll look for that,” the young Prince answered. “There are bodies enough out there right now” the General nodded. “I’m sure we find a suitable one.”

“I’ve got to get back to the palace for the operation. So hurry up, declare peace young man and have your father repaired”, he giggled like a goat.

The scene was somewhat peculiar and very strange, so Dorothea overcame a sudden chill and Grisella turned in dismay, while Intellectus covered his head in his father’s arms.

The proclamation of peace was outlined in no time. The head of the Prince was displayed on a pedestal covered by a cloth to lend him more dignity. Thus prepared, he read the declaration together with his son. Their joint peace treaty was transmitted all over Laptopia and was supported by readers and flyers later on, to get the broadest possible acceptance.

The war was over before it began. All active troops were sent home or returned to the police forces under General Armyless’ command. The superfluous weaponry was deposited in special troughs or subsoil caverns. The tribes went back to their sites, with all kinds of guarantees and things, but didn’t really care, as long as their liberty remained untouched.

Without a rebellious semi-human head, the artifacts fell back into their common pattern. The first law was strictly obeyed again, under all circumstances. Precautions would be taken to avoid future excesses of that kind, so the saying went.

The Laptopians maltreated their servants and made them responsible for the outbreak of the civil war, even more when they had suffered under the quartering of the soldiers, while the city had been made base camp of the misguided Prince regent’s army.

The young Prince Watchanot had his bodiless father taken to the clinic of the palace. A suitable body was soon found. Arundle hadn’t been mistaken: by getting rid of his body; Prince Watchalot lost his negative approach to life and his fellow-beings. Freed from the electronic apparatuses, he almost became natural. A heavy burden had been taken from his soul, when a warm heart was beating again in his breast instead of the titan pump.

20. The Rioters

Prince Watchalot soon recovered after his operation. He managed well with that basic change he underwent. The doctors were completely satisfied. However, after a while he began to experience extremely hefty changes of the mood. Euphoric phases altered with deep depressions. Dumb doubts turned him upside down, while reflecting on what lay just behind him.

What would His Secret Majesty say to his decision? Could he share his secret knowledge with his son? Was he ripe for that yet? Could he trust anyone at all? (That was the most general quest and made him feel sick.)

The fact that his son and those earthly beings from the past didn't have the faintest idea of what was really going on was sometimes unbearable. Whereas the answers seemed to him as obvious as the day-light.

He was fed up with responsibility. He'd loved to retire and take up his former life, when he and his wife had spent their time sitting in front of one of the hundred TV sets of the palace. Princess Soshedoes was dead now, and the comfortable life at her side was over forever.

He'd never been interested in politics, and now he was forced to make politics. He had to come to decisions and had to mind pressure groups – even to lead the country into war. Why all that? He still didn't understand enough of the intentions of the secret circle in the background.

At first, he felt good, when he hadn't had any idea of such level, but that went by soon. He had lost his cruel air together with the titan limbs, and power couldn't attract him any more.

The young Prince stayed by his father's side day and night. The palace was taken care of by the General's guards. "Safe is save" was the General's saying. Such an occupation wasn't laid down in any treaty, but wasn't explicitly prohibited either. Besides, the General exchanged the whole commanding level of the army, and had a sharp look on the degree of humaneness. No semi-artifact human was allowed to command humans. A complex system of grades regulated the chains of dependence. His final aim was to free the forces from all non-human artifacts-in-charge.

Thus, it happened, that almost each soldier of organic origin was promoted to an officer's or petty officer's rank. That of course led to other problems, because not all were actually suitable for a leading position.

Artifacts of semi-human conditions, who had been responsible for or in charge of oppression or mistreatments amongst the civilian population were arrested and returned to the labs and factories from where they originated, to become either wholly deconstructed or altered into an acceptable state of being.

Most of them ended up on the moon that was the cheapest solution. There they were out of the way and couldn't harm any longer, while

labouring about with the fabrication of wholly artifact servants. That seemed to be a useful occupation.

By then doubts arose of whether the production of artifacts was responsible for the loss in time. Nevertheless, the hostile emotions arisen by the occupation demanded such measures. The city of Laptopia had suffered to an unbearable extent by the quartering of the troops. That was why the bad feelings dominated still the public opinion. Therefore, the moon programme was highly appreciated, whether or not it had to do with the time-loss.

The loud-mouthed in the taverns and clubs raised their voices and asked for total extinction of all artificial forms of life. They told fancy tales of servants having beaten up their mistresses, or carry-on-laptops having thrown their masters into the dirt of the street.

Fierce cries for revenge arouse to answer such behaviour as well as that of the officers, who had maltreated the people by presenting themselves as occupants and masters. Genuine humans – so the rumours had it - had been forced to the lowest labours, you could think of.

The mob raged through the city by night and knocked down whatever artifact was unlucky enough to be still underway. Therefore, it didn't take long and the streets were covered with smashed laptops. Angry owners made them jump out of the window. They lay there still somehow alive and uttered all kinds of strange nonsense, as to how deeply devote they were to their masters and so forth. Garbage trucks came by to collect the debris occasionally.

Official announcements to deliver surplus artifacts to defined hotspots were scarcely attended. The Laptopians seemed to enjoy their private revenge. The police was permanently underway - not to protect such poor creatures – but to help with or take over their destruction.

“I ordered that naughty thing to creep into the oven, and what did it do? You wouldn't believe it - it resisted my order. Such unacceptable behaviour cannot be tolerated, can it?”

“He dared to shut off the dryer against my explicit order – I'd made him sit in, to teach him a lesson. I wonder how he managed...”

“The filthy fool resisted the bath I'd prepared for him. Somewhat strong it was - some sort of acid anyway. Well it takes strong means to get rid of such awful smell they deliver them with...”

The victory over the artifacts served as an alibi for the lowest instincts. By all kinds of ridiculous means, the Laptopians proved their superiority. And the worst were those, who formerly sympathised with the old regime of Prince Watchalot. Most likely they would have tortured the free tribes in a

similar manner, the young Prince wondered, while reporting to the crown council.

The young Prince, who was now in charge of the government, asked his ablest scientists to find out the reason for such behaviour. Why were the Laptopians so full of hatred? That was the question.

One major field of action seemed to be the psychology, first of all, the psychology of the masses. The mass couldn't be treated with the methods and medicine of the individual cure - that was the problem. Fact was that there were severe malfunctions caused by a specific way of life and the appropriate mode of education.

Deep down inside a huge amount of self-hatred slumbered more or less depressed in every individual. First of all, in those individuals with artificial limbs and incorporated spare-parts. They obviously developed symptoms of self-denial, as it was typical for the whole phenomenon as such.

Little could be done against such implantations, when it came to vital organs. At least a ground seemed to be set, where a therapy could start.

Ways of guidance had to be found. While the outcome of the field research seemed fairly clear. The study was unable to explain, why a similar or the same virus infected the free tribes as well. They had nothing to do with bionic spare-parts or organ-transplants of any kind.

Here and there marauding bands swarmed in from afar - about the outposts or even came to the city to chase down frightened servants or carry-on-laptops still underway by night. Once even a former Laptocop, who earned a little extra as private eye, had been attacked, while on nightly watch for a prominent customer.

Those were no frustrated former followers on the wrong side, but youngsters who had earned their merits lately by supporting the cause of righteousness.

The scientific investigation quite obviously didn't meet the clue. The initial cause for such violence lay deeper or somewhere else. The hatred had different roots. What were they to do now? What could be achieved by the given means? There was no answer in sight. Therefore, the young Prince looked elsewhere and contacted helpers from afar. He sent the Professor an arrow, whom he thought ablest. -Arundle had let him three arrows for emergencies.

The earthly beings had departed the same day of the victory. Walter took the Slyboots home first and came back for Billy-Joe and Pooty, whom he left behind, as their destination on earth was different. That was one reason, but most important - he didn't want to risk another overload, still being aware of the severe problems, they'd had the other day.

Arundle had in fact left right away by means of her magic bow, as soon as things seemed straightened and set. She just arrived in time for dinner.

Her parents had used the day to talk things over, and had come to some kind of conclusion. The boarding school had come into a very close range. It seemed to be more a question of the costs and other whereabouts, than a question of one or none.

Since Florinna and Corinia's parents had raised the same question, Arundle wasn't that scared any more. If she managed to join her friends, she wouldn't care where the school was. She'd go all the way down to Bombay and learned Hindi or so, if she had to.

Her friends were bound to change right next term. They were in the right age and Professor Hare looked forward to have his wife with him all the time, while excavating somewhere abroad. That was one of the reasons, another was far more thrilling, and had to do with the talents, both girls were blessed with.

"Talents are one thing, training and constant exercise the other", her mother explained. The school she had in mind seemed to meet the requirements of both parents.

"Most likely we'll join a boarding school, right next term," Florinna explained. "But it's not just a boarding school like all others", Corinia added.

Then the girls explained. A school of the other kind it was, while the name was peculiar enough already "School of Inbetween" – "strange, isn't it?"

Such plans altered Arundles attitude. In fact, they changed everything upside down. However, her parents mustn't know yet. They still should think that she didn't want to leave home.

The international family of Hares didn't meet the expectations of Arundle's father at all; her mother was a little different. Therefore, Arundle talked things over with her somewhat more open. Mrs. Waldschmitt generally agreed upon the idea, that Arundle joined the same institution. "If we can afford it" was her final comment, "and your father agrees..."

Arundle received the Prince's urgent plead three days after her return. The message came from the Slyboots. Scholasticus had been the addressee of the Prince, who referred to such horrible things as the battering of servants and other riots of that kind. Most alarming – so the message went on - was the fact, that the tribal kids formed gangs and terrorized the outposts or even the outskirts of the city.

The message had suffered again on the way through the time loops, as they seemed to do ever since. Scholasticus had repaired at his best and summed up the Prince's text.

His own note on the reverse side of the parchment started like that:

'Two weeks had passed in Laptopia, while things deteriorated. Prince Watchanot and his General didn't know how to proceed. 'We don't have the right to fence our little heroes in, after all they did for peace and freedom.'

Scholasticus suggested an urgent meeting, preferably in his house, and asked, whether she'd be able to let Walter and the sisters know, and of course Billy-Joe, who'd become a permanent member of those meetings meanwhile anyway.

The Waldschmitts stay at the Heaven's Gate ended. From here their route took them straight to Uluru, where Walter and Pooty were waiting.

Billy-Joe had been fired for not turning up and was free now. So Arundle suggested, he should try as a freelance tour guide, and offered her magic bow for assistance.

Billy-Joe was in desperate need of money, because he supported his clan folks. Without his income from the hotel, they couldn't do.

Good was indeed that they could meet any time now, all the more the bow liked Billy-Joe and accepted him as a mate and master.

"All you need to do is utter the wish to be with me, and you'll be right next to me" Arundle explained somehow bleary-eyed, before she lowered her eyelids, while she blushed.

Billy-Joe was confused and scratched the floor with his foot. Somehow, he felt secure on the contrary, and sure to make the same amount or more he'd earned in the hotel.

"You'd be an excellent guide. It doesn't matter, whether you know all the sights. The way you look is sight enough. I'm sure, you earn more than you did in the hotel, with the bow and all that."

In fact, bows didn't belong to the standard equipment of an Australian origine - they knew both. So the body-paint would do and the didgeridoo, and, of course the boomerang he was so proud of, after having saved a world with it, so to speak.

"Ah, yes that note from no-where - I had almost forgotten of that. Scholasticus is making a fuss about nothing again, I'm afraid. Well, I'm not quite sure what he wants. The Prince's letter isn't readable once more, so we have to rely on the Professors interpretation. While we tour through the land, you may see Walter and Pooty and have them travel over to Germany, and you pick me up for that meeting the Professor is so eager about."

Arundle waved with the note she had received from the Slyboots. It was indeed in bad shape. "...Didn't look better before" she said, while Billy-Joe shook his head when he looked at it, then gave it back.

The Professor's scribbling didn't mean more to him than Egyptians hieroglyphs. The letters of the Prince's letter on the back couldn't be filled with much sense either.

"Such messages suffer while travelling through the time. Or someone - kind of eavesdrop on us again - as it happened when you and Scholasticus got trapped the other day." Billy-Joe commented.

"Something's going on, that's for sure. It sounds like a state-crisis again, as far as I read Scholasticus, who seemed to have understood more than we have.

Well in fact, if you compare both notes, you may come to a similar solution. Things went out of control. The public morale dropped to the dumps. The police can't help it. But this time the artifacts seem to be the victims."

"So let's go then. Walter may have arrived already and the girls from Greece as well. It's night time over there anyway." The bow intervened, and off they went, as soon as they grabbed each other's hands.

They met the Slyboots in their joint parlour. Scholasticus just explained the situation. In the meantime, a more detailed report had been sent over by the Prince, also partly blanked but overall quite sensible.

"A scientific investigation by Laptopian scientists hadn't brought concrete results, but led astray. The scientists found a psychological explanation for the violence in the city. The scientists first believed that self-hatred was the key to the problem. They found out, that self-hatred came from the state of being the individuals were in. The lower the human likeliness declined the more the self-hatred increased.

In other words, if you were totally human, then aggression, self-hatred and violent acts against artifacts of any kind, were not your problem. As to the scientists the Laptopians hated their implantations such as bionic spare-parts, artificial limbs, and all kinds of electronic devices in the body."

"Yes, and this thesis turned out to be pure nonsense - soon was proved. When tribal gangs came pressing into outlets and solitary hamlets or larger villages, and after some successful attempts, even to the outskirts of Laptopia-City. Those youngsters consisted of pure unspoilt nature from top the toe, so to speak." The Professor went on.

Billy-Joe nodded. "It's the time, quite clear. Don't you see the point?" he asked. "It's like in your own world. Nobody has time anymore. No wonder your people become nervous or even aggressive after a while. If you

are always late and don't see how you could change, you have to become neurotic, don't you see that?"

"Well, and in Laptopia things are much worse. Time became the most precious good of all. And people can feel the time running off, dripping away like fresh blood from a damaged vessel" - Arundle agreed - I only have to look at my father. Even now, when we are on holiday, he hurries from one appointment to the other, so to speak. Well, in fact he keeps himself always busy and has always more to read, to phone, or to think about, than he is able to achieve. 'While on holiday, you are still in this world' he argues, when mother pleads for some spare minutes. As far as my father is concerned, I can clearly see the connection between lack of time and violence - more clearly than any other. Self-hatred on the other hand doesn't seem to be my father's concern, I'd say. If you knew, what he thinks about you... No, no whatever builds up in him is turned inside out right away. I'm sure you became aware of that, didn't you."

Arundle didn't know how right she was. Her father had come to her mind just like that. She didn't quite know, why. That came later, thank God, the bitter truth became obvious later, and racism was his minor problem, compared with the others.

Scholasticus saw the point Arundle and Billy-Joe rose. He asked his sister-in-law, if she saw any point in another scientific approach. The Laptopian scientists had obviously come to their limit that was the reason why the young Prince wanted them to interfere and help again, if possible.

Grisella agreed wholeheartedly and saw the point right away. She was certain, that she was able to overcome the weaknesses they had discovered in the psychological approach of the Laptopian scientists.

21. The Expert Opinion

The **'Institute of Applied Anthropology and Comparative Ethnology'** of Professor Dr. Dr. Grisella, Lady of Griselgreif to Greifenklau-Slyboots was very busy.

Grisella was modest in her everyday-life. Titles didn't bother her. She didn't care about the outward appearance, while secretly she was as proud of her birth, as of her titles and academic degrees. For the latter she had done a lot. With redress she realized, that by her person the old prejudice of the unavoidable mental decline of the blue blood was not only brought to a halt, but became reversed.

Prince Watchanot's desperate notes from afar were responsible for such hectic state in the Institute. All computers were humming their melodies. Busy assistants hushed about, carried weighty files of printouts, not all that different from those Laptopian laptops, they were wondering about. Grisella evaluated one study after the other that she had performed by the detailed advice, she'd received from her brother-in-law, the Professor, who was in contact with the Laptopian regent.

At first, she realized how difficult it was to elapse the adequate parameters. In fact, such studies referred to an entirely strange cultural epoch with very different prepositions. Nothing could be taken for granted. The simplest modes of being had to be questioned and eventually re-evaluated. The so-called anthropological constants, most studies started off from and relied on – either in ancient or present days, had to be questioned.

The human factor was most likely not the dominant one any more. Too many social affairs were steered by artifacts, sometimes in the third generation, so to speak, and lived their own lives in autonomy and autarchy, which reflected back on all human affairs.

Thanks to Walter and his magical stone from Uluru and with the assistance of the General's police force, a flock of eager young scientists found their way to Laptopia. In order to overcome Grisella's 'Mobil phobia' the magical stone had arranged something very special. Instead of the invisible cloaks he used to transport the cargo in, he produced for the same purpose a rubber-like black box that made Grisella feel much safer, while others felt like being closed into a coffin.

The magical stone killed – so to speak - two birds with one stone by such alteration. Grisella travelled free of pain and the young scientists didn't see anything, and didn't even realize, they were travelling at all. To them the black box was a kind of gate, they passed through.

As soon as the young researchers arrived, they began to investigate. They were probing into people's private affairs and snuffled about in the dwellings of the average Laptopians. They asked a lot of more or less sensible questions, while filling in all kinds of forms and tables, about habits and customs, and, of course, - reasons for the outbreak of violence. They also measured the psychic threshold levels of violence and frustration and the like.

Violence was the main topic of the investigation, the aim was to find out, why the probationers were so easy to upset, and why they were seeking for scapegoats and made them responsible for all kinds of mischief, foremost the artifact whipping boys.

‘Scapegoating’ seemed to be a general pattern of the whole society. Every now and then, a whipping boy tuned in. Whether they referred to the forbidden zones or the tribes, the mammals, the earthly beings and finally yet importantly the artifacts – without scapegoat, life didn’t seem to work.

As far as the time was concerned, the scientists had an eager eye on. Time was the subject of their main hypothesis. Permanent lack of time, furthermore the loss of time, caused severe problems.

The question was how such mechanisms precisely worked, and what could be done to influence that. After all, the investigation should not only bring forward discernments into the Laptopian society, the idea was also to alter the course to the better.

As a result, the investigation was intended to produce ways out of aggression and violence. And to show clues for tolerance and harmony among all beings (including artifacts.)

The result of many labour days confirmed, what Arundle and Billy-Joe had suggested right from the start. The scientists regarded time as the crucial factor of the highest priority, so to speak - the inner core of their hypothesis.

The lack of time made life difficult for the majority of Laptopians and caused all kinds of aggressions. Scapegoating (not self-hatred) was the outcome of this. The whipping boys were the artifacts at the time being. The Laptopian society longed desperately for time. Time was the most precious value you could think of, and leisure was pleasure.

An ever-lasting life was the key to happiness. In fact, it was the potential as such – people wished to know and wanted to ascertain themselves repeatedly of the potentiality of their singular and personal life without any end.

You could think that a society of that kind didn’t know boredom. In fact things turned out to be just opposite.

Such a paradox asked of course for investigation. As a starter, the scientists thought boredom to be the dialectical function of the lack of time - a mode of compensation, so to speak. In fact, they didn’t quite understand, what did that either mean.

Their explanation had somehow to do with fear. The increasing and permanent lack of time resulted in an overload of fear, they said, and disabled the probationers to think of anything else but the lack of time, and this fear turned thus into boredom – somehow.

This hypothesis was in fact some kind of speculation and therefore didn’t contribute to the enlightenment of the situation or to the state of being in general. The facts as such remained:

People, who don’t have time, and suffer from the lack of time, feel empty and hollow, in other words, are fed up with boredom.

In fact, the investigation was of great value to the sciences, even though the outcome for Laptopia was poor. The results were all too well known over there.

Several doctor's theses were initiated and met an interested academic audience, while still in the state of progress. The comparative Anthropology experienced an almost revolutionary boom. The world of science spoke of a discovery of epochal dimensions.

Professor Dr Dr Grisella, Lady of Griselgreif to Greifenklau-Slyboots experienced (much to the disappointment of her brother-in-law) the unexpected international attention of an enthusiastic audience all over the scientific world and even above or below, so to speak.

Professor Scholasticus Slyboots namely thought himself to be the discoverer of the strange world of Laptopia. The merits, his sister-in-law were in due course to harvest, in fact were his, and his alone.

The Laptopian secret was somehow destroyed, and was no secret anymore. Even though, nobody understood the mechanism of the mode of transformation as such. Stepping through 'the time-window' (as Walter's black box was addressed) was still a secret and only available for the selected body of the project. Anyhow – Scholasticus was upset and felt almost the same violence the project was about.

For the first time in the history of mankind the aspect of the future came into a reachable focus. 'Responsibility for the Future' became the 'word of the year'. While in fact things went wrong right from the start. Irresponsible time-hunters showed up out of no-where with all kinds of safe working programmes, and made millions in no time, selling them to a greedy audience.

The fact that they had the money to become cheated that way didn't make things better. All of a sudden, the public realized what was going on: The future had begun already. The idea of the exploitation of time was born, and was only a question of time, after all.

There were no limits. The big bosses, when they grew older, but as well, scientists, physicists and politicians were most interested. The 'Time-Value-System' (TVS) fascinated all those, who longed for power and privileges – the ruling class, in other words.

The Laptopian problems came out of focus all too soon. The cause of the study, namely the horrid aspects of mankind's future, didn't bother the public really.

Aggression didn't mean much in a society where crime and violence belonged to every-day-life, whereas the new values fascinated and stimulated the people, and most of all the ruling class.

The question to the scientists was, how the Laptops managed to control and master the time to such an extent. How could it be, that time could be deposited on a bank account? As one of the theses out of Grisella's team suggested. That found its way out to the public - unauthorised, as Grisella pointed out.

Scholasticus had severely prompted on her not to lift any of their very special secrets, like that of the swollen fore-fingers for example, and of course the consequences, and the way things had been corrected afterwards. Such topics were prohibited under all circumstances, and Grisella had promised to that. Now a leak had opened, she could explain neither to herself nor to the public or to her brother-in-law.

The publication suggested that the author knew more than what the investigators had found out. He seemed to have a wider view on the subjects as most of the engaged scientists.

Most likely had there been a revolution in between, (most likely on the turn of the twenty-second century), because no 'Time-Exchange-Account-Converter' (TEAC) were in use anymore. The whole system had obviously changed. Subtler methods seemed to have taken over in the Laptopia of the investigation.

One individual was finally spotted, who had investigated in the central library of Laptopia-City. He found clues to a 'radical social turnover of epochal character'.

When he traced further, he almost got lost in the maze-like labyrinth under the castle. Nobody had been down there for ages. And there he found an almost complete file of historical documents - (that's what he said afterwards.)

Furthermore, the eager investigator excavated a complete third volume of the 'History of the TEAC-System' and made it the base of his sensational publication, Grisella found out.

"It's better that way, than one of us had let the cat out of the bag, or my people in my Institute, where we fuddled around with these damn TEAC-things lately", Scholasticus turned in when he realized Grisella's acute difficulties, and what she had found out about the leak.

"I just can't tell, how disappointed I am" Grisella ended her explanation and excuse. "Even more, because we came emotionally so close by now, after all. I'd have put my hand into the fire for each of them..."

"...While I made absolutely clear that every bit and piece had to go over my desk before publication..."

22. A School of the very Different Kind

The Waldschmitts' tour to Uluru led them right through the half of Australia. Such a bus-tour was part of the roundtrip. While on tour you should assemble impressions of the landscape and things. However, scenery passed by day by day rather monotonously. None of the travellers cared for what passed by outside, but were reading or chatting or had a nap.

Mr and Mrs. Waldschmitt had an argument. They always had one – either with each other or with Arundle, who was sitting right in front of them.

Arundle was bored without her magic bow. She was in a bad mood and as aggressive as a sand viper. All the problems she had in mind didn't allow her to read. In fact, she was waiting for the evening to come. That was the time; she used to meet Billy-Joe, who was travelling from station to station, as did the bus, by means of the magic bow.

This took just seconds, so he had enough time to guide tourists through the land to all kinds of wonders and sights, the scarce land offered, or if it didn't, he invented them. He performed strange rituals, sometimes even strange to himself. He had invented them right away, or he blew the didgeridoo, he'd purchased in a souvenir shop, as well as a box of body paint – 'to be washed off easily' - it said in the instructions.

He earned quite a bit, definitely more than at the hotel, as Arundle had predicted, and he liked his job. Nobody cared about the bow, and if someone did, he said, it was a present to his grandpa by Shaman-Chief Sitting Bull.

That's why he possessed a little extra power. And therefore, he was not allowed to let it, not even for a short tiny moment of taking a photograph. In fact, he knew how precious the bow was to Arundle.

Every night they met in front of the hotel, while Arundle's parents sat in the hotel-bar for a slumber-drink.

Sometimes it happened, that Florinna and Corinia joined them, and then they rehearsed the action taken after the crippled message had come over to them from Laptopia. Both girls thought Arundle's reasoning about the latest violent outbreaks quite enlightening.

With their own parents, they had talked things over. Their parents had also suggested a scientific investigation, similar to the one, underway right now. The girls agreed - not wholly convinced - when they learnt, who was in charge. (They then didn't know yet about the leak, but learnt the following night.)

The project was stopped, because of the leak, Walter was available again and promised to await Arundle and Billy-Joe at Uluru.

Florinna and Corinia felt at first somehow superfluous under the bright shimmering stars of the Australian sky by night. Arundle enjoyed the scene all the more, when she took the chance and lay well hidden in the warm sand together with Billy-Joe.

They didn't do anything. They just lay there glancing up right into this sky. They felt somehow forlorn and taken care of at the same time. Mother Earth underneath bore them and made them feel the oneness of the universe, so to speak.

Billy-Joe hummed and whistled some kind of melody or uttered strange sounds, while she plaited his curly hair. They were together, that was it, and felt the universal harmony they were part of: one in all and all in two.

Florinna and Corinia almost were in due train to wake up. They didn't want to disturb. Then the sky reached out for them as well. Their oneness might have been slightly different from that of their friends – so what?

It still was a great feeling, and had to do with what they had in mind and for what they had really come.

In fact, it had to do with the coming up school-term and the letter; they had received from the 'School of Inbetween'.

The night proceeded, a cool air made them shiver. The mood passed and they sat up, all four of them.

"We got the papers after all, believe it or not" Florinna exclaimed.

"Yes, both of us, isn't that great?" Corinia went on.

"Our parents strongly recommend you should apply as well, right away." Florinna exclaimed.

"It's just the right thing for Arundle as well, our mother said" Corinia nodded.

"Really, she said, that you'd have to, indeed..." Florinna said.

"Yes, but what about the test? How can you be so sure?"

"Well, the test was really easy, you know..."

"See, we were invited to meet one of their scouts."

"Yes and that was it."

"We talked things over and after a while she okayed us through – both of us. It was peanuts..."

"We did it all by night, while dreaming."

"Won't be a problem - for both of you, anyway" – Florinna said, with a long thoughtful glance over to Billy-Joe who followed the conversation with a strange expression on his face: A mixture between admiration and desperation.

The worries about Laptopia's future had covered up Arundle's genuine sorrows concerning her own near future - to come about - next month already. She had agreed to her parent's idea of sending her to a boarding school, when she learnt, that her friends' parents had had the same idea.

Now a decision was made. Her friends had been already accepted at the 'School of Inbetween'. 'What a strange and funny name' she thought.

"It's high time now to register and have the scout look after you, while asleep. Won't trouble you, I daresay", Corinia smiled.

"Won't be no problem for both of you", Florinna added laughing.

"If things work out fine, we'll meet live and in person next month on that funny Isle of Wisdom-tooth. A secret island hidden somewhere in the hemisphere anyway. So, wait and see..."

"We'll wait, and you see..."

"It's kind of special school..."

"Very special, indeed..."

"The School of Inbetween is quite different. It is for girls like us. You find the queerest subjects, you could think of."

"And the oddest combinations as well. Say you were interested in Fortune telling, then you'd be wisely advised to combine with Sleep learning for example..."

"Or mystic's go best with magic..."

"Well, of course there are conventional subjects as well, but not only, that makes the difference."

"Lots of sports and things, of course", she said with a look at Billy Joes broad shoulders in the dim light of the stars.

"And for a chosen few there is an extra isle, near-by..."

The sisters uttered what came to their mind, more or less unsorted.

"...And for those who cannot afford the fee, there are generous scholarships."

"Yes, I think this school is the right place for all of us" Florinna looked around again and ended up at Billy-Joe.

"It is a wholly international affair, so to speak." She continued. "The students come from all over the world."

"Rather big, as well..." Corinia went on - "And you can pass all kinds of exams, like psychology or gardening or deep-sea-diving..."

"Our parents said, they hadn't had a chance like that, while young..." Florinna said.

"All you've got to do, is ask for the application file..." nodded Corinia. - "Just like that..."

"And there are no other tests, you said, are there?" Arundle asked.

“Well, yes and no, you’ve got to fill in a lot of forms, you and your parents...” Florinna said: “But the only real test is that scout, you know... - well and some kind of questionnaires as well, I’d say, am I right, Corinia?”

“And the scout is a woman?” Arundle wanted to know.

“Well our scout was a woman, no doubt, her name was Marsha, am I right, Florinna?”

She nodded. The sisters only had to look at Arundle to see, what was going on with her. She was all in favour of the School of Inbetween on the Isle of Wisdom-tooth, deep down under, untraceably hidden, a kind of nowhere-land, so to speak.

“We’ll be picked up in Athens for the new term next month, by some kind of shuttle, travelling all over the world.”

“In Sydney we will change for the last hop...”

“So nobody can find out, where the island is.” Florinna confirmed.

“I think we will be picked up by a helicopter.”

“Only three weeks from now, I’m really looking forward to the end of our holidays this time...”

“Well of course we will have to say good-bye to our mom and dad, sure enough – still we’re really looking forward...”

“What a name that is – ‘School of Inbetween’ – between what, I wonder” Arundle said and didn’t expect an answer. I’m sure; my parents won’t let me go. The boarding school is supposed to be a kind of punishment in my father’s eyes, hard work and discipline, to become prepared for the hardship or even cruelties of life. My mother sees things not much different. They want me to become as hunted and driven by the lack of time, as they are. They don’t want to see me happy, I’m afraid.

“Let’s see. I ask my mother to call your mother. They came along pretty well, as far as I remember” Corinia referred to Mr Hare’s birthday-party, when Arundle was allowed to stay over night.

“We ask for that special application file, designed for managers, executives and analysts and so forth. I’m sure they’ll find the right tone. Perhaps the scout will come to you. All you have to do is let her join your dreams, if you’re able to – and you are very able, that’s what we know...”

“And so are you, Billy-Joe, yes, yes I caught you, you know quite well how to move and select the right track while dreaming.” Florinna said, while she blushed and so did Billy-Joe. Perhaps she should have an earnest word with her, Arundle thought, but then pushed such dark clouds off. She definitely had better things to deal with. Well a word amongst mates might be useful anyway...

“School of Inbetween probably teaches the art of uncertainty and vagueness as well and the name derived from that...”

“Could well be...”

“ In the executive’s application file the global aspects and the international attitude will be focussed, I presume” Corinia said. She seemed to have had a quite different conversation with her scout, Florinna thought.

“Major computer-companies are sponsoring the School, that might perhaps change your father’s attitude, don’t you think so?” said Florinna, while Arundle nodded with a little and hopeful smile on her face.

Billy-Joe had to earn money, and couldn’t afford to spend it for such a purpose. His clan depended on his income. His little sisters and brothers would starve without his support.

His stepfather was a heavy drinker and spent each penny he could lay his hands on, in alcohol. He wondered what could be done to stop him drinking. He knew how little he could do.

Sometimes, when desperation stretched greedy fingers at him, he wondered, what good there was in a lifespan of over one hundred years, as predicted on him, while his near future was sad and dull.

The longing for knowledge almost hit him physically, and he felt like a dry sponge in need of water, to become alive. Even more, when he had learned everything his mentor, Kaúua Bereróo, was able to teach him.

Since he met Arundle, a wide new range of life had opened. With the impatience of the youth, he insisted to step in right away.

Florinna and Corinia were about to leave, that is, to wake up. They promised to care about the application-files and the scout’s visit.

“Would be best to have things sent to you by mail, right here, while still on tour. Otherwise it will be too late, I’m afraid.” Florinna said.

“And for you, Billy-Joe, we order an extra pack. There is always a way, don’t worry, and it’ll be found, I am sure. There is no reason to hang down your head, poor boy”- little Corinia said in a motherly air.

“...Won’t take long, and you can check through the folders yourself. It’s very personal, though. Somehow, they seem to know us already – wait and see...” and off they went - fading like mist in the morning sun.

Some days elapsed. Uluru had been reached. Billy-Joe took the honour of guiding the Waldschmitts through the red rocks, where nothing was beside the heat. The red rocks were glimmering and the light hurt in the eyes, while the back and the feet were aching from the steep climb in the boiling heat.

You didn’t notice anything of the magic of that site, while the tourists flooded up and down the narrow path, leading to the top.

“You must have been up there, while here” Mrs. Waldschmitt insisted, when Arundle recommended going back for her father’s sake. Mr Waldschmitt stood gasping dark-red in the face and longed for air in vain.

“You go on, I stay right here and sit down over there in the shade below that rock,” he panted. “You can pick me up, when you come back...”

Arundle wondered whether she should help with a little magic, then dismissed that idea. Her father would have minded, for sure. He stubbornly denied the existence of the supernatural, when it came from his daughter. She had caused enough mess and trouble already with that bow of hers.

Had Arundle by then only known, what else was hiding behind such clear-cut positivistic position.

Billy-Joe was first to get the mail, while the scout seemed to have visited them simultaneously. “Mine was a man” Billy-Joe reported, “didn’t ask him for the name... well, yes, we had some kind of conversation, so to speak. That was it. After five minutes he rushed off, said he had a lot more checks. I’d be okay anyway, no question about that, he said and vanished.”

Arundle sneaked out of the dining room where the busload was having dinner with floorshow. She met him as he was checking through the thick bunch. Many questionnaires had to be filled in, as their friends had told them. A friendly letter reminded him to fill in all forms carefully, before sending them back.

“This seems to be some kind of description of the place, even with some photographs. Looks rather pricey, I’d say. I doubt very much me fitting in,” he murmured somehow disappointed. At that time, he hadn’t yet read the small print on the reverse of the personal application form.

Arundle was no less sceptical as to her application. “You only mind the money, for that - a solution will be found, but what shall I say. My only hope are Hares – and of course, my parents’ wished to get rid of me. However, for that, I’m sure they know other solutions. – Alas, come on, why don’t you start reading. What does the article say?”

23. Nobody’s Wish and Will

Billy-Joe began to read:

‘Nobody shall wish to oppress an other – thus reads the motto of the School of Inbetween. As freedom is most important. Only while free, (wo)man can unfold all her/his capabilities, and all her/his abilities. Not in solitude by her/himself, but in communion with each other, a human can become a whole human. This is in short the guideline and conviction of the School of Inbetween.

The School of Inbetween is located on the Isle of Wisdom-tooth, somewhere in the South Pacific. The island consists of one single volcano-head and is formed like a molar tooth (where its name comes from.) The edge erects high up almost perpendicular but of different height (at some spots almost one hundred yards.) The island looks like a medieval castle, or, as suggested here, like a Wisdom-tooth – thus combining appearance and contents. This was the idea of the founders in 1984, when they constituted their ‘School of the specific kind’, (the latter School of Inbetween.)

While ‘nomen est omen’ – wisdom became the declared aim of efforts, as wisdom fills life with sense.

From a geological point of view, the island is still young. There are volcanoes some hundred miles away still alive. This might have been the reason why the island never was settled, although the interior offers a somehow limited but succulent flora, growing in the fertile lava-soil. Only a few species found their way on their own over the sea.

The rare human passer-bys regarded the island as the seat of spirits and demons, - another reason for staying apart.

The island does not only erect upright down to the sea level, dangerous reefs also surround it, so it is impossible for ships to land here. Except for a secret passage through an adjacent atoll, there is no possibility to land even with a small boat.

The School of In-between itself is located with most buildings on the inner plateau – an almost circular flat volcano-slot head, about three quarters of a mile in diameter.

An extension of the same volcano is close by. The main island erects black and repulsive at least some fifty yards out of the foaming sea around.

Down to sea level, lead some hidden stairs (besides - there is a cargo-lift as well.) Right at the bottom, you find a small beach, where the pupils may bath and swim, or surf and sail.

From the highest peak on the opposite side, skydiving is possible. Trained skydivers may find their way back on their own; all others will be picked up by boat.

The central building has grown downwards, down into the ground, that is, down to sea level. The cabins of the first hour you still find, but the teachers and students now live in the subsoil tower.

On the surface, you can find all kinds of agricultural devices, stables, barns and cabins, for a variety of animals, next to fields and meadows and orchards.

There are by now some hundred people living on the island. Therefore, we can't produce all our food, but have to import more than half.

A picturesque cascade is sparkling some thirty yards down from the highest erection, immediately next to the little helicopter-port. The water is pumped up by means of hydraulic pumps and comes from the so-called 'seawater de-salter' that was invented in the early days.

The lack of fresh water had most likely been another reason, why nobody set foot on the isle. Of course, you find fresh water here and there, after the regular rainfalls, but no fountain or rivulet may be found.

The main reason, why people stayed astray, was still another one. When the rough wind from the south gets caught in the interior, the crater starts humming and howling like a band of madmen, and more than one low grader woke up by night, while he meant to hear some kind of werewolves or the like, and was probably not even mistaken.

The elder ones get used to the noise, as the southern winds aren't blowing all the time, but in fact, seldom enough, that is in July and August, when the winter is at its peak, and temperatures fall almost to the freezing point.

Otherwise the climate is friendly, although wet around the year. Rain is falling often but short and bad weather is moving fast, because the island is small.

Inside the subsoil harbour at the lower end of the atoll, you can find all kinds of boats and yachts, even a submarine.

Excursions to neighbouring islands or to the mainland help to avoid boxed-in feelings. A couple of hundred people so close together can hardly stay apart. Therefore, lessons last from morning until evening, and a library, containing a great variety of books, offers the chance to sit back and retire.

Its beauty compensates the tightness of the vale. From the cascade on the one side to the stairs down to the marina on the other, any detail may please the spectator's eyes. Nobody, not even the founders, have ever become fed up by such sights.

The houses are a feast for the eyes by themselves with the glittering black walls, the red roofs and coloured window-frames and doorways. Palm trees accompany the footpaths, and orchards invite for a stay, while the cascade is rushing in the background.

The interior of the main building offers even more surprises. The building extends downwards. Most classrooms and all students' dormitories are subsoil. Pupils rest in common rooms, so nobody may feel alone. Only the single teachers have their rooms on the ground floor (teacher-families live in their own houses.)

A wide, light- and air-flooded centre well, and exotic plants all along the walls, simulate nature in its origin. The light is led in by a tricky system of mirrors, while the air circulates by means of pumps.

Varieties of halls house all kinds of facilities. Cosy bars invite to relax. The only two discothèques of the island, might be somehow outdated, but manage without drugs and alcohol. Beside narcotics, you find almost everything, the youths may dream of. It's impossible to refer to anything, that isn't available or is obtained right away.

The indoor arenas comply with international standards. Most common ballgames can be performed there. Even polo is no problem. The sauna next to the indoor pool is located at the sea level. Over the whole south-easterly front, you find huge panorama-windows letting the daylight in, not only into the swimming-hall but also into the adjacent facilities above.

However, the outer facilitations mean little compared to the inner. The School of Inbetween is living on by its spirit. As nicely as the southern sun is shining, compared with the inner light, that is shining bright inside out, the sun looks somewhat pale.

That inner world can't be described in the same manner as the outer. Everyone namely has this world in the inside obviously. There are also blossoming gardens, and flowers grow and it's going to be built there faster, braver, and mightier than the ablest builder ever dared. The buildings of the spirit, the castles, built in the air, the fairylands and dwarf-dwellings behind the seven hills, can only be seen by the inner eye, as be shone by the inner light, and hidden from unauthorized, profane gazes of bleak curiosity.

Occasionally a gifted writer or artist may turn the inside out on paper or canvas, or have it sound in immortal tunes.

The magic of the instant, that is, the instant of eternity, may release its splendour and open wide for such an individual, to give her/him a faint idea of the unlimited ability of our wholeness and the reality to come.

However, beware of leaden gravitude and morbid earnest. Asceticism won't be regarded as a singular gate to the no-where-land of hope and glory and may turn out as misleading.

The senses shall be free, and shan't be oppressed. The School-community knows but one limit: The freedom of the individual mustn't serve as the proposition to limit others.'

Billy-Joe stopped reading because the paper's finished. He sat there silent, and so did Arundle for a while, then she said "Well, that's it, I suppose, there you feel drawn to, don't you?"

Billy-Joe nodded. "You'll see, we shall manage. If we really want to, we'll get there..."

24. Mr Waldschmitt's Annoyance

"See, what I've got here", Mr Waldschmitt exclaimed. He sat at the breakfast table with his wife, close to Uluru right in the middle of Australia and read his homely morning paper. Normally it was sent to him daily by mail. However, while touring through the land, things didn't work properly, so a thick pack ended up right here at the turning point of their voyage.

What a nuisance that had been, all the more he'd have had plenty of time reading while being seated in a bumpy boring bus all day long.

"Doesn't make sense, spending a hell of a lot of money over here, while giving up everything" he argued. Arguing was his major occupation since he was here. The service didn't meet his expectations. Dust was everywhere, it came through windows and walls just like that.

"Is that my problem?" he used to say, when his wife pointed out, that there was another sandstorm raging outside. Therefore, the personnel just couldn't help it.

"You've got to care for clean rooms under all circumstances, I repeat, under all circumstance" - he addressed to the manager. "It's your job not mine. What do you think would it look like in my office, if I accepted any of such excuses. Where there is a will, there is always a way. Believe me. From us you could learn a lot. German law and order, that's what you need over here. Well, had I the command over here, things would be different, I assure you. You wouldn't believe how fast a world can change with a little discipline..."

The patient service personnel didn't really care, while listening to such tirades. They knew their men and protected themselves inside as good as they could, whenever the 'German Danger' was about.

"Well, at least my papers are here, that was after all about high time" Mr Waldschmitt ended his tirade at the Eden Hotel close to Uluru. He grabbed his bunch of papers and rushed into the dining room, where his wife was awaiting him impatiently.

“Where were you again, Roland, your coffee is almost cold. Wait, I get you a fresh cup. Now sit down finally. What can I get you?”

“What I always have” Mr Waldschmitt grumbled, still upset about the poor service and the reluctant morals. Mrs. Waldschmitt hurried to the buffet for scrambled eggs with ham and German ‘Schwarzbrot’ (not such English gummy-stuff) and some Swiss cheese, and returned heavily loaded, only to meet her husband deeply involved in his papers.

“That is unbelievable, such an impudence...” she heard him shout. However, this time something in the newspaper raised his anger. There he had discovered an article – after all on the fourth page – under the headline ‘News from Science’.

“They have snatched our idea, that’s unbelievable. While we have been so close already” - he was screaming red-hot with anger, when he raised his face from behind the paper. He grabbed for the coffeepot inattentively and raised it to his mouth.

“Yah, my lip, that thing is steaming hot” he shouted and threw the tray by accident off the table with all the scrambled eggs and ham and Schwarzbrot and Swiss cheese, and the coffee pots (Mrs. Waldschmitt had taken one for herself again as well.)

The bunches of papers went the same way - the same way unread, over the Jordan, so to speak, and were ending up their short-living lives in the juicy mess on the floor.

His impetuosity caught attention of cause. From all sides servant came rushing by, asking how to help and whether a doctor had to be called.

Mr Waldschmitt only shook his head, so he and his wife were complimented over to another table, while a cleaner with bucket and swab approached and began to clean up.

Mrs. Waldschmitt rushed off again towards the buffet to get the same load of breakfast again, while Mr Waldschmitt still held his burnt lip. Then all of a sudden his papers came to his mind, most of all the article he’d been raging about.

“Halt, halt, um Himmels Willen (for heaven’s sake)”, he screamed at the cleaner, who just was in due course to shovel the worst mess together, and looked somehow irritated towards that funny redheaded man, who had switched into his native tongue by excitement.

While in fact in general he seldom left the German language and accepted the uncomfortableness of the Australian English to take over the communicative command.

“Halt my Zeitung, I need doch my paper noch” but it was too late, the whole bunch just landed in the bucket and couldn’t be saved anymore so full of scrambled eggs and coffee as they were.

“Nu, come with the feet on the ground, my Lieber, they’re online – even down here, I’m sure. You go and get your article in the office over there, it’s as easy as that.”

Mr Waldschmitt patted his wife’s backside, as she bowed down at him to serve the second breakfast of the day.

“You are a clever old house, that’s what you are, although you aren’t the brightest up here” and he pointed at his forehead with a dirty grin on his face.

Mrs. Waldschmitt blushed over the compliment she’d heard, while forgot about the rest. Even compliments of that kind had become rare in their matrimony.

Mr Waldschmitt greedily gulped the food down; the whole affair had been stimulating his appetite, and while eating was telling his wife what had annoyed him in that newspaper article.

“Some rotten band of researchers stole our idea, believe it or not” he was mumbling and spit his wife some Schwarzbrot-crumbs on her dish.

“What idea, my Lieber, nu, what idea?”

“How shall I explain that, to you after all? – We started of with an entirely new concept. It has to do with relativity, so to speak. Time is no fixed quality but a state of being that differs with an observer’s point of view. Has to do with Einstein, of course, and is nothing new. Everybody knows that in the meantime. It all depends on what you are making of it. We in the club, I’m proud to say, managed to proceed a good step ahead, not only theoretically but in practice, that’s the point. We can prove now, that you can deduct time on the one hand and that you can add time on the other.” While he said that, he stressed on **deduct** and **add**. As if that was all-important.

Mrs. Waldschmitt nodded eagerly, as if she understood what her husband wanted to tell her. In fact, ‘the Club’ her husband had mentioned, was a thorn in her eye, so to speak, for a long time already, because he spent his free time there, and when he was at home, he chatted with his fellow-members on facebook or the like. That wasn’t much better either.

“...As I said, in the article they reported about some researchers, who copied our approach. And they even claimed to have overcome the threshold of the future entirely, while we are happy to spare a couple of seconds and that only with mice, while they gave the impression of having been there by themselves. That far I read...”

Mrs. Waldschmitt went on nodding. “Now you contact the reception right away and have that article printed for you. I’m really curious of how it goes on.”

Arundle stepped - still sleepy - through the entrance of the dining room.

“No word to the child, especially not about ‘the Club’,” Mr Waldschmitt was hissing in his wife’s ear. “This mustn’t interest the witty thing at all. Besides, no word to no-one, is that clear?”

Mrs. Waldschmitt nodded eagerly while swallowing the wrong way. Her fits of coughing sounded almost natural, so Arundle didn’t notice her parent’s secrecy.

Besides, her head was full of other things. Since she had read the description of the ‘School of Inbetween’, she couldn’t think of anything else. How could she manage to be sent to that boarding school?

Arundle had just sat down, when her father jumped up and headed towards the reception. “I go then, Spatzi,” he said with such a meaningful glance at his wife, that Arundle heard the bell ringing at once. However, she pretended not having noticed anything.

She saw through the entrance her father talking fiercely at the receptionist, and was asked behind the counter after a while, only to come out again after some ten minutes or so.

He waved with a piece of paper over to them and seemed quite satisfied. “I’m upstairs, huffle-puffle,” he roared. Mrs. Waldschmitt nodded back somehow humiliated, while everybody in the lobby looked up and at her.

It took only minutes until Mrs. Waldschmitt also tried to retire. Nevertheless, Arundle took her time with the breakfast, and her mother didn’t want to be impolite and leave her all alone. So she drank her fifth cup of coffee and ate another roll with jelly, although she was all fed up already.

“Your father and I wanted to get up to that cave up there where the pupils got lost on Valentines Day. You know that tale, don’t you? I fact it’s a movie ‘Picnic on Valentines Day’, don’t you remember?”

Arundle nodded. “I’m meeting Billy-Joe” she was in due course to utter, while she recalled that her parents mustn’t know anything about her relationship with him. So she altered her saying into “... well, with Belinda Jones actually, an English girl, I met here in the hotel - for a round of squash or so”, she altered her faux pas rather elegantly.

“That’s a good idea, love, but beware of the heat. And don’t forget to drink, your body needs that...”

Arundle nodded acquiesced and Mrs. Waldschmitt went upstairs after her husband, to pick him up for their excursion. The shuttle-bus to the Rock left every fifteen minutes.

Arundle kept waiting in the lobby until she saw her parents descending. She waved at them a farewell. "Until lunch, dear" her mother called.

"Take care" Arundle replied. As soon as they were out of sight, she rushed to the lift. The white sheet lay on the desk; it was the copy of an article from a newspaper. She noticed the actual date and looked at the headline. Then she knew, she was on the right track.

<< Sensational Discovery by German Scientists.

>> A Professor together with her team of scientists of the renowned J.W.v.Goethe-University came about with a sensational discovery. 'Einstein's theory of relativity was transformed into reality', they say. That would mean nothing less than the conquest of time. In their sociological survey at a place called Laptopia (such is the name of our future planet) they give us a very negative discernment into the planet's future. 'Creation runs into trouble' the Professor said.

One of her assistants even topped her conclusion. 'There is a war going on. A war about the most precious good of the future', the young man declared, and referred to his actual publication titled 'The Time War'.

'Far too soon' said the Professor, have these so-called facts been published. 'The eager young man clearly passed the line between fiction and science. The publication can hardly be called even 'science fiction'' so the Professor. 'Nothing but speculation of the worst kind', the Dean went on.

'The time is not at all at our disposition. There is still a long way to go, before the problems of time travelling will be solved. Mere coincidence and surprising circumstances made that singular sight into the depth of time and space possible.'

The scientist made clear, that there was no substantial perception whatsoever, of how to handle that doorway to eternity. 'But if there was, the booklet wouldn't be worth the paper, that it is printed on.'

'I'm deeply hurt by that malicious and wholly unacceptable breach of confidence' the dean concluded.

We will keep you informed of the further development.

Before copy deadline, first comments by renowned futurologists called the whole affair a canard. ><<

25. Trouble at the Institute

Arundle was sure the article referred to Grisella's investigation, although the report didn't mention any names. How came, her father was interested in such research? Why had she only learnt by accident from the newspaper how far the survey had developed already? Furthermore, how could it happen, that a book had already been written about the subject? Even though Grisella seemed to deny, what was published in there.

That would explain why Billy-Joe and herself had looked out for Walter and Pooty in vain. They eventually should have been here at Uluru, as they had agreed upon.

Walter was obviously in Germany and arranged that strange time-travelling business there.

Arundle didn't dare to take the article with her, but put it back right where she had found it. She hoped it was quite the spot, it had been before. Her father was absolutely fussy about details. He'd noticed the tiniest change.

She hurried out of the hotel, turned around the parking lot until she came to that eucalyptus-grove, where Billy-Joe camped right in. He was just about preparing his breakfast. Over an almost fume-less open fire, he was cooking something lengthy, fixed to a stick.

Could well be a snake, Arundle thought and shook in disgust. Billy-Joe's smile, when he saw her, gave her a warm feeling, nonetheless.

He invited her to sit by the fire and offered a cup of coffee, but she shook her head. "Had breakfast just a minute ago", she said and settled on a pile of blankets. Still panting after a quick run, she reported of what she just had learnt from the paper. Billy-Joe listened carefully, and was thoughtfully chewing the snake.

"I don't understand, why Grisella didn't inform us – no call, no arrow, just nothing. Why had I to read that in a paper? They seemed to be busy with that investigation for quite some time by now."

Billy-Joe nodded again and murmured ascertaining, while he was chewing that tough meat, he'd cut off a piece from time to time, while he's gulping it down with a sip of steaming hot coffee from a rusty tin-can, its opened lid a handle formed.

Arundle was scribbling a harsh note on a piece of paper, tore it round the shaft of an arrow, she pulled out of the invisible quiver of her magic bow, and put in the aim, and off it went, straight up north, through the cloudless blue sky, disappearing soon behind the horizon. Thankful and tender the bow snarled at her with some kind of a giggle: "A shot a day, keeps the doctor away." While she followed it with her eyes, she wondered,

whether the bow was out of his usual equilibrium, for reasons she only could guess, but didn't at all disliked.

"I'm going to take good care of you soon" she let him know. "Shouldn't we go and have a look by ourselves, don't you think so?" she asked and looked Billy-Joe right into his eyes. "Why didn't they let us know?"

"Perhaps their message didn't get through," Billy-Joe suggested without conviction. No one had ever heard of an arrow, which totally missed the aim. While they were quite familiar with garbled messages.

Therefore, Arundle only shook her head. "Nonsense" she uttered, "complete nonsense, there must be another reason - and a good one, after all. There had been that trouble in the institute, if you could believe the paper. Who knows who's behind that again? - My parents are out of the way until noon, anyway, they climb about in the rocks. That gives us almost three hours. Enough for a short visit."

Billy-Joe eventually had had a tour, but that he'd skip, if his 'toadies' didn't wait - which they most likely did. That would strengthen their prejudice about the unreliable natives. That was also some kind of touristy delight, he decided with a smile, and so did Arundle.

"Well then" he said rather decisively - "off we go, let's get away - here is your bow, after all." He pushed the magic bow right at her, and while she took it, she realized that warmth flooding right through her whole body from tip to toe, so to speak.

She grabbed for Billy-Joe's hand murmuring senselessly, and an instant later they stood before the Slyboots' house in Germany.

There it was morning as well, but the morning of the day before. They seemed to have arrived even some hours earlier, because nobody was up yet.

In fact, Intellectus and Scholasticus were out of the house already, the one at school, that had started again already, because Intellectus went to the Waldorfschule (a private public school, that didn't comply with the order of public holidays.)

Scholasticus was at the university. He held his basic lecture like every morning from eight to ten.

Grisella was still in bed and Dorothea was sitting at the breakfast-table. She didn't know much about that survey.

"Grisella has sent several messages and tried even on the telephone but couldn't reach you. She wondered, why there was no reaction from your side, anyway. Well, at last you came, - might be even better, though. I think I get my dear sister out of bed right away. I'm sure, you aren't here just for fun."

“Right you are” Arundle answered – “besides, I’ve got to be back by half past twelve Australian local time. I have to see my parents for lunch then. And I don’t want to upset them again, because... - but that’s a different story, we’re going to tell next time.”

Had she only spoken of their plans, and then they’d been told, that Scholasticus and Grisella accepted a call to the School of Inbetween. Negotiations were about to come to a positive conclusion. The Slyboots families after all were already sitting on packed suitcases, so to speak.

Grisella appeared in no time. Arundle told what she’d read in her father’s morning paper and wondered again, why her father was so interested in the project. “Somewhat strange to me too”, Grisella said with a long serious glance at her.

“Yes, strange things are happening, dear child. Ugly things... I had that feeling all the time, while the project was underway. As if we were spied out – and then that leaks here and there. In the end, I hardly dared to trust myself. Where did that guy come from? All of a sudden a student appeared. His name is Marduk, first name Malicious – strange enough, isn’t it? Seemed to be a programme more than a name. He cheated himself into the group. I thought my assistants did handle that, and they thought I did. We woke up far too late. Walter and Pooty and most important of all - the magical stone - disappeared of course right away, but it was too late already. Let’s hope for the best in that respect. Without our so-called time-window, he won’t get far on his own. Anyway, this man set foot on forbidden grounds, and that’s all my fault, mine alone. As if our poor descendants won’t be in trouble enough... Lucky though - had Walter the brilliant idea with that magic black box, otherwise...”

Most of Arundle’s questions had been answered by this brief and somewhat muddled report. She glanced over to Billy-Joe, whether he had something in mind, they should ask. However, he didn’t say anything.

“What was the outcome of that survey, anyway?” she then asked. Grisella explained as clearly as she could, what had been done over there by the investigators, and what had been proved, while the causes still weren’t so clear yet.

“If I understand it right, your studies confirmed our suspicion.”

“Yes, responsible for the outbreak of violence is the permanent loss in time, while all other causes seem to be only aspects of the main cause, if I may say so”, Grisella explained and went on: “Well, of course you shouldn’t neglect the culture gap as well. And the role of the artifacts is by no means clear at all.”

“But what does that mean?” Arundle interfered. “What are the consequences? How shall we help those poor creatures and their brave

leaders? That is the question, and I'm afraid, you didn't get much closer to an answer."

"Well, I don't quite agree, at least I wouldn't put it that way" Grisella objected vaguely. She knew by heart that Arundle was right. The survey did only confirm what was known already, or what had been suspected. Besides, the study couldn't exclude other components, but that Grisella was not prepared to admit as well. The factor time was one amongst many. Not all the time of the world could guarantee a peaceful world. Therefore, a lot more was required.

"In fact we are confronted with a horrible alternative," Grisella concluded: "Either Laptopia runs out of time or the Laptopians kill each other beforehand. The outcome is the same. All our efforts, as far as they tried to stop the loss in time, led into greater trouble. The worst would be, if we were responsible by interfering."

Arundle had had a similar idea. Still she doubted and saw unsolved contradictions. Her father came to her mind, although he didn't fit into the picture at all. He had had a negative relationship with time, ever since she could remember, had suffered under the lack of time and the pressure of time. If he all of a sudden began to ask similar questions, something else was in due course, something, they had no idea of yet.

"That guy, who wanted to profile on our account, was dismissed right away, exam or not. He has to see how he'll manage on his own with his inaugural dissertation. That's his own fault. He should have thought about before he ruined everything", said Grisella, still in rage.

However, that didn't help. Neither they, nor the Laptopians would get rid of such plague. Arundle and Billy-Joe looked at each other. They'd never let things out of their hands again. Had they only known, that Grisella was swarming into Laptopia with a whole bunch of scholars, while they had thought of a more theoretical survey, back home in the ivory tower of sciences.

It was too late now for accusations, but not for to stand the challenges, that were lying ahead of them. Even more because things were deeply connected with Billy-Joe's personal future. He would experience that in time by himself. The development over there in Laptopia was therefore also his cup of tea. The question was, whether they could still manage to lay some kind of positive germ for a lucky outcome. The upcoming failure mustn't be the end. Even now, there was still enough hope left for Laptopia. Good men endured and tried hard. The young Prince, General Armyless, and even the altered old Prince Watchalot, who managed to reflect on mischief and misbehaviour. So many people were longing for a worthwhile life, were

defending their liberties and traditions, all those brave tribe folks, most of all the Churingas...

If they managed to trace down the parasites, which were steering processes of decline and decay, even the time might be safe in the end. Wherever they followed a track in success, strange things happened elsewhere and overran the present trouble. News was falsified. People were moved like puppets on the string, were altered or sacrificed or finally disappeared at all. And behind all that stood the time. Be it hidden under other derivations, or plain and open, spotting at another culprit that soon turned out to be the false one again. A war all of a sudden seemed to be unavoidable, artifacts rioted, or the humans raged about and destroyed their artificial servants.

While Arundle spread out her thoughts like a patterned carpet, Billy-Joe was ascertained as well, as to the role he was playing. Most important would be after all, to keep a clear sight on the overall picture, instead of being stirred up by any detail. It would be of great help for him to study together with Arundle, and to exchange knowledge and experience, and to be attracted and influenced by her clear brain. Arundle, no doubt, was able to clear things up in order to get an overall view.

Even Grisella had to accept, that Arundle achieved more in a couple of minutes, than the project in days.

“We can only hope, that the regent family and the General manage to restore peace long enough, until the secret circle of parasites is spotted” – Arundle summed up her thoughts – “that’s what it’s all about.”

“That means some of us should have another close look again. Would you know, where to begin?” Grisella asked, somehow intimidated.

“Well, I won’t say anything right now. That place isn’t secure. All our movements and notions might well be watched and spied out. Hopefully not also our thoughts and feelings... well, that’s not my idea” Arundle lifted her magic bow and gazed about meaningfully.

Grisella didn’t say what she had intended to. She asked instead: “But how shall we be watched and who should do that?”

“If they manage to stop our arrows, they employ quite some power. I guess they have erected already a stronghold at present. I won’t say more for now...” Arundle said with another meaningful gaze.

As soon as she finished, an arrow came in. It was the one, they’d sent this morning in Australia. Arundle checked the time. The arrow hadn’t been stopped, or over read and falsified, as the note was identical word by word, with what she had written.

Perhaps somebody tried to throw dust in their eyes, now, when they had uttered their suspicion. Sure enough, they’d find the arrows sent by

Grisella just like that, as soon as they returned. Therefore, it would look as if they hadn't searched carefully. That, in fact, they hadn't really done, as they had had other things in mind.

Arundle promised to keep in touch this time. Best would be to meet in the dreamtime, the Australians and the other Star-maids were so familiar with, while the Slyboots didn't seem to be gifted enough for that.

"And if you go right at that culprit, what was his name again?" Arundle asked. "Marduk, Malicious Marduk" Grisella answered – "but he's gone of course."

"He surely had someone to back him up," Billy-Joe suggested. "Somewhere we've got to start anyway, and you definitely wouldn't be forced to fly" Arundle picked the thread up.

Grisella thought this a good idea. She still was very upset. How dared that boy making her look like a fool in public, by publishing things, he didn't have the faintest idea of. He might even still have friends in the institute. Someone must have brought him in, at last. Of course, she had to be careful. The best would be, she talked things over with her brother-in-law and her own sister. Together they might have an idea of how to proceed.

"What can be done, we'll do. I'm going to ask Scholasticus in any case, if he'd like to come along with you to Laptopia again. No, that won't work; he isn't familiar with that dream stuff, and you wanted to go that way this time to be less vulnerable. Am I right?" Grisella asked.

It was indeed a great advantage, whenever you got into trouble, you could wake up. That worked most of the time, if you didn't wait, till it was too late..."

Arundle was going to see her friends anyway, they might as well travel together with Billy-Joe, who wanted to come along. Since he knew his role in the future world of Laptopia, he sometimes felt as if he was there already.

The sight of an almost endless life ahead, made him easy. He knew he wouldn't miss anything, no matter how things looked right now. –

The School of Inbetween came to his mind, while he got aware of such outlook. Anyway, without Arundle, Florinna and Corinia he didn't know if he had still wanted to go there.

"See what you can do. Remember everything is of help, each hint. Things like - why my father had the idea of wondering about the problems of time. If I had the time, I would first overhear my mom. Would that be not a good job for Dorothea? We will be back the week after next. Perhaps you can arrange something. You could right as well talk about me as the troublemaker. Well, you could do me a favour then. I want to leave home for a boarding school, but it has to be a special one, and therefore I need any

support, I can get. I want to get to the ‘School of Inbetween’. That’s a very special school, you know...”

“Of course I know, my dear, don’t you know, that I’m going to teach right there next term? It’s somewhat secret, you know, don’t you? – and things aren’t settled yet for you?”

“Well, yes and no, they want me, that is to say, they want us, as Billy-Joe applied as well. But now my parents have to agree, and that’s why I can’t go any risk.”

“Don’t you worry, dear child, we are on your side and won’t let you down, nor your friend.”

Arundle nodded very gratefully, while Grisella went on: “We are going to make the big move at the end of the year, if things work out fine and we like it there. I’m sure we will. Scholasticus is going to have his own professorial chair and is able to research in his beloved border fields.”

“Well, ‘nomen est omen’” (the name is programme) Billy-Joe put in and felt good about the admiring glances of the women.

“Yes, that fits the name: School of Inbetween, right you are, thank you” Grisella gave him a warm smile, then went on: “I wasn’t fond of the idea of going there by plane. But you can of course go by ship as well.”

Arundle looked over to Billy-Joe and her glance expressed her thoughts. ‘Things gonna work out alright for both of us.’

It was about high time to leave. “We gotta go now. Give our regards to all we love, and don’t forget my mother...” - and off they went, like a flash of lightening.

26. The Equilibric Balancer

At lunch, Arundle tried a normal conversation with her parents. Instead of sitting at the table monosyllabic as usual, poking listlessly in her plate, she asked about the excursion, and tried to be friendly, anyway.

Mr and Mrs. Waldschmitt didn’t know, what was going on. First, they wondered, but didn’t really mind, when Arundle managed to twine in nasty remarks here and then. Her morning had been boring to tears, “that English girl is exacting” she said, she had been with.

“Well, next week, we are leaving anyway” her mother replied. “Why didn’t you come with us?”

“Yes, it’s about time to get home, isn’t it?” Mr Waldschmitt agreed. There was still that long bus-drive ahead of them.

Her parents didn't see much either in those caves, Arundle learnt.

"Plenty of rocks of course – 'viel Steine gabs und wenig Brot'" (many stones there were but little bread) – her dad recited laughing. Arundle's empathy improved his mood quite a bit. Why wasn't she always like that? - He thought and sighed.

From Belinda she had learnt what happened at the breakfast-table, Arundle was chatting on. "The spot can be still seen in the dining-room."

"That was quite something" her father nodded giggling. "While burning my tongue I kicked that tray off."

"That happens when you read while eating" Mrs. Waldschmitt couldn't avoid to mock, but turned the conversation exactly to the topic Arundle wanted.

"You can find lots of interesting news, I'm sure, Arundle patted on the pile of papers waiting to be opened.

"This morning there was something about Daddy's Club, you know" Mrs. Waldschmitt nodded. "Nonsense - had nothing to do with us. In fact it was about a scientist, who stole our ideas."

"What kind of ideas?" Arundle asked miming curiosity. Some of her father's club members appeared occasionally at home. Arundle faintly remembered their frightening appeals. They picked up her father or disappeared in his father's room, and didn't want to be disturbed 'under no circumstances'.

"And I thought you'd play chess or something" Arundle remarked just like that.

"Well, you never knew, that your old man had it in him. – Oh no, we don't play cards, we think about the world in philosophical terms, so to speak. Believe it or not. In a way, it was you, who gave the first kick. Do you remember when we moved? We had so many things in mind. Well, so things turned into the better, anyway. Out there I'd never met the club-mates."

"Your daddy means our move back into the city. You didn't feel well outside in this suburban environment. That is the time, your father's referring to. We had so many good intentions... well, after all, things turned to the better somehow, don't you think so as well?" her mother said pleadingly and tears glittered in her eyes.

Arundle nodded, patting her mother's arm softly.

"That was the time, when I began to think about the time. That is to say, we in the Club made ourselves familiar with such problems, I should say to be more precise" Mr Waldschmitt explained.

"I see" Arundle answered "and that was it about, in the morning paper, am I right?"

Mr Waldschmitt kept poking undignified in his teeth so Mrs. Waldschmitt uttered pained – “please Roland, behave, I beg you.”

“Heard anything from Einstein?” he asked without attending to his wife. Arundle nodded. “Its about him, to be exact, its about his discovery of the relativity of time. That’s what we deal with in our Club. It’s an old dream of mine, though. Do you remember, when I told you this tale about our vacation at the beach of the Sea of Tranquillity? Had of course only taken place in our fantasy... well, the moon – the moon had always been a kind of resting pole in the ocean of time. Always, since I was a little boy. I imagined the man in the moon taking me by the hand and leading me into his wonderland, where the time stands still, and everything remains as it always is...”

Mr Waldschmitt got red eyes and sniffed, and Arundle had a lump in her throat. She indeed remembered. That was a long time ago. Her father had been sitting at her bed and told the story of the man in the moon, he had made up for her.

“Well, sometimes I think, the worst mistake of you little ones is to grow older and older... of course you can’t be blamed – nobody can – that’s the way it is” Mr Waldschmitt sighed rubbing his eyes.

Mrs. Waldschmitt gave him a pat on his back. “Don’t you get excited, think of your heart. How did you come about these old affairs? – Well, yes, Arundle had been such a nice little thing, hadn’t she? Much different from now – and how much we did love you, both of us, well, well, if we just could turn back the wheel of time, for once, but of course this doesn’t work, it’s turning and turning, and we are the ones to become overrun...” now Mrs. Waldschmitt sighed and sobbed.

“Please Daddy, just for once, tell us the part when we went for a swim, just the two of us in that Sea of Tranquillity”, Arundle pleaded in a most childish air.

That was too much for Mr Waldschmitt. He bathed in tears and covered his face at the bosom of his spouse, who pampered him with tender care.

Arundle was conscience-stricken, but her father soon recovered. While he looked up again he was smiling as he hadn’t been smiling for a long time.

“Well, as you wish, but I hope you won’t get bored. My stories are not extraordinary at all.”

“Perhaps we better go upstairs” Mrs. Waldschmitt suggested, “ there nobody will disturb. We can order some ice-cream, what about that?”

When the room service knocked, Mr Waldschmitt was in the middle of his endless moon-tale. The Man in the Moon played an important role in it. In the Sea of Tranquillity, all kinds of things were floating about. Under

water, you didn't need an oxygen mask and when you dived deep enough, then you came to the entrance of the fairyland. That was where the Man in the Moon resided.

He was some kind of Santa Claus and occasionally he laughed his Ho, ho, ho. Only Daddy knew the language of the Man in the Moon, therefore Daddy had to translate for little Arundle everything, what the Man in the Moon said.

Arundle felt small again. She'd almost crawled on her daddy's lap. Instead, she kissed his cheek, and his eyes went red again.

It was all too true; his tales didn't burst of originality. The Moon man's Land had more in common with the toy's department of a warehouse. So, Mr Waldschmitt soon ran out of suitable items to be mentioned.

"I was not allowed to skip the slightest detail, while you were young" Mr Waldschmitt recalled and paused somehow exhausted. The emotional strain as well as the continuous talking made him somehow vulnerable. He felt as if a suit of ice was melting away and a soft kernel appeared hidden deep in the inside.

"Never did I find an end to my tales. I went on as long as it took, until you fell asleep," he explained and looked thoughtfully into the naught.

"Well, well, could I ever manage to return, I'd give - you name it - for that."

Arundle understood. What he meant, she couldn't give him, despite all the magical power of her bow.

"I think one of your problems is, that you are all too modest, in a way. You have to take, what you long for most. You never had time. As far as I can think back, you always were in a hurry. Why didn't you take your time?"

Arundle looked at her parents not at all childish anymore. The old bitterness ruffled her voice.

"You may be right, we'd better have taken the time once in a while, and things had gone a different course with us", her mother agreed, while Mr Waldschmitt already raised his invisible armour to parry the attack of his witty daughter.

"That's said just like that - take your time. How can you take something, you don't have? You have no idea, what it's like outside there. It's high time for you to wake up" Mr Waldschmitt yelled.

"Now, don't be unjust", Mrs. Waldschmitt tried to quieten him down. "First you tell us your old tales, and when we take you by the word, you have us to shut up. As I understood, you were busy with such problems - on a scientific level. Well then, it works, or it doesn't, you have to make up

your mind. First you tell us, how far you went, and then it says ‘wake up’, if one claims a tiny crumb of the cake, so to speak.”

Mr Waldschmitt had told his wife of an experiment with two mice. A mouse in America grew younger, while a mouse in Europe grew older in some kind of equilibrium, as far as she had understood.

“Well alright, thank you for to remind me. Our major problem is to prove, that the European mouse grows older by the same amount, the American mouse grows younger. The equation is kept in balance; no law is offended, like in real life. The difference is that one mouse has the advantage on its side, while the other the disadvantage – so far so clear now?”

You could almost feel Mr Waldschmitt’s enthusiasm physically.

“That’s of course but one step, but the direction is the right one, I’m convinced of. Soon we will manage to connecting people with our ‘Equilibric Balancer’ and then – in the long run – the outcome will be everlasting life.”

All of a sudden, a strange greed appeared in the eyes that had been filled with tears of love a minute ago, and now pure madness had taken over.

Arundle was frightened. She could feel the strange wave of madness passing by. Mrs. Waldschmitt felt uneasy as well. “Come down back on the ground, Roland” she said “and eat your ice-cream before it’s melting.”

However, Mr Waldschmitt couldn’t be stopped. “Just imagine” he went on “you have all the time of the world. Imagine what you could do. You could achieve almost anything, you could think of.” He was not easy to discourage and continued to paint the outlook in the brightest colours.

Mrs. Waldschmitt tried any way “I don’t know, if I wanted to become one hundred years. What would it be like? You know everything; you’ve been to all the places you’d dreamed of while you were young. I see boredom, an awful lot of boredom. No, I don’t want to live forever.”

“You and your negativity, you tore us down all our lives” he answered bitterly. “As a matter of fact we are not that far yet. It’s just a dream. Right now we can only prove the state of the mice, that’s all.”

Nobody broke the silence that came about. You could hear the spoons clicking while they had their ice cream.

“I now see, how right you are, I’d like to get prepared for that real life, Daddy just mentioned” Arundle tried to lead the conversation on another track. She had heard enough about her father’s ideas and about his strange club. It was high time at last, to talk about the School of Inbetween. She wouldn’t get a better chance.

“Whenever you are discontent with me, you’re threatening to put me in a boarding school...”

“...It’s only, because we can’t help it, you’re just too much for your poor old parents” Mrs. Waldschmitt tried to ease off.

“No, no, let it be Mom, I quite clearly see, that you are right - often enough. I don’t do enough for school, and while you are busy the whole day, a boarding school might be the best.”

“That’s what we mean. Who’s gonna care about you, while we are away? Of course, I’m conscience-stricken. On the other hand you are old enough, don’t you think so?”

“A boarding school is no bad idea at all. When I learned that my friends are going too, I made up my mind. But of course I’d like to be with them again, they are my only friends.”

“Have they registered already?” Mrs. Waldschmitt wanted to know. That would indeed be an elegant solution she thought and gave her husband a secret glance, to be careful now and watch his tongue.

“Yes, they have registered, and it’s a fine school too, wholly international, very modern, with computer-lessons and all that. Pretty far away, though. You can get there only by plane and helicopter, I understand.”

“Well, that won’t bother us, will it, dear?” Mrs. Waldschmitt didn’t know how to answer, because the distance did matter a lot to her, but she didn’t want to put a spoke into her daughter’s wheel. Therefore, she said nothing. A school like that was perfect for Mr Waldschmitt who thought of his club-mates and colleagues. “What about the terms of admission?” he wanted to know.

“Well, my friends had to pass a kind of exam. Otherwise, you are not allowed to enter the site. The School is located on an island in fact.”

“Would that exam be a problem in your case?” her mother wanted to know.

“No, of course not, in fact I’ve passed it already. I did it just for fun, to see whether they’d take me as well. And they did... well they would, if you agreed, of course.”

“That’s my daughter” Mr Waldschmitt boasted and had a broad grin on his face. (Whenever anything advantageous occurred, he referred to ‘his’ daughter.)

Mrs. Waldschmitt didn’t answer, although she had a harsh reply on the tip of her tongue.

“Shall I ring them up, for the formalities and things? Would you have me registered then?”

Mrs. Waldschmitt looked at her husband, and as she saw him secretly nod, she nodded as well.

“Oh Mom, I’m so glad, thank you, thank you. You’re the best parents in the world.”

“Well, we didn’t speak about money yet. I’m no nabob, you know. More than one thousand marks per month we can’t afford, hope you understand that?”

“My friends are even two and their father earns quite normal, I think. If they can do, we should do as well.”

“Tax-wise you’ll be deductible a hundred percent.” Tax-calculations were Mrs. Waldschmitt’s subject at the counsellor’s office, where she worked.

Arundle checked the clock. It was almost three o’clock now. The time-difference between here and Greece was about eighteen hours.

Fifteen plus eighteen equals thirty-three minus twelve or even twenty-four...?

Well it didn’t matter; the news was all too urgent. So she rang up, and had it ring a while, until a sleepy voice answered, so she knew, it was nighttimes in Greece.

“Do you know what time it is?” Vasantha asked after she realized whom she was talking to. “It’s two o’clock in the morning.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, my calculation must have been wrong – by the way, it’s me, Arundle.”

“Of course it’s you, who else dared to call in the middle of the night.” Mrs. Hare answered with a smile, Arundle couldn’t hear, but somehow see.

“Could you tell Florinna and Corinia that things worked out fine for me as well? Therefore, we’ll meet over there on the Isle of Wisdom-tooth in two week or so, from now. Tell them, I’m looking forward so much, I can’t tell. – Oh no, don’t wake them up, just tell them, and thank you, thank you so much for everything... Well, yes our flight leaves from Sydney... Well I’m not sure, whether I’ll be with my parents, would be waste of time and money. At best, I’d stay right here and jump on that helicopter in Sydney... I’m sure; they’ll let me know. Thanks again, good-bye for now, take care...”

“Who’s that?” Mrs. Waldschmitt asked.

“That was Mrs. Hare in Athens, that’s a city in Greece, you know.”

“Sure, I know...”

“Yes, and it seems that everything was alright. Florinna and Corinia will be picked up by the school-shuttle in Athens, and will be taken right away to that island, you know. That would make things easier for us as well - don’t you think so? We’d save a lot of money though, and I needn’t travel back and forth. You’d sent me my stuff by air-cargo, don’t you think that a good idea, mom?”

Mr and Mrs. Waldschmitt were deeply impressed; this young lady of theirs seemed to be grown up all of a sudden.

Arundle was busy meanwhile ringing the secretary over there in the Sydney-office. “The application-file’s been sent out today by urgent mail, a friendly voice let her know. “Everything’s been explained in detail – parents’ share of the costs, conditions of residence, possible exams, and the like.

Single parents need the signature of the absent party – this doesn’t apply? Then all the better. All copies will have to be signed twice. That’s it... good luck and have the application sent back as soon as possible. Thank you...”

Right next morning a thick envelope with a fancy stamp lay awaiting for Mr and Mrs. Waldschmitt at the counter.

The school’s insignia was displayed in capital letters in Latin – OMEN EST NOMEN –

“Rather impressive”, Mr Waldschmitt commented, while opening the envelope with shaky fingers.

It took them the whole morning to go through all the documents, and fill them in, as applicable. The parents had to answer as many questions as the students. Nevertheless, by noon they had made it and off the file went, right back to where it came from.

A phone call the next day informed them, that Arundle was free to jump on the school’s helicopter in Sydney or being picked up by the school-shuttle in Frankfurt, Germany. “While I suggest the first proposal. The copter takes some two hours or so, only. That’s quite a difference, isn’t it?” the friendly voice recommended.

Therefore, she’d be there even before Florinna and Corinia. Arundle almost busted, while she embraced Billy-Joe repeatedly, telling him the news.

When an arrow came in from Grisella, signalling green light for Billy-Joe as well (Grisella had arranged things via secret channels), their happiness exceeded beyond all borders.

For the next two years, Billy-Joe’s family would be supported with the same amount; he’s at present been able to obtaining. That was his major concern.

27. The Moon of Laptopia

A dusty bus-tour lay ahead on a different route, but that was hardly noticeable. Mr Waldschmitt was better prepared this time, a thick pack of

unread magazines lay beside him, while Mrs. Waldschmitt was sitting next to her daughter to enjoy the last days, they were together. They wouldn't meet for month or even a whole year. Arundle was no child anymore; she was a self-assured young lady by now. Not in years (not even fourteen years of age, though), but in fact.

It's always hard for a mother, to see her only daughter off for good. Such were the feelings, and although they lasted, you couldn't bear them all along a dusty bus-ride. Things were said, repeatedly, and after a while, mother and daughter went silent and clung to their own thoughts.

Laptopian worries came back again to Arundle's mind. The moon was attracting her attention, she couldn't say why, or she could, but didn't want to admit. Since that conversation after lunch, where things turned to the better between her and her parents, the moon didn't get out of her mind again. Something was in her, and didn't want to keep quiet.

Arundle hesitated to suspect her own father, but his romantic love for the moon, and his crazy greed to master the time was the kind of coincidence, she couldn't ignore. What was that all about the club, he belonged to as a member? Was he the blind tool of evil, secret forces, similar to those the Laptopian Regent depended on, before he lost his head?

It was high time again to get over there to Laptopia. Only there she could find out about the moon-programme, as it was going on, and how far it was of help to get rid of the riots.

Walter, the magical stone, and Pooty were in desperate need of a long good rest, after the disastrous service for Grisella's investigators' team. Billy-Joe and her magic bow were somewhere abroad and not available until tonight, so Arundle decided to take a nap. She bedded her head on her mother's shoulder, and in no time, she had fallen asleep.

The advantage was all too obvious. If things turned out to become disadvantageous, you just woke up. Of course, you mustn't miss the proper moment; otherwise, it could well happen, that you were trapped.

Florinna and Corinia seemed to have had the same idea, because they arrived shortly after and so did Billy-Joe.

The four of them met at the palace (in fact they had an appointment there) although Arundle would have liked to meet on the moon. In the palace, they met the young Prince and General Armyless. The Prince looked sad, and while asked, what the trouble was, he said, his father was in bad shape.

He guided his guests along the corridors to the hospital, and stopped in front of a shiny door, behind which sat the former Regent on his mighty throne. He looked awful.

“After a period of recovery” the young Prince explained, “he fell back into fits of depression and suicidal notions. It’s a shame. Look at him, the way he sits there. I even cleared the throne for him again, but in vain. The doctors can’t help it... he’s getting at anyone in his vicinity. We had to lock him up. There is madness in his eyes. Poor Dad, I just found him, to lose him right away again.”

“And outside it’s all the same”, the General went on, “madness wherever you look. Now madness rages through Laptopia. If only the pogroms did stop. Each night dozens of youngsters become arrested, raging in the outskirts, and destroying everything and everybody, they get hold of.”

He looked at Billy-Joe: “We’ve got to start with those kids. It has to stop. That would be a great challenge for our champion, whose deed is unforgotten. I’m sure they would listen to him. But we need you live”, he went on. “Not as a vague shadow though, somewhere in a blurred dreamland, I’m afraid. What’s wrong with that stone of yours and the magic bow? Aren’t they working anymore?”

Arundle could feel a heavy load of aggression waving over to her from the General, and so did the others. No wonder for all that strain and responsibility every day, she thought in excuse. After the victory such a disappointment, that wasn’t fair. Now all this, and from the entirely wrong side, namely from their truest allies.

They had to be careful. First, they had to stick to their plans, as they tended to alter their course to the needs of their hosts. This time they would examine the moon, searching for those who secretly pulled the strings.

They’d tackle such problems as soon as possible, but for now, they had to check the moon, Arundle explained. She didn’t mention the survey, but confirmed the General’s remark about the magic bow, to pamper his mood.

On the way back Arundle guided the conversation to her subject while asking about the moon-programme, whether it worked and how far it had grown. Neither the Prince nor his General seemed to be up to date. The local trouble kept them busy and focussed their attention.

The young and the old man looked at each other somehow bewildered. How could they forget about that programme? The General tried to remember the latest state, and only recalled, that many shuttles had come back, because they weren’t allowed to land “for technical reasons” it said. Some of the autopilots reported debris in the orbit.

“We were at the point to divert the whole programme to Mars, if it wasn’t for the distance. Another idea is to build a huge satellite station. But what ever we intend, we’ve got to deal with acts of vandalism, even out here in space.”

The General sighed, while the young Prince shook his head. “We just don’t know, what can be done. Wherever we look, whatever we try, it’s all the same...”

“...Murder and revenge is everywhere. Most of these poor creatures from these factories are by now almost human-like, with feelings and an independent brain of their own, produced to serving their masters,” the General explained.

“On the other hand we’ve got to understand our human fellow-citizens, who suffered a great deal under the occupation by the regal army of my father’s, while he still was all different” the young Prince agreed. “Those semi-human artifacts in fact switched the roles and had their former masters become their slaves. That’s not forgotten, and never will be...”

Why were the shuttles hindered to landing on the moon, or were even destroyed? There were no humans on the moon – well almost none, she learnt, but were those few the culprits? That could be checked. Arundle was very convincing and in the end, she got them all.

The guests from earth and the young Prince were standing on the battlement of the castle, watching the moon (the battlements stuck through the clouds.) Unfortunately, the moon didn’t stick to the expected role, as she had shrunk to a small sickle, as if she wanted to keep her secrets. The guests didn’t have time to wait for two weeks until full moon again.

Therefore, they arranged with the General for a shuttle and managed to get on board right away. “We are going to send the complete bionic laboratory – all kinds of precious spare parts for the cosmetic surgery, and so forth. If someone up there wanted to gain wealth or power, he’d be well advised to capture that load. A lot of good can be done with it...”

“...That’s right, but also a lot of evil. Think of my poor father, there is little hope for him” the young Prince interrupted.

“Anyway, they’d indeed be nuts, if they destroyed that” the General concluded - “but, you never know these days.”

Billy-Joe still felt guilty, whenever the old Regent was mentioned, as he beheaded his former opponent. He had cut the man’s head off and he felt now responsible for the bad shape of the Prince. No matter whether it was the body’s fault or not.

“The body is sound and well – it’s the mind that’s sick”, the doctors said.

Why did he cut that head off? Billy-Joe thought this repeatedly and still hadn’t come any further. He still had no answer for that. First, he found excuses. He had been out of mind, almost dead. He had been led by another will. He had been copying a historical sample. Finally, yet importantly, he had been forced to give a clear sign of victory.

All that was true, but still – why did he cut that head off? None of the answers, he found, did fit.

Billy-Joe hardly dared to look into the Prince's sad eyes, and while the young Prince always found excuses and even hailed him for his deed, Billy-Joe couldn't calm his bad conscience down. Somehow he wanted to heal that awful wound he'd cut.

If he succeeded in that, the suffering body of whole Laptopia might as well be healed.

They might find a clue on the moon, as Arundle suggested, she was almost certain to find the key to the secret right there. Where else should they look? They had tried almost everything with poor results. While strange things went on at the moon, almost unnoticed and out of control.

Therefore, the young Prince supported the new approach and gave it a very last chance. They either succeeded or lost on the eve before doomsday, so to speak. Before they all went mad, and tore each other to pieces, they might as well grab for the straw in the moon-man's hand.

Whatever was going on at the moon, they'd soon find out. The shuttle was due to leave in two hours, while the constellation was best at that time.

Disobedience and carelessness had been responsible for some of the accidents and for most incidents, but this answer was not sufficient at all. Sure enough, the war had influenced all artifacts, wherever. And the moon was still in their hands, - nothing would work without them. Artifacts were responsible for the production in factories and in agricultures; artifacts controlled traffic and communication – in one word, they ran the show.

It was about time to get on board. They proceeded to the shuttle ramp, where the General was awaiting them. Once more, he pointed out, how dangerous and useless the whole enterprise was. Obviously, he still didn't trust the artifacts, and that was indeed no wonder.

“What, if they arrest you right away after landing?” he warned all too impressive, the girls thought. Did he still hide something? Did he know of facts, he didn't share?

Arundle declared that she had to go for her father's sake, and won't stay back under any circumstances. She told her friends and the Prince, what she had told Billy-Joe before about her father's club and all those strange ideas and experiments they dealt with.

“I've got to know for sure,” she said, while entering up the steep gangway. For those old-fashioned freighters you still needed a space suit because no air-circulation was installed or gravity.

A last check at the hatch assured them of the functionality of all applicable devices. The intercom was tested and the seatbelts fastened, while

the hatch closed, and with a mighty sizzle, the engine took over against all forces of gravity.

“Lift Off” it said and up they went, faster and faster.

The Rubicon was passed, so to speak. The pilots up front were experienced astronauts, regardless of the fact that they were artifacts, how else could it be?

They knew their job and even the General stood surety for them, the young Prince declared.

If nothing stopped them, they approached the moon in a few hours. They would turn into the orbit and circle around a couple of times, to lose speed before landing in the ‘Sea of Tranquillity’, because there was the landing strip and no water, like in Mr Waldschmitt’s tale – once upon a time – for little Arundle.

They wouldn’t see the Man in the Moon either. Arundle smiled somehow sad – it had been nice, though.

How many hours had her Daddy been sitting next to her bedside, how could she ever forget about that? Had he been the same squabbler then?

“Do you remember, what your father was like, when you were a child?” she asked the young Prince, who’s sitting right next to her. She didn’t consider the intercom-connection. It took a while until he realized, he was meant. ”Well, no, things didn’t work that way in the palace. The little Prince rarely met his parents, I’m afraid. Well, I had you, I do remember you, of course... - and I hated all those TV-sets, though.”

“We surely didn’t do enough, I’m afraid” Florinna went in, while they all overheard the intercom.

Billy-Joe was still busy with his heavy thoughts and bad feelings, while Corinia joined the conversation, and participated in the revival of the Prince’s early days, where she played her role as well.

“It won’t take long now,” the Prince said. “With my mother I used to come here once in a while. Our summer palace was up here, you know. I can’t remember, when we gave that up, must have been shortly before she died. Travelling didn’t do her any good, anymore.”

The young Prince pressed some bottoms to get in contact with the pilot. “We’ll be right there in exactly fifty-three minutes, anyone cares for a refreshment?” The guests from earth denied, they remembered the food, that wasn’t convincing at all.

Now that they knew, how close they were, the old bad feelings returned. How trustworthy were those artifacts up front really? Would they manage to land properly? If they were reliable, what about the ground staff? Could they trust them as well? Would they be diverted or even sent right

back? The worst case of all was of course a fatal emergency landing, but that they didn't dare to think.

"The summer palace is inside deep down subsoil," the Prince explained to cheer them up. "It's rather spacey down there and very comfortable. Well at least it used to be, might have changed in the meantime.

Quite a little world on it's own, with artificial sunlight and fresh air and all that. You feel so light and easy because of the low gravity. Well, I still have been lonesome somehow. In fact, I've been lonesome all my life" he added after a thoughtful pause.

Compared to the orgies of light and fury - travelling by shuttle was like riding on a snail. You saw little through the tiny bull-eyes. Space threatened black and empty and somehow fearsome. The reason for that was obvious but couldn't be seen. It was all a matter of speed. That was why things remained where they were. While the magic bow used an entirely different mode, that based on the power of thought and the might of desire. By that two means the necessary energy was mobilized, and dissolved the image of solidity of the visible, shining up then, as a kind of firework and light effect in the vicinity of such mystic space shuttle.

Scholasticus once tried to explain that principle, but Arundle doubted, whether she got him right, or whether he got the principle right, that still was the question. There was a lot between heaven and earth that couldn't be explained, and the power of the magic bow was certainly one of those things.

From up front the squeaky voice of the pilot was heard. "We now turn into orbit - No unforeseen circumstances - Landing in twelve minutes - Get ready for landing - Fasten your seatbelts - Move your seat into an upright position - "

The tension was growing and could be felt almost physically. Would they succeed? Could they trust their pilot?

"It's too late now, the point of no return has passed. At that stage we won't escape the moon's gravity", the Prince explained. "But all goes fine, seems to be a routine landing after all.

The guests tried to spy down to the surface, but the bull eyes were narrow and might need a cleansing as well, so they could see very little.

"Ah, right there, that's supposed to be the Sea of Tranquillity" Arundle explained and pointed at a huge basin with an almost regular rim.

"Looks like the effect of a mighty collision" Corinia said, somehow absent-minded. She might as well be leaving the scene.

"Over there must be the landing strip," she added, while obviously returning to the site.

“I think, I’m sick,” her sister groaned, while pressing into her seat. “If things turn from bad to worse, just wake up, before you vomit into your helmet” Arundle advised, while Billy-Joe added - “would reduce the sight, though.”

Corinia couldn’t help but burst into fits of laughter and even infested Florinna, so that she forgot all about her sickness.

While they had fun, the Prince was tied down to solid grounds. He could not escape, because he wasn’t asleep. ‘Not in this world anyway,’ Arundle thought, feeling somehow light and easy, though. ‘What the heck was the matter with Florinna, didn’t she know the state of being, she was in?’

The old landing gear was rumbling over the uneven strip, the spider legs quivered, while the shuttle turned and slid to the left as if out of control, but then erected like a wounded warrior for the last blow, and came to a sudden halt. That was it.

“Kind of rough landing” the Prince commented. “Up here on the moon, almost without atmosphere, landings are always a certain problem, as the buoyancy’s got to be artificially produced, that makes the touch-down not easy for the pilot. My mother hated these landings. Well, yes, as I mentioned before, that was one of the reasons we gave up the summer palace.

- The installations seem to be all in order, that’s a good sign, I daresay.” He pointed at the buildings and at the vehicles approaching. “Those artifact-systems are self-sufficient, they regenerate without input from outside. That’s why I just can’t understand why the shuttles couldn’t land. That doesn’t make sense at all.”

The stairs were there and the hatch swung open. They all climbed down the steep ladder, still stiff in their suits, and pretty weighty, although the low gravity of the moon reduced their weight by two third.

A friendly ground hostess welcomed them and guided them halfway down the stairs. Her smile on her shining face was somehow frozen.

“Metal endures the environment better than any organic tissue. The radiation is just too much out here”, the Prince explained when he noticed the bewildered glances of the girls.

“It’s all routine” he shook his head, wondering, while he entered the ground-vehicle awaiting them at the bottom of the staircase, to take them to the arrival hall.

Before passport control, they had to cue. The grim loptocops behind their counters took their duty rather serious. They studied the travel-documents carefully the Prince produced for them. They had to open their

helmets now, to show their faces. Florinna still suffered from airsickness and appreciated the fresh air.

The Prince was busy with all the formalities. He filled in all kinds of forms for them and finally assisted with the precious cargo, to be unloaded and stored properly for the disposal of the beauty-clinic-to-be.

“Those shuttles weren’t refused at all. The schedule works fine; things are, as they should be. I don’t understand that. Should that only be a matter of communication? I wonder, where the General got his information from.”

“You are right, such information came from the General. Was it to hinder us, getting here?” Arundle wondered.

“While we are here, why not show us around, little Prince?” Florinna asked - she seemed to have recovered. The Prince just waved her off and asked one of the hostesses instead to guide them about.

“It won’t take long. The moon is everywhere almost the same” he said, when Billy-Joe indicated, that they didn’t have too much time to go.

So it was, after a couple of minutes they decided to return and wanted to have a look at the summer palace instead, the Prince strongly recommended, because this was part of his early life.

Arundle was looking for other traces, that also had to do with the past, and with her father and his fancy tales.

She even imagined some kind of secret circle hiding somewhere and watching every step they made. Perhaps they were only safe, because they were protected by the dream world, they were in. So, Arundle decided, not to talk about such matters now. She didn’t want to confuse her friends. Perhaps someone arranged some kind of show for them.

No matter how this visit would end, she wouldn’t give in. Next time she would come here by means of the magic bow. Things would look entirely different then, she was almost sure.

Right now, the young Prince was guiding them around in the summer palace. The site, where he spent, as he put it, “some of the happiest hours of his early life.” The palace was indeed beautiful, and overloaded with all kinds of precious items.

Greek pillars draped with jade wine leaves and golden grapes hosted Hercules and Atlas carrying the world on their shoulders. Huge paintings covered the silk-bespanded walls.

Neat little golden chairs and stools next to even more golden tabulates, invited the visitors to become seated and relax, while eager servants attended hardly visible near-by.

Floors and corridors were covered with marble tiles and mosaics of the highest quality; - Gates and fences, stairs and handrails here and there and almost everywhere; - all glittering in an orgy of hidden light, while here and there voluminous crystal lustres professed the illusion of myriads of enlightened stars.

The splendour was overwhelming, the brilliance indescribable, and the sheer brightness managed to heave you beyond imagination, provided, you had an air for magnificence.

The small group sat down on one of those 'Isles of Tranquillity', as the young Prince called them. Servants, more humane looking than ever, hushed about in their ever-lasting beauty and grace. Neither Billy-Joe, nor the young Prince were able to keep their eyes with them.

Florinna pushed her little sister and the two of them started giggling, while Arundle frowned and touched Billy-Joe's sleeve; he turned right away towards her and blushed, as did the young Prince, and, as if someone in the background had monitored the scene, young male-servants appeared with baskets full of fruits, and trays filled with the orders, by no means less handsome as their female counterparts.

Now it was the girls' part to try and keep their eyes with themselves.

While they had their snacks, nobody dared to lift an eye, or wink a lid, neither to raise the attention of the servants, nor of the comrades, - one was as uncomfortable, as the other.

Food and drinks were delicious, and the more they were eating the hungrier they became. They felt a never-ending desire, and could have eaten on and on. The young Prince set an end to that, when he noticed the greed, and asked the servants to take everything right away. Then he had them rise.

"We didn't see a quarter of the palace," he explained. However, his guests were unwilling to proceed. "If you go on teasing us, we could easily wake up" Corinia said and all four of them nodded.

"Well then, think of our task. We aren't here just for fun." Nevertheless, his guests had forgotten the reason. They felt heavy and fed up and unwilling to move on. The Prince himself didn't feel well either. Therefore, he said that, and raised the question, whether this could have to do with why they had come here at all.

"What, if we're close to a significant encounter, and some-one tries to make you stay away and give in? So let's combine our forces."

"Yes, let's put all our strength together..." Arundle confirmed with a thankful glance at the Prince.

"We are now getting to the 'Hall of Fame and Honour'." - the Prince explained and raised the attention of his guests. They indeed became curious and were pressing towards a splendid portal, they were soon passing.

The hall, they just entered, was very large. It was indeed so large; you couldn't see the other end. On both sides, there were busts and statues, and engraved plates, and brief memoirs. Nobody could ever read them all.

Arundle noticed that her spirit rose. She overcame the lethargy, and managed to somehow infest her friends as well, only Billy-Joe was still slurping behind with leaden legs, and lack of lust.

Arundle was looking for hints, referring to her fathers club. "Watch out for dates earlier than the year two thousand. I only know very few of my father's club-mates, almost non by name, but perhaps someone is mentioned, who succeeded in some kind of pioneer's deed with reference to time-control or the like. Anything might be of interest, anyway."

While the girls read on, they noticed, that they were on the wrong track. "We're far too early, here are only ancient Greeks and Romans, on my side" Corinia yelled. Arundle and Florinna were somewhere in the middle ages, and were approaching modern times slowly. "Galileo, Copernicus, Bacon..." they didn't skip anyone" Florinna hollered back. "Let's jump ahead some hundred yards" Arundle suggested and hurried on.

"Well here it's getting interesting, after all", she gasped and remained in front of Einstein's torso, who was standing there, so typical.

"My father refers to him explicitly," she told Florinna. Corinia, on the other side, caught up and entered a new dynasty. She had now already come up to the twenty-first century. She didn't find any presidents or prime ministers and the like, anymore, but Princesses and Princes.

Someone with the name Princess Jet stream delivered a child in 2065, that is – a son – bound to become the Regent, but came to death under mysterious circumstances, as he grew on, Corinia read.

"Here is probably something of interest. Emperor Rolandus, born in 1949, coronate Emperor in 2080 (or 60 – the number had partly vanished.) 'His Imperial Highness, Rolandus, Caput Mundi' to be exact. What a title – and that man grew really old. Look, how tall he is", Corinia shouted. "And there - the title even gets on – 'tenet urbi et orbi' - it goes on." Corinia waved the others over to her side, so they could see 'Emperor Rolandus' with their own eyes.

"That's Latin, isn't it?" Billy-Joe asked when he picked up. "Yes it is" Arundle answered somehow absent-minded, while the lad grinned. (The Fathers at the reservation wanted him to become a priest, but he ran off.)

"He then was, let me see, 2060 minus 1949 – then he was one hundred and eleven or even one hundred and thirty one years old, when he became Emperor" Corinia figured.

"Pretty old, wasn't he?" Billy-Joe wasn't convinced – "as old as I'm going to be or even older, anyway", he said, but the others didn't pay

attention. So he didn't ask, whether the old Shaman of the Churingas might be found as well. Perhaps he was not important enough or not long enough dead, though. Or most likely a 'persona non grata' (that was also Latin and meant a disgraced person.)

Billy-Joe was alert now. He also began to search, as he knew, what he was looking for, instead of following with the Prince, who didn't show much interest either. Down here, he said with a smile, he used to skate.

The old Shaman was then found, at last, standing not far away, and opposite, amongst the philosophical and spiritual big shots. You could clearly identify the untidy frowsy appearance. The torso seemed much alive. You could feel the strange appeal somehow. That was because Billy-Joe knew him well and would never forget the circumstances of their joint subsoil - up soil venture.

'Let's hope then, I won't become that filthy old bump in reality' he thought, 'and the prediction won't become real, and have him end up like this.'

As the power for that biblical duel had come at him from that Shaman, that was sure enough. That he recalled, although other events of great importance superposed such memory in the meantime.

His last encounter deep down in that cave came to his mind. Once again, he could feel death approaching and meant to feel the eerie grip. The emotional part was easier to recall, while he still didn't know what really had happened on the factual side. Fact was, he stood up and fought and made it after all. Not knowing what he did and how he managed. He did, what he had to do, and appreciated what he did. Even the worst part of it.

The young Prince by his side made him feel guilty whenever he noticed the sad gaze of his eyes. Billy-Joe shook off in vain such memories. The close encounter with his 'alter ego' didn't do him any good, although it was nothing but a marble bust.

Arundle didn't feel good either. Could that Emperor really be her own father - as some details indicated, or was that an accidental coincidence, perhaps even arranged by that weird forces, she still conjectured behind all this.

The name and date of birth suited all too fine. On the other hand was there the aristocratic appeal of the statue. That Emperor Rolandus looked all too haughty.

A marble Semi-God with the laurel-wreath on his head, and a snooty smile on his lips - at last a little sign of familiarity. And the father, who had told her the tales about the Man in the Moon came to her mind, when he sat at her bedside, telling with his monotonous rough voice more or less concise

details of the hidden fairy land under the Sea of Tranquillity, to make her fall asleep. Details she knew in fact better than he did, because she had often to correct him, when he happened to forget what was to happen.

The Prince stepped by. He looked thoughtfully at his guests from earth, but didn't say a word. They all felt the strange mood and a threatening anxiety. Billy-Joe and Arundle somehow infested the sensible sisters.

Had they found out anything of interest? Well, Arundle seemed to have met the very strange image of her father that made her uneasy, because she didn't know what it was about. While Billy-Joe was reminded of something, he didn't like to touch, and wanted at best to have thrust aside.

Something was there, and forced them to refrain from muddling along at the site, and to care, as not to be drawn still deeper into affairs, they didn't understand, and clearly went beyond their capability.

28. The Man in the Moon

Corinia began to flicker first. A definite sign that she was due to wake up.

"We're coming back," Arundle yelled, as she realized the same symptoms at herself. Her inner unrest couldn't be suppressed any longer. Something was there, that forced her to wake up without delay.

She didn't hear any more, what the Prince answered in return, while she found herself sitting upright and all awoken in her bed in the hotel-room.

Outside there was dark night. The thin sickle of the moon was due to disappear, and looked somehow sad just over the horizon. For a moment, Arundle felt the unbearable loneliness, the pale celestial body emitted, and fled back to her childish idea, she used to pamper, while she was small. - One of her father's tales dealt with such topic. The Moon man's wife had died and had left him behind in sad solitude.

She pulled herself back, and slipped into her dress. Then slid out of the window. She jumped down, and pricked her ears for a moment, but everything remained calm. Nobody had noticed her. Then she rushed to Billy-Joe's camp, as fast as she could in the darkness and almost broke an ankle while tapping into a rabbit hole.

Softly cursing, she hobbled on to the eucalyptus-grove, behind the parking lot. Billy-Joe could hear her come from afar and helped her for the last fifty yards or so.

“You steam like a steam-engine” he said with a smile. Arundle pointed at her leg and had him support her. “Let’s hope nothings will be broken, anyway” she stammered –“that’d be it. Is the bow ready to go?”

She didn’t have to explain anything - that she knew. Billy-Joe knew exactly, what he had to do. He nodded and got the magic bow, leaning right next to him at a tree. The air of weakness had gone; they’d been both caught in while still dreaming. Now they were awoken and had their wits about them.

While on the way to Billy-Joe’s camp Arundle wondered in vain, whether the Emperor could be her father. Most likely, her leg’s been pulled, and the question was, who’s been pulling. After all, dreaming was somewhat fragile.

Wishful thinking was an important part of the world of dreams, and more than once things happened to become real, and of course vice versa, as now was the case with her. She’d been afraid of circumstances that most likely never would become real.

Before ‘the big jump’ (as he put it) the magic bow longed for some familiarity with his mistress, he didn’t see for quite a while.

“Just to be sure, she still is the same,“ snarled he with a giggle (he somehow managed to do both at the same time.) So he did. He seemed to be satisfied with the outcome, so he was shouldered and the hand took Billy-Joe, and off they went towards the strange far moon of Laptopia.

While approaching that future moon, Arundle didn’t care much about the beauties of space-time-travelling, but had to think back to her father, as he had appeared in her dream. She saw a being with two faces, one she was familiar with, while the other was strange and repulsive.

“Dreams are funny enough” Billy-Joe confirmed although Arundle didn’t say a word. ‘Must have read my thoughts, though’ she wondered. However, there was no time for musing, when they turned into the orbit around that strange celestial body of Lady Luna below them. Full and round she was again, out there in the dim light of the eternal night of the universe, and was - in no time – one hundred years older.

At best had it been, if the bow took them right back into that honourable so-called ‘Hall of Fame and Fortune’, but somehow it didn’t work. Either the coordinates didn’t fit or the entrance was denied. They could not get near that summer-palace.

They goofed about on the devastated surface of the moon. They passed through the Sea of Tranquillity with huge jumps, for the low gravity. Arundle didn’t feel her ankle anymore, but didn’t know if this was a good or a bad sign. They felt careless and gay, as they jumped on and on. Arundle imagined the basin filled with water, (that special kind of moon water, where

you still can breathe under water.) Her father's image appeared sitting at her bed, telling his Moon-tales.

What, if he stood behind all that, what was going on in Laptopia? Arundle couldn't think of anything worse.

Like kangaroos, they jumped. Without any pain in her foot, she took hurdles, no world-champion managed down on earth. It was pure fun. The easiness went up their heads, and made them high and dizzy. Billy-Joe was already giggling like a fool, and Arundle couldn't help keeping her leaden sorrows, and saw them floating off, as she joined him laughing without reason. Each jump made them feel lighter.

Out of breath Arundle finally gasped "Let's stop that senseless hopping, we're gonna get crazy, after all." It took her a while, until he got her, and halted, out of breath as well, she realized with satisfaction.

"What's now?" he asked, looking around. "Something should look familiar, though." Arundle shook her head: "Not to me", she said "but it should, after all we had just been here some minutes ago. Let's look for landmarks." In their dream, they had also passed the Sea of Tranquillity, or part of it. At least the terminal must be there.

"Well, the horizon is much nearer here, and the moon is so small" Billy-Joe guessed, when no building came in sight and no characteristic landmarks either.

They couldn't go on and on. That didn't make sense. The ground they went on was entirely strange to them. The whole moon was strange, though.

"That isn't the same place we have just been" Billy-Joe agreed. "Yes, we are lost" she answered somehow pitifully. "Besides, the bow signals, that we run out of oxygen. If we won't get to the palace in the next five minutes of so, we've got to return, right away, I'm afraid." The magic bow confirmed to that by having the string vibrate, so that Arundle could feel it.

While things went crucial that way, the well-known hills appeared next to the entrance to the summer palace. "How strange is that?" they wondered.

"Back or forth?" the bow snarled as they took their time to think things over. "Well then, let's go ahead, don't you think so too?"

"Yes, let's try again once more" Billy-Joe agreed and on they jumped.

The closer they got, the stranger things looked again. That was no solid stone anymore, but of much softer fabric. The wind they produced with their wide kangaroo-hops - even in the thin atmosphere of the moon - made the fabric flap. It turned out to be just ordinary cloth - some dirty-greyish pile of cloth lay there. At the far end, they discovered gigantic shoes pointing upside down, while at the other end a face bowed down at them. They realized their error.

“Right -ho, ho, ho, ho,
 I’m the Moon-man though.
 While only the sickle is to be seen,
 I’m free to relax with the greatest esteem.”

The Moon-man was leaning at his bundle of dry wood he’d have traditionally collected to take it home, and have a fire made with it, for to cook his meal during daytime, when he couldn’t be seen.

With his right hand, he upheld his head. In his left, he kept a long tobacco-pipe, and on his head, he was wearing a night-hood. His face was almost round indeed, and reminded of the full moon.

He was of course much smaller than the shadow, which was seen from earth. “That’s caused by the rays of the sun”, he explained without being asked – “somehow reflecting and enlarging things on the surface a thousand-fold.”

He was still gigantic as he laid there like a chain of mountains, on the edge of the Sea of Tranquilly, his favourite bed. Whenever there was a chance, he had a little nap. As soon as it was getting dark on earth and no clouds were in the sky, he stood up, topped his bundle on the shoulder, to have the proper shade reflected, down on earth.

“Stretched to the floor, down on the ground
 Make things go round, and round, and round.” –

He said with a giggle. - “Besides, nobody notices, what I’m doing anyway. The times are long gone, when people stared at the moon.

“Who then tells these days?
 The Moon-man’s finest tales?”

Arundle just wanted to answer – ‘but my father did’ – when the Man in the Moon went on talking, as if she didn’t say anything. He might as well be deaf.

“How nice of you to see me in my solitude
 A boy as handsome, as the girl is cute.”

“Please ask him for that entrance to the summer palace, our oxygen...”
 Arundle whispered and hoped that Billy-Joe’s manly voice wouldn’t be ignored.

She was right. The Man in the Moon answered right away.

“Is that the site, they were building some years ago, and these shuttles came in like busy hornets? Nice times though, after all, had to take care of them. Once it still happened. One was caught in my coat, and puff – I stood in flames. Well, in fact, it was just the coat, lack of oxygen up here, you know. My wife put the fire out in no time.” The Moon man sighed – “well, she is gone by now, over there she lies forever...”

- “Oxygen, oxygen’s our problem right now...” -

“That shuttle, what happened to that shuttle of yours, you mean? - Well nothing serious, I suppose, they fixed it just like that, no harm to you, little earthworms...” he sighed again -

“...You call it summer palace, don’t you? - Why not? See right here, under my armpit, that hole? That’s it, right there – and in you go. See me on return, please, you’re always most heartily welcome...”

‘How nice of you to see me in my solitude -
A boy as handsome, as the girl is cute.’

...Your names, though, just in case someone should ask...?”

However, it was too late by now, because Billy-Joe and Arundle had disappeared into the inside already. With a little more air, Arundle would surely have asked for the Moon-woman, she was interested in, even more though she had heard of her by her father already. So there was a good reason to continue the little conversation.

As soon as the second sluice shut, they smelt the refreshing air right away. Even the magic bow took deep breaths. “That was tight,” he snarled. Only he knew how tight. The way back would have become a serious problem for the two human beings. But that they needn’t know.

Inside here, Arundle and Billy-Joe recalled many things, the magnificence and splendour, and all that. They hurried through the corridors, searching for that ‘Hall of Fake and Furore’ as the bow put it, (he didn’t seem to be in favour of.) There, they hoped to find the Prince again. They couldn’t think any further, but they knew of course, that there were tasks awaiting them, tasks of the strangest kind, those could only be fulfilled by their real presence.

The overall challenge was defined by the time-thieves, if they existed at all. Arundle was almost sure of that. All too obvious had those interferences been. There was someone or something hidden in the background, - some kind of evil being - that provoked turmoil, distress and disaster, and somehow her father was involved. He had to do with it, here the root for his madness originated.

Right now, they were guilelessly goofing around in that palace; its beauty didn't mean anything to them, because they had better things to do. Had they only met anyone, friend or foe, they could have asked.

Arundle recalled, what they had been told by the General before taking off to the moon. The moon was supposed to be in the hands of the enemy.

Again they passed those splendid halls and came to the place, where they had been served such delicious snacks, you couldn't get enough of. The waitresses and waiters stood about as last time and were as beautiful and handsome as before. Thirsty and hungry as they were, they accepted the invitation like they had done before.

While they had their snacks and beverages, they realized again, that they couldn't help but stuffing things into them with uncontrollable greed. They had to mobilize all their will to get away from there, and without the magic bow, they probably wouldn't have managed at all.

The fact, that they were already right next to that so-called 'Hall of Fake and Flurry' or something, made them proceed and got them on their legs again. They now remembered any detail, and the further they went, the clearer they got.

They finally made it to that so-called 'Hall of Glint and Glory' or whatever its proper name was. They stepped alongside all those celebrities, looking for that Caesar Rolandus and the filthy Shaman, and of course for their little Prince and guide.

The hall was still so large that they couldn't see the end. It seemed even larger and taller, when sunlight flooded down from the ceiling, and a fresh breeze was flustering their noses and made the heat fade, they'd been expecting.

The bright light was somehow mirrored in the plates at the pedestals, and was as well glittering in the jewels, been fixed at the 'Learned and the Chosen of all Times and Modes'.

The two of them could hardly keep their eyes open for such flooding glow. Therefore, - for a reason, Billy-Joe wasn't able to render account of, - he asked Arundle, whether she'd read the name on the platform of the old Shaman's statue.

Arundle couldn't know the answer of course. Somehow, Billy-Joe later was glad, that he hadn't told her. And while he still wondered, why that had come to his mind, he heard Arundle exclaim: "There he is, that's him, I'm sure this is the Caesar."

29. The Caesarean Audience

They found the Prince still standing in front of the Emperor's statue, as they had left him. He was just studying the writing on the socle. It read:

'ROLANDUS CAESAR IMPERATOR CAPUT MUNDI TENET URBI ET ORBI' -

'Emperor Roland – head of the world holding the lead of the earthen round' – the magic bow translated for his mates at best he could.

"There you are again" the young Prince exclaimed, when he looked up, seeing Arundle and Billy-Joe, still gasping for the short run on the last yards. "I thought I'd lost you."

Billy-Joe nodded – "so you did, but we are back again. Although it wasn't easy to get back here",

"...not easy at all", Arundle confirmed and raised her magic bow. They reported on their odyssey, and on the Man in the Moon, who'd helped them. However, the Prince hadn't heard of him. "Never heard of a giant, dwelling up here," he said.

Billy-Joe just wanted to give him a lengthier explanation of the giant's whereabouts, when Arundle interrupted sharply: "We've got to talk about that Caesar, right here. Is there anything you can tell us, little Prince?"

"Not that I know, nothing more than it says here anyway. - Well, in fact, he was mentioned at school, I think, but I hardly remember anything" the Prince said reluctantly. Then he made up his mind and came about with a sound explanation:

"The Caesar, it is said, doesn't interfere into planetal government, but leave it up to the Regent or President and the associated Councils. Somewhere out there" – and the Prince pointed vaguely into no-where - "the Caesar is reigning amidst a mighty court on some kind of virtual facility of no dimensions.

Bothering about individual planets is absolutely quite impossible, because the universe is the empire in fact and of immeasurable size. That's why he has Regents or other representatives all over the places, where the inhabitants developed that far. There are a couple of thousands, I'd guess – or millions – well, I can't tell. - Nobody knows exactly, how many, and nobody can tell, whether the Emperor is alive or has ever been living. Not in the sense, we mean it, anyway. I don't know anyone, except my own father, who came near that residence at all, or even met that so-called CAESAR IMPERATOR face to face."

The young Prince couldn't go on. From afar, from the other end of the Hall, horns and shams resounded, while drums caught up, and trombones fell in, only to carpet the supra-light Haendel-trumpets, taking the lead while things developed, that is, the marchers caught up and set foot, like an eager band of angels running after Thee on Doomsday, maybe.

The brilliance went beyond all boarders. Over the whole width of the unspeakably wide hall, a wave of sheer splendour, of never-ending delight of the most fabulous kind, came travelling on. Like thunder the myriads of footsteps resounded, despite of the light-footedness of the marchers, because there were so many of them. Carrying all kinds of sumptuous sedans, gorgeous stools, fabulous canopies, and other stuff the like, not to forget those ostrich-feathers and ivory-teeth and King Salomon's ebony beauties, - well, you name it, after all.

"Talk of the devil, and he will appear..." Arundle whispered. She's convinced to face the Emperor's Court.

"Who may be seated in those sedans?" she thought and her heart was beating hard. Was that her own father? She looked at that statue so very unlike, except for the little smile on the lips, but that was surely not enough.

"I don't think the Emperor himself is giving us the honour of his personal encounter," the Prince said. "His Majesty's surely sending an ambassador," the Prince hissed.

Billy-Joe and Arundle nodded rather nervously. "No soldiers though, seems to be a good sign to me, I'd say, don't you think so?" she whispered, while Billy-Joe hid the magic bow behind his broad shoulders, because the bow was indeed a weapon, so not to spoil their peace-loving appeal.

The head of the pageant got at the Emperor's statue, but still was no end to be seen.

"And if that is him anyway?" Billy-Joe whispered while the first sedans were carefully lowered and set to the ground, and servants with tiny little stairs jumped in, and the Master of Ceremonies had hurriedly erected the throne-chair, and the inner circle of stools and cushions arranged.

The Master of Ceremonies looked at the Prince and his guests from earth. He meant them to kneel and lower the head, as soon as the curtains of the sedan were drawn open, and not to look up again, before he gave the sign to do so.

The Prince was familiar with such ceremonies, and he supported the Master by conviction. That was not easy, because Billy-Joe hated such gestures of inferiority.

Arundle was not much better. However, the Prince argued and begged and tried to persuade them not to spoil everything beforehand. So at last they

lay on their knees, at least Arundle did, while he and the native boy knelt only on one knee that was supposed to look more elegant and male-like.

They had their eyes under control and looked straight down at the ground in front of the throne, awaiting the things to come.

A short while later, they were allowed to look up. The inner circle was filled now and someone – maybe even Caesar himself - was seated on the throne. Courtiers of minor a ranking were standing behind those sitting.

Some fifty pairs of eyes watched every notion of the petitioners, and His Majesty himself produced the same little smile as the statue did. Arundle doubted not – His Majesty was really His Majesty, no qualm about that.

“We were told of you, my dear children” His Majesty opened the unequal intercourse, and waved them closer to be seated on cute-looking little stools. Arundle and Billy-Joe kept their mouths shut, even though they’d been addressed to, and let the Prince do the talking, because he was used to such ceremonies, and would do no harm.

Looking upright from down under, Arundle could only see the imperial mouth and nose-tip, nothing else. If she had hoped to find out about his identity, she was mistaken. Therefore, she didn’t get any closer to the mystery. Of course, she could have asked, “Is that you Daddy?” but she didn’t dare.

Beside the little smile, she hadn’t come to any further familiarity. Like the statue, the original was draped with a laurel-wreath on the noble head, and a tunic on the slim body, and sandals on his small but otherwise unspectacular feet.

The throne was far too big and mighty for him. He reminded Arundle of the Roman Caesar; Mr Schwertfeger had been so fond of, much more than of her father. She better gave up on that entirely. The little itch of disappointment didn’t really hurt.

However, there was no time for pondering. Just as they were seated on those low uncomfortable stools, the Master of Ceremonies introduced the Emperor. It was a sheer endless list of titles the Master had to read on, the most important planets and solar systems were mentioned.

After that the Master of Ceremonies recounted the glorious deeds, the battles and contracts and peace-treaties and so forth. Peoples he had saved, progresses he had proceeded, and governments he had replaced, or supported, or installed, or deleted, or left alone.

The guests from earth got uneasy. Time was not endless at their disposal; in fact, Arundle was supposed to be in bed by now, and would do so, if she hadn’t been woken up by an unidentified or even unidentifiable cause.

The Prince remained calm and at ease, he seemed to be familiar with the procedure.

Arundle knew, she had to be back, before her parents finished with their breakfast, but definitely before the bus left, because otherwise the bus wouldn't have left at all.

Besides, she had to talk things repeatedly. They had to think about many aspects and to arrange all kinds of things you didn't even think of. Where did she get her visa? Could that be done right here in Sydney? For how long would she be allowed to stay? What kind of insurance, vaccination, precaution of what kind – were necessary?

Billy-Joe wasn't much better off. He had to deal with his local authorities and to sort out mainly the financial aspects.

The Caesar up there wasn't Arundle's father. He couldn't be – not in a hundred years.

The Master of Ceremonies came to an end. The Prince now introduced them and pointed out the merits they earned serving Laptopia. He hopelessly exaggerated their role during the war and the riots, and all that.

Then he spoke about the Prince's father and how he developed after the defeat. He mentioned the plague and the epidemic madness that was spreading all about, and the Prince asked for advice and assistance, he was gratefully promised.

Despite all that, the Prince added in the end something that made Arundle suspicious. He said, he'd be able to handle the situation, with his General's assistance.

The main cause was settled that way. They had come up here to find answers, and had got them at last, no matter how strange the procedure was and how poor the result.

So she thought it wiser not to mention Grisella's survey now. The Prince knew what to say and how to put it, and how to run the negotiations. There might be another chance to talk about the loss of time.

When the Prince finally ended, the Emperor whispered with his advisers. He waved those who stood apart to get closer and listened to them as well. Finally, he came to a conclusion. He made the young Prince the new Regent over Laptopia and all planets and satellites of the solar system. The General he nominated as Minister of the inner and outer peace of the solar system as well.

Arundle and Billy-Joe, as well as Grisella and Scholasticus, he appointed 'extraordinary members of the Laptopian subdivision of the Crown Council'.

The final decision had to be acknowledged by the Parliament of the Ranks. However, His Majesty was convinced that his proposals would be confirmed.

The meeting ended. Arundle gasped and almost suffocated, while the young Prince looked pleadingly at her, not to spoil everything they had achieved by superfluous remarks.

They got up again, knelt and lowered their eyes, on the Master's of Ceremonies advice. The music picked up, everybody sat down or stepped on, and the whole glamorous lot slowly disappeared.

"You know now, that the Emperor is on your side", a voice whispered, and from behind, a pillar a small appearance stepped into the open and introduced himself as the Advisor.

Billy-Joe was just whispering, "he knows about everything, I suppose he's got his spies everywhere" while he noticed that mysterious figure, and felt overheard. The whole procedure that just had passed, didn't meet his taste at all.

Arundle agreed, the authoritarian attitude wasn't her cup of tea either. Thus, the Advisor caught them on the wrong foot.

"He is no democrat, you're right" she said. "At least we got an impression, how big the empire is. This wasn't clear to me."

Billy-Joe agreed. "All of a sudden your own problems seem small and meaningless," the Prince confirmed – with shining eyes, he was glad, about Billy-Joe's discernment. Besides, he appreciated his designation, and was prospering under the impact of the new role he was going to take over.

"Will we get a chance to bespeak at least some minor problems, or must we do all by ourselves? I'm thinking of the medical problems of your father, for example. Someone's got to know more about that, and what had been implanted in his head." Billy-Joe wanted to know.

They had almost forgotten about the Advisor, who was standing beside the pillar unnoticed. He was hardly more than an image and a voice - as he harrumphed and sighed somehow sorrowful.

'Why not have him listen to what we have to say' Arundle thought, while she noticed him. 'He and all the spies, one of whom he most likely is.'

Instead of the Prince, who looked rather alert because of his father, the Advisor himself took the word.

"One reason why the Emperor is so fond of you and your proceedings is the fact that there is always a revolution underway to be dealt with. Fact is that we are the minority in the universe, while the powers of darkness still keep the majority. That's why we would give up ourselves, if we gave in. In the democracy, the children of light would become hopelessly overruled. We aren't yet in the position to settle back and have things grow in peace and

liberty. The fires of darkness glow everywhere, and beings get attracted by the evil gloom, no less than by the glorious trumpets of true faith. Right now, there is one name appearing everywhere – Malicious Marduk – he is the challenger of the aeon. We don't know, how far his influence has yet been growing, but, I'm afraid it went further than we know. He won't give in, until he and his Miseriors reign in chaos. Your dear father, the former Regent of Laptopia, can be seen as a pitiful example. He changed sides and enlisted in Marduk's ranks. Now that they lost him back again, they won't let loose, and that's his present tragedy. He's to be torn to pieces, and there is little to be done..."

The Prince nodded and sighed, while Arundle asked for that loss in time – "Is time not your major concern?"

"Oh no, quite the contrary; the leakage is one of the most horrible weapons. Time is a precious good, probably the most precious good of all. The battle at present rages about such questions. It is said, that the Emperor and Marduk had been once friends and came across while exploring the secrets of space and time. After all, it's all a question of to be or not to be. Where there is no time, there can't be anything. Time and space correlate, and depend. Time is the dimensional key to the universe."

Arundle felt dizzy – „we saw that all too tight, though“ she said – “we thought someone stole the time of the others to improve his life on their behalf, quite similar to what was done with money.”

“Basically looked at, exploitation still exists” the Advisor confirmed. “You are right, what we experience these days is a new form of exploitation, a variation of the old power-game, that has been confirmed once again. The dualism in space may approve such. As it looks, there is no clear position possible any more. Nobody can be sure of his or her righteous point of view. In the end, they all tend to become selfish and ignorant. The poison of greed and hatred and envy is crawling into all modes and forms of being. Who can be safe of Malicious Marduk, after all?”

“Not even the Emperor himself?” – Arundle asked and the Advisor confirmed: “You're right – not even the Emperor!”

“And why are you telling us stuff like that?” Billy-Joe wanted to know. “You yourself belong to those slimy courtiers, don't you? Why should we trust in you?”

“You are absolutely right, I'm member of the court and my duty is it, to uncover with you the secrets of the universe, to what ever possible extend. You have to understand, that's most important. Without proper knowledge, you may overshoot the mark again. As long as you don't get the proper idea of the total whole, you're serving Malicious Marduk involuntarily. I need not remind you of that barbaric act of beheading the former regent, my young

friend,“ the Advisor said with a thoughtful look at Billy-Joe. “With deeds like that you are heading straight into the open arms of Malicious Marduk; - might have been him anyway, who assisted you with the ultimate blow. How did you feel? What was it like? Do you remember? – See...!”

Billy-Joe looked to the ground uneasily. He knew exactly what the Advisor meant.

“It’s so easy to have right turn into wrong,“ the Advisor confirmed. “You’ve always got to be alert.”

“I would like to return to the question of exploitation - if I may”, Arundle stepped in. She pitied her friend though, while he looked very ashamed, although she had been against the one to one copying of the biblical guideline, right from the start. It had been Billy-Joe himself, who insisted in such an awful fulfilment of the prediction, or what it was. He could have all the better shown mercy. If things had then turned out so much different for the Regent, was still another question.

Right now she didn’t want to speculate about that, because the question of exploitation seemed far more burning and crucial, with regard to the riots raging down there in Laptopia.

“You said” she addressed to the Advisor “exploitation only changed the mode, but is leading to the same results, I agree. The reality down there proves that without question. So the wrath uprising now, is the same, as was the wrath of the oppressed and exploited of all times.”

The Advisor agreed: “You are on the right track, just go on.”

Such agreement didn’t do her any good. All of a sudden, she didn’t know how to proceed.

“Well, that’s about the end of my idea, I didn’t think any further. I just wanted to make sure, that all class struggle always had to do with exploitation. In other words, the cause of revolutions and civil wars, no matter whether they’ve been fought in the name of justice, freedom or ‘Lebensraum’ always is the same. Exploitation does overshadow and imply all other causes.”

“And how shall things go on, now?” Billy-Joe asked, still thankful for being released from the trap he was caught in.

“Find Malicus Marduk” the Advisor answered and stepped back behind the pillar and vanished, just like that.

30. The Return

The shuttle back to Laptopia was ready to start. All precious cargo was unloaded and taken to the newly built warehouses.

The Prince was glad to hear, that things had worked out fine. He returned as a new man, raised and praised by the highest possible institution, he could think of. His Majesty himself approved his promotion.

The paperwork, as unnecessary it may be, had to be done and was done as promised, while he found the file awaiting him at the captain's locker on board of the shuttle, signed and sealed by convention and tradition, and he was delighted to obey.

"May I express my highest esteem and appreciation, Your Highness, on behalf of the whole moon-garrison. Your prompt appointment as Regent is our undividable and singular honour and praise of the glorious day, from now on to eternity - hosting His Majesty Himself, not to speak of the heavenly chorus and courtly herd; - may the crystal blue moonflower - unbreakable as it is - remind you of that glorious and unforgettable day; - we for our parts, will keep in our hearts for all our lifespan."

The moon-band got the sign and blew with all might into their trumpets and trombones, while the crystal blue moonflower was handed over. The Prince spoke a few words and thanked for the hospitality. The garrison defiled, accompanied by the band, the hatch was closed, and off they lifted.

The more personal farewell had been done before in the VIP-lounge. Billy-Joe and Arundle didn't know what to say. Their thoughts went ahead and they figured that they had run out of time once more. That wouldn't do them any good at all, with regard to the changes both of them were projecting. They couldn't risk any of their 'pranks' as Arundle's parents put it.

"Well then, little Prince, we've got to say good-bye now, for some time. All our best wishes are with you and your brave General, the new Peace-Minister. May the power be with you" Arundle exclaimed pathetically while she gave her little Prince, who now was a mighty Regent, a big mighty hug and so did Billy-Joe.

The Prince was looking forward rather optimistic, to overcome the worst obstacles together with General Armyless the new Peace-Minister. The leaks weren't all found yet, but the problem of the precious time was well known by now, and would be handled on a broader level on their

behalf. There was no individual solution possible for Laptopia alone. The whole universe was affected.

That didn't mean to give in and do nothing. Equality and justice were the keys to peace that seemed to be obvious. His duty was it, to arrange for just shares and equal rights for everybody and to find niches for the artifacts as well, if they promised to keep the law and have their poisonous industries removed to the moon or even further.

That was his understanding of democracy, because he was no dogmatic feudalist at all.

The rioting youngsters in the free zones were another field of action. The riots had to stop, that was clear after all. He then would guarantee full territorial autonomy. Furthermore, he would introduce Nutrition- and Healthcare-Programmes, as well as a 'Villages-Improvement-Concept' following the model of the Churinga-village. Finally, yet importantly he would stimulate all efforts concerning education.

Thus were his ideas to tackle the chaos, Malicious Marduk was spreading about.

The magic bow got ready for the trip, as soon as the shuttle had gone. He checked all data again and had a trial just in case. Then he compared the data anew, but still wasn't completely satisfied. "Well then, a couple of minutes might do", he snarled, while Arundle tried to make him find his legs, so to speak. While Billy-Joe was shaking his head thoughtfully, and murmured unintelligibly. Even Arundle couldn't help it.

"Let's get away, I'm fed up", he bluffed to retreat Arundle. He didn't look friendly at all, in fact kind of scary, hadn't she known him.

"Who's Malicious Marduk after all?" Arundle asked inaudible and shook her head with anger. "Nonsense, that Emperor is not my father and Billy-Joe's remaining my Billy-Joe, that's it."

His doubts couldn't be banned again. The old Shaman and the big counterpart of the Emperor seemed to be secretly connected, and so was Billy-Joe. That was his problem right now. The Advisor's revelations were uncomfortable, no doubt about that.

Even more, if the old Shaman was his future 'alter ego', Billy-Joe figured, - although a long time ahead. Without the Shaman, he'd be lying dead out there in the desert of Laptopia, disfigured and forgotten.

“And if the Advisor had appeared only to catch us for the Emperor – and make us change sides and be bribed – first the Prince and then we?” Billy-Joe’s still was muttering, while they went to the start-up finally.

Arundle took the virtual keyboard. She couldn’t care about the worried comrade of hers, she was all concentration now.

“What did you say?” she uttered “who’s gonna be cooked and knifed? – All of us? – Yes, but why?”

“We’ll be cheated, that’s what I mean. What would you say if there was no Malicious Marduk? If the Advisor had just pulled our leg, and that name out of his pocket, to drive us crazy, and to turn us round? - Could well be, couldn’t it? It worked fine with that little Prince of yours. He is heart and soul for his Emperor, isn’t he?”

Arundle had to admit that there was a point in what Billy-Joe said.

“Let’s get back first, okay?” she answered. Lucky enough, they still had Grisella and Scholasticus. Soon they all were together on that isle and they’d even get closer.

Arundle couldn’t help but was looking forward, despite all the trouble and agony all around. She was looking forward at her little private piece of happiness.

Behind the parking lot, in that eucalyptus-grove, at Billy-Joe’s campsite, a bad surprise was waiting.

“There he is” a voice shouted when Arundle and Billy-Joe appeared out of no-where. The voice belonged to a ranger of the National Park. Billy-Joe was thrown to the ground and handcuffed in no time. Arundle just managed to keep her bow, while an assistant tried to get hold of it. “That’s mine,” she yelled. The ranger let go at once. She wasn’t maltreated at all - only because she was white, she thought, but that was not the true reason.

Mrs. Waldschmitt stood mouth open next to her husband, her eyes all red from tears, and couldn’t believe her eyes, when Arundle all of a sudden stood right there. The poor woman didn’t understand what was going on.

“Thank God, it’s you...” she exclaimed repeatedly.

Mr Waldschmitt stepped to his daughter and gave her a hearty hug. “Thank God, you’re safe and sound, dear...” he murmured softly.

“We got that garbled note and the eucalyptus-twig. Well-done, dear, clever girl. See, that’s my daughter” Mr Waldschmitt exclaimed with a meaningful glance at his wife. “And there the rangers found this” and he pointed at the untidy heap, Billy-Joe’s stuff was piled to. “So we derived a conclusion...”

“Did you really?” Arundle interrupted “well, yes - you put two and two together and made five, I’m afraid. That’s no kidnapping-stuff, what a nonsense, we were having a bit of an exercise, - had a lap around the grove though...”

Arundle recalled that garbled message – something about urgent help and distress that had come in at last. The twig she’d taken for the smell. For some reason, Mrs. Waldschmitt had had a look after her daughter before breakfast. Somehow, she felt uneasy and didn’t know why. Arundle’s bed had been empty, the message lay at the table, the room was a mess – thus the idea was born, eagerly picked up by the local authorities.

Later Mrs. Waldschmitt reported the ‘crime-case’ repeatedly. “It happened shortly before Arundle left us for good, so to speak, her new boarding-school down there on that island with that funny name. I still don’t know whether our decision was right...” and every time she used to sigh deeply and painfully.

“I found that message on the table, it looked strange enough, - can’t really tell why, and of course I read it. Couldn’t help but reading it, anyway. I called my husband, and he called the police right away. The suspected kidnapper was caught. It was one of the native boys Arundle was somehow familiar with. We didn’t like the idea at all, but Arundle had her own mind on that, and we weren’t in the position any more, to check on her relations.

The message turned out to be part of one of their stupid pranks; they played at each other or at someone else. In fact, we never found out about that. Somehow, her friends, who stayed in Greece at the time, had to do with it. - She claimed to meet them at night, while sleeping - in the so-called dreamtime. But that’s of course nonsense.” Mrs. Waldschmitt was certain about that.

Arundle had to turn on the charm in order to convince the ranger, and asked her German friends to interfere. Therefore, other authorities were involved, and proved Billy-Joe’s integrity, as nominee of the scholarship at the School of Inbetween. So, he got free at last.

After some days in prison, he was the picture of misery, when Arundle was allowed to pick him up. But some good was in the whole matter, Billy-Joe pressed as hard on the proceedings as Arundle now, and stood with both feet on solid grounds. That did him only good, because he tended to run astray, and all too often got lost.

Had there been reasons to question his promotion, the injustice, he’d suffered, straightened the road for him, with extraordinary generosity, quite unlikely to governmental authorities, even in a clear case like that. The period was extended and instead of two years, his clan would be supported over the whole distance, and he was free to study on, as long as he wanted.

The lady at the office was moved to tears, when she became acquainted with Billy-Joe's biography. Such a valuable and gifted person had to be supported.

Arundle's father was of different fabric. Her tales couldn't move him. Somehow, she had to explain to him the unexplainable. The truth wouldn't help here. If she told him, what was really going on, she'd have been sent to a psychiatric asylum instead of the School of Inbetween. So she had to invent a fantastic prank, her friends in Greece had played on them.

In order to make it more acceptable for her father, she invented all kinds of internet-tools to overcome the distance, because this was to his taste. The message, her mother found, she said, was some kind of garbled fax, and indeed the key to the prank.

She didn't really expect him to understand, what this was all about, because there was nothing to understand.

"It's like a bottle post somehow," she explained: "If the bottles are in the water for some time, the writing begins to fade, that's about the same effect we experience, on our mode of transportation. Our messages have to overcome rain and wind and weather, quite like a bottle post on its way over the Atlantic..." she paused to check the effect, then went on:

"The poor fellow, who had been arrested, brought the message to me from afar – he ran day and night for it. It turned out to be my own message; - now 'returned to sender', so to speak. Instead of being rewarded, he then was arrested. That wasn't fair..."

Even her father agreed. He seemed to be satisfied and didn't dig any further. He was quite relieved, - his daughter didn't seem to be as close to that boy, as he had suspected.

Arundle giggled childishly when she repeated 'Return to Sender - Address unknown' – a pop song-title, even Mrs. Waldschmitt was familiar with. She sat back with a smile, while trying to recall the melody.

Everything seemed to be in order again. Billy-Joe, who worked as a porter at the 'Heaven's Gate' already, should have been known to them, but they didn't remember. For them, these 'dark folks' all looked alike, and so it was vice versa.

"Strange games" Mr Waldschmitt concluded shaking his head. He checked the note; the police had given back to Arundle after Billy-Joe's release. Mr Waldschmitt snuffled at the fabric, rubbed it between his fingers, and looked at it from all sides, then shook his head. "Strange, very strange – is that common over there in Greece?"

Arundle looked bewildered, she didn't want things to start all over again. Therefore, she nodded and murmured something about ancient culture and strange habits.

Mrs. Waldschmitt padded her husband's back and moved the pile of papers at him that now came in regularly every day. He took the bait, and started leafing through the magazine on top.

Nothing special happened on their way the Sydney, beside the common touristy programme, that was supposed to be very interesting.

Had Arundle not been so fully engaged and occupied, she'd been able to enjoy the natural beauties of the landscape. She was deeply in her thoughts. She dreamed with open eyes, thought of this and that, and imagined the would-be life waiting for her – all the new impressions finally, and understanding everywhere, and similar interests, though. She also was kind of aficionado of dear Billy-Joe, all the more, he'd been suffering innocently. Nobody was allowed to ever become aware of, the least he himself.

Where might he be now? The Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs had arranged transportation for him and some other gifted youth. They'd be taken by plane to Newsealand and from there by helicopter to their final destination, as was arranged with the Headmistress of the School of Inbetween. The Ministry insisted on a complete record of the whereabouts and the location of their protégées. Thus, the coordinates of the Isle of Wisdom-tooth were confidentially recorded.

For Arundle things worked out even straighter. All of a sudden, she found herself standing at the copter-port. Her parents waved a last good-bye from the visitor's platform, and then left for their own flight back home to Germany.

Her stuff would be sent to the island by air cargo, and would be picked up right from her home. "Kind of strange, such service..." Mr Waldschmitt grumbled. Why are these people all wild about that child? Do you understand that, dear?" He shook his head again, suspicious like an old dog. Somehow he felt envious anger, he wasn't able to define.

The Waldschmitts had arrived at home safely and had soon taken up their common activities. Two big parcels with Arundle's personal belongings had been picked up by a parcel service. All other things of hers would be sent together with the household goods of the Slyboots by ship in November from Bremerhaven to Auckland. The Slyboots moved with all their mobile property for good.

- Obviously, Grisella and Scholasticus had made up their minds already, and signed in on the school board of the School of Inbetween on a long-term basis.

It was too late now. Mr Waldschmitt would never find out, what really was on his daughter's mind. That was it. Yesterday she'd been a baby in her nappies and today she was fully fledged – and naughty even more – well, and kind of witty as well. Mr Waldschmitt was somehow proud of his only child, nevertheless.

Mrs. Waldschmitt had packed only the very necessary items. The porters had to go upstairs twice to fill the lift. Arundle wouldn't believe her eyes. Mrs. Waldschmitt didn't forget the books and the old copybooks, and none of Arundle's toys. Especially the stuffed dolls and cuties, those were by now under the bed, suffering a dark dusty lot there.

Arundle should decide on her own, what to keep, Mrs. Waldschmitt figured, while on the verge of tears – now that Arundle's room was cleared, and looked so empty and disconsolate.

Mr Waldschmitt meant to install a third office instead, he eventually didn't need.

“Was that necessary, Roland?” Mrs. Waldschmitt asked. “Well, you wanted all those things to be packed, didn't you?” he hollered back in defence, because he himself didn't feel good at all.

“Why couldn't we leave everything the way it was? Oh Roland, we probably made a mistake.” Mrs. Waldschmitt busted into tears. Arundle would come home only once or twice a year and soon she wouldn't come again at all.

“On the other end of the world ... – was that necessary? ... Are you sure, we didn't make a mistake, Roland?”

Roland wasn't sure either, but he couldn't admit, he sighed and vaguely waved about the empty room: “It's too late now anyway – the dice are thrown, so to speak” Mr Waldschmitt answered, and laughed uneasily. To his wife it sounded somehow cruel.

31. Arrival at the Isle of Wisdom-tooth

While Arundle entered the school-helicopter, she noticed the difference. The helicopter was still a helicopter, and the pilots were real pilots, as well as the pupils were noisy children, especially the younger ones; the friendly airhostess, who welcomed her on board and guided her to her seat, was like any airhostess. Still there was a difference, as soon as she left the grounds of the outer world, to enter the world of the School of Inbetween, which extended somehow as a thin extension all the way to Sydney. Almost like a flower, which sent its rays out into the world, such Arundle imagined the Isle of Wisdom-tooth. She was on the way right into the centre, right now in a couple of minutes!

She left not only her parents behind and the annoying school. Mr Schwertfeger – her old enemy – had her picked up there as well. He had become assistant director of the comprehensive school she attended, while she thought she'd got rid of him for good. He was teaching right in the same class of hers, until that incident, when he lost control and ruined his carrier. Florinna didn't think him all that bad, but Arundle still couldn't stand him even five years later. Too disgusting had been her first awful experience of the life at school.

She also left the touching boredom behind. How she hated these endless afternoons in the empty flat – her listlessness to only open her bag. While her fear of punishment and bad marks was immeasurably growing, and she had to fly into the world of dreams and imagination, while her excursions turned all too often into nightmares. – With one mighty stroke, this circle of evil was disrupted.

Could it be that she overestimated the School of Inbetween? There were teaching only human beings as well, after all. – Sure enough, but what kind of! She said to herself and thought of Grisella and Scholasticus. Besides, you could choose your courses yourself and weren't dependant on a dull teacher and his dry stuff...

She left behind the turmoil of Laptopia to a certain extend at last. A bit more distance would do them all good. The pile of problems there seemed invincible. It was almost impossible to find out, what was true. They met indeed always new problems in the strange world of Laptopia, the further they stepped in and got involved. From all sides you felt drawn and everybody claimed to be right, while the other side was wrong.

There were of course facts, which couldn't be neglected. – Why could it be, that some people seemed to live on forever, while others ran out of lifetime all too soon? Such question would remain, no matter what the legal aspect was.

Well, during the next months she'd have the chance to tackle questions the like, with Scholasticus and Grisella, looking together with them for

solutions. – The hint of the Advisor, to search for Malicious Marduk, was after all not as wrong as Billy-Joe thought. For him, the new task was just another manoeuvre of the Emperor, who wanted to fix the young Prince at his side and to throw dust in their eyes. To have them chase on the wrong trace, and to get away from the real roots of evil.

Such were the questions and quarrels Arundle put aside, somehow forcefully, to be looking forward to what was coming. To begin with, she enjoyed her meal. She had strawberry-tea and after that a peppermint-cocktail, while she was eating vegetable-pie with rice balls and hot ginger-curry sauce and for desert she had kiwi cream tartlets on coconut-wafers.

While she was eating, she was listening to some kind of strange music, she had never heard before, but let her been carried away voluntarily.

As the copter was travelling at a lower altitude than the jets, she could see the blue sea quite clearly, and when they met ships, you could see the people on board waving. They were heading towards southeast, as you could see by the position of the sun.

After the meal, Arundle took one of the brochures from the bag in front of her. However, it was the same she had been reading already together with Billy-Joe, describing the School of Inbetween and the Isle of Wisdom-tooth.

Instead of reading, she tried to talk to two girls on the other side of the gangway – she was seating alone on her side. The conversation turned out to be difficult, because they came from Korea and their English wasn't the best. Besides, the helicopter made quite some noise. Therefore, they ended up in friendly smiles and polite nodding.

Nevertheless, Arundle found out that they came from Seoul and that this would be their first year at the School of Inbetween, just like hers.

Whether Florinna and Corinia had arrived yet? It was about high time to meet in reality; the dreamtime wasn't quite the same. Something was missing anyway.

Billy-Joe would soon be coming in, or he had arrived already, that she didn't know. His departure from Auckland was bound to be today anyway, and Grisella's ship was due now any day as well.

The two scholars intended to use the long sea journey to get prepared for the upcoming challenges. Theirs it was, to be a little better prepared than their future pupils, who were only looking forward.

The helicopter got ready for landing. Arundle felt her heart beat. She glanced down through the little bull's-eye, but couldn't see anything except the blue sky and the sea.

The helicopter went down over the port bow, while she was sitting on the other side. Just shortly before touchdown she noticed the typical ring of rocks – as was described in the brochure.

A last sway, a knock and the grounds were contacted. The rotors lowered into a deeper twittering, were lower and lower and finally died. The hatch was pushed open. All passengers jumped up, as if there had been a secret sign, and began feverishly rummaging for their hand luggage. While the first rushed down the stairs already to welcome their promised land. Some jumped up into the air, others fell on their knees and even kissed the ground, as their nature and customs demanded. Arundle wasn't alone in that either.

While she stepped out of the hatch, she saw Florinna and Corinia from afar running towards her. They waved and shouted, and Arundle waved back, when she stepped graciously down the stairs. She felt like grandeur. She shouted neither for joy, nor fell she down on her knees. She stepped proudly, like a Princess over the thick soft green. However, after a few steps she lost control and rushed forward and in no time the girls were taking one another in their arms.

That was a hassle! “You’ve got to go through that sluice,” Corinia pointed ahead. “You’ve got to get graduated” Florinna explained, when she met Arundle’s questioning glance. “Let’s hope you’ll join us,” Corinia said mysteriously.

They took Arundle’s luggage and followed the others to the Arrival Hall. “Now you’ve got to make up your mind” Florinna said. “You decide which gate you go through”, Corinia confirmed. “While the two of us went through the same gate” – “Even though, we were separated, and didn’t know the decision of the other” – “In order not to influence one another...”

“That’s therefore called the ‘Sluice of Disposition’, you gotta know. You know our preference of the Dreamtime...” Florinna added and sighted quite meaningfully. “We aren’t allowed to say more, I think we told you too much already.”

Some kind of artifact approached on soft purring wheels, Arundle noticed pretty stunned. He pushed the two girls aside, away from Arundle, and had her follow him to the starting point. From there, she had to make up her mind on her own, and go through one of the gates. They all looked the same at the first sight. Arundle felt left alone and helpless as well. She tried to concentrate on the task anyway. She knew, she was supposed to follow her intuition. She decided not to think for the best alternative, but to let things go. She closed her eyes, and stretched her hands out, and stepped slowly foot-by-foot towards those gates.

Soon she realized some kind of attraction, while the noise around seemed to fade. She felt as if she walked along a line straight ahead towards a light – a kind of window, though. She felt curiosity and even fits of homesickness. As soon as she arrived, she felt certain, that she had made the right choice. She opened her eyes and pressed the door-handle of gate number four. The door swung open and she stepped into some kind of corridor, she couldn't see the end.

Did she make the wrong decision? The certainty left her. She wasn't sure at all. Then she closed her eyes again and stretched her arms out, and hoped for the right revelation. The corridor had to lead somewhere – most likely down to the dormitories, Florinna and Corinia had spoken of. If her choice had been right anyway. She decided to step on until the feeling of certainty returned.

She walked on for a good while. It took longer this time – until she noticed a similar notion than before. Would she compare the attraction now with the attraction before, it was only a little creek instead of a demanding clear stream. Thus made her decision a triviality.

She could step through any of the doors, she felt, there was only little difference, whether left or right. Unreal enough was that fancy descending corridor with its uneven floor. She didn't doubt to be dreaming. The magic bow made him known for the first time since she was making up her mind. He confirmed her notion and had her come to an end. "Get on in" he snarled and kicked her in the back.

Arundle pushed the door on her left open and stepped into a large hall. Up and down merry youngsters of all ages were seated at a long table, having their lunch. Everybody was talking and laughing and yelling so there was a hell of a noise in there. A similar artifact as the one, which had attended her before, pushed trolleys laden with all kinds of dishes along side to serve and wait the hungry lot. While from all sides and through all doors, other newcomers – like Arundle - stepped in and looked for an empty seat.

Arundle was of course looking for her friends. However, she couldn't find them at first amongst the buoyant lot.

Corinia was waving all the time, she had noticed her at once, and Florinna went to get her by.

"Later, such hullabaloo will come to an end" – "Let's hope for the best" – "It's always the same at the beginning of a term."

"It's their first term either" Arundle thought, when Florinna led her to her seat, but didn't say anything. Her friends were right anyway. After all, they were all dreamers and noise for noise's sake was not their major concern.

“Here you are at last,” Corinia yelled as they arrived. “We thought, you had tomatoes on your eyes, as the Germans say.”

“Come on, sit down between us” Florinna waved elegantly with her free hand. The golden arm rings jingled. “After lunch, we’ll show you where we live.”

“You’ll be amazed, I daresay” Corinia predicted and her eyes sparkled. “Or not at all” Florinna said with a smile.

“Shall I get you anything, or would you come along, then you can see, where the food comes from and where you find the menu of the day as well? Today we are having red lentils, mangos in sesame coating or cheese-nut-wafers with lattice, and peas in almond-sauce, and for desert, there are banana-cookies or ginger-rice-tartlets. Sounds great, doesn’t it?” Corinia said while waving the menu in her hand.

Arundle nodded and grabbed for the menu, then read on, on her own –

“Ginger-chicken stuffed with Lemongrass,

Bamboo-Sprouts on Coconut crème,

Fried Bats in Tamarind-sauce...”

“What’s that?” she yelled frightened. “What do you mean?” Corinia asked back while she waited patiently until Arundle had read the menu for the whole week.

“Well those fried Bats.”

“O, no those aren’t bats. It’s an Indonesian speciality, I think. They are made of yams and strange spices. They taste good and are called bats, because they look like bats, simple as that... You know, we are down here in the Pan Indian corner; there are other areas as well. Italian may be found on the other side for example – well the food refers to all kinds of tastes and customs, because we come here from all over the world...”

“I’m only having the desert,” Arundle decided at last. She wasn’t hungry, she had had a snack on the helicopter just an hour ago. Besides, she was all flustered. She poked about in that coconut crème and waited impatiently until her friends had finished. They sorted in and roughly cleaned their dishes at the conveyor-belt. “Thus, it’s got to be done” Corinia explained.

After that, they led Arundle to the lift that took them down. Deep down, almost on the last floor, the lift halted. “Have we only chosen for you” Corinia explained. “Well, not only for you, for us as well” Florinna added. “Deep down in the belly of Mother Earth” – “Or even under the sea” – “I’d say both” – they explained while Arundle was standing in front of the most spectacular panorama, she’d ever seen. Above them, the dark blue ocean gloomed mysteriously. Behind thick panes, there were all kinds of fish

swarming about, as well as octopods and starfish and other unidentified species amongst the black rocks of the former volcano-flue.

“You can turn the light off” Corinia explained, and pressed a button, and the window went dark.

“That’s your locker, by the way.”

“And this is your bed...”

“And over there, we sleep.”

“We’re supposed to be ten all together in that room. Over there are Mailun, Songül, Ilsa, Tabea and on our side Imogen and Sumai.”

“You are right, one’s still missing.”

“The boys have their own dormitories...”

“And they are all dreamers, like us...”

“The other girls anyway...”

“Beside us, there are soul-wanderers and flying dancers, and others, who can even change their appearance.”

“We were combined for our talents – all of us. Everybody shall get, where his or her talents demand. Therefore, we all pass through the sluice. Of course, there are multiply gifted beings, also amongst us, I’m afraid. Well, during the regular lessons, we come together anyway.”

“Is that true, there is no general time-table?” Arundle asked. “Well yes, and no, you’ve got to participate in certain basic courses, everybody has to. Otherwise you can’t go on.”

“...Has to do with your talents...”

“We all found out about that by our mates. Some of us are already in their third year. We might have difficulties in picking up, I’m afraid.”

“What am I going to say, I’m even one year younger than you are.” Corinia went in.

“I thought, you choose your subjects and your teachers all by yourself” Arundle exclaimed, when she heard the word ‘time-table’ - a disciplinary item, she couldn’t stand. In fact, she hated timetables.

“That’s what you actually do,” Florinna answered. “Some mandatory lessons there are, anyway.”

“I see,” she said, she recalled to have read of such freedom in the brochure.

“...Has to do with your talents” Corinia repeated, and thus it went on from both sides:

“Except for the regular school-stuff – languages and so on...”

“O no, languages don’t belong to that category, not for us dreamers anyway – we call it sleep-learning, we pick up languages just like that...”

“All we have to do, is dreaming ourselves to a place and mingle with the folk, simple as that...”

“Many things are so much easier for us. Think of Geography, though.”

“Has school started yet?” Arundle wanted to know.

The sister shook their heads. “Lessons begin, when we are all together.”

“We just had a look and spoke to the others.”

“You can speak with almost everyone.”

“Everybody is so friendly...”

“Most of them are” – Corinia met a peevish caretaker, who was the exception from the rule, so to speak.

“It’s everywhere the same, after the vacations.”

“And keep in mind the routes you gotta take and your floor number and the like, you won’t find anyone who could help with that.”

“If you like, we’ll show you around right away.”

“We don’t know everything either...”

“And you can test, whether you manage to find back to the dining-room...”

“Well, I’d like to pick up Billy-Joe, he’s supposed to get in by now. Then I’d like to see Scholasticus or Grisella. Billy-Joe and I have to talk urgent Laptopian stuff over with them, might be of interest to you as well...”

“It’s a pity we can’t get Scholasticus or Grisella for teachers” Corinia went in. “They are no dreamers, I know, but what about their subjects? I’m sure they have to offer matters of interest.” Arundle rejected. “Philosophy and Physics are good for everybody all the more for us...”

“Besides I’m all interested in the secret teachings of the magical stone and my magic bow – probably more than in that dream-stuff. Dreaming to me is a kind of loophole and a vehicle, rather than a matter of its own,” Arundle said. The sister weren’t all convinced, because they didn’t owe a magic bow.

The three were on their way to the helicopter-port, to find out about Billy-Joe’s arrival from Auckland.

“That’s where teachers live” Florinna pointed at the neat houses along their route. Arundle knew from the brochure, she and Billy-Joe had studied carefully. They had to wait for another thirty minutes or so, they found out at the terminal.

“Shall we have a look at the cascade?” Corinia suggested. The cascade’s supposed to be underneath the copter-port. They could hear it from afar, when they approached to the cliffs. They looked for the footpath that

was said to be somewhere, but couldn't find it. The cliff lowered straight down everywhere.

"Perhaps you gotta go through the terminal," Arundle suggested.

They gave in while the time elapsed and sighted down into the foaming sea at the bottom of the cliff. Thus, they almost missed the helicopter when it was approaching.

They rushed back to the terminal and waited impatiently until Billy-Joe had made his decision.

To cut it short: he also belonged to the dreamers, as they had hoped.

While the Australians mostly belonged to the so-called Somniors, the Sublimations (the flying dancers) - and Animations (the soul-wanderers) often came from China or Tibet or even from the Siberian Taiga. That probably had to do with the temperature, Billy-Joe suggested.

He was somehow ill at ease still. Arundle thought to know the reason why. It was a combination of his ill experience as her false kidnapper, and before a precarious closeness to a dubious spirit. Both didn't leave him untouched, though.

He only knew Florinna and Corinia from the dreamland and had to become accustomed to their presence in reality.

Other Animations came from the jungles of the Amazonas or from the heart of Africa. However, the conditions weren't fix of course, otherwise no tests had been necessary.

"You've got to measure the brain current, I presume" - Billy-Joe suggested. The method didn't meet his full support; neither did the idea of sleeping under the sea level. He was used to sleep in the open under the wide sky. "That's going to be solved, and shouldn't be a problem" the girls suggested.

The afternoon went by. The newcomers had stored their property in the appropriate lockers; they had made their beds and became acquainted with their comrades. Verbal communication wasn't all that easy. Understanding took quite some time, and time passed by, just like that. So many new impressions made their efforts worthwhile.

Arundle tried to contact the Slyboots, but in vain. Nobody could tell, whether they had arrived, as shipping was almost impossible in the vicinity. They could have changed the means of transport by now for the last hop from either Auckland or Sydney.

Arundle and her girlfriends met Billy-Joe again some time later in the dining room for dinner. He wasn't happy with his campsite, though, because it didn't quite meet his desires. He might as well have been upset, because of

the strict division of the genders; he wasn't used to, Arundle presumed, but didn't speak about.

Billy-Joe had found a lonely terrace at last - on the first floor, in the teachers' section. There he'd put his hammock and blankets. Nearby was a roof, in case it rained. This was not quite the true nature he was used to. No open fire was allowed or hunting and cooking his own meals.

Billy-Joe's menu was even more colourful than that of the sisters at lunch, Arundle noticed, while she joined him. Although she had eaten this and that already, reading it was another strange experience:

'Grilled Ring-Snake'

'Poached Lemur Stew'

'Broad-headed Moggot in Aspic' -

for example, tickled your palate the wrong way. Therefore, she got her a pizza like at home, and while they seated together, each of them eating their own stuff, they all of a sudden felt very strange. They wouldn't do that again in future. Instead, they would travel from country to country food-wise. They wouldn't really starve after all.

"I'm not so fond of maggots anyway," Billy-Joe said while he's just cracking one.

"My parents even eat snails," Arundle answered bravely. She wouldn't have liked to kiss him at that very moment.

Although it was night, it was still light outside. The evenings were stretching by now pretty well, as the isle lay slightly south of the Tropic of Capricorn. Now at the beginning of September, the summer was about to come down here, and the longest day of the year wasn't far. Wherever you looked, the green was dwelling, juicy and overwhelmingly fertile, you could almost hear those strange screams of the sheerest, never-ending lust of just being.

Arundle and Billy-Joe had discovered the access to the cascade and walked about the pillars and rocks, breathing the fresh foamy air from the sea, that was swaying around the isle, and couldn't get enough of the sight.

They hadn't been able to contact Grisella and Scholasticus, but learnt at last that the Slyboots were here. "You can have an appointment tomorrow morning after ten o'clock with Professor Grisella, Lady of Griselgreif to Greifenklau-Slyboots" - Arundle exclaimed with a high pitched voice, imitating the obedient secretary.

"That's supposed to be our Grisella" Arundle explained when Billy-Joe looked rather stunned.

“Let’s hope, she’ll manage to be out of bed at that time” Arundle giggled. “In any case the four of us will go there, the Slyboots got to know. - Can I send them an arrow?” she asked.

“We’ve got to deal with quite something, though” Billy-Joe nodded, “all the more both of us have their own opinion on the matter” – “And differ quite a bit” Arundle confirmed. Because she tended to trust the Advisor’s ‘General View’, while Billy-Joe thought the Advisor’s tale a sophisticated manoeuvre of the Emperor.

“Let’s not get this evening spoilt” Arundle suggested, but the sisters, who joined them at the cascade, insisted that they had to come to an agreement right away. Arundle asked for paper and pencil. While Billy-Joe reported of what had happened after the sisters had left.

“That was in the not so-called ‘Hall of Honour and Humbleness’ right at the feet of His – so-called - Majesty. Do you remember?”

Billy-Joe wasn’t able to hide his personal opinion. When Arundle returned with scratch pad and pen, and some tape as well, he had the sisters on his side. They wrote a message, stating how dubious the Advisor’s role was, and how the young Prince was bribed with a title and the governmental power, while the mess was still the same and madness was raging.

Of course Arundle’s own point of view differed quite a bit, but that she could make clear in the meeting, she thought. The advantage of Billy-Joe’s version was that their interference in the internal affairs of Laptopia became necessary again. Therefore, the message was sent uncommented towards to – what they thought to be - the new home of the Slyboots.

They didn’t want to part, none of them, the least Billy-Joe, despite the quarrel. Therefore, he suggested having a swim either downstairs in the indoor pool or outside. However, it was too late for the lagoon. They knew of course how dangerous it was, to swim in unknown waters by night.

The girls were back in no time with their swimsuits on, because their dormitory was so close. Billy-Joe didn’t owe a proper swimsuit, so he had to borrow one.

Things like swimsuits didn’t help him to become familiar, - none of them, while all Australians shared his point of view, when it came to such aspects of the so-called civilized life.

At last, he found a suitable trunk; the guard had lots on stock. He was then last in the water, while the others were already entering up a kind of artificial island, where an artificial sun was still shining.

Arundle looked like marble between the two sisters.

‘The skin of the whites make them look more naked, then us’ Billy-Joe thought, and a strange itch hit him between the shoulder blades. He couldn’t turn his eyes away from her, but his feelings had somehow been touched by their argument.

Besides – so much had they together obtained: They had been petrified statues, after having jumped into strange waters. They had almost been cooked by the dragon, and torn to pieces by the hound-dogs. In fact, each of them wouldn’t be alive anymore without the help of the other. Right here they were safe and sound, and at ease. That made the difference.

Such he said to himself and dived under the little isle for quite a while, because he was used to that, and could keep his breath for a good while, until the girls got nervous and came down looking for him.

While diving, almost nobody could keep up with him, but on the surface, he swam doggy-like. However, his mimetic appeal made him copy the elegant nymphs in no time, while they were going their lanes. He managed to keep up after the third reversing.

Arundle was still swimming with him, but couldn’t keep her margin and gave up. She joined the others on that isle again. She pressed and arranged her long dark-wet braids as elegantly as a mermaid might have done.

Billy-Joe didn’t mind swimming any more. He would give everything right now, if he was wrong, and the Advisor was right. Because Arundle believed in what the Advisor said. Nevertheless, he couldn’t get rid of his doubts, no matter how hard he tried. It was not the whole truth the Advisor told them, and not the real cause either, of what was going on in the future universe of Laptopia.

For good reasons he didn’t trust him. However, Arundle didn’t share his experience, which had little to do with Laptopia. In fact, they were older and homemade, so to speak.

The meeting next day with Grisella didn’t bring them any further. Billy-Joe and Arundle presented their opposing positions, but Grisella wasn’t much slyer afterwards. Both points of view had something in it.

Perhaps it would be the best to have a look at what was going on in Laptopia, after the Prince had taken over the governmental authority. If things changed to the better, and the riots and attacks got lesser, the course might be the right one.

“Time isn’t everything” Grisella pointed out. “From a philosophical point of view, a long life makes sense only under specific circumstances. As

life has to give reasons for its own sake. Life is first of all a matter of quality, while length is first of all a matter of quantity.”

With big eyes Florinna and Corinia witnessed Grisella picking up speed and getting warm. Soon they had problems to concentrate on what she said and to follow her bold connections and conclusions.

That didn't bring them any further, Arundle thought, and asked for Scholasticus' whereabouts.

That meant to interrupt Grisella's flow of speech and thought harshly. Nevertheless, the engaged Professor didn't mind, or she didn't show, but said, that Scholasticus was due any day now.

He was taking care of the former protégées. “His University don't let him go, before they didn't take their exams. That means Scholasticus has to jet back and forth almost every second month or so. However, until next summer things should be straightened finally – that's what he hopes anyway. Then we'll also have done the big move, hopefully.”

Grisella stopped for a moment, and then she picked up her philosophical thread, where she was interrupted.

“Let's come to the point then. I recommend the two of you have a look of what's going on in Laptopia, while a couple of weeks or even months passed by over there. Our further action shall then depend on the outcome of your survey. Is that a word?”

Arundle looked at Billy-Joe and he looked back at her and then at the magic bow, whose eye went all red and gloomy. If the magical stone had been in the vicinity, they could have waited for Scholasticus, who might as well had liked to join them, because he had a clear mind and a sharp brain, while on the other hand he was a hopeless fan of his descendant - the General.

“Walter is on holiday,” Arundle said. “It's only fair to leave him alone for a while. He'll be showing up, he promised.”

“Without the magical stone the trip couldn't be done”, the magic bow interfered – “not with the Professor and the two of you, I mean.” He gave Arundle a push in the back and kicked Billy-Joe with his lower tip.

Grisella was glad to hear that, but didn't show. “As your teacher, I cannot recommend, what I recommend now, I'm afraid. So I just do it: Would you then mind, going on your own again? - I won't go – no way. It was hard enough in that black box, anyway.”

She got shaky and went all upset, just thinking of that. Besides, her own mission had turned out to be a complete failure in the end. The results were poor, but the worst thing was, that her survey opened the door for Malicious Marduk.

32. Bank-Account-Time-Exchange-Converter [BATEC]

“...But it’s done my way” Arundle said to Billy-Joe, who somehow behaved like a stranger, still insisting on his questionable point of view. Otherwise, she wouldn’t follow the Professor’s advice, she said.

Billy-Joe hesitated for a moment – almost too long for critical Arundle, but then he nodded and the two took to their heels. “The isle’s waiting for you and will be the same tomorrow” the sisters yelled, but they had gone as if they vanished into thin air.

The magic bow took them right back to the regal palace of the newly appointed Regent of Laptopia. And they busted right into an audience. The delegates of the tribes were just bringing forward their demands and complaints. Arundle and Billy-Joe decided to stay hidden behind their pillar, because they hadn’t been discovered yet, and to eavesdrop what was said.

What they heard raised Arundle’s mood. No month had passed, since they said farewell to the Prince on the moon, and now the ambassadors came already forward with their complaints about the realisation of the promised programmes.

“That means, of course, something’s happening” Arundle whispered into Billy-Joe’s ear, who nodded reluctantly. The complaints were about the teachers, who weren’t empathetic enough, and didn’t know anything about rural life out there in the countryside; – and about the water supply that didn’t work as promised, because people didn’t come to an agreement with their neighbours.

Four weeks on earth meant more than a quarter of a year in Laptopia. Anyway – hats off for such results. The Prince and his governing team had done a very good job. Nobody stepped forward to complaining about riots or attacks. Even Billy-Joe doubted, whether he had done the Advisor and the Emperor wrong.

“I think we heard enough” Billy-Joe nodded and followed Arundle into the open. The audience was ending anyway.

When the Prince noticed them, he jumped off his throne and rushed down the stairs of the pedestal to welcome them with great delight.

Then he introduced his crown councillors and explained to the assembly the role Arundle and Billy-Joe had played in the late history and what they had done for Laptopia, while a lot was known to most of the delegates already.

Like himself, he explained, 'His Majesty Himself' had appointed Arundle and Billy-Joe.

A reverential whisper hushed through the ranks. When the Prince guided his guests of honour to his pedestal, the whole assembly bowed or sank on their knees. In vain, Arundle looked out for General Armyless.

"The General is tied down by imperative duties, I'm afraid," the Prince explained, before Arundle could even ask. Her questioning gaze was enough. "Our Honourable Minister of Peace and Defence is performing indescribably fabulous deeds, as is brought to our attention by daily reports. We can be highly satisfied."

The ambassadors retreated, and the assembly dissolved. "Let's have a bite to eat, I'm starving. Such meetings don't find an end. It's always the same" he explained with a satisfied smile. "You came just about in time. Last month I didn't have given a penny for our project. But by now they are all different, as if they had been exchanged."

Arundle congratulated her 'little Prince' she still used to address him, for all his successes. "After lunch I'd like to show you something" the Prince said with a mysterious air "perhaps it helps to dissemble your doubts – well, well, I know – you don't agree with many of our steps taken or projected. You think of free elections and the like. That is not out of sight, not at all, I can assure you."

Billy-Joe blushed and felt uneasy. His beheaded opponent came to his mind. - "What's your father like? Is he any better?" The Prince denied: "Physically he is still a wreck, while he is clearer now mentally. The process of degeneration can't be stopped or even turned in direction. More important for him might be to come to peace with the world. He is soon departing. Fortunately, the horrid fits of depression tend to decline as well in force as in sequence. He won't recover, he is a broken man" the Prince ended "You will understand more of my father's problems, when you have seen, what I'd like to show you."

The humble meal was served. Billy-Joe and Arundle took care not to help themselves excessively. An untrained eater could hardly swallow the synthetic stuff, the Laptopians consummated. Everything was over-flavoured, but worst was the strange consistency. What ever you chewed produced a slimy layer on tongue and palatals.

The tribes rejected such development, thus food was another field of action to be tackled.

The Prince enjoyed his meal, while his guests joined him politely and swallowed every bite down with the liquor only little better than the food.

Therefore, they were all too happy, when the Prince suggested to go ahead with the intended excursion of his; that was going to take some time.

They didn't leave the palace, but went downstairs again such irregular stairs, they recalled. This time they didn't get to the dungeons but to a huge shiny safe.

"That's the secret access to the State bank and is reserved for family-members only." The little Prince declared, while he got a huge bundle of keys at hand to open the seven locks of the door with seven different keys.

"My father couldn't keep the key-code in mind, therefore he had installed those locks instead" the Prince explained. He turned one key after the other and at last, the door swung open.

"Down here, you will find the wealth of Laptopia" the Prince said and asked them to follow him through endless corridors again, with safe deposit boxes on both sides. "Behind those hatches immeasurable wealth is deposited, perhaps not behind every hatch anymore, as things began to change, but still..." the Prince went on. "Here is all the money, after all" Billy-Joe nodded.

"Who's talking about money, though? Money has lost importance a long time ago. Money is of interest only for historians and coin-collectors. No, down here you find the preserved time, mostly converted into energetic quantum. Because it is not easy to preserve time. In former times, the loss was immeasurably. By ninety percent of the boxed in time get lost by preservation. You have to imagine... Arundle you may recall your space disaster, when you got lost in time. You were lead into the area when the business with the time prospered. Then nobody had the faintest idea of what was coming all too soon. Such losses were then taken for granted. Then, when people lost youth in no time and grew older almost visually, things turned into the open but it was too late already. You couldn't stop or reverse the trend just like that. The monetary system had been replaced by the temporal system irreversibly. Some order was necessary to keep the society going, if people didn't want to return to the very basic exchange of goods. And soon it became clearer and clearer that the wealth of nations assembled in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals, to an immeasurable extend beyond all historic comparison."

While the Prince talked, they stepped ahead, still along the corridor and between those rows and rows of lockers, behind which the preserved lives of a countless multitude rested, fading unused.

"Whom do those lockers belong?" Billy-Joe asked. The Prince gave him a long thoughtful glance then said: "I don't want to lie at you. All you see in this area belongs to my family. My father was crazy about such wealth. The worst was, he bought on the black market whenever his contingent was exceeded. But we will come to that soon..."

Arundle noticed by his look at the Prince, what Billy-Joe was thinking. He wasn't very wrong, though. If the Prince had wanted to throw dust in their eyes, he could have lied or kept them away from that horrid family bank of his.

"In those lockers there are hoarded up values of whole lifetimes, what a waste..."

"And if you give the time back to its proper owners?" Arundle asked.

"If that was as simple... believe me, I had done it. Whatever we do with that" and he waved helplessly around "we won't solve anything but only stimulate the black market. You can't through values in, and hope of no effect. What do you think the heirs do with their relatives' lives? They gamble with them, try to increase their value and of course extend their own lifespan, but that would be the least of all problems..."

Since the great currency-reform, when the exchange rate was voluntarily put up from two to one and the free time-trade was limited, you can't distribute time, just like that. In former times, there was even a state-lottery, and the winner of the week cashed a check over eternal life, as it was called in those days. Of course, nobody lives on forever, but a couple of hundred years can well do, all the more since the currency-reform I mentioned."

"What does that reform mean?" Arundle asked.

"When the free commerce with preserved time became more and more obscure, and parents sacrificed their own children for their sake, and riots arose not all that different from those we experienced, the Emperor decided to interfere. The time-exchange-converters all over the country were drawn back. The time-exchange-stocks were closed down everywhere. Existing accounts were frozen in, and instead of the time-currency, they tried to install a credit-system, similar to the old money-related system. But things weren't handled wholeheartedly enough, I'm afraid..."

They had come to the end of the corridor by now, and were standing in front of another huge strong room, the doors of which blocked the corridor completely. This time the Prince used a secret code number to unlock it, and the mighty hatches swung open.

"We are entering now the so-called 'Workshop of Renewal'" the Prince explained.

"Be careful, what you see is shocking..." The Prince's warning came just in time. The room was filled with body parts like in a slaughterhouse. Legs, arms, and torsos were hooked up the same way, but here the parts belonged to former human beings - that was the difference.

"What the hell is this?" Arundle yelled. She couldn't stand the sight, her stomach rebelled. It took some time until she dared a second look. The

first impression had been misleading. This was no dead meat, bound to be eaten. Such extremities seemed to be alive and ready for action. All kinds of artificial spare-parts were connected with bones and sinews. Everything looked clean and well maintained.

“From here most hospitals procure the spare parts for transplantations. You find almost everything here, suitable for any blood group and as fresh as on the day of extraction. Those who get equipped here and don’t miss the inspection-intervals, are provided with an almost perfect body, that lasts for ages, so to speak, while the spirit and the soul need some extra service.

My father was a good example. Had he not lost his head, he would have gone on forever. But the price he had to pay, was high, extremely high in his case, from a moral point of view.”

“The corpses look so fresh, they must come from somewhere” Billy-Joe exclaimed. The Prince nodded. “Those are the victims of the system. They have sold themselves or have been sold by others. The creditors cash those who plunder their account before the time has come. Their executives - the so-called Miseriors - have no mercy. Meanwhile the situation became better for two reasons. Since spare parts of that kind” he pointed at the disgusting scenery – “became superfluous and have been replaced by more elegant and less cruel methods. The keyword here is cloning.”

“And we wonder, were the aggression comes from” Arundle said, shaking her head.

“How come, we didn’t find out? Grisella’s interviewers inquired in any possible way, and asked the people over and over again.”

“I think it was fear, that made them keep their mouths shut,” the Prince suggested. “If you don’t know it otherwise, you take such things for granted, and you don’t talk about them anymore. You wouldn’t question the daily sunrise, would you?”

“Are they going to be slaughtered while still alive?” asked Billy-Joe in disgust.

“That’s not necessary. The life-light extinguishes, as soon as a Miserior presents the Proclamation of Exitus (POE). They then get hold of their victims, who exhale their living soul, that’s put into a special plastic bag. This way such life has definitely terminated” the Prince concluded.

“Would they die anyway?” Arundle asked.

“Most likely” answered the Prince – “but it never happened. The creditors have been so keen about corporal spare parts.”

Arundle shivered.

“You spoke of reforms, that followed. What did change then, after all?” Billy-Joe asked.

“Well, first of all the extend of such practice was concerned. Nobody was allowed to deal with ‘time-related articles’ – (as such corporal human remedies were called) - uncontrolled any more. Each transaction had to be registered, and most importantly - was charged. In some cases by an enormous tax-fee, depending on the wealth of the proprietors.

All ‘Time-Exchange-Account-Converters’ got withdrawn, which had been positioned in each supermarket or other public facility of any kind.

Can you imagine, the youngsters spent some ten to fifteen years of lifespan for a trendy glider, just like that? All they had to do, is put their finger into that TEAC – (that is the ‘Time-Exchange-Account-Converter’), and the thing was theirs. That was indeed pretty seductive and you had to have a strong character to resist. Then - what does the youth care about age. The bill was then presented all too soon. Those who had chosen this seductive main road to immediate happiness, didn’t do - as a rule - for more then five years or so.”

“I see” Billy-Joe said “and by that way all the youthful corpses came here to become cannibalised. How awful...”

“Disgusting” Arundle, added.

“But that was it - the creditor’s executives cashed with ‘mind and body’, that is, the whole being by terminating their lives. I have to confess, that the corpses were much better off, than the souls. Although there are only rumours spread about, nobody has ever confirmed. The Advisor spoke to me of unbelievable excesses, though. He’d be the one to explain all this much better than I can. All the more Malicious Marduk comes in right here, he is meant to be the Big Boss of the Miseriors.”

The mysterious Advisor appeared right at that same moment from behind a pedestal. He bowed politely and greeted the Prince’s guests deservingly, but didn’t show, whether he recalled them.

“I’ve found about that one” the Prince declared and pointed at the Advisor, as if he was an object. Arundle thought him to be almost rude. “Was the Advisor after all no man of flesh and blood?”

“I think, he is something like a thought”, the Prince went on. “Try to touch him, then you understand, what I mean.” The Prince stepped forward and grabbed into emptiness right through the Advisor. “See – nothing but pure air. He’s an image, nothing else.”

The Advisor smiled softly and bowed again: “But I fulfil my duty” he said.

“His Majesty gives his regards to the young lady and her disapproving companion.” He smiled again and bowed heartily towards Arundle and a little stiffer to Billy-Joe, who sighed at him somehow confused but still disapproving.

In the meantime, they had entered another room. Here the atmosphere was even denser and more uncomfortable than before. Arundle didn't find out at first, what the cause was.

The Advisor accompanied them just like that, and even took the lead. "As far as here, even the Prince hasn't gone" he explained, and pointed at the strange bubbles fitted to the lowered ceiling. The bubbles looked like blown up plastic bags Arundle thought after a second closer look. Each was neatly closed and labelled, and was filled with some kind of milky something.

The Advisor grabbed for a bag, opened the string and softly knocked on the top. From inside a thin screaming was heard. Arundle saw two little hands trying to get hold on the slippery skin, but were slowly gliding towards the opening. Before the grey shadow could fall, the Advisor held his hand under the opening and pushed the being right back. The frightened eyes in the little face, which Arundle noticed between the thin stretched arms, closed. A thumb got to the mouth. The being rolled in like an infant in its mother's womb, while the Advisor carefully closed the string and fixed the bag back to the ceiling.

"Those are the lost souls," he explained. "That's all the better, then up there" and he pointed up. The ceiling, the bags were fitted to, was a kind of trellis. "Behind - something terrible is lurking" he said and pointed at big dark shadows, who made faces at him as soon as they realized, that he was referring to them.

"They know exactly that I can't get at them," the Advisor said. The monsters were shaken by fits of horrid laughter.

While the Advisor had opened the bag, they had stretched greedy fingers at the trellis but couldn't get through. "There is nothing the poor souls are more afraid of than those Miseriors" the Advisor explained – "those emissaries of the criminal Marduk – and there is a good reason for that. In their bags, they aren't free, but they have peace after all and may find a useful place somewhere. But woe betide them, when they fall into the hands of the Miseriors."

"What do they serve for, and where do they come from?" Billy-Joe wanted to know. He cut Arundle off that way because she had intended to ask for the horrible fate as victims of the Miseriors.

"The lost souls originate from the debtors and form the most valuable part," the Advisor explained. While cashing the debtors, they are extracted first from the terminated corpse and are caught in those plastic bags, as we just have seen, before they can escape into nothingness.

They are condemned to become victims of the Miseriors anyway, therefore they accept any other solution. They serve as a kind of lubricator.

A dead leg for example becomes only alive again by means of a living soul. The soul is the most important factor of the transplantation.”

The Advisor waved around in a circle. “All those souls wait for an opportunity to be used.”

“But is that not dehumiliating? Souls are bound for higher purpose. To become a leg’s soul can’t be it” Billy-Joe went in somehow upset again.

“That could well be, but such complicated philosophical questions we may discuss somewhere else. You have seen how frightened the soul was, while I tried to get it out of its bag. It has noticed the Miseriors earlier than you did. That was the reason why it didn’t want to be knocked out of its shelter.”

“Is there no way of getting rid of the Miseriors?” Arundle asked and looked uneasy up at the ceiling. One of the monsters just made a face at her.

“I’m afraid, no” the young Prince interfered. “Our hands are bound. We can control the state-official sector and we can try to get hold of the black market as well, but against evil spirits from other spheres, we are powerless. As long as Malicious Marduk keeps control over the twilight zone of the Miseriors, we won’t overcome the black marketeers. There are other means required. Means we expect you to obtain.”

The Advisor nodded: “Nevertheless what lies in our hands must be done, to get control over the black market and the black marketeers. Otherwise, all our efforts are in vain and devaluations turn out to be inefficient. You see, we came to the factor four by now. Nevertheless, the last word hasn’t been spoken. Our combined efforts may let us focus on factor three again. You never know what’s written in the stars.”

33. The Black Marketeers

Arundle and Billy-Joe looked at each other uncomprehendingly. The Advisor - while noticing such glance - nodded reassuringly and declared: “It’s like that, - well no, I better try historically.” - The matter was harder to explain than he thought.

- “One of the actions that was taken to calming down the riots, (I referred to in the beginning) was to bring everybody back to the same level. In other words to spread the time regularly – as far as possible. The Emperor decided for the first time a general devaluation of time. Beginning with a fixed date the time was devaluated by ten percent, that meant, the time was

shortened by one tenth. Seconds, minutes, and hours – all measures of time were shortened by one tenth. At the same time, the free trade of time was abolished, and was limited to the state-controlled sector.

However, we didn't consider the black market. Just as our actions began to work, the black market began to boom: - time, TEACs, corporal spare parts, souls – everything you could think of was traded on the black market. The demand regulated the supply, and soon the worst possible forms of slave trade revived. While we were still busy, handling that devaluation.

After some ten years or so, we were down to fifty percent. Can you imagine – the night has only six hours – at night people couldn't be cheated, the body required its rest, while during daytime at work we could have easily quartered the quantum” the Advisor smiled.

“No matter how often we devaluated. New secret strong rooms were installed uncontrolled. (The one we are in right now was of course authorised.) Greedy bumps were purchasing and dealing under cover. The consequence was that people died again earlier and earlier. The average age was sinking dramatically again, while our plan figured the average age of seventy earth-years.

The black marketeers caused confusion in many ways. They initiated slave trade and headhunting on the one hand, and satisfied the most primitive and cruel notions on the other, as they found clients enough for their dirty trade.

Again the underdog youngsters had to die far too early. It was like a pandemic plague. This development led to considerable obstructions. Riots and upheavals were the consequence. First of all the youngsters, - who couldn't lose anything but their chains -, rioted and terrorized the quarters of Laptopia-City, and even got them under control, while the Miseriors didn't miss such opportunities to stimulate chaos and cruelties of the worst kind.”

“And always one name appeared: Malicious Marduk...” the Prince added. Again, the Advisor nodded:

“Malicious Marduk became the big opponent of the Emperor. The Miseriors, you must know, are mentally very limited beings, although full of malice. Without guidance by Malicious Marduk, they are easy to be seen through, and we managed to keep them under control.”

“What terrible things are they actually doing?” Arundle wanted to know.

“That's a good question. All I can do, is to refer to the lost souls” the Advisor answered.

“Amongst the living no-one knows for sure” the Prince interfered – “and from the souls you wouldn't get an answer. Nevertheless, the pain must be unbearable, otherwise the souls wouldn't clamp to their plastic bags.

Although, it is natural for souls to roam. If they prefer to stick to their bags, while Miseriors are waiting outside, there must be some good reason though” the Prince explained. Again the Advisor agreed, but not all wholeheartedly, perhaps the Prince was simplifying a much more complex matter.

“There is one thing, I don’t understand” Billy-Joe objected thoughtfully, ”How can time be devaluated?”

“Well, principally it’s simple. You shorten the time by increasing the speed of rotation. The faster the rotation, the shorter is the day. The earth turns around in twenty-four hours. Today we have come to six hours, from your point of view. We Laptopians still have our full lot nominally. Time passes faster. In order to balance the increased centripetal force you have to increase the gravitation as well. That means the core increases in mass. That is the true secret, only the Emperor is familiar with...” the Advisor bowed gracefully while mentioning the Emperor, and the Prince hurried to do the like.

“That is but one half of the process,” the Advisor agreed. Arundle nodded “I just wanted to refer to the orbits. They have to accelerate as well, of course. Earth must go round the sun four times as fast, in order to shorten the year to a quarter, am I right.”

The Advisor and the Prince looked respectfully at her. “Very right, young lady. The whole solar system has to be involved. Only then major catastrophes can be avoided,” the Advisor confirmed.

Not only Arundle realized that this was too much for Billy-Joe. He didn’t know anything about this matter.

“The physical whereabouts in space, as far as we know them, will become a major subject soon, if you’re interested. – Scholasticus himself will be our teacher, I strongly presume.”

Billy-Joe also bowed now. He hardly managed to hide his embarrassment, while his attitude changed.

They left the hall of the lost souls. Arundle did a long last look at the ceiling and behind the trellis, where the Miseriors kept waiting. “What are they waiting for, anyway, there is nothing for them to gain?”

“Well, it sure does happen that a bag burst” the Prince replied. “Sometimes they even try to make them burst” the Advisor assisted – “although they are limited, when it comes to physical power. On the other hand, they can go anywhere unhindered. You may have asked yourself how they manage to be even in here,” he continued.

“That’s a real problem we do have with them. You can’t get them, and that’s Malicious Marduk’s advantage” the Prince picked up the thread.

“We are coming now to the most inner heart of the bank, the best preserved secret, so to speak.” The Prince explained while fiddling about with a strange lock, where he had to dial certain numbers on a huge wheel. At last, the hatch swung open and gave way to a narrow passage they had to crawl through. Inside there was a strange humming noise. The air was thick and felt like lead in the lungs. What ever it was, it emitted from countless wires and cable-connections leading from block to block and from box to box, endlessly piled up to the ceiling, while millions of little lamps were flickering in different colours. Relays clicked and rattled. Boxes were moved and drifted apart, and docked elsewhere.

“In here, not even Miseriors dare to come” the Prince whispered. “They couldn’t stand the power grids,” the Advisor added. “I myself have trouble remaining stable. I’d prefer us to leaving right away.” He added and Arundle could see what he meant. From all sides invisible hands were pulling. His appearance destabilised, and the more he tried to keep contour the worse he looked.

“This is the only access in here. If you have enough, just let me know and retire from here. It’s no place to stay...” the Prince said, still trying to behave. Seen had they little, but felt even more. Still they hoped for an explanation.

“That’s kind of nightmare” Billy-Joe said with a shudder. “What’s going on in there?” he wanted to know, when they all were standing in front of the closing hatch. The Advisor still tried to keep in shape but in vain. “What burdens you’ve got to bear after all” he sighed, while the Prince tried to answer Billy-Joe’s question.

“The simplest answer would be that we just had a look into the TEAC-accounting process, or what’s still left, anyway, but of course this is not as simple as that. It’s surely not, what you think accounting is. There you wouldn’t get far with your type of mathematics, I’m afraid. Much more, I can’t tell myself. I’m no bionicist nor cyberneticist either.” He looked at the Advisor, who was still busy keeping control. “Accounting will have to do. That’s what is done there, as a matter of fact” was his brief comment.

Arundle felt weak as well. The Prince looked at her questioningly – “I think, you’ve had enough for the time being. Do you want to go back?” he asked. They all agreed. He called four very small gliders, one for each of them. They jumped on it and off they went quick like arrows through the glittering corridors to the inhabited areas of the palace that was by no means as elegant and comfortable as the summer-palace on the moon, Arundle noticed during the last part of their excursion.

“Let’s hope we can keep that all in mind. I think we got to talk things over with Grisella, before we plan further” Arundle suggested, who would

have liked to go ahead and look for Malicious Marduk on her own right away. However, where should she begin? Nobody knew, where he was, and whether he'd be as easy to locate as his Miseriors.

Besides she had to talk things over with her magic bow, before she planned any further steps. If that was enough already.

The bow namely realized narrow limits indeed, he didn't like to admit, but couldn't help it – since quite some time already.

The Advisor said good-bye immediately after they had returned. The Prince looked at Billy-Joe then asked whether he should show them the one or the other of the projects in due train. Arundle believed him anyway and Billy-Joe was by now also almost convinced of the Prince's integrity and agreed with Arundle.

“Give the General our best regards, please, little Prince” Arundle said, while preparing the magic bow for departure back home. “We will contact you, as soon as we get an idea of how to tackle those black marketeers and Malicious Marduk. In the meantime, you'll have to manage on your own. Enlightenment is a mighty tool, but is of course not everything.”

The Prince nodded – “You are right, there will always be enough people left, who will follow the false promises of the criminals, and what is even worse, such criminals will find enough victims, I'm afraid”, the Prince confirmed. “As long as we can't do more for the underdogs, they will continue to sell their lifetime for a little extra comfort, when they get the opportunity. And that even the best police couldn't hinder. So try hard and see what you can do, - in you we trust...”

34. The Conference

Scholasticus came back from Germany one day later than Arundle and Billy-Joe. He had imagined his start on the Isle of Wisdom-tooth a little different, and was fed up already of all the flying back and forth, while he did the route just a second time.

“You've got to think you are a pilot” Dorothea recommended, although she was of course very happy when she had him back in Frankfurt so soon.

His brother Amadeus, also missed his wife desperately already and couldn't await the big move that was planned for November. The house was sold already and the furniture packed.

This meant for Intellectus to say good-bye as well. He would join the first grade at the School of Inbetween.

Physically he was eventually still too small. However, he had inherited his mother's brain, so it was obvious to everybody that he would make it.

He would have to leave his mates behind, and that was the bigger problem. On the isle, there were of course other children, some in his age, mostly the sons and daughters of the teachers and the employees. However, there weren't as many of course, and they spoke their native tongues.

Intellectus nevertheless was really looking forward and could hardly wait the day of departure. He was missing his mom as desperately as Amadeus was missing his wife, who was gone by now for over a month already.

Amadeus longed so desperately for Grisella, that he intended to ask Arundle, if she could help him by means of her magic bow arranging for a secret visit on the Isle of Wisdom-tooth.

Then the workload because of the removal ate him up and he forgot to ask. Besides he had mislaid the arrows, he'd been keeping since his brother had left. That was why he couldn't send her a message.

The more obvious idea, just to lift the receiver and dial a telephone number, didn't come to his mind. Perhaps because he mistrusted the spooky business with that bow and stone and all that magic, anyway, and still had enough of such kind of experience.

Thus, he only asked his brother to give his beloved and acquaintance the dearest regards.

"You'll see, the last weeks will elapse just like that" Scholasticus reassured his brother, when he tried to soothe his wife, who was all in tears. "I'll be back in no time, still got lots to bespeak, though..."

"Never, never ever shall I turn in on such a deal again, I promise," Dorothea said to her brother-in-law still sobbing, when they waved behind the taxi that took Scholasticus to the airport. Amadeus nodded fiercely: "So ain't I, so ain't I, I promise..."

Soon after Scholasticus got along with the jet lag and the hardship of the long journey as well as the demands the new position put on him, Arundle and Billy-Joe finally got the opportunity to report of their trip to Laptopia.

They had also regards to pass on, from the Prince and from the General as well, which they hadn't met in person, because he was in a similar situation as was Scholasticus, and was almost buried under a tremendous workload as well.

“This Malicus Marduk brings in a wholly new dimension” Scholasticus said thoughtfully after Arundle’s report. “And you both are convinced of his real existence by now, aren’t you? – I wasn’t all against Billy-Joe’s scepticism, in fact. – Well, then let’s take it for granted, and things are as the Advisor pronounces. Then we all went pretty far astray. I’d even say we looked like fools with our balloons and the stuffing of the so-called ‘time-holes’. Those black marketeers poked fun at us, no doubt. And all those hassle about the factories - seems to have been all in vain. Such had nothing to do with the real causes, but why was there no one to interfere? Those in charge seemed to agree, didn’t they? – Well those on our side anyway... They knew about the truth, didn’t they?”

“Well, yes and no, a lot was known afterwards. The young Prince is still young, but he picks up very fast. Many facts he learnt by advice from the Advisor, though. While the General probably knew better sometimes. The old Prince Regent definitely dealt with those ominous black marketeers, that’s proved by now, and that is one reason, why he has trouble now to recover, and get rid of his depression. It might be too late for him anyhow.”

“Then the black marketeers initiated the riots – they were the secret agents stirring up the crowd, I see” Scholasticus said thoughtfully.

“So it was Malicious Marduk who falsified our messages. He and his Miseriors dominate the sphere in between - the presence and the future, that makes sense...” Billy-Joe objected.

“While we were chasing on the wrong trail...” Arundle agreed.

“And we opened the door and let him come right into our presence. Him and his Miseriors. What a nuisance...”

“Do you mean it was Grisella’s project, Walter’s magic black box that served as a gate...?”

“Well, I’m afraid so it was...”

“There are still some absurdities left,” Billy-Joe said. He was thinking of the old Shaman of the Churingas, and wondered how he managed to become so old. Could he have managed on his own? Without the black marketeers’ evil methods and dirty deals?

Of course, he was even more bewildered, because it was him, whom they’ve met as a statue. It was him as an old man. That could mean he was a definite link between the presence and the future. Was he therefore involved in that dirty time-swindle? Did he unconsciously anticipate, what was coming up? What did the statue mean; they’d met in that so-called ‘Hall of Glory and Glamour’? The statues, actually, as there were at least two crucial ones, and Arundle had her own lot to carry on since then.

They had been in the summer palace on the moon of Laptopia for the first time, together with the little Prince, who then became Regent by

imperial promotion. Arundle had been turned around as well, just like the Prince, while they were promoted to Associate Crown Councillors.

Billy-Joe by now noticed the way the other members of the meeting looked at him. Nevertheless, he wasn't prepared to give in completely. A tiny rest of doubts remained despite the convincing facts he'd been confronted with. Therefore, he shook his head silently, even when he noticed Arundle's disappointment.

It has to be cleared what name there was written at the bottom of 'his' statue. Such had to become clear first. Perhaps someone tried to pull his leg, by mixing up badges or something. He knew of course how thin the ice was he was on. In a way, he was convinced already, if there hadn't been that little strange itch right between his shoulder blades...

Scholasticus raised his eyebrow, somehow bewildered – “so what?” he murmured – “we can do without almost the like...” He intended to have a word with Arundle, whether a rehearsal of Billy-Joe's whereabouts might be worthwhile. She knew him better than they did, but the responsibility was still theirs.

“Well then, Arundle, how shall we proceed?” he asked. “I think we'd best follow the Advisor's advice and look for Malicious Marduk”, she answered. “But where shall we begin?”

“That's indeed the question. This time it might be necessary to involve Walter and the magical stone as well, I presume” Scholasticus said. “Besides, I would certainly like to come with you, no matter whether I've got the time or not. I see the urgency, so other thing must wait.”

Grisella nodded affirmatively, she hadn't interfered yet, but like Florinna and Corinia, she had been following the dispute and didn't wholeheartedly agree with the way Billy-Joe was treated by the Professor. The question of democracy for example hadn't been touched at all. So – was there really no point in Billy-Joe's doubts, after all?

“I still think our ideas and the actions, we were taking, worth while,” she said – “there is no reason to stray ashes on our heads. Even if now comes out that the time-reduction is caused by purpose, and we have to consider the fact, I understand. We have to accept that the Emperor has the power to do so, which I personally would like to question. Be it, that he is the Creator of the world himself.

Still, I wouldn't go as far as the Advisor's proposal predicts, that our survey opened a loophole for Malicious Marduk to slip in. It might well be vice versa. Anyway, I agree, it is worth while now trying to get rid of him for Laptopia's sake – after all, it's our future as well...”

“I agree, and to me such outcry of injustice still goes on and is in no way annulled yet” Florinna added.

“The time got reduced for everybody, but the court didn’t seem affected at all. The court lives on in it’s Olympus forever. No wonder others try the same and grab for a ‘fair’ share of the cake” Corinia agreed.

“How did the former Regent happen to fall into the hands of the black marketeers?”

“Right, that’s a good question, I’ve asked myself as well” Billy-Joe turned in. “Perhaps it’s the Emperor’s fault anyway?”

“You think the measures of cutting the time-trade were insufficient, I see. Too many exceptions were possible and accepted. Too many kept their privileges, and those, being exempted, managed to slip in by means of the black marketeers?” Scholasticus summed up what’s in the air.

“Perhaps all of them stick together with those black marketeers” Billy-Joe suggested – “all the upper class of Laptopia while threatened to become reduced to an average sized life, and do without privilege. That would answer Corinia’s question” Arundle assisted. Billy-Joe was all in favour of how things were bespoken and looked at. All he wanted was to dig a little deeper and see what’s hidden under the surface.

“I just don’t like that simplifying mode of black and white colouring. After all, everybody takes good care of himself, no matter how strongly they’re fighting for general justice and equality. Those people in charge we met didn’t suffer from the shortcomings of the system – friend or foe. Perhaps for them the foremost task is to keep the circle of the upper class closed...”

“For you, someone like Malicious Marduk is a kind of Robin Hood, isn’t he?” Grisella said thoughtfully. “Well, if we consider him to be the one drawing the strings of the rebellion...”

“Still, we can’t overlook the fact, that the black marketing is a very dirty business...” Scholasticus replied.

Grisella agreed wholeheartedly - “...it’s indeed a shame, no question about that. On the other hand, we must probably accept that some inventions can’t be shared by the masses. Perhaps we have to weigh and find the sound equilibrium. There are surely enough gifted heads, who deserve a long life, because they do a lot for the public...” Grisella thought of the philosophers and scientists.

“But someone has to make the decision” Scholasticus answered. “... Can’t be made by the individuals alone, after all. Everybody feels somehow VIP. – Without a catalogue of objectives, you’re surely lost at once. Here the Emperor steps in. He represents the law. Without some kind of order, things won’t work. His allotment has to be somehow accepted, otherwise chaos is the consequence. Malicious Marduk is the culprit; besides all the evil, he represents and produces. There is no way out for him. To make that very

clear, once and for all – Malicious Marduk is no Robin Hood. He doesn't take from the rich to help the poor. What he does, is just the other way round, he takes from the poor and gives it to the rich, to make them even richer.”

Arundle felt dizzy in her head. There was so much in it that needed closer bespeaking. She felt lost and couldn't feel the ground under her feet. Certainities turned out to be vague assumptions and so called facts mere fiction.

There was something in Billy-Joe's argument demanding to watch out for the shades and to take care of Black and White painting. There were so many open questions. They understood very little of the greater whole and groped their laborious way tiresome and slowly towards greater connections of the most complex kind.

What ever they thought and the many doubts there still resisted, the Advisor was fond of their assistance that at least seemed to be certain, and he asked them to look for Malicious Marduk. Arundle was sure he had more in mind, than they understood, but either didn't want to tell them, or wasn't willing to tell them, because they weren't able to understand.

Arundle was sure that they were able to do the job. Had she been asked, why she was so sure, she wouldn't have been able to give a clear straightforward answer.

She trusted in her magic bow of course, and she believed in such brilliant brains as Grisella's or Scholasticus', and last, but not least she trusted in Billy-Joe, who had proved his loyalty by risking his life for the well of the future mankind.

Besides - the magical stone would be with them, how could they then fail. There were of course Walter and Pooty, who were standing for something great, even they weren't able to fully understand themselves. Such were no hints where to find Malicious Marduk of course, nor what to do, as soon as he was found.

Arundle felt her curiosity to be sweeping away the rest of doubts there still remained. What was hiding behind the sonorous name? Rebel and avenger of the disinherited or the destructive outburst of hell? Who was Malicious Marduk?

35. The Feast

Arundle's curiosity had to wait. She and her friends had other things to do, and were tied up in their own world, where Malicious Marduk hopefully didn't set foot yet.

It was part of the tradition of the School of Inbetween that the previous grade arranged a feast for the newcomers. As in previous years, the girls and boys did their best to welcome their new mates. The whole community, who was by now together, was enthusiastically looking forward to the feast.

Days ahead of the great event, there was a hustling and bustling back and forth the corridors. Little troops of volunteers in fancy outfits gathered and parted. The mixed band named 'Loblolly Girls 'n Boys' prepared on stage and did last rehearsals of their show until late at night behind locked doors.

Early in the morning when the 'Loblolly Girls 'n Boys' were still sleeping, the ballet met and after that the Theatre-workshop practised on the same stage. The stage was the busiest site of all – indoors as well as outdoors, as a very special kind of water ballet exercised behind the drawn curtains of the panorama glass front. Nobody was allowed to see, what was meant as the biggest surprise.

Magicians and jugglers tried to hide, but were found almost everywhere executing their conventional tricks, while some dared to mix in with real magic. That of course was risky, as they were still beginners. So the natural gifts got involved already, and the weaker characters meant that to be of little artistically value. A false opinion that would become corrected soon.

Those who wanted to bet could do so on conventional tricks or on magic and vice versa. The quota was updated every morning on the general board of information in the main lobby.

Those artists, who managed to lift people or other items up into the air, stood a good chance to win the public's attention. But it had to be spectacular things that were then travelling through the air, let's say a spectator sitting on his chair, or the like. That is - spectacular objects, nobody before had tried and succeeded.

Thought reading had a low ranking. Most knew something of that on the isle of Wisdom-tooth. Reading thoughts here was as stunning as the human ability to talk elsewhere. Thought-control on the other hand was something else and was a favourite objective, that most of them lacked. Failures now and then amongst teenagers, who were discovering new and surprising emotions, led to abashing laughter occasionally.

They all had heard a lot of such emotions, and a lot of whispering was about. However, it was a definite difference to experience things like that on

your own. Being ‘overheard’ that way, was definitely a very strange situation.

Not everything was convenient though, and was welcomed, while the positive tension overrode the scene. The mere fact of being together with your mental kin for the first time in your life – was quite something. Such an experience no one would like to miss, foremost none of the newcomers, as this was the offspring of the greatest emotions and the deepest discernments into their own selves, they had ever experienced in their young lives.

Occultists, fortune-tellers, and other esoteric of that kind, didn’t catch the attention, they may have expected. You had to present a real spirit from abroad on stage; otherwise, you would earn a meagre applause. Even better would it be, to have your ghost speak on stage or do something spectacular that at least caused a shiver or an involuntary outcry.

This year, the rumour rushed about, you could expect a real sensation. “You’re going to see” so-called insiders knew, “something you wouldn’t believe your eyes.” No wonder was it though, that the tension increased and reached an almost critical level.

What ever there was otherwise, that kept the newcomers busy, the closer the feast came, the more they focused on it, and everything was put aside, although Malicious Marduk wasn’t all forgotten. Still he and the world of Laptopia had to step back for some days, which was in his case absolutely no disadvantage, as there was a clear intention by Arundle and her friends, to get hold of him.

Of course, they couldn’t leave right away, even more though, as nobody could tell, how long the expedition would last, not to speak of the perils on the route. They didn’t even have a plan, and had no idea, where to begin with the search for Malicious Marduk.

Scholasticus still hoped for a revelation, but that used to be Grisellas part. Besides, Walter, Pooty, and their magical stone hadn’t shown up yet, although Arundle had sent for them.

- Might have been wiser to invite them to the feast anyway, then to send suspicious messages, that could easily be overheard, as was done in the near past.

Arundle somehow hoped it was Malicious Marduk who disrupted their communication, as that gave them at least a hint, where to begin with and to concentrate on.

The arrows, not really intelligent though, spoke of some kind of invincible barrier on the way out and in the isle, that made them alter their course for some seconds, before thing went normal again and smoothed down to the proper legal way, they were used to - that was gliding over sea and land at an altitude of the virtual kind, that was invisible for every-day

people, no matter how close they got, be it in airplanes or other means of transportation.

The closer Malicus Marduk was, the easier would it be to trace him down, Arundle wondered. She felt almost swept away by such alluring prospects, when the preparation for the feast got a somehow dangerous turning.

So much would be done for them, the newcomers learnt from the Headmistress, that the community felt free to utter a legitimate desire and that was an introduction of each of them presenting her- or himself and at the same time something typical of their origin.

The idea as such made Arundle's heart beating harder and wetted her palms. The rumour as such stirred the newcomers' ease and brought them back to the grounds, while they had been drifting apart and closed in their imagination, first of all the dreamers, of course.

That now changed everything from one second to the next. And all thoughts, no matter how urgent they were, got banned at once and let room for only one topic: "What am I going to do? What shall I perform? What I'm going to look like? What will the others think of me?" Not only Arundle hated such modes of self-disposal. They all had the same problems. They all had to find an individual solution. Arundle knew she wouldn't do without her magic bow – in order to disappear with him, if necessary.

"Present yourself and something typical for your land or locality, feel free to improvise, you are the only one who can prove what's going on anyway. Don't be shy, the spontaneous ideas are often the best" the Headmistress said with a smile.

"...Same procedure as last year, Ms Marsha?", her husband, the Vice-Headmaster, asked with a grin, as the set up was indeed the same every year. "Same procedure as every year, Adrian" the so addressed Marsha replied with a pleasing smile. "One or two minutes will do, the others want to get their chance as well" the friendly Headmistress, Marsha Wiggles-Humperdijk, added, while she went through the protocol with the newcomers, and fixed with them, what had been just a rumour, into sound fact.

"Your predecessors gave their best, so I'm sure you won't stay behind."

There she was, all alone and on her own. Billy-Joe didn't think twice. He would perform one of the ancient dances of his people, he declared all at his ease. Lucky Billy-Joe, Arundle thought. For him it was easy. Florinna wanted to do something with horses, although her engagement had suffered lately, actually, since she led the herd of Laptopian ponies via transmutation over here to Australia. However, she didn't mind, she said. She could as well

join Corinia, who wanted to perform an Indian dance, she had lately learnt from their mother.

“How would you get a horse on the stage, just for two minutes?” Arundle wanted to know while they exchanged their ideas. The sounder her mates felt, the weaker she became. It was a shame. She didn’t have the faintest idea, what she could do.

“Perhaps I try with mass-hypnosis” Florinna laughed. She didn’t want to unveil, how she planned to overcome - “such a negligible obstacle.”

“And I?” Arundle yammered. Nobody had an idea. Not even Grisella, who she actually wasn’t allowed to ask, as she was member of the board.

Grisella was nervous for a similar reason and was brooding over an introductory speech. She had to introduce herself same as Scholasticus and two other new scholars. As the first impression is most important, she wanted to give her best, same as the others. Therefore, the adults were under a similar, if not a harder pressure.

Very late, almost in the last minute, she then had after all finally an idea, worth while thinking it over, and while she did, she changed completely. Her doubts were gone just like that, and she walked about with a self-assured smile on her face.

Thus, the big event got closer and closer. The Day broke on at last and met a beehive-like in obstruction, so it seemed; in fact, everything was more or less under control of Adrian Humperdijk, the Vice-Headmaster of the School of Inbetween.

The crucial part would be solved right before the fealty supper at about seven o’clock in the evening, as dawn was only an hour ahead, which had a slight effect on the outside performers. Anyway, things should have been settled by half past nine or so. During dinner, the band would perform, and as well, some kind of floorshow on stage by the theatre-workshop, if they managed with the limited space, they had to share with the band. That was some kind of a problem, the Vice-Headmaster pointed out in his appeal for tolerance and respect. The ballet, the choir, the magicians, and the like, were all packed into the dinner-frame of not more than all in all two to two and a half hours. That was indeed a tightly packed programme, if not an overloaded one – “as usual” so the Vice-Headmaster, and not at all unlikely was a very special friend of his to be introducing himself and his environment, of the most secret kind, so the Vice-Headmaster hoped. He didn’t know, whether at all yet or to what extend, as that was of course a matter of secrecy, and would be decided upon at the very last minute.

Practicable would such performance be after all, as the aula faced the sea’s underworld by a huge glassine outer wall. You had only to open the curtains and illuminate the outdoor scene.

The Headmistress, Marsha Wiggles-Humperdijk, opened the feast with a whimsical little speech, that took the tension off to a certain extend, and smoothened the atmosphere noticeably. She was followed by the new teachers, who introduced themselves and their subjects in brief, and how they wished their subjects to be understood in general, and what they intended to do in the upcoming term.

The Vice-Headmaster, Adrian Humperdijk, overtook the role of a taskmaster. Eager to get out of his wife's shade, he overdid his role. Therefore, he caused confusion with the new teachers, instead of facilitating their task.

Grisella's voice became shrill of nervousness and anger. She managed her little speech nevertheless without major booboos. Her trial to focus a proper light on philosophy was a success, and earned a big applause.

Grisella was a mousy and inconspicuous person quite opposite to Penelope M'gamba from South Africa, who followed her on the microphone. The difference between these two women couldn't be greater. Ms M'gamba was a mighty and very impressive appearance, all covered up by an even more impressive colourful dress, as she was used to from home, that made her look even mightier and bigger, as she in fact was.

She had a heart of gold and an almost supernatural emissive power of the most embracing kind, nobody could resist. Therefore, she gained the hearts of her future pupils just like that.

Her subject was herbalism. She knew all the healing herbs, and of course the poisonous ones as well, that were growing in the African jungle. She gave some hints beforehand and her mighty voice rolled like thunder over the heads of the assembled and filled the room, even when she soothed down to a mysterious whisper, while mentioning forbidden secrets, in order to stimulate the curiosity of her – mostly - female audience and made them shudder or even gave them creeps by mentioning the spirits and daemons of the forest, who were supposed to be living in plants and waters or in hidden caves and hollows subsoil under the mighty roots of the jungle-giants. Attention was guaranteed, no question about that, and they would all meet in class again.

Scholasticus was a similar nature - energetic and charismatic the like. He attracted the male audience, by referring to the secrets of the universe, and therewith didn't stay behind those of the jungle, but even overrode them, as the outer world was even more mysterious and in a way stranger than everything that was experienced over here. Thus his hints were raising the

curiosity – (by no means less than Penelope had been able to) - of mainly male youngsters.

Even some girls felt the contradiction of the radiating warmth and attraction of the cold and somewhat distracting infinity. All the more, a handsome assistant Scholar of Astrophysics was next to being introduced. He was Canadian and his name was Dr. Peter Adams. Scholasticus was in contact with, for quite a while. He was happy to know him at his side, he said, and gave way at the microphone, as Peter Adams was quite capable in making his point. Somewhat sloppy and American style he presented himself witty, but didn't try to override his Professor, when it came to their joint subject. His boss had said enough of that, anyway.

After the new teachers Vice-Headmaster Humpertdijk took over again and ran the show his own way, while had been slightly gone astray because of Grisella's intervention. He called the new students by name, one by one and asked them to the stage. They marched on one after the other, twelve by number, and were seated on two tables right next to the stage. Later they could go back to their friends the Vice-Headmaster pointed out all conciliatory and pliant. He wanted to win back grounds after Grisella's annoyance, which hadn't passed unnoticed.

Florinna and Corinia looked fantastic in their Indian habit, Arundle thought, while she looked quite alike every day. She had refused her to change her usual dress for such a purpose anyway.

Billy-Joe was also all dressed up for his performance, that is, he had undressed and wore nothing but a loin-cloth, while his body was all painted white with yellow and black or red stripes and circles and zigzag-lines here and there.

His martial outfit wouldn't go with his convincing smile on his face. Not only Arundle thought him once more absolutely attractive and handsome.

The candidates were asked to introduce themselves in alphabetical sequence. So Arundle was one before the last – (W for Waldschmitt) while Florinna and Corinia were due right before Billy-Joe (H for Hare and K for Karora.)

Corinia's dancing her Indian dance almost perfect, and Florinna had Walter's magical stone, who managed to arrive last minute, to bewitching a holographic piece of Australia on stage, with wild flying ponies and original landscape, accompanied by all kinds of suitable accessories and gadgets. Florinna was riding light like an elf, and was disappearing behind a veil of mist all too soon. She nevertheless received the first standing ovations of the day, while the question arose, what her performance had to do with her offspring.

Billy-Joe asked the magical stone to let him the scenery as well, what he did. He even produced some raindrops as an answer to the rain-dance Billy-Joe performed once more. The same he had been practicing lately over there in Laptopia, while staying with those little Churingas in that solitude vale, where the green was still growing amidst an otherwise vast and deserted wasteland.

The sound of distant drums from no-where got closer, while the rain stopped. Billy-Joe was climbing hand over hand now up an imaginary tree, while in the next moment jumping with mighty hops through the bush. Pooty couldn't stop laughing and almost suffocated in Walter's belly bag.

Then Billy-Joe had his boomerang dance and whirl above the heads of the assembly, that came always back to his hand like a well trained dog.

The Australian scenery vanished from the stage, just like that, and the two Korean sisters, Arundle had met in the helicopter already, performed the perfect balance of mind and body by a number of acrobatic exercises. They doubled each other apparently without exertion, and proved their inner harmony by doubling out of site, behind a wall between them.

On and on the show went on, so to speak, until it was Arundle's turn at last. She couldn't do without magic as well, and had the bow produce the thick leaden clouds of Laptopia, where she performed a bowling match with Walter and the bow, who was ejecting some kinds of little arms and hands quite similar to those the Laptopian Laptops called their own.

The arrows from the invisible quiver served as skittles and Pooty got himself rounded to some kind of bowling ball. After each strike he extended and hobbled back to the bowlers, that is to Arundle, Walter and the magic bow, making fun of his little arms, and called him artifact.

The skittles had their favourite bowler, and so had Pooty. Pooty was screaming and howling like an imp while underway as the ball, while the arrows bent sideways either to avoid or to provoke being hit.

Walter was thus made the winner, as Pooty was the wittier of the components, and on his side. Though the performance was big fun, the question arose again, what such had to do with Arundle's origin, but could easily be proved and witnessed by two of the new professors, who also originated in Germany. Arundle somehow promoted to something very special, and that was quite something amongst all those special ones gathered right here.

She could feel all those good vibrations and was happy while she seated herself back between her friends, panting and sweating, and Walter joined them with Pooty in his belly bag. How happy Arundle felt. Billy-Joe was back, clothed again but still some colour in his face, grinning from ear

to ear, all in favour of her that she could feel. That was the kind of acceptance she'd been longing for all those lost years behind.

A timid little boy was last after her. She pitied him, as nobody took notice of him any more, and while he realized, he'd have almost died of shame. As soon as he returned to his seat, Arundle got up and went over in order to comfort him. However, that wasn't easy, as they didn't understand each other. Therefore, she kept standing helplessly at the table. The boy gave her hostile glances and then turned round to show his back.

"Take care of the Tartars," a voice whispered, while she returned to her friends. The pigheaded little Tartar gathered his kin round him reassuringly.

Arundle meant to do him well, as she knew such feelings all too well. Even the anger and overwhelming wrath she knew, and didn't misunderstand. If you were stuck in such a hole of inferiority and despair, you had no chance to get out on your own, without help. She'd have had to consider that. Such emotions took their time.

The feast went on. After the introductions of the newcomers, it was dinnertime and the buffet was opened. In no time, everybody was queuing right where their tastes demanded. The menu reflected the variety of the people gathered on the isle of Wisdom-tooth.

Signs in some twenty languages tried to guide through that jungle, or did they confuse more than help?

"Let's stick to the South Pacific buffet once more" Corinia suggested and her sister, as well as Arundle and Billy-Joe, agreed at once, as their tastes met more or less right there. Meat was somewhat exempted though. That didn't really bother them, not even Billy-Joe, who couldn't make up his mind yet, whether to wholly change sides for good, as the girls had done. In case someone still felt hungry after such fleshless fare, he could try a second helping somewhere else at the huge buffet.

You wouldn't believe what there was. The menus alone were worth studying, as they were written in many different languages.

For a starter the friends choose baked white radish in tamarind-sauce on fennel bed with sassafras rasps, followed by a big bowl of gado-gado salad for all. After that they had filled Arabian vegetable-pancakes garnished with lemon-grass, bamboo-sprouts and Soya sticks. For dessert, they had refined coconut-crème on banana-cookies coated with nougat-almond-crocant. With the meal, they were drinking avocado flips and sweet cucumber-met. They gormandised at best they could, and felt like in the seventh heaven.

While they were on the fat of the land, a young trainee-wizard of last term's beginners, demanded the attention of the betters, who hoped to double their bet-quotas, and some even succeeded.

As soon as he left the stage the Loblolly Girls 'n Boys took over, and the fed-ups enjoyed a bit of a physical exercise after the heavy meal (or in between the courses.) Thus, the time passed by. It was after ten o'clock already and the younger ones began to yawn. It was their bedtime. While on stage the ballet tried their best. Besides, those from afar still suffered from the jetlag and had problems adjusting themselves, because they came from all parts of the world either for the first time or just returned after vacation.

The ballet gave in and retired. The stage was empty at last and the lights were dimmed. Even the last had eaten up by now and the tables were roughly cleared already, when the curtains in front of the huge panorama-windows were drawn to give way to the outside underwater world shimmering deep-blue in the light of countless spotlights, before the mysterious black of the distant background.

Those seated next to the windows jerked in shock involuntarily, even more while those spots were instantaneously turned on.

"I'm sure it's the water-ballet again" Arundle heard a voice whispering near-by, but it was something else. The rumour didn't fail. From afar out of the dark, you could see the strangest band of beings approaching. Widespread over the whole width of the outlook, a whirling line of glittering fins and scaly flapper-tails came nearer.

Beautiful mermaids with ruby-red eyes and silvery hair kept elegantly swaying back and forth. Their green bodies were richly decorated with corals. They were accompanied by handsome nixes of the same complexion and outfit. No less attractive to the girls, than the maids to the boys.

Those were no disguised divers of the diving-school, who fixed their legs together and covered with some kind of flipper-bag. These mermaids and mermen were real, you could see right away.

Through the assembly went a sigh, while the Vice-Headmaster, Adrian Humperdijk, stepped to the centre and placed himself right next to the pane. Opposite outside an elder merman with crown and sceptre did the like. His white beard waved softly with every movement. His big wild eyes were wide opened. A soft thunder raged through the hall, while he knocked at the pane with his sceptre.

"I'm going to pass on word by word, what King Melisander has to say" the Vice-Headmaster explained with an air of prominence. At last, there was an opportunity to step out of the shade of his wife, the Headmistress.

“I’m proud to call King Melisander my friend” he went on and reminded Arundle of Professor Slyboots and General Armyless, who he shared the figure with, and the theatrical mode of gesturing.

Adrian Humberdijk and King Melisander met many years ago. Adrian was deeply devoted to the king. The king had saved his life in nineteen forty-five when he managed to rescue him out of a sunken submarine. Adrian stayed some months with him in the mysterious world of the deep sea, and was another being when he returned to the surface back into the world of the ‘drylanders’.

From then on he devoted his life to the deep sea, and did everything he could to improve the situation down there, that is, he tried to minimise the perils and the persecution of the creatures in the sea.

Adrian was never member of a university. All he knew, and he knew a lot – more than most in his field - he’d learnt by doing in practice, and he was the only person, who knew about the secrets of King Melisander’s hidden kingdom.

Academic merits remained beyond his reach until he met his future wife Marsha Wiggles and the School of Inbetween on the Isle of Wisdom-tooth. There he soon found the recognition, he deserved.

He remained in his wife’s shade, which he was deeply devoted to regardless of that. She gave him the opportunity to go on with his sub-sea investigations and surveys. While she was the boss.

Meanwhile, King Melisander held his speech and like most monarchs, he had to read it from a manuscript. He spoke about peace and acceptance, and about coexistence. But he also complaint about the ruthlessness of the fishermen and sailors with all their dirt and poison. They were so carelessly throwing their garbage into the sea, and what they did to the fish was even worse.

Thus, most habitats were shrinking considerably or had gone altogether by now. Some peoples were on the verge of extinction. The infant mortality rate was alarming in some areas. His own people was hardly better off, than most of the land bound natives of the world, King Melisander explained.

His words touched Billy-Joe’s heart, and raised the rebellious nerve in him, because his own people’s fate was much alike. If he could, he’d swum out there between the nixes right away.

His intense notion stirred up the magic bow, who made Arundle aware. She rechecked with him, who spontaneously agreed, and all of a sudden, the two of them were dancing midst the water-folk.

The magic bow miraculously produced little oxygen bottles out of the invisible quiver as well as flippers, so they could keep up with the mer-folk.

Billy-Joe was an experienced sponge-diver anyway. Hand in hand, the water ballet was thus dancing to the sounds of shell-horns and coral-flutes.

However, this was just the beginning. Wherever they could, the naiads and nixes mixed with the divers of the diving-school, now swarming out at best they could. Unfortunately there weren't enough oxygen bottles on stock, or were half empty, so, after a few minutes, most of the divers had to return, and view the show from inside.

Corinia got the chance to participate in a genuine seahorse-race – a strong desire; she'd been bothered within her dreams. However, she couldn't keep up with the wild racers in their native element, while her seahorse did its best. After all, she managed to stay on the horseback and passed the finish in the saddle.

Arundle took the chance to have a closer look at the mer-folk, while she saw Billy-Joe somehow communicating with a very nice nymph. She wondered how he did it. The nymph giggled and waved elegantly with her green arms or was nodding or shaking her head and had her silvery long hair wave like sea grass.

Her light green complexion went well with her beautiful big red eyes. The whole appearance was very feminine besides the fins and the flipper that could have easily gone with a dolphin. While the merry game of the naiads and nixes strongly reminded of a school of dancing dolphins.

One of the mates of the naiad, Billy-Joe was conversing with, lost patience, when the conversation didn't come to an end. He circled the two and signalled how he felt. Arundle got kind of nervous as well, so she pointed at the gas-bottles, which were indeed running out of oxygen, and took him by the hand back to the dry land, that was done by means of the magic bow in no time. As soon as they got rid of the diving stuff Billy-Joe reported, what he had learnt from his sub-sea friend. "She said, she knew you, while you were a little girl" Billy-Joe reported. Arundle shook her head. She didn't remember a similar situation, when Florinna joined them, who seemed to have overheard what they'd been talking.

"Must be the old story", she said "when we got stuck in the dreamland, while our house burnt down... yes that was quite something. We were inside that big bubble..." – "Yes and deep down under the sand in those dungeons..."

Florinna hadn't got an oxygen-bottle so she had had to stay inside, while she watched her little sister and her friends fooling around outside. She was happy to have them all back, when Corinia approached at last, still kind of feverish and all upset by the race she'd just performed.

"Corinia did the job, while we lay in coma, without her, we wouldn't be any more..."

“Right you are, that was quite something...”

“Our flat was totally ruined, while we lay in hospital with smoke poisoning.”

“Yes, and you stayed with us overnight...”

“The dungeons could only be opened by the magical stone from Uluru...”

“Do you remember the Princes?”

“You mean the frogs.”

“Right, I wonder what happened to them...”

“I don’t want to disturb you”, Billy-Joe intervened “but look, what’s going on now out there.”

36. The Pummel Pump Match

Outside in front of the crystal panorama pane, the water-sprites were busy forming some kind of playground by fastening ropes at eight corners to the rocks, that were available and seemed to be bound for such purpose. “We are going to watch some kind of water-ball,” the Vice-Headmaster, Adrian Humperdijk, explained.

“You can compare this sport with our hockey” Adrian went on, while outside the teams got ready. “Instead of clubs, you use heavy water pumps in order to manoeuvre the puck, that looks more like a jellyfish though. The players try to drive the puck through the opponent’s sea gherkin-circle. Pummeling at the opponents with the pump is a bad foul and is punished with a penalty blow at the sea gherkin-circle.

You play with three swimmers each, those are the field players, and one so-called gherkin king. His task is to have the sea gherkin-circle move along the basis line. He moves the seagherkin-circle with a lead in the one hand, and a little one-handed pump in the other. His task is to pummel the jellyfish-like puck out of the range of the seagherkin-circle. So he has a great responsibility, and most of the times it is up to him and his ability, whether to win or to lose. He has to avoid of course pummelling at the attackers as well. Such a foul is called ‘NAP’ (Not Pummelled the Puck), and is meant to be the worst foul, while in the penalty zone.

Each round goes on until the first score. The losing team may ask for revenge. After two lost rounds in sequence, the match is definitely over.”

While the Vice-Headmaster still was explaining the rules, the match had started outside. From the basis line the yellow team started the first attack. Flash like the players hissed through the water. The pumps emitted white foamy rays while the jellyfish-puck chased ahead.

However, from the other side the red team parried the attack with their pumps and had the jellyfish-puck reversed back to the attackers. A red pump pummelled one of the yellow swimmers. The referee (all in emerald-green) had his horn blow to the first penalty.

The fouled swimmer executed by means of his pump, and fully hit the puck, that rushed towards the red team’s seagherkin-circle. However, the gherkin-king was alert. He tore the lead just in time, and the puck missed the circle by the fraction of an inch.

Now the attack reversed when the reds chased the jellyfish-puck towards the yellow seagherkin-circle. This attack also ended with a foul of the gherkin-king, but the penalty pummelling failed as well.

Those defender penalties were hard to avoid, but if that happened, or the referee didn’t look carefully, dramatic scenes developed in the middle-field. The water seemed to be boiling so wildly, you could hardly see anything of the swimmers. The jellyfish-puck was the only thing that appeared here and then above the turmoil, or even disappeared in the outside sphere and had to be replaced by another.

Corinia watched the match from outside together with groups of naiads and mermen behind the seagherkin-circle, in order to support their team, but also to see the puck flushing through the seagherkin-circle, but that didn’t happen on either side. The yellow and the red team fought much alike, and neither side outnumbered the other. That had a lot to do with the gherkin-kings on both sides. They were clever and fast and didn’t make serious mistakes.

“They are simply the best,” her neighbour just said. Corinia wondered, why she understood her. Right at that moment, the spectators raised their arms in rage. The yellow team hit the circle.

While the exultation on the one side couldn’t find an end, the losers tried to attack the referee and the yellow swimmers. The late penalty that led to the score hadn’t been correct, they kept yelling.

“Revenge, revenge,” the multitude shouted. Obviously the match wasn’t over yet. The teams retired into their invisible quarters, very back in the dark, and the band returned with horns, shells, and sea-drums. Both teams needed medical care, because the match not only cost power, but also led to bruises and minor injuries.

The red team from Bermudia needed psychological support, after the harsh throwback. The yellow team was at home here in Australis. This was a home game for them on their home ground and with their fans backing them.

If the Bermudians lost again, it would be the third defeat in row, and King Melisander would be very sad, because he was a great fan, and so would be the whole Bermudian nation.

For many of them a defeat would be almost unbearable. Many fans had come by intercitysubmarineexpress, others did the trail on their own, and were almost seventeen intervals (that's roughly one month) underway, - a risky and strenuous way of travelling, that could cost one's life.

Those, who could afford, therefore took the intercitysubmarineexpress, and spent a season's income on that.

Thus - all the more - the threatening defeat hurt. The first stroke was the worst, though. Those who had come on their own couldn't believe what was going on. Some thought it high time to return right away.

Then they recalled all the hassle and strain, they had suffered, while coming down here.

They first had had to catch the Coastal Counter stream and the Brasilstream. Had you reached the southern tip of the American continent, you had only to find the cold Southpolarstream. And if you had managed that, you could have let go and only take care, that you didn't freeze, while the enemy now was the cold; until you came into warmer areas near Newsealand, much like the Bermudian intercitysubmarineexpress.

Having thus risked their lives, the fans wanted to become rewarded, of course.

Corinia's new friend named Boetie was all prepared to explain to her the conditions and general way of life down here. Life didn't seem to be all that much different from life on solid ground. Well, of course other sports were performed...

The break was over. For reflections of such kind was no time. The teams returned to the battlefield. Vice-Headmaster Humperdijk commented the exciting moment.

He was a follower of the Reds, and therefore he didn't like the situation at all, like his friend the King, who looked rather moody.

The young advancing colony on the other side of the world threatened to become a real competitor not only on the playground. The conditions of life were more advantageous over here than at home, where pollution was dramatically increasing and oil platforms began to conquer the deepest depths of the Caribbean and acquainted deep-seas, thus limiting their habitat

to an unacceptable extent, not all that unlike to what was going on in the near-by Amazonian rainforest with the native tribes, dwelling right there.

The mer-people came originally from under the shelf of the Bermudian triangle, but had settle elsewhere as well in the meantime, wherever they had found favourable conditions.

Finally only Australis remained, the advancing colony on the edge of the world, that was located at an ideal site, not far from the mainland under a protecting shelf and more or less left alone by those drylanders.

Australis was heated from the depth with volcanic heat, and that was one important precondition of survival for good in such depth.

Again, the battle raged back and forth. The penalties seemed to be unavoidable, Corinia wondered. Some tricksters even might be hushing into a pump-ray purposely.

Boetie agreed: - “still there are slight differences, the Bermudian cheat and foul were ever they see the slightest chance to get away with” – well, she was from Australis.

Corinia’s air got thin. She promised Boetie to view on from the inside and keep her fingers crossed for the Australisans.

The Vice-Headmaster was taking his reporter-job serious. Even though everybody could see with his or her own eyes what was going on, he commented every move that was done in the field. His shrill voice reached the last corner of the hall, Corinia noticed while returning back, as soon as she got rid of her wet swimsuit and diving stuff, and was back in her clothes.

“...And again rages Paplobb, the Red Sprite, he is called. He has the pump ready for action. – There - the puck, a good pass from the right, and almost... too bad, what a pity, the yellow gherkin-king – otherwise not a brilliant performer - was lucky to get the gherkin-circle somehow out of the reach. Was that correct, or did he leave the basis-line?

That in fact was a good chance, worked out by the brave sprites from Bermudia.

But here comes the attack from the other side – watch out Pablopp... Oh, the puck is through, doesn’t look good. A yellow flash is there, his ray grabs the puck, whirls it about... now the attacker is in an ideal position, - and that doesn’t look good at all for the brave sprites from Bermudia.

A fierce whirl, all foam and turmoil. What was that? Is that the flag, there at the corner? Was that it? I’m afraid so. That is the decision – the fateful second. Yes, I’m afraid so, that is the decision. Over and out the second round in sequence.

What a shame. The Bermudians – all of them, the sprites on the field as well as the spectators dissolve in grief. The worst case occurred. This is the end of the glory. This day becomes the doomsday of the once glorious Bermudia. A small colony, at the end of the world, challenges the motherland. What a shame, what a pity, who can bear this?

Let's stay with the victorious side for a moment. Sheer joy and frenetic applause without end is to be noticed. The onlookers almost drive crazy. Somewhat strange though, somehow savage-like, I'm afraid. Well, such are the colonies; you can't compare those savages with decent people anyway...

Such are the hard laws of the arena, shame on the defeated. Was it the strategy? Many discussions had there been. Did those colonists hit harder, more brutal and careless? The last word has not yet been spoken, though.

What's needed for now is a new beginning. Probably a wholly new team, as it had been speculated by certain insiders. We will see.

What a joy on the other side. The young sympathetic team all in yellow. Trainer, aids and athletes hug over and over again. From the sides spectators press in...

The cup remains in Australis. King Melisander is soon handing the trophy over again to the Australisan team-captain. Over there you can see the preparations for the solemn act.

There are the seasnail-hornblowers already. Indeed a remarkable sight – the pride of the United Kingdoms of Melisandria and all the united subseatowns and enclaves.”

The Vice-Headmaster went silent at last, his shoulders quivered, he was sobbing, while the cup was soon to be handed over to the local heroes again.

Corinia had joined Arundle, her sister and Billy-Joe, while back in the hall. The three were infected by the one-sided report of the Vice-Headmaster, and looked somewhat bleary-eyed and all sad, although they hadn't had a decided position. Therefore, Corinia cheered them up by pointing out the facts, and what she'd learnt from Boetie.

“Enjoy the victory of our side, we are no less ‘deep-down-unders’ as they are, after all, you should always keep in mind. They're our close neighbours. If we like, we can go for visits any day out there...”

The three didn't quite get, what Corinia wanted to tell them. Then Arundle understood first. “You are right, Corinia, we got infected by the Vice-Headmaster's partisanship, without noticing. We should indeed enjoy the victory of ‘our’ team, after all, we are some sort of Australisans, aren't we?”

“Going to be Australisans, you mean” Billy-Joe added with a smile on his face, because he was Australian, more Australian than most, indeed.

Outside the ceremony went on. The band was playing the anthem of Melisandria in full length of almost half an hour – somewhat monotonous back and forth, while the proud team could hardly manage to stand still, who lined up before the King’s pedestal, right opposite the crystal pane.

The whole lot of mer-folks was singing wholeheartedly, and most kept their knobbly froggish fingers at the forehead and gazed over to their king.

King Melisander was sitting straight and proud on some kind of throne, and looked as if he was the one to be honoured. He took his time and had a word with the defeated as well, and waved them to his side, right next to the advisers and crown councillors, before he gave the cup back, almost rough, though, his face all bleak and motionless, while the victorious team went on shaking hands, pretending they didn’t notice the affront.

For the mer-folk a splendid buffet was waiting now, which looked quite different from the buffet on this side of the crystal pane, that had just been plundered by the students.

Vice-Headmaster Humperdijk ended with his reportage. The dining habits of the sea-sprites and naiads were hard to get used to, and wouldn’t earn them sympathies over here. Therefore, he had the curtains carefully lowered. A last hand-waving by Boetie – Corinia thought her to see amongst others, heading for the ‘buffet’ – that was it, the curtain fell, so to speak, over an irreversible end of the feast.

37. Searching for Malicious Marduk

While Walter and Pooty with their magical stone were here, because of the feast, they could as well go on searching for Malicious Marduk. Therefore, Arundle and Billy-Joe called all who were in the know together to discuss, how to proceed. The magic bow talked things over with the magical stone, and Scholasticus was brooding over a plan as usual – besides, he was prepared to have his assistant involved. “Peter is absolutely reliable,” he whispered into Arundle’s ear, while she looked somewhat bewildered. “He is specialised on time-hops, that was one reason why I asked him to come over here.”

The buffet in the great hall wasn’t yet completely cleared, when the ‘Taskforce Laptopia’ got ready – as Scholasticus quickly baptised their enterprise. –

“Only to please Peter,” he said, (because Peter Adams was used to such kind of labelling.)

Arundle was bound to take the lead as pathfinder and scout all alone with her magic bow, while the three men would press in Walter’s virtual spacecraft; not a magic black box anymore, because Grisella stayed behind.

Neither Florinna nor Corinia minded such exclusion and Grisella was almost delighted, although she didn’t show, and fare-welled them with feminist nonchalance.

“We may accompany you in our dreams” the sisters ascertained Arundle, who’d fly somehow alone, not only as a scout but also as a – going to be – woman.

Corinia would use the time when Arundle was absent to widen her newly fitted connections with Boetie and her world under water. Florinna would join her, she said. Corinia still didn’t understand why communication between Boetie and herself was no problem at all. This was just one field of action; she wanted to put an eye on.

The magic bow and the magical stone could neither agree on the exact route to be taken, nor on the target, until Scholasticus intervened, as he feared the whole enterprise would end in a fiasco, before it began.

Thus, conditions weren’t ideal during these last minutes before departure. “We are going to start our search right in that damn ‘Hall of Fake and Frustration’ for heaven’s sake” he was hollering, while the magical stone was just in due train of disappearing in Walter’s belly bag, and Arundle’s bow was raging with anger and dismay, his red eye kept flickering like a neon light on the verge of ruin.

The moon as such was quite about Arundle’s taste, whether or not Scholasticus’ idea was somehow original. Nobody had a different idea anyway. Peter Adams didn’t have, he had no idea at all, and did what his boss wanted him to do.

“We will have a look on the other side” Scholasticus said, although he hadn’t yet been there and only knew of the site what he had been told. He’d never been in that hall of fame, and he didn’t even know the proper name, or didn’t want to mention it, - like all others, who didn’t know why.

“You know that statue of the old Shaman, or your alter ego, so to speak, young friend” he said and patted on Billy-Joe’s shoulder with a generous air. “We might be able to get in contact though. I can’t imagine the Emperor and his entourage showing up just like that. There had been a good reason for that. Perhaps you got some mechanism activated at it was the statue that made the court appear. Well, they didn’t seem to be real, am I right? The Advisor, wasn’t he himself the one, who did confirm that he was

just an image? Perhaps the whole set-up was nothing but a holograph, a kind of virtual material transmitted just for you...”

Arundle agreed; she liked the idea, and now she recalled the funny kind of communication. In fact, there had been no communication, not in the sense of the meaning. What was said had little connection with what was answered, and vice versa. Even the Advisor, who presented himself in the liveliest air, failed often enough to refer to what was said or going on.

“Such a mighty Emperor can’t be everywhere at the same time, so what else could he do, but send virtual copies everywhere...” Arundle agreed.

“On the other hand, is Malicious Marduk not hiding just now? This might be a good reason why you were contacted.” Scholasticus thoughtfully opposed his own idea.

“Well, I could think of another good reason” Billy-Joe said. “Perhaps Marduk wants us to find out the truth about the whole imperial construction and the false picture we get.”

“Sounds somehow sound” Scholasticus agreed, while Arundle wanted to protest, and so he added, “no matter what your own position is...”

“Can it be beyond our limited borders, that things are going to dissolve in contradictions?” Peter Adams intervened. He was thinking of the opposing interpretations the light experienced, whether it was pure energy or energetic bits – that was still the unanswerable question of the century. For both sides there were good arguments available, proofs and counterproofs. However, the dualism remained as a fundamental discernment into the condition of existence.

“What are we going to do right now?” he asked and widened his arms as if he wanted to embrace to universe. “Don’t we turn our logic upside down, by leaving time and space, to step in again at another point in time and space? Of course, that contradicts with our common laws of nature. And still it is possible...”

“Only with magic” Arundle threw in. “So what? Shall that be a contradiction?” Adams answered. “Magic is always still the not yet known, what we aren’t able to explain. I stress on ‘not yet’. One day, people are going to understand such phenomena, that seem so unexplainable to us now, I’m convinced.”

Adams was glooming of exaltation, his eyes were blinking, you could see his enthusiasm. Scholasticus agreed wholeheartedly: “That’s the right spirit” he said and patted the shoulder of his new assistant in an air of generosity. However, the assistant only listened to the praise and didn’t get the undertone, so he blushed of pride and joy.

There was a far more exciting example than the contradiction inherent in the phenomenon of light, if that was possible at all. Were they not on the verge of the mightiest contradiction of all, and hadn't Billy-Joe helped them up on such a difficult level of seeing reality, that is, of producing a kind of image that bore the contradiction as its centrepiece and absolute momentum?

The magical stone and the magic bow still didn't agree on the route. The magical stone wanted to take the safe route, offshore, so to speak, always in eye contact with the land, that is – the earth, while the magic bow preferred the free jump out of the window, so to speak.

Such a jump had its disadvantages, as you never knew a hundred percent where you'd land. However, this way was much shorter and – once taken – did its thing, while the other way required the full attention of the navigator.

It would only be the safer way, if the navigator didn't make a mistake. And mistakes were very likely, the time travellers recalled. The landing in the wrong age was still on their minds.

All too well, the time-travellers recalled the false landing some seventy years abroad. Afterwards they understood, why that had happened. However, that didn't eliminate such a mistake.

That was why the magic bow insisted on his approach, as he more or less guaranteed the entering point time-wise, though a minimal deviation with regard to the exact site, was possible. However, that was the worst that could happen.

Malicious Marduk couldn't harm them - that was another positive side effect. Getting into such a time-hop was impossible, while the offshore route, which was favoured by the magical stone, was meant to be an invitation for all kinds of pirates, luring ashore, which was very likely, the magic bow said, while the magical stone denied.

“No case of piracy did occur during the whole past millennium,” the stone yelled rather upset, because of such an allegation.

They parted after all, and while Arundle was underway, the bow let her know, he doubted very much whether the hard-headed stone was at all able to do a time-hop.

Even he wouldn't dare a time-hop with such a payload. “But why can't the stubborn stone admit that?” the bow asked. Arundle didn't answer and kept her thoughts hidden.

The big trek was meanwhile also on its route. Billy-Joe knew the secret entrance to the summer palace in the Sea of Tranquillity. The entrance was

under the armpit of the resting moon man, if he kept his exact position, and if he rested.

Arundle also hoped to find the entrance again. If not, she could divert to Laptopia, and ask the Prince to get her to the summer palace, by moon shuttle. There was time for that, because their route was so much faster than the male trek.

Meanwhile the trek kept steering through eternity and Billy-Joe was still in good hope, as far as their aim was concerned – the so called ‘Hall of Honour and Humour’, or whatever.

“With his excellent sense of orientation the magical stone won’t have the slightest problem” Walter said, while Billy-Joe was describing the hidden entrance under the armpit of the moon man in detail.

“Make sure, the stone understands that you can only find it, in case the Moon-man’s resting. Otherwise I don’t know. We had problems finding it, so you never know...”

Billy-Joe remembered all too well how difficult it had been, to get access to the palace, while trying the second time.

Arundle still raced ahead. Left and right, the stars were streaming. An indescribable feeling of lightness and freedom came over her, she’d almost forgotten about. She felt somehow stretched and almost bodiless, as if she consisted only of consciousness. However, that was surely just a feeling, and perhaps she was only dizzy. Since she had been a little girl, she suffered from spells of seasickness, like right now.

However, the sickness reminded her of her body, and that meant she didn’t dissolve, and reassured her again. Coolness came back, and well being. She was even able to enjoy the trip, that came to an end.

Below, Arundle discovered the metallic shimmer of the Laptopian clouds, and ahead a huge full moon was rising, she was approaching quickly, until she turned into the orbit at last.

She felt the pressure of gravity - tons of weight clung to her body; she’d have to escape again by now, and meant a harder strain for mind and body as the acceleration at the beginning of the time-hop.

Had she then had a feeling of dissolution, she now felt quite the opposite – of becoming squeezed. She couldn’t remember comparable extremes, though she’d done quite a few trips ever since. Something was different this time. Was this up to her?

However, there was no time for reflections. A last turn and there she stood right in the middle of the Sea of Tranquillity. Not far, the chain of mountains indicated the edge, where the moon man rested, if the constellation or the weather allowed.

With mighty hops she paced towards her aim – the armpit under which the entrance to the summer palace lay hidden, or had been last time. She didn't know a different entrance.

Arundle felt rather alone and the surrounding here on the moon stimulated such feelings. Right here amidst the grey dull rocks and dust the vast space got at you harder and more unavoidable than ever. She felt the horrible lonesomeness of the moon for the first time wholly unprotected, because she was here alone for the first time.

Not even the moon man spoke to her. He hadn't noticed her yet, when she popped about the height of his knee, and had still some long hops to go before she came into his sight.

The magic bow tried to help and had her make jumps of twenty of even thirty yards, instead of only ten. Had the moon man been so tall? Last time he had been shorter.

Under her helmet the sweat was running. She could almost see nothing. In vain, she tried with her sleeve to clean the outer pane, yet the mist was inside. She contacted the bow and had him know her problem, but he snarled defiantly. He's working hard, he let her know. Quite obviously, the technical challenge of airing a space suit properly exceeded his abilities.

In fact, he also felt uneasy. Things weren't as they should be. Difficulties came from the wrong side. He had to admit that he was lost. He hoped more than he knew whether they approached the summer palace. Like Arundle, he hoped to find the entrance under the moon man's armpit.

Something disturbed the local navigation-system. Not very different from the disturbance he experienced before, during the time-hop. Now there was nothing he could use as a landmark of orientation.

From the others he didn't hear, see, or notice anything. Nothingness wherever he turned to. Yawning empty swallowing naught - and where there had to have been life – at the shuttle ramp and the terminal, there was nothing, not the slightest bit of a building. Nay, this wasn't the moon of Laptopia; they must have landed in the wrong segment.

However, before Arundle and her magic bow were able to jointly reflect on the subject, she felt stopped in her pace and lifted up and before she realized what happened, she was in an entirely different world.

It took seconds to shake off the shock. Then she noticed the Advisor, who came rushing towards her from the bulk of the entourage, with a friendly smile: "My dear, how nice to see you again" he exclaimed enthusiastically and bowed continuously.

"May I guide you? Did you have a pleasant journey? You're being expected, though." While Arundle hesitated: "Come on, please, would you

please follow me? This way please, if I may... Their Majesties awaiting you.”

Arundle missed to ask a question. Of course, she wondered how she'd come here. Perhaps she could ask the Emperor, while seeing him face to face.

She still wasn't sure about his identity. The statue in the so-called 'Hall of Rhyme and Riddle' or what ever - didn't look like her father at all, not even as a could-be, or might-be father.

On the other hand, she remembered the strange glances and most of all her own funny feelings.

Well, but had it been a wonder in such a situation? When did you meet a real intergalactic Emperor of all worlds?

However, things turned out to be different again. The Majesty, the Advisor was guiding her to, wasn't His Majesty, instead it was Her Majesty.

Her Majesty also sat on a throne amidst a huge hall on a pedestal, where Arundle was demanded to halt and bow. Her Highness was seated so high, that Arundle could hardly see the tip of her nose. Besides, her head was all covered by a veil.

“Right away towards hell's gate, what must I hear?” Her Majesty opened the conversation.

“But have one brought about some seating accommodation for our honourable dearest guest, though” her voice sounded clear and lovely. Her order was hurriedly obeyed. A huge red armchair was carried about, and Arundle was seated and while she did, she felt being lifted and raised up on the pedestal some twenty yards afar from Her Majesty almost as high.

Arundle sighted as inconspicuously as she could at her counterpart, and Her Majesty seemed to have a similar interest in her. She not even smiled generously, but looked her straight into the face, all behind that veil of course, that showed only the eyes clearly.

Something made Arundle feel familiar somehow, in a very special way. However, for lengthier reflections there was no time. The Advisor raised right next to her on a neat stool and explained how he just managed to rescue Arundle.

Not the entrance to the summer palace had been waiting for her under the armpit of the moon man, but the trap of Malicious Marduk.

Without noticing, the magic bow had entered the sphere of the Miseriors. They didn't have difficulties in presenting such images all the more the big boss took the director's part, and guided them as it pleased him.

“Had your friends not announced your coming, no-one knew you were about somewhere” Her Majesty confirmed.

“Well, well after all we got you out there just in time” while Arundle hissed at her bow rather sharply. “Your bow did as best he could, I’m sure. However, never underestimate the slyness and power of the evil. “Let this be a teaching” the Advisor added, rather unnecessary. As if Arundle purposely almost went into the trap of Malicious Marduk.

She argued with her bow, because she hated his selfish air, and the way he treated the magical stone, whenever possible. There was absolutely no sense in it.

While she reflected on such matters, she felt lowered to the ground. The audience was over. When she reached the ground, a door opened and Scholasticus, Billy-Joe, Peter Adams and Walter with Pooty in his arms stepped in and rushed towards her as soon as they realized who she was.

The magic bow tried to hide behind her back, while Pooty got the magical stone out of Walter’s belly bag. The stone was glooming obviously happy and was in good mood, while the magic bow felt ashamed.

The men’s tour with the magical stone didn’t meet any difficulties. The Advisor met them in the Hall of this and that, and got them up here, because the moon was too dangerous.

The Miseriors had conquered the greater part of the moon soon after Arundle and Billy-Joe left with the Prince.

“They are interested in the organ transports and the ‘lubricant’ associated with. The Prince once explained how things work. Souls are being used and transplanted together with limbs or lungs and the like, while souls make them alive. But of course they can as well be eaten by the Miseriors and that is what those lost souls fear most.” Arundle explained.

“I wonder whether they notice down there, what’s going on meanwhile.” Billy-Joe added.

“I’ll have a look at that, your Highness” the Advisor bowed, while the Princess got off her throne and pedestal to mingle with the common folk from afar.

Billy-Joe seemed to amuse her and raised her curiosity. While he noticed, he got confused and tried to hide behind Arundle’s back, like the bow had done a minute ago, but was of course far to big.

“Malicious Marduk, I understand, is located then, is that so?” Scholasticus concluded. “The little accident of yours did have some good in it, though.”

“Right, didn’t you yourself say ‘find Malicious Marduk?’” Arundle asked the Advisor – “Well, now he found me. That’s all we need. I wouldn’t mind being the bait, if that helped, to get hold of him.”

Scholasticus and Peter wondered how cool she was, all the more, when she went on “while you, my dear Billy-Joe, resist such measures. Thus goes

on since you beheaded the old Prince. Somehow, you're not the same anymore." Billy-Joe shrugged uneasily, but didn't say anything.

"What are the referential imperial intentions, Mr Advisor, Your Imperial Highness?" Scholasticus asked straight forward. The Advisor gazed over to Her Majesty, but she avoided his eyes. However, seemed to know the answer. The Emperor was at the other end of the galaxy and wouldn't be back soon. Therefore, the Princess was on her own and had to come to an agreement with the Advisor.

"Who's going to eat the hare before it's shot?" The Advisor answered on her behalf.

"May we learn as well, what your plans are, Professor?" Her Majesty asked.

"It doesn't really matter, what I think, I'm afraid. Still it is all-important to know how to proceed after we trapped the enemy. Beheading seems no option though, I understand, because this leads astray and causes all that harm, the poor boy's experiencing right now."

In fact had Scholasticus - together with Walter and the magical stone, Billy-Joe and Peter Adams - developed an interesting scenario that convinced by its primitive simplicity, and was at the same time absolutely sophisticated.

Her Majesty nodded agreeing while Scholasticus explained how to proceed. - "In brief terms" -

"You may understand - not to go into detail. You know, walls got ears, so to speak - wherever power is concentrating" Scholasticus went on with a meaningful look.

Again, Her Highness agreed, while the Advisor look disappointed, not only Billy-Joe, but also Peter Adams noticed. Scholasticus was far too busy, to put things into the right words. Arundle took her time to take a closer look at the Princess.

Arundle was now almost sure about the identity of Her Majesty, and felt more confused than ever.

She couldn't ask straight forward what relationship there was. Was the Emperor husband or father, uncle or brother? She had to find out otherwise.

The last secret of the confusing game wouldn't be unveiled. First, they had to capture Malicious Marduk. However, whatever they did, they'd have to avoid Billy-Joe's consequence. No matter who's blood was meant to be saved.

Scholasticus and Peter started with their preparations. The magical stone also asked Walter to get started, and so Walter grabbed Arundle by the leaf, while she didn't listen to him. He needed her and her magic bow for a very special duty.

Billy-Joe's task was to involve the Advisor into a conversation, and get as much as he could out of him about the old Shaman of the Churingas, and the whereabouts of him, because it seemed not so clear anymore, whether or not he switched over to the realm of the dead.

Her Majesty retired. Rather offended, when she meant to realize, that she was of no use. While Arundle wanted to have her on her side. However, that wasn't likely to happen. They went a high risk, and Her Highness was far too valuable, and would be needed furthermore.

That would be quite something if Malicious Marduk trapped Her Majesty instead of vice versa.

Meanwhile things developed. Scholasticus and Peter calculated the amount and the size of ice cubes needed to build an igloo with a diameter of four yards and a height of two and a half.

The magical stone and the magic bow checked on their ability to produce negative energy. Which wasn't very difficult for them, while they hadn't settled their dispute.

Walter and Arundle were covered in blue flashes the two of them produced, and shuddered under the shockwaves, while adjusting the exact poles of the grid, bound to capture Malicious Marduk.

"You've got to imagine the functioning of the grid like a stake net" had Scholasticus explained.

Billy-Joe meanwhile found out about the location of the Shaman. The Advisor even agreed to guide him there. Together they would produce magical water that had to be frozen to ice. An ice cube producer was available on the space station, because alcohol was a severe problem among the entourage. Most of them drank whiskey, and quite a few wouldn't do without ice cubes. That was why such an apparatus was unalterable.

Most difficult was the amount of water required. The physicians calculated an enormous amount of water, much more than they had estimated. Even after they reduced the size of the walls, they still needed too much, so they reduced height and radius by half - that still meant a lot of water.

While water was a problem, freezing was it not, because temperatures went down far below freezing point as soon as the night fell in. Therefore, the production of cubes turned out to be the slightest problem.

Every member of the team was busy when the plan came into pHase II. Again had Arundle to talk over the dangerous mission with her magic bow. Purposely-wrong coordinates were incorporated in order to make Arundle land at the wrong site. Again, she did that suicidal run towards hell's gate

that is the moon man's mouth. She prepared for the jump, her bow holding tight in both hands.

It was a matter of seconds now. While in flight they had to produce the negative power grid between the bow and the magical stone, who followed unattended a tenth of a second behind with Walter.

While still in the hop, the bow covered Arundle with a protective shield against the acid in the belly of the moon man – because she had to rest some time in the stomach and the bowels. Long enough to have the evil spirit of Malicus Marduk exorted, only to have him captured again in the stake-net-like grid. Therefore, Walter with the magical stone kept waiting outside the moon man's mouth, all attentive. The bow and Arundle would follow the extirpated daemon on the foot, and wouldn't give way until the energetic stake net was closed behind him.

To cut it short - things then happened as planned. Thus, Malicious Marduk was captured, and was taken to that igloo at the space station, that was built meanwhile. The captured daemon in the electronic stake net raged like mad, but in vain. A band of howling Miseriors accompanied the payload but in safe distance, incapable and helpless without their master. The combined powers of the magical stone and the magic bow were too much.

Meanwhile the ice cube producer produced ice cubes by freezing the holy waters, the old Shaman managed to lead over here from the dreamland, where there would break out a draught. Billy-Joe was murmuring secret words, while the sacred water was sprouting into the apparatus, as well as into the cube models outside in the cold of the night, where it took only seconds to form an ice block of considerable size.

A ferry took the cargo right away to a separated plateau, that didn't have any other access. Right there, bricklayer artifacts were building the igloo, guarded and led by the two astrophysicians.

Solid frozen water was the only medium Malicus Marduk couldn't get through – all the more if it was of holy origin. The idea was, to imprison the chief daemon in this icy prison, until the Emperor decided how to proceed.

The igloo was almost ready. For the last crucial part, the torch was used excessively, that was necessary to have the blocks glued together. The cubes got shortly heated from all sides; to have them glued together all the better. The ceiling was thus closed and the inner supporting posts were removed. While from the outside a shower of icy water closed the tiniest openings. Peter Adams was checking the walls carefully. Then the igloo was ready to host the perilous guest. The hatch stood open and would be shut and sealed immediately.

And there the flash like cage appeared, as if coming out of no-where. The flashing blue of the negative bipolar energy grid, that was formed a

stake net, mingled with the blueish appeal of the igloo, while the contents of the stake net was pushed through the hatch to the inside, and while the grid still protected the open hatch, a thick solid ice block was pressed into the opening. A last spraying with an icy shower, and the work was done.

Malicious Marduk was in prison. You could see him jump about and hear him yell and holler through the walls. Here and then, his face was seen, as he pressed it against the ice, and what Arundle then believed to be seeing, made her blood freeze in her vessels.

38. Who is Malicious Marduk?

Like in clockwork, the wheels worked together. There had been no failures, and things worked out as planned. Scholasticus was proud on him and his assistants. None of the elements failed. Everybody did his or her job.

The news of the Emperor's enemy's capture was spreading in no time on the virtual space centre. Soon the entourage came looking on. The little shuttle went continuously to and fro, while the igloo stood apart on a separate spot.

The guards allowed only a few moments in front of the ice walls of the igloo. They had to keep a safety distance of two feet, because the hot breathing might get the ice to be melting. Repeatedly Peter Adams checked on the thickness of the walls, and had the crucial spots been sprayed right away with holy waters. They didn't lack of the cold, though, out here in space. Nevertheless, the visitors required an acceptable temperature and the prisoner as well.

Arundle needed some time to recover from the sight of the prisoner. She still didn't understand, what was going on. Scholasticus had spoken of a plan, and she had participated unquestioning, but where did the idea with the igloo come from?

"Hints there were lots" Scholasticus declared humbly. "I'm sure you remember your visit at the safe rooms below the palace and the lost souls in those bags? I had the opportunity to have a closer look at such a bag – Billy-Joe was so kind helping me, and so was the bow of yours. And what did I find out? The bags were filled with water – to be precise there was a thin layer of water between two plastic skins. So I concluded, that the water was responsible for keeping the Miseriors off the souls. What else had they been useful for? From here, it was a short way to the plan of capturing Malicious Marduk under water, - and what was more suitable than an igloo?"

If it's impossible for the daemons to get into such a bag, it might as well work the other way round, provided, the same conditions were fulfilled, and here came Billy-Joe into the game. He had to prepare the water in a special way. The idea to that prison I lent from the chaos theory. As the degree of order increases reciprocal to the reduction of temperature. Order is the sheerest opposite of what Malicious Marduk spreads about, order was the ideal trap in combination with frozen sacred waters, into which you, Arundle, had to entice Marduk. His interest in your person might not be hidden to you – you surely know by now why...”

Arundle nodded thoughtfully. She didn't expect the chasing of the Emperor's enemy to be that easy. “You mean he didn't hide at all, but was waiting for me to become trapped. However, why wasn't it possible to catch him earlier? As I understood the Advisor, our main task had been to find Malicious Marduk first of all.”

Billy-Joe agreed – “we were told, the ring of black marketeers got to be destroyed, and that could only work after the head was cut off. That seemed to be clear to us, though...”

(Billy-Joe couldn't get that beheading business out of his mind.)

Scholasticus didn't have a concise answer – “It would perhaps be best to inquire for another audience” he therefore suggested. “Peter and I are almost ready, and the guards should manage by now on their own. We have to leave it up to them over here, how to proceed. Things have to be cleared with all that black market business, that Billy-Joe mentioned rightly. Those Miseriors have to be handle somehow, despite all these lost souls, who will have to find their rest and peace. -Yes, there's still a lot to do, and our assistance might be needed.”

“We should bring our suggestions forward with the upcoming audience,” Scholasticus added after a short break.

“If it's been granted, which I doubt” Billy-Joe said dryly. “As we learnt, His Majesty has departed.”

“Who said that?” Arundle asked. But Billy-Joe shrugged – “you're gonna see, there won't be any audience.”

Arundle still was widely confused. The distorted face under the ice couldn't be banned from her mind. She didn't know whom she'd been able to talk about. That was her thing alone; she had to get along all by herself. What did her father, and her problems with him, bother the others?

Had she been sure about her impression? One hundred years was a long time... - but still...

Was it the fact, that she suspected him for a long time? He had been hidden very well, no doubt about that. Still – her suspicion had increased. She was seeking her father in the prisoner, and only Billy-Joe would believe

her, while she didn't dare to trust her feelings. Scholasticus had referred her to Grisella and Grisella had told her of the images the unconscious fooled us with. Hadn't she searched for her father in the face of the Emperor already? She needed certainty!

The audience was granted, despite Billy-Joe's pessimism, but without His Majesty himself, and did lead to nowhere. Instead of His Highness, who granted them all his excuses and apologies, the Advisor listened to all their 'very helpful' suggestions, and promised to prove them thoroughly and keep them in consideration.

"As soon as the order will be established and the criminal elements got eliminated, time will get revaluated step by step. You will see. – We will see you as precious councillors in future and as our dearest guests, won't we?" the Advisor ended the session.

"The fate of the culprit will be decided upon elsewhere" he meant casually and overdid, Billy-Joe thought.

"You see, death is no substantial category in the range we are dealing with right now. There are different modes of suffering, though, and penitence – if I may say so. Each force has its counter force. The laws of the universe are sound and set" the Advisor added somewhat mysteriously, and was in due course to retire.

"Something's better than nothing, but isn't good enough, though, and can always be improved. Malicious Marduk's devoted to the naught, I'm afraid. He is the agent of the roll back, the servant of annihilation, so to speak. That's our problem."

Scholasticus nodded enthusiastically, he felt well understood and confirmed in his research.

Arundle hadn't been at the audience. She had other things in mind. Had she been there, she might have altered her doing. Perhaps she had noticed, how dangerous it was to personalize the relationships in the universe, because you always found aspects of existence that were mirrored in your own breast. Was she – like her father – attracted by the longing for grandeur?

Or was that not true? - Her father wished to live on forever. The idea alone filled his eyes with a mad shine. While she couldn't stand mediocrity - that was her weakness.

Arundle put such scruples aside. First, she needed certainty. Who was that creature in the igloo? She had to know and the magic bow accepted her will. If only he had protested aloud!

While looking for certainty, Arundle stepped over a dangerous border and not only brought herself, but the whole universe into great danger. With seeing eyes, she rushed into a disaster. She couldn't do otherwise, she had to! The face behind the icy wall didn't let her go.

Arundle mingled amongst the visitors, heading for the prisoner. Together with them, she pressed into the ferry and was sluiced about the igloo a couple of times. However, the prisoner remained a dark shadow, sitting in the middle of his prison and didn't care about the on-lookers.

She had to think about something special to attract his attention. The group she was part of, was already guided back to the ferry. The hatch opened. Now Pooty's magic hood had helped, but it wasn't here unfortunately.

The bow once said – came to her mind - it would be easy for him to make her invisible. “Hey, bow, what about it?” she thought - “can you make me invisible?” The bow uttered an unpleasant purring. He didn't like such challenge, but then gave in. “I won't help you any further, I hope, you know, how dangerous it is, what you are intending.”

Now it was Arundle who grumbled, “Don't you worry, I'm taking care,” she kept thinking lamely. All she was longing for was a piece of certainty, and for that she'd take any risk. What did they really know about Malicious Marduk after all? Only what others had told them. Who had spoken with him? – Well, she forgot about the trouble in Grisella's institute and the black marketeers, and all that.

‘I've got to find out about my father’ she stubbornly insisted. Billy-Joe was even buried with his alter ego, and I shouldn't be allowed at least to talk to such an acquainted imago?’

The bow somewhat reluctantly agreed. Arundle's longing conveyed a grain of truth, although she ignored the danger. The prisoner was still a mighty opponent, perhaps the mightiest in the universe.

Would the magic bow protect her? He wouldn't let her down, Arundle was sure about that...

First, she had to manage with the crowd until late in the evening, still coming wave after wave from the ferry. Arundle was invisible now, but she took the same volume as ever, and had to take care getting out of the way on the narrow platform, thus it frequently happened that people collided with the invisible obstacle and looked bewildered at their neighbours, whether they gave him a leg.

At last, the artificial night lowered over the satellite, right in the shade of her big sister – the space station – that was swallowed by the moon's mighty shadow again.

Without the sunlight, temperature dropped immediately, and Arundle got cold. What did that mean for the prisoner? She wondered.

The last ferry just left. She had no time to spare. First, she had to make herself known to the prisoner. While still hidden under the magic cloak, the bow had supplied, she knocked at the icy cuirass, which was embracing a being of flesh and blood.

She had pity on the poor prisoner, while being terribly cold outside. Inside it surely was worse.

The guards had retired into their cabin near-by, but still kept an eye on the igloo, as their order demanded. – They were told ‘neither let the prisoner nor the igloo out of sight – under no circumstances’.

Up here, nobody was experienced in safeguarding magicians or daemons. What would the guards do, when the creatures of the night came? They had no experience what so ever, while it was almost certain that the Miseriors would try something at night.

Arundle knelt right at the igloo. She knocked at the wall and listened, then knocked again, but nothing happened. She might as well drill a tiny little hole for the thin microphone, she had in the magic bow’s invisible quiver.

The bow warned her to do that, but how could a grown up person slip through a tiny hole? She had to contact the prisoner in any case, that was the least she could do for him, who might be her father – while that question had not yet been answered.

“Well, if that is your father – what then?” the bow snarled, he seemed to know the answer. Arundle didn’t dare to think what would be then. She just couldn’t imagine, and didn’t want to. In fact, she wanted to ascertain herself that Malicious Marduk was not her father, but at worst one of his blokes from the club. He might even be Mr Schwertfeger, whom she’d liked best for that.

The Emperor, whom she had suspected before, was most likely not her father. That was the reason why she had changed her mind and was favouring his enemy now.

The cold was creeping through the magic cloak she still was covered with. In a few moments she’d be frozen to ice. She had to hurry.

At last, the drill got through. Arundle put the thin microphone through the hole and began to whisper her father’s name, and who she was, and things the like, but there was no answer.

At last, some kind of awful growling was heard. The frozen brain seemed to take some time to get started again.

The humming and grumbling went on for a little while, before first words were heard. The prisoner spoke at last. His voice sounded surprisingly well tempered.

“Yes, I’m your dear daddy” Arundle heard him purr. Her heartbeat almost stopped. Then she reassured herself. What did she expect?

The prisoner would of course catch any straw he saw to get out of the prison.

How could she prove whether he really was her father, and how could she stop him from mentally crawl into her thoughts? She could feel already such attempts from inside the igloo. The magic bow gave her another warning.

Sweet longing for lost harmony kept trickling into Arundle’s heart, and made her feel small again. Buried love broke off and tears got into her eyes, while the pity with her poor old daddy was melting a remarkable hole into the icy cuirass.

Again, the magic bow tried to get her out of the endangered zone. However, her unfulfilled yearning was stronger, once awoken. The hole in the wall of the igloo got bigger, - bigger, almost fist-like it was, and during the day, Arundle would have noticed her error already.

Malicious Marduk and her father didn’t comply, although there was a certain likeness. The diabolic sight he presented, detected him as a swindler.

“Come on in, dear daughter” the voice said invitingly. Arundle obeyed, while the magic bow resisted. So she just slipped out of the string, before she disappeared inside.

However, the magic bow wouldn’t leave her alone in her worst hour. He followed unnoticed, when Malicious Marduk’s attention was with the girl.

The race was won. The silly humans meant to have captured him against his will. Even the Emperor hadn’t known better. All these fancy lords and ladies of the entourage had come to see him.

How could one do with such a band of toadies? -Angels? - Fools would do better. Well, his own followers weren’t any better either.

He knew, why he dissolved from the Emperor. Although they had to share power now. As long as he was allowed to act freely, he wouldn’t mind. Well, the limits were all too obvious by now, and that was not the end.

If he managed to get this clever girl over on his side, he’d have gained grounds again. Of course it wouldn’t be wise to slaughter the cow you wanted to milk, but a little blood for the time being, would do no harm. If he

didn't manage to get Arundle on his side, he could let her disappear – she and her eager friends, who once set him free.

The space was immeasurable. Whole galaxies disappeared. Didn't he have those spies from the past led astray once? Well, they somehow managed to return into their time.

There was still that damn time-string everything was moving alongside and wasn't bendable. Such mysterious connections even he didn't understand. There was a lot of ruinous stuff on the trail of fate left or right.

Now he'd have to trickle some poison into an innocent soul, and find the lever to make her stagger. He had discovered some clues – hypocrisy was the one, while the other was double binding, though.

Arundle heard him laugh a cynical laughter. She felt as little Red Riding Hood may have felt when the weird old wolf swallowed her at last. She'd been betrayed and cheated, and knew it as soon as she entered the igloo.

A grave-like dark hold in the ground was waiting for her, wherein a wide gorge yawned. She felt drawn by an irresistible force, and was sliding downwards, as fast as the gravity demanded. Strong arms were holding her. She felt seated on a cushion and was gliding softly now.

Now she could see where she was. This must be space. But how different did it look, everything was upside down.

Instead of light stars, you could see stars with dark blue tails of comets through milky greyness of the naught, forming strange figures here and then.

She didn't feel better, since she had left the ice channel, and the pressing arms had diminished. Still her heart was beating full of empathy.

She knew where she was: This was the land of the lost souls, and Malicus Marduk was master here. She was in the centre of his empire, where all his power focussed, while his weakness was revealed as well.

Malicious Marduk had been able to get Arundle at his side, but what was the price? He wasn't any better off than all the other creatures of the Zone of Uncertainty, who stuck to an earthly life, until their debts were settled, and someone came to have them redeemed.

The brave girl with the caring bow over her shoulder had come to him. Had he been sure about his matter, he now felt how far he went astray. Not he conquered that brave heart, not he opened the door to hypocrisy.

The opposite had happened. Arundle's goodness didn't only burn a hole into the ice, but also burnt into Malicus Marduk's mind.

She overcame her fear. Her pity tore the walls down between the world of the living and the world of the dead. She had carried him home at last.

Malicious Marduk felt free and redeemed. He left the chaos behind that would be altered now, because his destructive hands had loosened their grip.

The band of Miseriors, who were slow thinkers, didn't understand, what was going on and probably would never do, if not God in His never-ending goodness altered His judgement over them.

They kept on following their master, because they didn't know, where else to go. Malicus Marduk was their only stronghold; they got shelter from, and had granted them their kind of existence.

Meagre times lay ahead; they'd have to understand soon enough. Malicious Marduk was not the same anymore. A new spirit conquered the world of the living, a spirit, Arundle brought forward and came about with her. There was no place for them, where such spirit prevailed.

Without malice, things would turn upside down. Here and then a lost soul was not at all promising, a meagre fare would that be. What a difference, compared to the times of the richly laid table while the black marketeers served the ruling class. They were all on the go.

Those holes were stuffed, and no sluices left open. The spheres were separated, and if there were exemptions, it would mean little for a hungry band of Miseriors. The eternal damnation, they were charged with, had them back.

39. Entanglement

The howling of the desperate Miseriors kept yelling in her ears. She covered her head with the pillow in vain. The sound was inside. She couldn't shake it off. Arundle was back in her bed. Had she come back?

Had all that been only a nightmare? She still had Malicious Marduk's fatherly voice in her ear. Everything had been so real.

She got up and stepped over to Florinna. She lay in her bed in a peaceful slumber, like Corinia and the other girls in the dormitory.

What had happened? Had she been dreaming all that? The excursion to the imperial entourage on that virtual space station, the capturing of Malicious Marduk, and her stupid visit inside of his icy prison...

Had she dreamed all that? She had best liked to wake up the sisters. - That wouldn't help, because they hadn't been with her. She had to wait until the morning to see for Billy-Joe – so much care had to be. The school

regulations demanded that, and she didn't want to break rules right from the start.

On the other hand – what did small-checked regulations mean, where the fate of the whole universe was concerned? What would it mean after all, if she was responsible for the escaping of Malicious Marduk?

His capturing had been so real. Something inside her resisted, calling that just a dream.

She could of course go to see Scholasticus right away. That would be the easier way – but would she be allowed to see him in the middle of the night? She had to have a sound reason for that. The truth would sound wholly illogical and unbelievable to the ears of a simple caretaker.

She couldn't help it; she had to get to Billy-Joe. No matter what the regulations said. At least she wanted to see, whether he was back as well.

She had been sneaking on her own to Malicious Marduk – but was she also repelled on her own? When did she see Billy-Joe last? Where were Scholasticus, Walter, Pooty, and Peter Adams?

She could have asked her magic bow, whether he knew anything, but that didn't come to her mind, instead she put her clothes on and sneaked out of the dormitory.

Billy-Joe still preferred to sleep in the open. Arundle had to get up to his favourite terrace that lay in the teacher's section already. Therefore, her excursion was somewhat dangerous. She risked to be dismissed from school. She asked her magic bow, if it would perhaps be better to make her invisible, while she was sneaking through the forbidden corridors and staircases. Elevators had been unwise to be taken, though.

The bow did so, to please her. Invisibility meant to see less, so she didn't see anything at all in the dark now, while before the red eye of the bow helped at least to keep her course. Therefore, she asked him to have her return into visibility; while she got deeper and deeper into a kind of maze, and didn't know where she was. She had definitely left the students' section by now, and whatever her excuses might be, her presence was hardly explainable.

At the doors, she read the teachers' names on both sides, while it was lighter now, and she could switch back to invisibility. She hoped almost desperately to find Billy-Joe's terrace at the end, where he was dwelling with special permission.

However, when she came to the corridor's end, she had the choice between two turnings. Both sides ended in the dark. The bow wasn't prepared to assist. Either he didn't know himself, or he still was upset, because he thought the idea of visiting Billy-Joe in the middle of the night, somewhat crazy. She could have easily waited until the next morning.

Had Arundle's character changed under the influence of Malicious Marduk? Somehow, she wasn't the same anymore. There had been a lot of nonverbal secret communication between the two, right since their first encounter. No one else knew of the secret contact. Only Arundle had been contacted while the angelical guardians safeguarded the others already.

Arundle didn't dream the manoeuvre of how she was picked up. In fact, more and other things happened while she was rescued. Her thoughts had been searched and overlooked. Malicious Marduk thus gained access to her state of being.

When he noticed, that Arundle didn't have come far to understanding the true nature of the time-loss, he dismissed her right away, after having her branded with an invisible, virtual mark of Cain for her hypocrisy, she'd have to carry on as a burden.

More important for him and for the world was, that the encounter didn't remain without consequences. While he still meant to have control over the brave girl, it was the other way round. All his sorcery didn't help; not even the 'forget-what-you-experienced-spell' he managed to put on Walter and his payload.

Malicious Marduk wasn't the same any more. The girl's pity had softened his besotted heart. The brave peace fighter stepped loose an avalanche of mercy that had been dwindling above since the beginning of time.

By that he got over rolled and turned inside out and upside down, he hardly knew himself anymore. While he slipped into thousands of roles and was hiding behind uncountable masks.

Some people had been easy victims, others were a real challenge, and in Arundle, he found his master – that is – his mistress at last.

Arundle turned to the left. One way was as good as the other, she thought, and the magic bow behind her head let her know, that she was right. She rushed on, as fast as she could now. The red eye of the bow was again her only source of light.

She felt uncertain after messing about for such a long time. Besides, she felt miserable and regretted her spontaneous notion to go and see Billy-Joe by night. While the memory of the nightmare didn't let her go, but came back in waves with invertible impact.

She'd have given everything, if she were lying in bed again. Last week had just been too much. She felt exhausted even more; she had fought a dubious battle, and still didn't know the outcome.

She was lucky with the direction, though. The corridor mounted into a moonlit terrace. Fresh air from the sea welcomed her. She breathed deeply and relaxed. The worries and fears she had felt while coming here, were all gone by now.

She found Billy-Joe under his favourite tree. He was sleeping right next to Walter, who slept with open eyes, and was all-awake as soon as Arundle approached. Pooty stretched his little head out of Walter's belly bag and twinkled sleepily.

When he saw Arundle, he slipped back into his warm bed inside the belly bag. Billy-Joe opened his eyes, without the slightest move. Still Arundle noticed it, when he whispered, "What's it like?"

He asked just like that, not at all meaningful. "Well, so, so" she murmured. "Couldn't sleep though – kind of nightmare, you know. Got to know something from you."

Billy-Joe nodded invitingly and raised an eyebrow. "Were we together on a space lab, some hours ago?" she whispered "and did we capture Malicious Marduk?"

"What?" Billy-Joe asked back and rose halfway – "where were we? Who did we capture?"

"Well, yes on that space station of the Emperor. We built an igloo and you provided holy water with that old Shaman of the Churingas, you know, while Walter and I installed that negative grid and entered the belly of the moon man, where Malicus Marduk was hiding right there..."

Billy-Joe shook his head then said – "Your bow and the magical stone didn't agree on the route, so we gave in. We'll eventually try tomorrow. You are right though; the moon of Laptopia is our aim. But it looks, as if we won't go at all."

"I'm sure, I was there. You were all there, you, Scholasticus, Peter Adams, his assistant, and Walter, and Pooty. You were travelling with the magical stone, and I with the magic bow of mine. It's the plain truth, I assure you."

" – Looks, as if you went on your own; or you only dreamed" he said, while Arundle shook her head with anger: "You were there, as sure as I'm here now, dear bow, do you understand, though?" However, the magic bow was either not willing to comment on that, or he wasn't so sure.

"Before we go, you've got to tell us, what you experienced, no matter whether it was a dream. - ...Sounds interesting enough, I'd say", Billy-Joe answered.

Arundle would have liked to get the whole band together, all those in the know. The others most likely had the same blackouts as Billy-Joe, Walter and Pooty, who looked at her somewhat bewildered. Nevertheless,

even she accepted, that this was impossible, all the more up here, where she wasn't allowed to be.

Therefore, she explained everything in detail, and while she talked, she got rid of the tension, step by step.

Things were said soon. Then there they lay, under the dark blue sky and myriads of stars above, while the moon was descending, and far in the east, another day was dawning.

She'd better disappear right away. Reluctantly she dissolved from the sight and was diving back into the labyrinth of corridors, to find her way back to the dormitory under the sea.

Had she hoped to become enlightened the other morning, she failed. Although Scholasticus listened sorely to her adventurous tale. None of those in the know recalled anything.

"The search for Malicious Marduk appears to be somewhat difficult" he summed up her report. "Malicious Marduk is master of illusion, so it seems." He sighted meaningfully over to Arundle. The others nodded. Arundle felt almost ashamed. Was she crazy? – She asked herself.

"Anyone's got an idea, what should be done?" Scholasticus went on and looked from Walter and Pooty to his assistant Peter Adams, who was sitting next to Billy-Joe, Arundle, himself and Grisella, who wanted to be part of the circle even though she refrained from travelling to Laptopia again.

"Whatever Arundle's vision was, we have to take it as a warning" Grisella said while patting Arundles arm. Scholasticus and Peter Adams agreed wholeheartedly.

"That wasn't only a vision" Arundle insisted, "I was really there, and so were you..."

"But you said, you felt strange, when you got transferred to the Emperor's space station" Billy-Joe answered.

"Please, try to remember" Scholasticus insisted "what was it like with that tractoring beam?"

"And where was that space station anyway?" Pooty wanted to know.

"Must have been close, though..."

"You didn't have trouble in getting into the moon-man's belly with your grid, you and Walter – well, but Walter doesn't remember..."

"Let's ask the magical stone then" Walter recommended –

"...whether he can imagine such a gird and have it built with the magic bow, though..." Walter suggested and got the stone out of his belly bag.

He forgot the quarrel between the stone and the bow; or did he hope the two would give in, while the world was in desperate need of their cooperation.

Nevertheless, their contradictions weighed still heavy. In vain, Scholasticus pointed out the endangered existence of the whole universe.

“The ever-faster turning systems threaten to collapse, eventually. It’s all too obvious that the rotation of the earth isn’t responsible for the loss in time, but all other systems are involved too. The planet orbits around the sun must have increased as well and in the meantime fourfold. Otherwise, the days won’t fit with the months. The consequences for the biological ecosystems are of course disastrous. No species are able to endure at length. How could that be, after all? Imagine a whole year packed into three months. There isn’t much left for the seasons. How shall things grow properly then?”

Even such reference couldn’t alter the attitude of the squabblers.

“In principle such a negative grid is no problem at all” the magical stone said to Walter. Arundle got the same answer from her bow. Of course, she had known before, because she had seen that grid at work.

Whether you were able to catch such a clever culprit by that means, seemed to be very doubtful though, they agreed.

This was of course bullshit, and the bow should know, or had he also forgotten the last night?

What could be done? Under no circumstances should Arundle go. Definitely not alone with her magic bow. Arundle was afraid, though, and didn’t contradict. The diabolical image was slumbering somewhere inside.

She knew, she had stepped over a border, she’d better have accepted untouched, and now found herself amidst the unbearable.

This was not the right way, neither for her, nor for her father. In fact, she didn’t want to be bothered any more.

She had been so happy, leaving such problems behind, while entering into the world of the School of Inbetween.

Was that all illusion? A fancy dream and wishful thinking?

The meeting ended. Billy-Joe wanted to take Arundle’s part, although he was scared too. Therefore, Grisella suggested to having a word first with the new Prince Regent and his true General. Because it wasn’t at all unimportant, how they handled the Laptopian problems. They might even get hints where to find Malicious Marduk.

Scholasticus offered his help. He, Walter, and Pooty could do the job. The others agreed wholeheartedly, and thus it was done.

The cause of the quarrel between stone and bow remained untouched, though. What ever this meant.

Before he left, Scholasticus gave his assistant last instructions. The preparations for the new semester were in due train. Everything had to be ready in two weeks time. Scholasticus didn't figure to stay late, but - 'you never know', he said to himself. Sometimes you got involved, and couldn't leave as you wished.

In fact, the journey was short. Scholasticus, Walter and Pooty were back by noon. And before those in the know went apart for their afternoon occupations, he reported of what was going on in Laptopia.

The riots were all over now, he learned from the General, and the black marketeers were stopped. Whole Laptopia got relieved.

"The established programmes work more or less perfect, with regard to education and fresh water supply, and the food production. And the young ones see a perspective, now that there is nobody trying to cheat them anymore.

- The universities revive, slowly but continuously. Humans do many tasks that had been delegated to the artifacts before.

- Of course, nature is still suffering. Nevertheless, there are attempts to improve here as well.

The transfer of the Laptop-plants ended. The whole banking system is under governmental control, no black marketing is possible any more..."

"At last, at last, I was going to doubt my own mind" Arundle uttered triumphantly. "And while I interrupted you, I should ask you who those black marketeers are?"

"Just a minute, I'll come to an end soon, and I'd be delighted to answering all your important questions, most of all yours of course, Arundle. While I'm not sure, whether I will be able to answer them satisfactorily, though. A lot will remain in the shade, or even in the dark, I'm afraid. – But let me go on, in order to give you a rough idea of what is really going on.

On the time scale, such figured Laptopian astronomers, mighty disruptions are coming up. The return to the standard is definitely on the way, so it is said. In intervals, the time is going to be redefined. Such is posted everywhere in the country and is no longer kept secret. The Prince wants to settle everything a five years' plan, by means of the imperial forces and our valuable advice from the past, so he said, and gave his regards to you."

"I still would like to know who those black marketeers are." Arundle insisted. "They can't all disappear, just like that. Someone has to be in charge. Such structures are complex and need a lot of know how..."

“Many black marketeers got arrested, of course not all. You are very right, it is absolutely difficult to prove the criminal acts”, Scholasticus answered. “But since Malicious Marduk was banned, - thanks to you - and returned back to where he belongs, things are on the move. Most hiding places and warehouses or safe-lockers, with those awful body-parts and soul-bags were dissolved, and either returned or delivered to governmental authorities.

By the way, such black marketeers worked quite similar to the drug cartels of our times. Even the pressure on the street pedlers is the same. The pedlers are desperate youngsters, whose account is almost empty. They have the alternative to become cashed themselves or to raise funds by seducing their mates and companions.”

“And the bosses? Were they the bankers?” Grisella wanted to know.

“Well, yes and no. I’d say the cores of the culprits are infested subjects, governed by Miseriors. Their souls are as dark as they could be, while they live their miserable lives on forever. - Seems as if they sneak into a human being and take over the reign, and guide them from inside. Otherwise it is hard to understand, why the black market was booming the way it did. You probably know – Miseriors eat lost souls, and need them for their own forthcoming; - and, souls only get lost, when the life span was sold out, as it happened on the black market. There the marketeers were wading ankle-deep in their elixir of life, so to speak.”

Arundle shuddered with dismay. What an abyss did there open! Thoughtful silence lowered over the assembly. Almost everything was said and explained, while the terror had come to a halt.

Yes, it was empathy and pity that banned Malicious Marduk, the ‘spiritus rector’¹ of the horror scene...

“Have a look, what I’ve got here” Scholasticus broke the silence and got a handful of coins out of his pocket. 1 A it said on the top and around you could read in small print ‘Bank of Laptopia’, and a large number.

“You’ve got to turn it round” Scholasticus said with a smile, when he didn’t notice any reaction from her side. Arundle did, as she was asked, and looked into a somewhat stern face of a young woman, she felt acquainted with.

There was also an inscription in a circle: ‘Star-maid of the Advisor’ it said. However, there was something else. She couldn’t read the letters, because they were upside down. Pooty jumped on her lap and yelled: “‘Arundle Star-maid of the Advisor’ it says.

¹ spiritual originator

Now what? – You are stunned, aren't you? Now you are famous. Imagine, you are a real currency..."

And so it was. In Laptopia people dealt with 'Arundles'. The economy returned to a moderate form of the money-system.

"You have achieved more, than you were able to foresee. And your dream hadn't been a dream, nor a vision either, but sound reality" Scholasticus said.

"General Armyless spoke with the deepest respect of you" he said looking around, triumphantly, then turned to Arundle and added: "In the whole land you are revered as a saint."

Arundle grinned somewhat ill at ease: "That's typical for the General" she murmured - "He's always got to overdo."