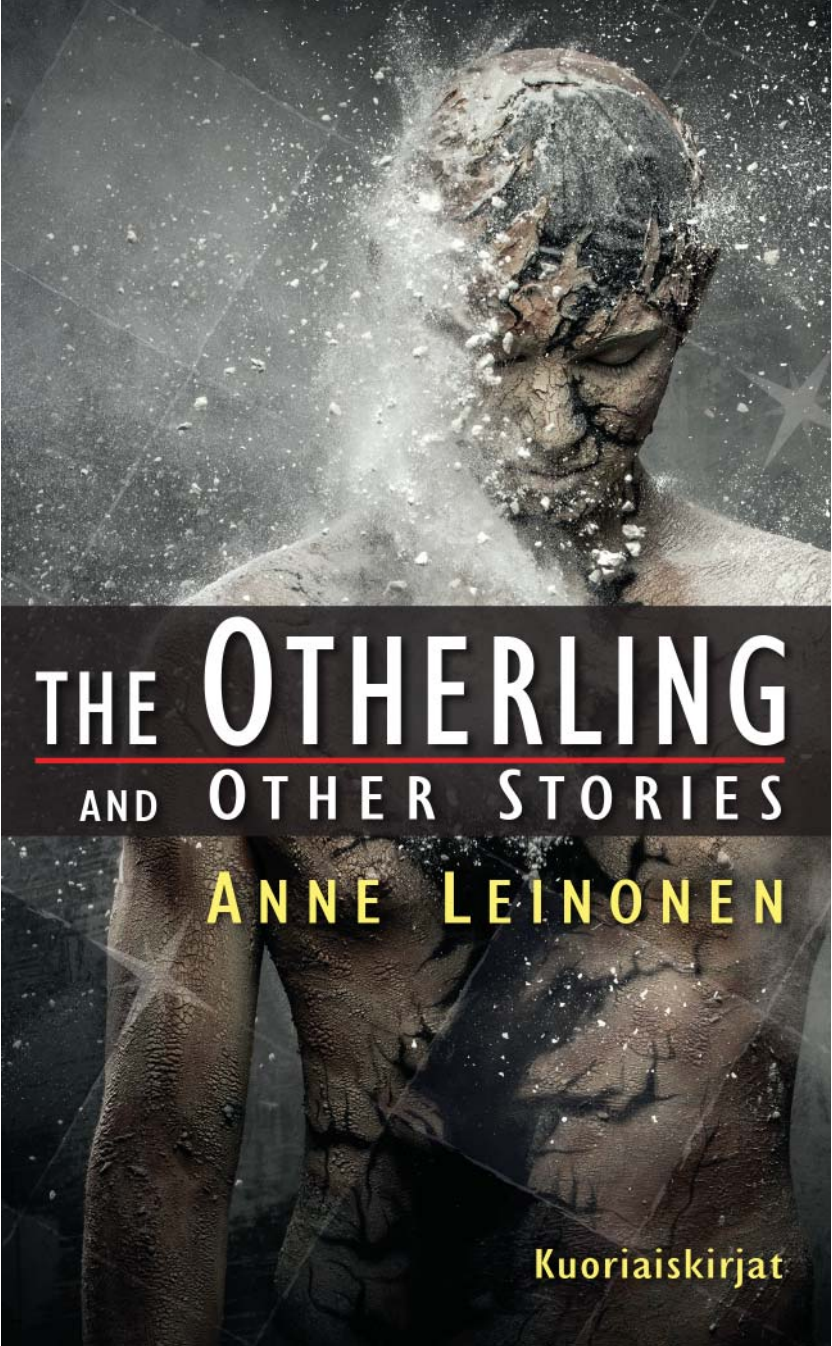




THE OTHERLING

AND OTHER STORIES

ANNE LEINONEN

Kuoriaiskirjat

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KUORIAISKIRJAT

The Otherling and Other Stories

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For Finnish fandom

THE SKINNER

Veita arrived in the village. The place was one of the small shacks in the borderland; she remembered visiting it years earlier. Nothing had changed, as far as she could see. The walls of the buildings were just as skewed and the roofs just as patched as before, the kids' noses were snotty, their feet treading bare and chapped in the mud. The farm wives doing their evening milking in the fields stopped to watch as Veita walked with even steps towards the village centre edged by a few cottages.

One of the men saw a glimpse of her skin, whispered his observation to the next, and the word spread like fire. She had no need to say anything to anybody, before she was received with bows and led to the village elder's house. It was the only house made of stone. The children ran

alongside her, lacerating their arms. They kept stretching their bloody hands towards Veita and touching the hems of her clothing.

The Elder – Veita remembered his name, Gentamon – came to the door, indignant, but even his face melted into a flattering smile. The man had aged since the last visit, his girth had grown to an enormous ring, legs peeking like thin sticks under his cape.

Veita wasn't pleased with the groveling, she knew it was just customary. Gentamon had always been arrogant, only tradition checked his behaviour. Veita drew aside the cloth covering her face. Gentamon's expression did not change, but his eyelids quivered.

– Tomorrow evening I'll be ready, Veita stated briefly.
– Prepare your feast.

Veita did not trust the Elder, just as she didn't trust any of the villagers, for she knew how greedy people were. The man would do as custom decreed, but she shouldn't expect honest respect from him. There had been rumours of attacks against skimmers in the borderlands, and fear had made them skip this village for years.

Gentamon ordered the women of his house to show Veita her room, so she could stay the night and prepare herself.

Hungry, expectant looks. Lust, longing and thirst. These were matters Veita was used to, she knew how to handle them. The people would give her everything she was bold enough to demand. And demand she did. She told the slip of a girl making up the guestroom bed that she wanted good meat, vegetables, wine and beer. She didn't care whether the villagers had the provisions or

not, it was autumn anyway and the summer's harvest was in, her demands were not unreasonable. The girl passed her request on, and in no time salted pork and fried peas were brought to Veita's room. She ate voraciously till her stomach was plump, for it had been weeks since her last good meal. At her age, fasting on roots and dry bread no longer brought the proper visions, her tortured body required warm meals and rest.

Veita did not need to look out through the window, she knew what was happening out there. Curiosity had driven people near the house. The grown-ups watched furtively from a little farther away, pretending to be busy, but the kids were playing close to her window, not bothering to hide their curiosity. They wanted to get a glimpse of her, a peek at least, before she was ready.

When she had eaten, she drank two beakers of wine. The girl came to the door again.

– Gentamon said to ask if you wish to have a bed-warmer. Any of the young men...

– No, I don't.

The girl remained standing, looked at Veita, hanging her head.

– I don't want you, either, Veita stated. The girl sighed with relief and shut the door behind her. Veita undressed and lay down naked. The bed was lumpy and the linen smelt mouldy, but it was still a real bed.

She stared at the darkness and listened to its breathing.

In the morning, Veita woke early and stretched herself limber. As the girl brought breakfast, she paused to stare at the naked Veita.

– Let's go, Veita said. – You can eat that food yourself.

The girl didn't answer, just snatched some delicacies from the tray into her pocket, but Veita thought she would need the food. Very thin and frail she was; in this village only the Elder got fat. Veita put on a simple cape and stepped outside. The blinding autumn light pierced her, its hardness nailed her to the doorway for a moment. She closed her eyes and tried to suck the warmth in, but her skin was so hardened it didn't feel the sun anymore.

The villagers led her to a cabin by the brook; the place was used for washing and preparing dead bodies. Now a chipped wooden tub had been set in a corner and filled with water up to the brim. She opened her cape and slipped into the water. Half-a-dozen young maidens, some of them just children, came to wash her skin. They were shy at first, but soon the steaming water and the intoxicating smell of herbs made them relax, too. Their hands wandered on her body, and she urged the girls to scrub hard enough to make blood spurt from her skin. The girls tried, but could leave no trace.

She was still lounging there when Gentamon came to stand close by. The man smelt of lard, his breathing wheezed through his nostrils. From the sound of it, the Elder wasn't healthy.

– Might there be any potential in these kids?

Veita shook her head. Not in these. Neither in any others to come. She did not want to take an apprentice, had been avoiding apprentices since she had taken the duty on herself at the age of twelve. She had given her woman's skin for a greater purpose and paid the price for that, proud and dignified. No one else deserved this life, not even if the

apprentice could secure the best of positions for her family. And would any have been worthy of Veita's attention? Even though years had passed and she already felt the foreboding of death in her bones, she still wasn't ready to give up her position, nor to tow an apprentice with her and transmit the gift.

– Perhaps if you looked closer? And there are others, too.

– I need to be scrubbed again, Veita said. – Scrubbed until blood spurts.

– Shall I ask the men?

– Yes, do.

Half-a-dozen young men came then to wash her, youngsters who were very excited at the sight of a naked woman. One of them, who had a mole on his heavy chin, got aroused by the skin scrubbing and tried desperately to hide his wayward manhood.

– Never mind, Veita said. – I've seen it all.

The youngster glanced at her but soon lowered his eyes. Veita managed to see that there was more than humility and submission in his eyes. Not enough, however. Not so that she'd have been interested in this upstart, either.

She was offered food in the bath, and declined again. Beer she consented to take, and drank enough to make her head hum and swim. She welcomed the drunkenness. That was at least something that made her feel alive, something to cling to during the empty days drifting ahead.

Evening had come when one of the boys finally managed to break her skin with his brush, and Veita knew blood was flowing from shoulders to back.

– That's enough, she said, and chased them off. She

pronounced the Words to the blood, stood up and stepped down from the tub. She wrapped the linen cape around herself, rubbed herself rhythmically with it, though she hardly felt the touch, and walked out to the courtyard. Her legs were shaky; she swayed but stayed erect.

A feast had been prepared by the brook during the day. Planks and wood blocks had been carried out of storage and used to construct a large festival table. Around it were smaller tables laden with food. Fires set by the forest edge had burnt to embers. The villagers had already feasted and were waiting for Veita. She walked to the central table and threw her cape on the ground. The flames reflected on her skin as she climbed upon the table to lie on her stomach.

One of the village musicians took a bowed harp and started playing an even, slow melody. Veita closed her eyes and let the eldest villagers come to her.

Hands wandered along her body, greedy hands, they probed, got familiar, ambled from one mound or curve to another. Time lost its meaning. The hands ran along the meandering figures on her arms and legs, groped for an entanglement on her buttocks. The fingers reached everything that had meaning, every essential happening, and they recognised familiar paths. When one of the old women found a new sequence, she started to read it aloud in a monotonous voice. She told of a war that had been fought a while ago, of battles that had destroyed entire villages, of scheming, futility and disappointment. Another woman found joy in Veita's foot and listed name by name those who had been born on the other side of the mountain.

Those not involved in the groping were each repeating their part of the telling long enough to store the memory of every detail. The whole village kept reiterating words at different beats, hissing like a huge word-swallowing snake, tasting the syllables, reciting and mumbling.

She turned on her back so the hands could read further. They found a glimmer of hope, stories of change and a better future. The hands also noticed the empty places, the sites ready for new information, and also the spots on her chest and stomach, the ones that were empty to allow the skin to be peeled off her and spread to dry cleanly.

She felt each touch. Internally, she knew the fingers, though her skin could feel nothing by itself, though it was numb and dead from all the scrawlings upon it.

One of the hands brushed her woman's parts, obviously by mistake, but it made her body tense up. It was long since she had been touched for her own sake, not through a need for information. Her body still remembered tenderness and lust.

Veita opened her eyes, saw in the crowd the strong-chinned young man and his hungry look. Though Veita suppressed her lust, she couldn't help a feeling of satisfaction: someone still wanted her, someone as young as that.

Finally the villagers had had enough, and Gentamon gave the sign.

One of the old women came and readied the spikes and pigment bowls upon Veita's stomach.

– What will you write? Veita asked.

The woman softly mumbled the names of people dead and born, information on marriages, penalties and deeds

of honour. And while she was telling of them, she kept hacking with bone spikes always more curls and knots into the village's life chain.

She hacked hard enough to make blood dribble, but Veita still felt nothing.

When the fires had burned down, Veita stood up and walked back to the cabin, where the refilled tub awaited her. The whole room was thick with steam that smarted her throat. The herbs had been carefully selected for this purpose. Veita went inside, but the villagers covered their faces with clothes and remained waiting for Veita to finish her job.

She took the drink she'd already prepared and gulped it down, though the sour and bitter taste made her cough and almost throw up. She stepped back into the tub, sunk down up to her neck and just lay waiting.

The labour started, sharp and even. Each time it was just as sudden and painful, and she always came to doubt whether she'd survive it. If there had been any other alternative, she'd have grasped it gladly, but this was her burden, which only she could bear.

She stayed in the tub as long as she could, but she had to get up and on the floor while she was still able to move. She remained lying on the ground and writhed in agony as each wave of pain passed over her. Her whole body arched stiffly as the labour reached its climax. She couldn't stand the pain, she clawed her body, howled and screamed. Faintly she sensed the villagers waiting outside the door, but no one dared approach her.

Her skin got tighter and tighter, until it started to

crack from the breasts. She groped among her possessions, caught hold of a knife set upon the table and grabbed it. She slashed her skin open with the knife. The skin fell off in large pieces, like a garment. The slash on the surface widened instantly and peeled the skin off along its invisible seams. The pain was immediately gone from where the skin had peeled off. She rolled and scuffed and rolled until the labour had altogether died out.

She dragged herself back into the tub, panting. It was as if everything had been dissolved away at once, all the countless years on the road, one miserable village after another, the land wasted by war and disease, her whole life. For a while, she was an empty book, an unwritten page, a thought wavering between the conscious and the unconscious, nothing but a possibility without a goal.

Someone peeked in at the door and one of the girls came to fetch the skin.

Now she had a sense of feeling. During the few hours of waiting, as she had just shed her skin, she was able to feel something with her body other than dark burning pain or fingers running along messages. She touched herself and felt.

The girl came back again.

– Do you need anything? she asked.

– No, Veita answered. With the approaching morning, wistfulness crept into her mind. This village had to be left behind, the road called. And yet she wasn't ready to give up.

– Yes, I do, she said. – Take me back to my room.

The girl wrapped her in linen and led her back to the Elder's house. Veita needed the girl's body, her strong arms.

For a while she thought that she might want a body lying close to herself and pressing against her skin, but soon gave up the idea. She knew from experience that it did not help, and she didn't have the strength any more. Every moment of rest was needed.

Veita fell into bed, stroked her clean skin with her hands and slept undreaming.

Something was wrong.

Her skin was not renewing itself.

Veita drew the image on her body with her fingers, but the ornaments did not return. The magic circle was not reproduced. That was unheard of. The images always returned. They came like a disease, they blossomed from inside like boils, never leaving her alone, though she sometimes wished to be free.

Should she be alarmed? Be sorry that the chain had broken for once?

She stroked her arms. The images were missing, and the sense of touch remained. She saw her hand and remembered what the touch of fingers on the veins of her wrist felt like. She touched the veins and felt it. The touch was like the memory, similar, but stronger.

One had to wait.

She swathed all her skin so that only her face showed. Only then did she dare to go out.

The villagers had returned to their everyday chores, just one lonely table left by the brook as a reminder of the night. Veita stretched her legs briefly in the courtyard and then decided to leave as soon as possible. The village would feed and take care of her as long as she wished, but

this place had nothing special to offer. There were other villages, and perhaps in one of them she'd feel peaceful and would like to stay on.

She went to see Gentamon, to say good-bye, since that was the custom. The Elder was quiet, but he still kept up the hope that Veita would approve of somebody.

– Anyone from our village? Gentamon asked.

– None, Veita answered.

Gentamon nodded, though he was obviously disappointed. Veita knew what the man was thinking: Veita was already old, it was high time to take an apprentice and transfer the tradition before it was too late. The apprentice would bring prosperity to the village, for the Guild of Skinners would pay lavishly for a new first-skin. Everybody would profit by the deal, the skinner, the family who sold the child, and the village as well.

But Veita was not going to give that pleasure to Gentamon's village. They were not worthy of it.

– Is everything all right? Is the skin safe? Have the Words of Release been spoken?

– Yes, Gentamon answered.

Veita didn't have the nerve to ask further, nor to find out why the magic had not renewed. Perhaps she was getting old after all and needed an apprentice. Veita did not know what they would do with the skin in the village: often it was ground and ingested during ceremonies, so that the eldest would get their share of the magic and the knowledge. Some villages saved the skins, collected them year after year, and let only the leader use them, read or stroke them; whatever, it did not matter to Veita.

She said a silent good-bye to the village. She was hardly

going to return here, time was running short. Each step further away from the village brought more sense impressions with it. Cloth chafed her skin. Both her back and stomach felt sweaty. Only her face, palms and soles were as before, hardened and numb.

She got as far as into the forest around the village when somebody approached her, running. It was the young man with the mole on his chin. Veita did not stop, but the youngster reached her effortlessly and matched his steps to Veita's pace.

– Take me with you, the young man said.

– Why?

Veita did not crave the youngster's arms, even though the nights could sometimes be long and lonely.

– I'll help you.

Veita shook her head and kept looking at the horizon. There, days ahead, was the next village.

– I would do anything.

Veita glanced at him. – Would you be willing to pay the price required?

– I want to be a skinner. I am suitable for it.

– To live a life like this. To wander around, a vagrant, serving others.

– I have abilities.

– Not enough.

– I'll come anyway. I cannot go back, the young man said and forced Veita to stop. He took a pack from his back and out of it a folded package.

It was Veita's old skin.

The young man presented it proudly, turned it from side to side, stroked the figures on the skin. Veita's whole

body vibrated, she felt the touch even though the skin had been removed. The Words of Release had not been spoken; the skin's new owner had to say them before three days had passed. All trust was based on that, the custom was not to be broken, for few would wish to anger the Guild of Skinners.

– Why have you taken the skin? Veita asked, voice trembling. – You have taken their knowledge. How will they now keep the ordering of their days?

– They don't deserve this. Stupid fools.

The youngster licked his lips. Veita saw the determination and greed in his look. He wanted more than life was currently giving him. He would not be satisfied with the monotonous life of the village and a marriage dictated by his parents.

– And you deserve it yourself, is that it?

– The eldest keep all the knowledge to themselves. They drink the knowledge off the skin, they don't give any to the others, though it could be shared by everyone.

– They must have their reasons.

– I want more.

– You must return it, Veita ordered.

Veita suspected that she'd be accused of stealing the skin in the village. Strangers were always accused, whether they had been welcome or not. The word would not spread immediately, but it would go around, and rumour would whisper that she had betrayed her oath. Somewhere, she'd be raised upon the wall, skinned up to the first-skin and left there to dry and be picked by ravens.

– Who controls the skin, controls the knowledge, said the youngster. – Now I control you.

Veita chuckled, but her smile froze when the young man took his knife and slashed a small cut into the skin he was holding.

It wrenched as if a piece of herself had been cut, and when she looked at her side, she saw blood flowing. The spells had not been said, the circle of renewal was interrupted. The new skin had not come into its powers and the old one was still connected to her. The old one contained her strength and her memory, the new one was still fumbling around, wondering what should take form on its surface.

– You will teach me everything, said the young man.

– I'm not willing to do that.

– But you will.

The young man came close, wrapped his arms around Veita, touched her breasts with clumsy hands. – But first I want you.

Veita could do nothing else. The young man wanted her immediately, there by the road, he pushed himself upon Veita and hardly got her clothes aside when he was already penetrating her with a young man's eagerness. Still, he caressed Veita's hair and breasts and groped for her lips with his own. Perhaps he imagined that was love, perhaps he had a different idea of tenderness.

Out of amazement, Veita did not resist, since her body concentrated on sensing things she had thought long forgotten. The grains of sand under her back. Another person's skin rubbing against her own. A hard touch of hand, a tug by the hairline. A man's sex inside her.

– Let's go now, the youngster said after getting off her.

– Take me somewhere where the skin will be useful.

They walked a few days towards the hills and camped in an old shepherds' cabin, in a sheltered place. The young man – his name was Kaimo – left Veita alone while he went to fetch things that Veita needed: ink, bone needles, fabric for bandages and herbs. Veita did not run off, for Kaimo kept the skin with him; he told her he'd put his own curses on it, too.

Since the young man asked for it, Veita started to tattoo his skin with ink. She ground the proper ingredients and added ink and spit. She rubbed the powder into a paste, stuck it on the tip of the bone needle and started forming the whorls, point by point.

The man followed Veita's motions jealously. He wanted to know everything there was to know about the world of skinners. Veita drew a figure, repeated its name, named all its various meanings, and the man iterated a similar figure on her skin's surface, where only faint shades of the old lines were visible. Without the Rite of Release on the old skin, her new skin would not start to harden. Each figure Kaimo drew on her hurt as much as during the first skinning, but Veita endured the needle strikes, and amidst her tears of pain she cried with joy.

So, by and by they began to ornament each other with stories. Veita started the tattooing of stories from the first story, of the time when magic had descended from the machines into the people and knowledge had for the first time been transferred into skins.

Kaimo's skin work, however, was not as skilled as the stories the village women had patterned, the continuation of the living and the dead and the events which Veita had carried with her. Kaimo's handwriting was faltering,

the story lines broken, the continuous chain of the past missing. Veita tried to steer him to work in a more composed manner, but he became angry.

– Why should the stories be copied the way they’ve always gone around? Kaimo asked, and drew his own lines and curves. Thus, extra deeds of valour, fictive tyrants, treasures, monsters and strange beings that never existed were stored on the skin.

Veita decided not to care, for each day without stories woven on her skin brought her own past closer. It was as if forgotten stories were found in the corners of her memory, stories which she had chained within the folds of the people’s stories, because she hadn’t dared to care for them. She was fascinated by the sensations of her own body. She would stand in the rain and let water caress her skin. She tickled her calves with a blade of grass, scrubbed her back with a cloth and enjoyed it all. For once, she could feel. Her skin had not forgotten everything she had experienced during her life, either. She sensed the touches of her childhood, her mother’s rough hand on her hair, her father’s sinewy arms holding her aloft, her brother’s fists striking her stomach, a dog’s soft and wet muzzle by her knees, a feather’s tickle on her chin. She saw her mother’s tearful eyes and felt her father’s encouraging touch on her shoulder when the guild master came to take her away from home.

The young man kept marking himself in a frenzy, partly copying the figures of Veita’s old skin and at the same time inventing new ones. The more his body swarmed with figures, the stronger the magic on the skin became.

– I can feel my strength, the man said, and once he had noticed the connection between figures and the feeling of

power, he no longer wanted to tattoo Veita's skin, he even forbade Veita to do it herself. Thus, the figures grew only upon his body. Veita's body remained clean.

During the weeks they spent in the cabin, there was not a day when Veita didn't think of her old skin. Kaimo refused to let it out of his sight. He kept it close by, stashed in a bag, even while he washed himself. Veita was patient. The man became constantly more arrogant and demanding. By day, Veita served him by cooking, tattooing and teaching, and by giving herself whenever he wished. At first he was pleased with Veita's charms, but as his magic powers grew he started to get interested in other women. Sometimes he went to a nearby village and slept with willing maidens there. Just showing off his tattoos got him whatever he wanted.

Kaimo also grew increasingly suspicious. By night he wanted to sleep alone, and he chained Veita's hands and legs, so she wouldn't be able to attack him and steal the skin. Veita lay awake outside the cabin, shivering of cold and listening to him puff and mutter in his sleep.

Finally the man was tattooed full of figures, only his face, palms, soles and genitals were clean.

– I want to go and enjoy the hospitality of the villages, he stated.

– They'll notice that you are a charlatan.

– How would they? My skin is tattooed full of figures. You will teach me how to shed a skin and to renew the magic.

Kaimo squeezed Veita's arm so hard she yelped with pain. Veita seethed with bitterness. Had she been able, she'd have taken a knife and thrust it between the young

man's ribs. He did not deserve the respect the skinners received, he had done nothing without self-interest, but only to benefit himself. But what could Veita do? Kaimo had her skin, and with it, her power.

Kaimo chose his first village himself. Veita walked a step behind and followed, saw how the man basked in the admiration of the villagers. He demanded food and drink, clean clothes, musicians, poets and entertainers to keep him company. All the time he kept Veita close to himself, to check and talk and mediate so that nobody would notice Kaimo was a first-timer. But nobody asked anything, nobody wondered or even thought that Veita herself might once have been a skinner.

– We've had no one here for ages, the village elder said, excited. – Not for five years at least.

– I have come, and I'll take care of everything, Kaimo boasted.

When they had arrived at the village, Veita had noticed a mark carved into the fence gate, as if an animal had gouged three parallel scratches there with its nails. It was a warning by another skinner to others who wished to enter this village: there were murderers living in the village, and it was not a safe place for anyone to stay. No wonder the village hadn't heard the stories carried on the road for ages.

After the celebration and gluttony, Kaimo started his work eagerly. Veita had to follow it closely, advise and guide at suitable moments. Nobody in the village questioned it. Veita felt like screaming: this was not how the work was done, a master and an apprentice did not walk together like this, but her scream choked in her throat. Just one

sharp expression from Kaimo, and she fell silent. If Veita exposed Kaimo as a charlatan, they both would suffer. As long as the man had the skin, he owned her.

But hadn't she always been owned? Hadn't the skin dictated the rhythm of her life? During the months when its figures had become darker and darker and there'd been no village close enough, she had finally been forced to scrape herself with a hard brush. It had not given her any ease, consolation at most, and still she'd scrubbed herself like a sick dog scratching at its hide.

Kaimo asked the villagers to clean his skin. The skin would not break, no matter what, and not until it was slashed with glass did the blood flow. The villagers saved all the blood and took it away as a part of their own preparations. Veita couldn't help feeling apprehensive. Didn't the villagers look at them too greedily? There had been rumours on the road and in the villages that here and there skinners were mistreated or even vanished, for some people had the idea that the skin was more valuable to a village than on a wandering tramp. There was good reason to trust the warning on the village gate.

Kaimo spent his night in the hut of the unmarried village girls, Veita curled up outside the door. Kaimo's cries of consummation kept her awake; the ground was cold and hard, stones chafing under her back. Finally Veita didn't even want to sleep, she had become so obsessed with the possible risk. Every rustle was a sign of danger, every approaching person threatened her life.

The morning came, bleak and rainy. This village did not organize any special festivities, the ceremony took place under the watching eye of the village elder, and the eldest

women tattooed the skin together. The act was quick, and Kaimo moved into the tub for the skin change. His first tattooed skin shed itself with an ease that made Veita cry: her own creation had always been saturated with pain. Kaimo arose from the grey water full of power.

All the time Veita just stood by without making a gesture. The traces of the familiar tattoos were already dimly visible on the man's arms: the new ones would show in stronger colours at first, but would soon fade to the same hue as the older ones.

Kaimo wanted to enjoy the fruits of his labour, and from the villagers he demanded food, beer, company, services – he was their hero now, the provider of stories. He intended to stay in the village for a long while.

Veita had a hard discussion with her conscience, and finally she tried to warn Kaimo. – Evil dwells in this village, she said. – I do not trust them, we should leave while we still can.

– You are just trying to thwart me, Kaimo said.

– No, I don't. I'm afraid for my own life, too.

– Old wives' nonsense, he said and chased her away.

Kaimo drank so much his speech began to falter. Veita fought against her fear, politely ate all the food that was offered her, but didn't touch the home-brew. Kaimo got busy with his sexual exploits, and Veita followed him; the villagers kept staring at them.

Finally, Kaimo passed out between two girls on a soft bed, and Veita's chance had come. She ransacked his belongings, and at last, held her own skin in her hands, stroked its surface and felt her own fingers on her back. Under her hand ran the news of the old king's death, of the

people's uprising, of the gods that came from beyond the stars, and of the golden era that ended in chaos.

She looked at the bed, there was Kaimo sleeping in the embrace of soft arms, waiting for his new skin to harden and for his destiny, perhaps for his death.

Veita lifted a knife in her hand: one precise cut, and he would be a corpse, Veita free again to continue her task. She straightened her back and put the knife down. Let it be. Let Kaimo harden his skin, spread his stories and invent new ones. If nobody noticed the deceit, people would just have to live with untrue stories. A skinner's lot was not easy; in time Kaimo would come to long for something else but never get it. There would be no family nor place for him, for the skin's magic would not allow that. Kaimo would have to go on shedding his skin until he was ready to give up his position. Unless he died before that.

She carried the skin out with her and crept past the guards, out of the village.

When Veita had gone far enough, she made a fire and pronounced the Words of Release. Word by word, she unravelled the magic bound into the skin, broke the connection between herself and the tattooed stories. The skin lost its elasticity, the figures blackened. Finally, she threw her old skin into the fire. It caught fire at once, and simultaneously, the flames licked her body. The pain exploded as an echo, as a feeling. The pain was. Veita was the pain. The agony was too much to bear. Mercifully, she lost consciousness.

But not her life.

Veita came to herself on the ground by the extinguished

campfire. The pain was gone, her first-skin was untouched: she checked her body, stroked her limbs, her breasts, her stomach. Feeling. That was left. Her fingertips felt her body, and her body felt her fingertips.

Gone was the magic, the memories: the knowledge gathered by the villages, the history from time immemorial. Not a single curl, not a brush of ink. Her skin was soft and pliable, the skin of youth, like it had been decades ago.

Let the memories be lost. Veita was not going to care anymore, not cry over it if the stories were changed and distorted, the memories of the villages fled away, lost and gone. She had done her part, carried the burden for her time. Now others should take their turn to remember.

THE MASTERSMITH

"Work, and if you have no opportunity or no ability, make yourself useful", the radio declared on the windowsill. Valfrid Mastersmith woke up with a start in his chair. Brass slivers from the table were stuck in his beard and his hand had gone numb under his head. It was six o'clock: he'd slept at his work all through the night, once again.

"Work well done is its own reward. Work is the basis of our State's welfare. No citizen needs to lack for daily work. It's time to wake up and start today's work with good cheer."

Though Valfrid was old and bent, his limbs cried for something useful to do. First he had to eat something, however. He put kindling into the kitchen range, lighted the fire and boiled a kettleful of water on the stove. The tin on the shelf contained crusts. Master-workers had a well-functioning rations service: once a month Joel, the carter, brought dried meat, bread, sugar and tea, sometimes buns or any other delicacies that Hilda, the village cook, had chanced to make.

He took his tea in slow sips, gnawed at the piece of

bread and looked around at his room. The log cabin was ascetic: there was only a small, unmade bed, the workbench and a couple of chairs. A bucket for refuse stood inside the porch: though there was an outhouse in the yard, there were days when he simply didn't have the time to go that far. One corner of the room had a bread oven that Valfrid hadn't used for months now. There were grooves in the floor planks, worn by his chair, drawn towards the table and back again countless times.

The thin curtain dimmed the room to provide suitable illumination for his work. There was a tiny hole in the fabric through which a bright point of light pushed its way into the room. It fell directly on the workbench. Valfrid stood up and reset the curtain to hide the hole within a fold. His eyes would be dazzled by too much light.

He rubbed his brow and settled his eyeglasses better. He could spend long hours by the table in the same position, and his limbs tended to ache, especially if he was doing several tasks at the same time. His muscles and joints were not as quick to recover as in his youth.

"You're listening to Waves of Diligence, the people's radio station. During the next half-hour we shall take a tour to visit some people at their work and talk about our people's community of fate, of the scientific and work-ethical needs that we all have."

On the shelf was displayed a dusty row of medals and prizes: the merit-wheel of the Instrument Makers, the golden badge of the Theoretical Physicists, the Vigour statue of the Efficiency Society; all of them relics from a time when skilfulness had been highly valued. Nowadays there were real Masters left in only a few villages, and the

few experts received requests even from far-away places. The local government was an insatiable employer, and he had as many orders as he could possibly accept.

Valfrid's workbench was full of tiny parts, cogs, slivers of metal and tools for precision mechanics: files, pliers, tweezers, pins for particle transfer and drill pits. A black power cord wound its way over the planks towards the wall socket. Amidst the chaos shone a bronze-hued apparatus the size of two closed fists. The wheels, axles and chains of beryllium and bronze made it a complex work of art whose parts fitted exactly together. Valfrid had now spent a week in making it, and it still wasn't quite ready.

"Every working community needs constructive individuals."

Valfrid shrugged. The work was waiting. His hands didn't shake when he joined the main mechanism into the casing of the clockwork motor mainspring and snapped the joint shut. Everything was in order as far as that was concerned, and he could now solder the spring casing fast. Many would have used an ordinary jet turbine cell or a fusion battery as the power source, but an electric motor was out of the question in this case. This device had to function in spite of a sniffer field of the technological golden age, an adversary that that couldn't be misled even by a Faraday cage.

"In our programme People At Work we are presently visiting the northern parts of our country, the village of Vilisjao, the home of energetic and diligent people indeed. And what kind of tasks are you carrying out here?"

Now the radio reporter was interviewing a man whose voice squeaked like an old barn door.

“ – It’s them chip baskets, that’s what, the whole village is famous for these baskets of ours, see. The youngest here, they help us what they can.

– But that’s not all you can do, is it? I am now standing by a chirpy little girl. And what is your father making, my girl?

– Father’s winding floater coils in the smithy.

– And where will those be sent?

– To the Floater City.

– Indeed, the Vilisjao village has long traditions in the field of antigravity technology; they actually have three master-degree workers living here. – But now we have to interrupt our regular programming briefly for an official announcement.”

Valfrid sighed deeply and set down the soldering iron in his hand.

“Citizens! We are answering the anxious inquiries of relatives. Rumours have been spread among the people of an accident involving numerous fatalities in the Sammatin Valley mines. Our Security Police wishes to emphasize that no accident has taken place. The communication with Sammatin Valley has been disrupted by particle storms caused by abundant sunspots. Because of numerous inquiries, a briefing has been organized for those relatives who are still worried about the well-being of their family members. We regret that at this stage we can only invite those who have no pressing work to do. Such family members who are talented and specially Named for their skills should continue with their work. The State Official Information Bureau will be answering all questions after this.”

The news ended with the familiar jerky signature tune.

“Attention, skilled workers! The weekly measurement break of the synchronizer pulse is about to commence. Please place yourself in a location with an unobstructed connection

to the transmission. Remember that this is a privilege; a high work ethic is to your own advantage."

Valfrid stood up and stepped to the doorway, where he stood with his feet slightly apart. When he opened the door, the landscape overwhelmed him: the heat struck his face, bees were humming in the lilacs, the birds in the trees were crying in the ecstasy of procreation. A few clouds lay dark and still on the horizon. A lonely low wisp of a cloud was sailing away. There might be rain, but never mind. Rain would not hinder his work. Though Valfrid closed his eyes, he could sense the brightness of the light through his eyelids. There was still a lot of work to do, and he had a feeling that he might have to hurry.

Valfrid yawned and shifted his weight to the other foot; his thoughts strayed back to the task at hand. Would information be transmitted fast enough from the tendril coils back to the intermediating rod set, he wondered. It should, according to his calculations, and maybe he was worrying in vain. But he had been working so long that he might have become dulled by sheer routine, causing miscalculations.

"Thank you, citizens", the voice on the radio said. The programme continued as always with a discussion of work ethic, and Valfrid hurried back to his machine. His hands hovered above the parts, his eyes picking up details that still demanded attention. His fingers wound around the tools and danced within the machinery at an accuracy of micrometres. All the time his brain kept composing the score of the total unit, several work stages ahead of his hands.

But there was an interruption again, as the wall

telephone rang noisily. Valfrid picked up the receiver and the microphone, annoyed at the disturbance.

– Mastersmith Valfrid, the operator said. – Logistician Uffick Punctual is calling you. Do you accept the call?

– Yes.

A moment of clicking on the lines.

– Well. Good evening. I just wish to make sure that the exotic particles that we sent have arrived.

– Yes, they have.

– Excellent. If you don't mind, I'd also like to ask when the dilatation field module might be ready for testing? Johan Electro-mechanist from the Progress Institute in Charm Ridge is eagerly waiting for it...

– It's going to take a while yet.

– Well, never mind. We've always had reason to trust the quality of your work. By the way, did you like the goose-liver paté?

– It was quite good.

– As it should be, being prepared by Sigurd Masterchef himself. We'll return to this business later. Good-bye, Valfrid Mastersmith.

The caller rang off. Valfrid put the receiver back and shrugged. The meal had probably been tasty, Sigurd Masterchef had hardly been named Master for nothing. Valfrid had given the food to his neighbour, Karel Dimwit, who had a family of several children to support. The field module bothered Valfrid a bit; at some stage he'd have to finish it, or they would send an inspector to visit him. Not that any inspector would have an idea of the stage Valfrid's work was at; they'd hardly be able to tell pincers from tweezers.

“Towards evening we may expect partly cloudy weather with thin high clouds in the centre of the country. There is a chance of thunder showers throughout the land. Curfew is in force in the areas where lightning or thunder are observed.”

The day passed quickly, and before he noticed, it was time to go to sleep. Valfrid couldn't bear to stop, he had to use all the time he could. Two minutes before the clock struck ten he moved his tools into the middle of the workbench. At the first stroke of the clock he laid his hands on the bare wooden surface and rested his head on them. He ought to have gone to the privy, but it was too late now.

By the tenth stroke he was fast asleep.

He wasn't supposed to have any dreams, but he did, anyway. He was walking in the clear August night; the mist rising up from the folds of the ground was milky soft, winding alongside the low hillocks and wrapping them in consolation. In his dream he was light as a feather and rose above the meadow, soaring over the roofs so high that he saw the whole village and all the people at their work, and everything was so tranquil, so peaceful that you could have heard the chink of a cog falling down. Even the parade of the soldiers marching on the road could not break the calmness: their boots trampled the earth in step, but there was no sound. The people's voices could be heard, however, voices of the villagers who had all kinds of worries and troubles. They were holding out their hands and offering their shoes and clothes to be mended, whispering to Valfrid that he ought to help.

“We take joy in our work and accept with patience whatever trials it brings.”

Valfrid's head jerked erect at precisely six o'clock. The weather outside was clear, he knew, because the light leaking through the window curtains had grown even brighter and the heat was downright oppressive. Sweat was beading on Valfrid's skin, but he drank a cup of tea, chewed a piece of bread and attacked the apparatus.

"A person's value is in the skill of his handiwork. We can all practice the skill of our hands from an early age on. Today we shall learn how the youngest in the family pass their days and go for a school tour with school superintendent Arvid Academic. Mr. Academic, what does your work consist of?

— I have to be acquainted with the daily work of teaching and education; that is, I monitor the daily life of the children and what kind of things they are taught. These little ones are absolute jewels, so eager to learn and try everything new..."

Valfrid had bought a large consignment of jewel-bearings from jewelsmith Aulis Dexterous. The production of bearing stones was its own specialty, and Valfrid hadn't had the time to master it. Aulis had cut up the artificial corundum pears of aluminium oxide with a multi-edged diamond saw. Then the bearing holes had been bored with a high-speed copper pivot and diamond powder, and the gem-cubes had been set on a metal wire and ground smooth and round. Ball-bearings produced by Aulis were round and perfect.

"This workshop is reserved for the professional class. This is where the select ones work, those who have discerning eyes and trained hands. The noise is quite something. Here, next to me, little Siri is engraving the delicate ornaments of a musical instrument. At eleven years, she is already the young talent of the region and has won several prizes in the Youth Society.

There are many who wish to name her. At least the guilds of the Embroiderers and the Specialty Carpenters are interested in Siri's training."

The machine needed hundreds of stones to make the ball-bearings function properly. He pressed the ruby-red gems fast to the gem-sets and screwed them into the dents in the brass clockwork body of the device. Valfrid hummed softly; it was a pleasure when the last pieces started to click into their places within the whole.

"During the next five minutes we'll have the Workers' Band The Shovelmen performing..."

The metal rock tunes filled the room. It was a gloomy and appealing song about a vagabond who returned after a long journey and found his home burnt to cinders. But thanks to the energy and voluntary work of the villagers, the house rose up to new prosperity. Valfrid's head nodded to the rhythm; the tune had been quite popular fifty years ago. He'd danced to it at the village harvest festival. What a pity that those dances were so rare these days.

The broadcast was interrupted in the middle of the song. The sudden silence in the room hurt Valfrid's ears, for he was used to the pulse of speech and music as the background to his work. Maybe the forecast thunderstorm was on its way, it felt so oppressive. Even the room had become darker. Perhaps there was a temporary disruption in the transmission, some tree fallen on the lines and the technicians busy repairing the cables.

Valfrid noticed that he was hungry, so he clambered to the cupboard and dug up the bread behind the tins. It shone bluish, mouldy all over. The pretzels and the pickles were just as far gone. On the back shelf he found a tin

of canned meat, worked it open with a pocket knife and spooned it up.

The parts of the requested module glimmered in the corner, waiting for the Master to work on them. However, Valfrid took up his machine again. There was a lot left to do before the evening, and anyway, it was not wise to hurry with work ordered by the government. They were used to a certain pace of work. If he finished the order too early, they would expect the next one as quickly, too, and soon he would have time for nothing but dilatation modules and antigrav gyroscopes. Nowadays they didn't remember how fast and skilful he really was, and better leave it that way.

The balance spiral of the synchronization mechanism with its anchor was meshed with cycloid gear wheels together with the power transfer and the synchron-rods of the central unit. His hands were steady as pliers, and his eyes focused on the tiniest parts. Now and then he glanced at the radio that was gaping mute. The silence was oppressive; the tick-tock of the wall clock felt multiplied compared to earlier. Perhaps Valfrid was a little too used to the solid atmosphere of his workroom, the sanctity and imperviousness that nothing was allowed to breach.

Valfrid polished the needle and stirrup of automaton steel in the read-write head of the memory drum with a stasis file, until it was completely smooth to the last atom. After the application of light pressure, the surfaces were permanently cold-welded together.

The radio channel came alive with a squeak. There was a whirring, then breaks and white noise, and in the background vague sounds of whispering, as if somebody hesitated to speak aloud. Finally the broadcast settled

and the sound stabilized. But instead of the afternoon entertainment programme, a breathless young man was wheezing on the lines.

"Attention everyone ... We... we have captured the national radio channel. This is the first free broadcast... I repeat, this is the first free broadcast."

For a while, the young man's voice trailed off and subdued talking could be heard from the background, but Valfrid could not make out the words.

Then the young man continued.

"Oh dear dark head, bowed low in death's black sorrow / let not thy heart be trammelled in despair.

Lift, lift your eyes on to the radiant morrow / and wait the light that surely shall break there."

Valfrid passed his hand over his sweaty temple and took a gulp of water from the ladle. The requested field module among the waiting orders would never be finished, and the machine he was now making would be the last in its series.

"They called me Evert Quarrel-maker, but now I am Evert Magnusson. I am here to expose the atrocities of the government. This radio channel, like all the other media maintained by our government, has served as a tool of tyranny. You need no longer fear the radio, but beware of people loyal to the State. Those murderers still have most of the power in our society, and they are prepared to commit genocide to secure their position..."

The wall clock with ornamental carvings was made by Aaron Skilful. Valfrid had learned much of his own professional skills from Aaron before the man was taken. It was now five or ten years since that day, or was it closer to thirty? Valfrid couldn't tell any more, time was so relative,

the days had become a smooth, continuous ribbon. Aaron had been blessed with a dexterity and understanding similar to Valfrid's. They had always understood each other! Aaron had taken with him his secrets and the names of his contacts; he had not been broken by the interrogations, since no one had come to Valfrid's door to ask questions. And even if they had suspected Valfrid, perhaps he was considered too competent and necessary to do anything about it.

"We have at last managed to capture this station for ourselves... and other government-owned establishments have also been attacked. We have witnessed atrocities, those of us who have survived the prison camps. We have exposed mass graves... we saw how the lives of over two hundred citizens were crushed in a demonstration, how their heads exploded when the Security Police..."

Valfrid flinched. Could he have scaled the power transmission of the feedback gear train better? Now it was too late to reopen the structure and check. He stopped and closed his eyes. Mathematical formulas danced in his mind: all the calculations were correct.

"The government of our country is guilty of atrocities. People who have been judged useless have been sent to the mines, into pitiable circumstances; many have died of hunger and disease because they have been considered worthless. Mass graves of tens of thousands of people, secret executions without trial... Join us, shake off the apathy to which you have yielded. We know that you think like us, that you all share this same hope, but also the fear, the fear of death that has made us obey the ruling powers. We have to fight back with all available means. Accusations and arbitrary executions have to end.

The exploitation of the people has to end. We do not want to be divided into those who work and those who are deemed capable of only trivial chores."

Valfrid swept unnecessary tools off the workbench onto the floor and leaned on his elbows. The machine's mechanic logic circuit consisted of a drum with its tiny rows of rods, which programmed the algorithm for the functioning of the whole machine. Whenever the drum rotated to the next row of rods, the shafts in the reader transmitted the information to the central unit, which functioned according to the command. Valfrid swung the drum to the start position.

"Now is the time to abandon pointless work, to return to the time when people were valued for their human dignity, not for their work effort. We no longer need the government Synchronizer! Our children deserve a life without forced labour! The transmissions of this radio have commanded the control crystals we all bear inside our heads. Those crystals are still active, and therefore we ask you to continue to shield yourselves from all officially prohibited electric devices. The crystal can interpret strong electric sources close to it as an attempt to remove the crystal, and you know what happens then."

Valfrid brushed the top of his head, but his hand quickly returned to the work. The apparatus would soon be finished. Once more he pictured the machine's functioning in his mind, counted each spring, cog, connection and transmission. Then a drop of Möbius oil into the bearings and petroleum jelly into the winding assembly.

"There are rumours that aluminium foil around the head can somehow block the pulse. That is a rumour, I repeat, that

is only a rumour, it doesn't protect you in any way – a moment, there are Special Troops outside in the yard –“

Valfrid admired his handiwork. The apparatus was carefully made, each detail thoroughly considered. To look at, it was just an angular metal object, a little like a clockwork box, but underneath the ornamental engravings there were countless interrelated cogs, overlapping transmission rods and microscopically sized mechanics. The whole complex construction had been assembled merely on the basis of a design in his head. The device had never been tested, for he trusted the calculations he'd developed.

Now a woman continued on the radio. She spoke more slowly, stressing each word carefully as if she'd just learned to talk. *“Citizen Evart has perished. . . he misjudged the power of the carrier ray. We acknowledge his sacrifice and continue in the direction he showed us. I was called Ada Useless, but now I am Ada Lisedaughter. Be careful, friends. Stay inside, do not go out, so that nobody on the government side can use the control pulse on you, it is set to kill. Only together can we be strong.”*

The device would have to be tested.

The contraption had straps to fix it securely on his head. The straps were adjustable so that the middle of the device stayed on the hollow underneath the base of his skull. With his other hand, Valfrid wound the clockwork spring and pressed the switch down. After this was done, the machine would function automatically in accordance with its programming.

Valfrid knew every single phase and saw in his mind how the machine functioned.

First, the mechanic processor performed a self-check.

The machine was ticking on its own and moving its transmission shafts, setting flags on to the memory rods and rotating gears until all the check-flags of all the different parts had come up and been approved.

The machine's tools were five filament tendrils. Each tip had a microscopic rotating drill point inside which there was a bit of monomolecular monofilament that was extremely durable and could cut anything. Getting the monofilament had been the hardest task, but luckily Valfrid knew Nestor in Special Materials, who had understood the importance of the matter and agreed to help.

The tendrils bored their way into the base of Valfrid's skull. He felt only a little nip, like a prick of a needle. It wasn't an unpleasant touch, rather like having your skin tickled by a feather. The tendrils started to seek their way towards the upper spinal cord: the machine's detection part had been programmed to search for an alien element within the brain. A mechanic hammer touched a tensed ultrasound string and made it vibrate. Around the echo chamber there were microscopic stethoscopes inferring from the echoes when the tendrils approached a foreign target.

The tendrils followed the instruction of the echoes and each turned towards their precise coordinates. They continually transmitted their precise location and the length of the filament to the mechanic processor within the core of the machine; it moved the microscopic shafts faster than any eye could see, and carefully marked the tendril readings into the memory rods with tiny bronze flags. When the messages from all the tendrils had been accepted, the central unit let the programme drum rotate and read the

last command in the main programme. A small hammer struck a piezo crystal, and an electric potential was created in the tendril tips. The monofilaments on the tips were released, and they bored without resistance through the shell of the control crystal and cut off each lead in precisely the correct order, before the target had time to react or even consider any countermeasures.

A metallic clink sounded from the machine as the programme drum rotated back to its starting position and the return-gears of the tendrils connected back to the power transmission, reeled the filaments back to their pivots and the monofilaments within the cover of the tips. The spring used the last of its energy to heat up the resistors in the reel, so that the tendrils would be sterile for the next user.

Valfrid took off the straps and lifted the machine onto the workbench. On top of the box there was a little quartz window with skilfully engraved windowpanes. A white note had turned up under the glass; in tiny engraved letters it said "*Freedom has come*".

He rewound the spring and lifted the apparatus carefully into its copper casket, then closed the lid and the bolt.

"The struggle has only started, we have a long way ahead of us. For too many years our work efforts have been exploited unscrupulously. For too many years we have toiled for the leaders of our government, done the dirty work so that they've been able to enjoy the fruits the people have grown with their sweat and blood. We have to declare the truth to everybody. We have to make it clear to the inhabitants of the Floater Cities how the ordinary people have been exploited, the ones who have actually done everything that it's been their privilege to

enjoy. But first we have to get rid of the shackles of tyranny. We have the means to help everyone."

Valfrid moved the workbench and the frayed rug covering the floor. A trapdoor was revealed; he opened it with a tug. The fusty air and darkness surged against his face. The steps creaked under the weight of his feet. He knew the way without looking, had measured each step, knew the dimensions of the space to the millimetre. Here he had sat, a small boy, when they came to take Father away. Mother had shut him there, among the potatoes, and sworn him to absolute silence. The trapdoor had been closed, the heavy workbench drawn back to cover it. If they had taken Mother, too, Valfrid would never have gotten out on his own. When Mother had held him again in her arms, she had said through her tears: – Valfrid, the government has chosen you to be educated. But never forget this day, nor your father's work, all that he sacrificed for us.

And Valfrid had remembered his father's fate through all the long years, when he'd been planning and constructing whatever had been requested of him without protests or questions. Because of his special abilities, Valfrid had been let off easily, he'd never been forcibly drafted, never been forced to monitor his family or inform on his neighbours. But it had been equally hard just to watch from the sidelines how time flew past and he was left to drift behind. He remembered the spirited Hulda, the laughter and noise of little children that had filled every corner of the cottage for a while. Valfrid had been left alone, the others had passed from the land of the living ages ago. He had nothing left but the promise to his mother, and at the bottom of a drawer a wedding photo of two figures faded almost to

non-existence.

His eyes got used to the darkness, the light streaming from above gleamed off the objects waiting at the far end of the cellar. Four thousand three hundred fifty-one caskets. In his hand he held the fifty-second. He had also carefully prepared the caskets in which the devices were packed. Each one was hand-beaten from copper, with a complex ornamental figure etched on the side. Those were just decorations, but it had been a captivating challenge to make them, and Valfrid was incapable of doing a careless job.

Those devices were the Master's last will and testament, each one with small differences that made it unique. Like a good clock, they would endure from one generation to the next with a little maintenance until they would no longer be needed. Valfrid's father had drafted the first plans of the device; many other members of the network had offered valuable knowledge and provided parts and materials that Valfrid had not been able to make himself or to confiscate from the raw materials of his job orders.

He set his last device among the others, turned his back and dragged himself back up the stairs. He sat down by the workbench and continued to drink his already cooling tea.

He lifted the cup to his lips and waited.

And waited.

It came faster than he had thought.

His ears became blocked with a bang. His hand started shaking and tea spilt over the tools. He set the cup quickly on the bench. He spread his right hand and looked at the now shaking fingers, then tried to visualize the work he had performed. The skilfully planned mechanisms, whose parts

had danced together so enchantingly and logically, now felt like an incomprehensible mess. Even his eyes didn't obey him: he could no longer distinguish the separate wing beats of the fly fluttering about on the wall, nor count the warps in the curtain cloth.

"We all have to make sacrifices before we are free. We are the revolution."

Not a sound escaped from Valfrid, but he was crying.

The skill no longer existed such as he had learnt to know it. A total of one hundred and sixty years he had been a Master and irreplaceable in his work, making machines with a professional skill and love – the crystal had not allowed him to let any half-done or defective work leave his hands.

Now he was old and unfit for anything useful. If only the result were worth it.

He staggered to the back wall. He pulled the receiver out, struggled to remember the numbers of the direct line and turned them on the number plate. The line rang a long while, until finally somebody picked up the telephone but didn't say a word.

Valfrid breathed one sentence into the microphone:
– They are ready now.

Then he went back to his place to wait for the people who would come to collect the caskets. Hopefully he would have time to see their coming before the fatigue took its toll. He lifted his eyes to the window, then stood up and softly opened the curtains.

OLIVER'S BOOK

Oliver pressed close against the window, careful not to touch the glass. There, behind thick armoured glass, worked the bookshop lady in her high-heeled shoes and tight suit. Dad said she owned the shop herself. She had to be well-off, then. The shop was nicely furnished. There were inviting armchairs and shelves where each object was carefully placed.

Oliver always stopped by to look in the window after school. It was easy to take a detour by the shop, to stare for a while at the lady, busy closing the shop. She always seemed just as busy, even when there was no one else in the shop. Oliver seldom saw anybody; sometimes there was a guard, but usually he, too, spent his time in the inner rooms.

There was one special glass cabinet Oliver liked to look

at. It covered the whole back wall, it had a humidor and it was illuminated with small bluish spotlights.

The cabinet contained real books. Rare unique pieces, each produced in only a few copies. Every one of them was numbered, and the bookshops sold copies signed by the author. Paper books were extremely valuable. Some of them you just about might be able to buy, but most were beyond the reach of an ordinary person. Once, when Oliver was small, he'd asked if Dad could buy them a book, but Dad had just laughed. Even the cheapest book cost a year's pay. And what would you do with it, then? A useless item, when everything you needed was available in digital form, in a version easy to transfer and use. Books – you couldn't even edit them to your own liking.

However, Oliver was fascinated with books. He'd never held one in his hands, but he could imagine what paper would feel like under his fingers and how it would smell if you took a sniff. He had tried to construct himself a book out of plastic strips or big leaves he found outside, but it was hard to get them to last. And they were not the same thing, not by far.

The shopkeeper lady kept the shop open only for a few hours each day. Not that Oliver had ever stepped inside, he had no money to buy anything. The lady sometimes threw parties for important people from the city. Through the window you could see how the guests drank sparkling wine out of tall glasses and had quiet discussions. Of course Oliver couldn't get close, but he peeked in from the other side of the street. The partygoers were opening their mouths and nodding their heads. Oliver could imagine how they were saying "Quite" or "Exactly", at the proper

moment in a cultured voice.

At some stage the gathering moved into the back room, where the lady presented the secrets of the special cabinets. The schoolteacher had said that the lady would take out a book, and then the guests would be allowed to hold it in their hands – with gloves on, of course.

Oliver would have liked to be there. As a fly on the ceiling, if nothing else was possible. The lady noticed Oliver and waved her hand towards him, angrily.

He drew his face away from the glass into the darkness, but stayed there, in the shadows.

Oliver just wanted to have a book of his own. Oh, to hold a book in his hands! At school, nobody understood his dream; to the others books were but eccentric objects from a bygone world. As odd as Oliver himself.

One day, as Oliver came home from school, there was hustle and bustle on his home street. Next to their house there was an old-fashioned ridge-roofed house that had been empty for years; Oliver had often gone around its boundary, looking for a suitable place to break in. He had never found one, however, and the gate, too, was thoroughly sealed shut. Oliver had been forced to stare at the tumbledown house from the window of his room. He'd always been bothered by the thought of who had lived there and what had happened to leave the house so deserted.

– It's owned by some estate, Dad had said. – They don't seem interested in what's happening to the house.

– Who used to live there, then?

– Some solitary old man. We never actually saw him.

An abandoned house would fall into decay. It was most likely not connected to the same technology as the other houses in the area. It hid behind thickets of poplars, lindens and maple trees; willow-herbs covered all the courtyard and black windows stared back at Oliver whenever he glanced in that direction.

Oliver had imagined the old man, basing his ideas on the little that Dad and Mum had said. A wrinkled, grumpy man, who had come out of the house only once a day to check the mailbox, where he'd ordered the delivery as a special service. There seldom was anything in the box, for letter-writing was so old-fashioned. Once in a while, something had been delivered into the box, and the old man had quickly carried it inside.

Then a time came when the old man had not been seen any more, and just when Dad had begun to wonder about his disappearance, the authorities had come and sealed up the house.

Now the gate was finally open. Furniture vans stood in the courtyard and the workers were busy carrying stuff inside. The things themselves looked interesting: wooden chests, cane chairs, tightly sealed cardboard boxes, brightly coloured carpets and heavy wooden furniture.

Oliver rushed into the kitchen.

– Hey, who's moving into the house next door?

Dad's fingers were scrolling the news on a data-flat. He gulped the rest of his refreshment and looked at Oliver.

– Even your mother doesn't know. The house is not on her firm's sales list.

– There's all kinds of old stuff! Antique furniture!

– Yes, some people still collect such things.

– What if there'll be children moving in here?

Oliver wished heartily that there were. No other children lived on their street, it was over a kilometre to the schoolmate who lived closest to him.

– Hardly, Dad said sharply. – Very few people are licenced to have children.

Oliver kept hoping. It would be nice to have somebody to play with, really play. Zatting or gaming with schoolmates wasn't the same thing. Not that many of them even wanted to have anything to do with Oliver. He was neither a math kid nor a sports kid nor a language whiz, he was just Oliver, and he couldn't point to anything as a special field or skill or strength.

His schoolmates were always pressing for it and the teachers smiled in a funny way, but Dad had said he should not mind. It was enough just to be Oliver.

Oliver went to his room, from which he could easily see into the neighbouring backyard that was surrounded by trees. Inside the house, lights and the shadows of the workmen were flashing about. It all seemed very efficient. Both downstairs and upstairs were buzzing with people when the furniture was set in place or put together. The windows were hung with velvety red curtains. The rooms were filled with the shadows of furniture and warm-toned lights.

Finally the moving vans left. Oliver tried to peek, but he saw nobody inside. The house looked like a decorated cream cake, though unfinished. Then a shadow flickered by the window. Oliver thought he saw a pale face, then the velvet curtains were drawn.

The next day after school Oliver went past the bookshop without stopping; instead, he stayed to loiter by the neighbouring house. He circled the fence and tried again to find a suitable gap to sneak in. The fence was made of thick planks; Oliver had once bored a few peeping holes in them – but you couldn't see anything important through them.

Oliver circled the fence to the back of the house. One of the planks looked shaky; Oliver eagerly gripped it and wrenched it loose. He was slender enough to squeeze inside, among the blades of grass.

The windows were so high Oliver could not see inside the ground floor. So he went around to the front and climbed the steps to the veranda. He stood there, tense, listening. It was very quiet inside the house, but a soft light streamed through the windows into the October evening. The light played on the late-blooming flowers that swayed in the wind. Oliver glanced at his home, looming close with its safe blue-painted surface and brightly lit windows.

Unexpectedly, the door swung open.

Oliver took a step back.

– Hello, a woman said from the doorstep.

She was middle-aged, small but round. Her bobbed blond hair framed a freckled face. Her soft expression calmed Oliver down.

– Hello, Oliver answered.

– Do you want to come in?

Oliver hesitated.

– Why stand talking out here in the cold?

– I'm Oliver.

– From next door, I know. I'm Margaret.

The woman opened the door wide and beckoned Oliver to come in. He slipped past her into the hallway. The smell inside it betrayed that the house had been empty for years. Oliver thought he caught another smell, too, a curious feeling that once the dried-up old man had indeed lived in the house. Perhaps he'd been lying there dead for a long time before he'd been found.

– Leave your shoes here, the woman advised, and also took Oliver's coat and schoolbag. Then she led him inside the house.

Actually, it was a mansion. Not because of its size, but because the old furniture made it look like that, mansion-like. The rooms felt big, or maybe it was because the furnishing was sparse after all.

There was a real fireplace in the living-room. Of course there was no fire, who'd be fool enough to burn wood anymore, but it created a rich atmosphere, for there was a lamp flickering inside it.

It was rather chilly and damp inside the house.

– The heating isn't working properly yet, Margaret said. She'd obviously noticed what Oliver had been looking at.

Oliver was eating up the room with his eyes. Mum would have called it tasteless and chaotic, but Oliver enjoyed all of it. The furniture, the rugs on the wall, the lights and the feeling of old times that fed his imagination. Then Oliver's eyes caught the back wall. There, on a set of shelves, behind glass doors, was something.

Something unbelievable.

Oliver took a deep breath and a step forward.

Book-backs.

There were at least thirty of them.

Actually, there were some lying on the table, just like that, without humidors or covers.

– You can pick them up if you wish, Margaret said.

Oliver reached out. His fingers stopped over one blue-covered book. Did he dare touch it? What if it broke?

His fingers brushed the book, and then Oliver snapped it up in his hand. It was lighter than he had imagined. He turned it around in his hand and delicately turned the cover open, as he had seen the shopkeeper do. The pages contained small text, words like in a data-flat, but printed. Page after page of text. The paper felt pleasant under his fingertips. A little rough, but soft. It was different from the surface of a data-flat or a drawing plate. Oliver's heart was throbbing. He sniffed at the book. It smelt different than he had imagined. Not old or fusty, rather like some preservative or a hospital.

– It's not a real book, Margaret said. – Not according to the present definitions. It's a printed volume, one of several thousand copies. Since it hasn't been numbered and signed, it's not authenticated, it's just a copy.

Oliver didn't care about that. It was still a book on paper. An object you could take in your hand, leaf through and stroke.

– Where did you get all these?

– I've inherited quite an archive from my father. I've spared them, though it's the fashion to destroy them all. And even though the authorities keep confiscating them.

– This must be valuable.

The woman shook her head. – Not these books.

Oliver was putting the book down on the table, unwillingly, when Margaret took his hands and pushed the

book firmly into them.

– You may keep it.

– May I, really?

– I once had a boy like you, Margaret said.

Oliver took the book home under his shirt. Dad sat in the kitchen, checking some accounts; he had several data-flats spread on the table and he was concentrating on the screens. Mum greeted Oliver, standing by the stove and asking her standard question about how his day had been.

– All right, Oliver answered and slipped into his room, the book burning his skin under the shirt.

Oliver's room was very simply furnished. Just the bed, the table, the trace walls, a shelf for some necessary things, and a couple of clothes boxes.

He would not be able to show the book to anybody. Nor to speak to his parents, they would confiscate the book immediately. But it was enough to have it, enough to open it at night when others had gone to sleep, to finger its pages and to read bits and pieces. The book's font was more ornate than Oliver was used to, but they'd studied old styles of writing at school.

It was a poetry book. Oliver was not sure whether he understood a word of it, but still he kept leafing the pages and whispering to himself.

I may not / I have to go / because the cherry-trees are blooming

The book must be immensely valuable. Or at least worth as much as the neighbouring house and their own house put together.

Oliver turned the book around in his hands. How

beautiful it was!

He had accepted it, but he knew he shouldn't have it.

Oliver ought to return the book. First thing tomorrow.

The school day passed painfully slowly. The teacher was talking about legislature: what could be copied and under which conditions. The creative production of free source code was already familiar to Oliver, as was the tightly controlled paradigm of Official Art.

Oliver's thoughts stayed at home and on the book under his mattress. It belonged to neither category. It stemmed from a time when any book was protected and could not be freely multiplied or revised. Books had been owned, stored at home, and cherished. People had read them aloud on special occasions, and not a word had been changed.

– Concentrate, master Twist! the teacher interrupted Oliver's daydreams.

Oliver focused again on the teacher and the trace-wall where the day's topics were running. Jash, who was sitting next to Oliver, grinned at him. His classmates mostly didn't speak with him, and he was used to it. There was talk enough behind his back, though, and sometimes he could discern stray words, like "deviant" or "defective". Oliver had built around himself a kind of veil under which he could hide whenever he wished. While the veil was over him he imagined his classmates were gone, and their talk did not hurt him.

The day crept by; on his data-flat Oliver searched the stream for information on old books, but didn't find anything new. He started thinking about Margaret: who

or what was she, to have so many books at home? A rich, eccentric collector? What if she also wrote books herself? Oliver had never seen an author, just heard stories about them. Authors withdrew into their chambers in order to produce art; they spent years creating one work and finally put on paper a great story or a collection of poems that ended up belonging to experts in the field.

Oliver tasted the words of the book. *Yet I am / stronger than others / by just existing.*

At last the trace-wall faded away, signalling that the last lesson was over.

Oliver slipped home, shouted a greeting to his parents and went to get the book from under the mattress. It had been hard to find a good hiding place for it, when the household contained so few things altogether. Oliver was allowed to have only ten objects of his own, and his quota was already full.

Oliver shouted that he was going for a walk, and even walked a couple of blocks, but behind the corner he turned back to the neighbouring house. When he was sure that neither Mum nor Dad were at the window, he slipped into the courtyard through the removable plank and ran to the front door. He thumped the door with the knocker. It was quiet. A lot of lights were on, but nothing seemed to move.

Finally the door squealed open.

– Hello, Oliver, please come in.

Margaret led Oliver into the house and seated him in a soft armchair in the living-room.

– I have to return this book.

– Why?

– I cannot keep it.

- Of course you can.
- If Dad or Mum find...
- You tell them that you got it as a present. They ought to be able to understand that.

Oliver still tried to hand the book to Margaret, but she refused to take it. Instead, she took a tray from the side table and presented Oliver with biscuits and a glass of soft drink. Reluctantly, Oliver accepted the bribe and took a bite out of the tasty biscuit. He glanced surreptitiously at the woman, wondering if she might indeed be planning a story just then, or what was the reason for her living among books.

- Have you ever visited a bookshop? Margaret asked.
- No, I'm not allowed in there.
- But you'd like to visit, anyway?
- Yes. They've got books in there.
- I may need your help. Perhaps you'd like to go there with me some day?

Oliver breathed a sound, his mouth full of biscuit.

- If Dad and Mum say I may go.
- We can ask them, Margaret said. – When it's time.

Then Margaret took books out of the cabinet and showed them to Oliver. She held each book in her hand as if she were touching fragile glass or explosive stuff. She didn't use gloves, however, not like the bookshop lady.

A week went by. Oliver went to school, and as soon as he'd come home, he slipped out to see Margaret. The schooldays went by painfully slowly, and Oliver noticed that he was living more and more in the world of books. He wanted to touch Margaret's books, to stroke their surface or listen

to Margaret reading their text in her steady voice. It was completely different from the monotonous story records of the data-flats or the multimedia clips, which were colourful but chaotic.

There really must have been something wrong with Oliver, to make him so attracted to something as simple as paper and the ink colouring its surface. He became bolder and started carrying the book around with him. It warmed him under his shirt and gave him the strength to go to school.

– What’s the matter with you, Oliver? he was asked, but he kept silent. He wasn’t going to share his secret with anybody. He didn’t feel lonely any more. He had learned poetry lines by heart and used to recite them in his head whenever he felt the need to escape.

More and more often the teacher complained that Oliver obviously had difficulty concentrating.

– Is something wrong? Do I have to talk with your father?

Oliver avoided the question, but he could see that he was under observation. As if the others had suspected that Oliver was carrying a treasure.

He had thought that at some phase Dad would notice his visits to Margaret and fly into a rage, but it was the book itself Dad caught first.

It was Oliver’s own fault. The book just slipped out from under his shirt and fell to the floor, directly in front of Dad. He picked it up before he even understood what it was.

– What’s this? he shouted and shook the book in his hand.

His face got red all over. He had looked just like that when Oliver had dropped the vase that Mum loved and it had shattered on the floor.

– Where have you stolen this?

Dad squeezed Oliver's arm, hard.

– Don't you understand... it's too dangerous to keep this!

Dad forced Oliver to tell him where the book came from. Oliver stammered the story of the extraordinary lady next door and her gift to him.

– Nonsense, Dad snapped. –You've made it all up. Nobody gives a thing like that to a child.

– It's possible, though, Mum said. – If you are really rich.

– This will only draw thieves here. And the officials will come and question us about a humidior and alarm systems. And we don't even have a certificate of purchase.

– Why don't you believe the child, for once, Mum said.

– We'll clear up this matter at once.

Dad grabbed a coat and shooed Oliver along. He led Oliver to the neighbour's heavy gate, opened it and marched to the door. He knocked on it, angry, and pushed the door open without asking for permission.

They went through the foyer into the first hall. The woman sat by the flickering fireplace lamp, her eyes riveted on the door.

– Come in, she said and smiled enigmatically.

Dad walked to face Margaret; he was calm and collected again.

– I came to return your property, he said, restrained and matter-of-fact; Oliver heard the edginess in his voice.

Margaret held out her hand and took the book. She pressed it tenderly into her arms, stroking its cover, while she looked Dad straight in the eye.

Dad had quickly drawn off his hand, as if it would be contaminated otherwise.

– Do you read poetry, Mr. Twist?

Dad shook his head.

– But surely your finger has occasionally hit on a poem or an aphorism, and you have stopped to think on the words.

– I just concentrate on the news.

– Indeed, that is fashionable nowadays. But surely, once in a while...

– No.

– I still want to show you something, Margaret said. She took a photo-album off the table, a genuine piece with its yellow-framed pictures, and leafed through it to a certain page.

– This shows my son Justin, she said, handing them the album.

Oliver peeked behind his father's back. –But he looks just like me, Oliver said. Dad sat down on the sofa, the air inside the cushion sighing under him. He took the book and thumbed through the pages. In the pictures, the boy was laughing, playing and running. And indeed, he had flaxen hair and a laughing mouth very similar to Oliver. Then, little by little, the Justin in the pictures turned graver. He looked slimmer and frailer and no longer laughed. In some pictures he sat next to Margaret or under her arm, but both their faces held an inexplicable sadness.

The last images were of Justin bedridden, pining away.

His eyes had sunk deep into his head. Sometimes he sat in a chair, sometimes lay in a hospital bed.

– Justin is different, Margaret whispered. – Though he's got double genes, it wasn't enough to keep him healthy. Whenever a gene mutation took place, the body's system was not enough to correct the mistake. The cell divided and the flaw spread to other cells.

She gave a sob.

– And then he himself started saying that he had to find the master-copy. As if the wish had been programmed into him.

– This is obviously none of our business, Dad said.

– I need you.

– I cannot help, Dad mumbled and pushed the photo-album aside.

– Nothing else will help now but finding the original. The one whose copy he is. So that's why Oliver...

Margaret's voice was just a whisper, but her words took hold of Oliver. The woman was demanding something from him. But what was it?

– Leave our family alone, Dad said. – I do not want you to interfere any more. Or put these ideas into Oliver's head. We want to live an ordinary life.

– This concerns you, too!

– Goodbye, Dad said sternly and led Oliver away.

– Don't be stupid! Margaret cried after them. – Remember the risk of pulping!

They marched straight home. Dad seated Oliver at the kitchen table; he was puffing and breathing heavily.

– It didn't go very well, then? Mum questioned from the kitchen; she was cooking pasta for dinner.

– We'll get a restraining order for that woman.
– You are always so harsh, Mum said.
– You must never speak with her again, Dad said and looked Oliver sternly in the eye.
– But what did she say? Oliver insisted, close to tears.
– Why does her son look like me?
– It doesn't matter, Dad muttered. – Some people just do.

Mum met his eyes.

– What, was her son...? she asked him.
Oliver couldn't see Dad's face.
– If that's how it is, why shouldn't we tell him? Mum said after a while.
– Oliver isn't twelve yet, it's required.
– Well, he'll be twelve next spring, Mum said. – Surely we can tell, if he promises to keep quiet about it.

Dad gestured Mum to be silent. She went to the kitchen and started banging around in the cupboard.

Oliver withdrew into his room. For a couple of hours he played a role game of adventures as a knight in a medieval fantasy world, and then he went to bed.

He wasn't yet asleep when Mum tiptoed into his room and sat by the bedside.

– How are you? Mum asked. The dusk made her hair shine bluish.

Oliver sat up. – I don't understand what's going on.

– Your father is just worried about you. And about the book, because we cannot own a thing like that.

– I only accepted a present...

– There's nothing wrong with that, Mum said and stroked Oliver's hair. Then she sighed.

– You must have guessed it already. We couldn't have children of our own, but we got a licence to have you. You must not worry about it. This is quite common and normal. They have surely taught you about genes and genetics at school?

Oliver nodded. A century ago humans could no longer have children in the natural way, and therefore they were forced to construct all children directly from the DNA. At the same time, the decision was reached to improve the human genome. A system was constructed where each gene had a copy. If an allele was faulty, an automatic programme located five cells within the body, moved their information to the fault site and checked which of the cells was flawed. And then the faulty one was destroyed.

– In a way we are the second, enhanced version of humanity, Mum added. – Of course we may get ill and die, but there are no genetic illnesses any more.

Oliver could not find anything to say.

– And we are all constructed this way, no wild gene mixes any more, she finished.

– So this Justin...

– He must have some other kind of illness, Mum said quickly and stood up.

Oliver could not sleep. Dad and Mum were not his biological parents. Of course he'd known it, in a way. It didn't feel as bad as it might have. Dad and Mum cared for him. Something had been mentioned about this at school, sure, about how advanced medical science was and how many illnesses and damaging characteristics had been eliminated in humans.

But Oliver had the feeling that he had not been told all

of it yet, not by far.

At school, Oliver kept watching the other pupils, powered by a new curiosity. Mum's words still bothered him. From the data-flats he had dug up more information about childlessness and genes. But there was a lot he wasn't able to access. "Not for children", and then the filters excluded the information. Oliver didn't even dare make his searches too extensive, for everything got recorded in the stream-log.

Finally, he ventured to impose himself upon Amy. She was very talented in the visual arts, and often liked to sit alone. Amy was quite popular, however, for she'd draw whatever you asked her to.

Oliver had planned his opening for some time and thought he had a good one. He sat down by Amy in the stone courtyard of the school.

– You've got a great dragon there, Oliver said.

Amy whisked the drawing plate in front of Oliver and changed the two-dimensional work to three-dimensional.

– The modelling is still incomplete, but I can soon animate this.

– What's it going to be?

– A school project.

– I thought I'd ask... you once showed a picture of a girl who looked exactly like you.

Amy started painting again with her finger. – Which of them?

– One of your cousins, I suppose?

– It must have been a chick from the art school on the coast; she contacted me. She's an imprint of me.

– What's the witless one doing here? Jash asked. He

had crept behind their backs and obviously listened to their conversation.

– I'm not witless! Oliver burst out. – I can do lots of things.

– You must have been produced from some second-hand original. Since you're no good for anything.

– I don't understand what...

– Ha-hah, you don't even know that, Jash sneered. – We all are imprints, from whatever original. But yours must be lousy. They haven't even told you who your original is.

– You mean there are several Olivers? I've got brothers, then?

Jash start to laugh derisively and threw a stone at Oliver. Oliver ran away.

The rest of the day Oliver felt like walking in the air. The idea that there were many others like him in the world, persons who had originally been made in the same pattern, was thrilling. What were they doing just now? Were they also fascinated by books? Or perhaps they were so popular in their class that they didn't have time for such an interest. There was hardly anyone so curiously devoid of any speciality as Oliver was.

But when Oliver thought of Justin's wan face, he felt cold inside.

Oliver stood in front of the shop. The bookshop lady was arranging things, though everything was in perfect order already. There was a messenger bringing flowers at the door, and somebody was sweeping the street in front of the shop.

– They are going to have an important event there

today, Margaret said behind Oliver's back. He hadn't noticed her. He'd been unable to visit Margaret for several days, for Dad and Mum watched his steps closely.

– Are you going there, too? Oliver asked.

– That's why I moved to this place.

– Oh.

– I want you to go into the shop. With me. Today.

Oliver's eyes widened. – You mean really?

Then he thought: what would Dad and Mum say? It was hard enough as it was at home nowadays. Mum bustling about with her own tasks, Dad sulking at his flats. Neither wanted to talk about anything important with Oliver; it was as if his parents had now drawn a veil of their own over themselves.

– This is the time. I have a task for you.

Oliver listened to Margaret's instructions, went home and ate his supper in peace. Dad and Mum talked about something supposedly important, but Oliver wasn't listening. After he'd managed to swallow his food, he thanked them for supper and went into his room. He said he had to concentrate on his homework and asked not to be bothered for at least two hours.

In his room he turned on the trace-wall and connected on repeat a discussion he'd had six months earlier with a couple of schoolmates, when they'd had to prepare a teamwork presentation. The boys' voices resounded in the room. Oliver sneaked out through the window and let himself drop the short distance to the ground.

It was dusky in Margaret's house. She herself was dressed in her best, a tight two-piece suit with a white ruffled lace shirt and high-heeled shoes. She offered Oliver

a small, black jacket and straight trousers; it was all in the same style as her own dress.

– These are Justin's clothes.

Margaret helped Oliver dress. The suit fit him perfectly.

– They'll recognize me in the shop, Oliver insisted.

– No, they won't. You are now Justin.

Margaret parted Oliver's hair on the other side and straightened his jacket. Then they walked to the door, Margaret holding her head high, Oliver furtive by her side.

The way to the bookshop felt endless. All the time Margaret held him by the hand. Some familiar neighbours passed by them, and even a few schoolmates, but when they saw Oliver they looked past him. It was as if his imagined veil had become real.

They stopped in front of the bookshop. Two guards were standing at the door; a customer was just entering. Prettily flickering fires were set outside the windows.

– Are you ready? Margaret asked.

Oliver squeezed her hand in reply, and evenly they marched into the shop.

They were frisked at the door. The bigger guard said quite rudely that every customer had to be searched to make sure that no troublemakers got in.

Margaret opened her bag and showed a book inside. It had a deep-blue cover. The guard pulled himself together and at once treated Margaret in a completely different manner.

– Please come in, my lady.

He didn't ask why Margaret was carrying a book or what she was doing with it. Oliver had heard that rich people had strange appetites regarding books. Maybe it

was quite ordinary for a well-to-do person to carry a rare book around with her whenever she felt like it.

In addition to the sofas, there were some portable chairs in the shop. Oliver sat on a chair by Margaret and accepted the cake and soft drink he was served. For a long while, he just held them, and finally ate and drank mechanically, hands trembling. Margaret stayed calm all the time. She sat with her back straight, the bag in her lap, and nodded to passers-by in a self-possessed manner. A man came to ask what she was interested in, and Margaret answered she was a poetry collector and had come particularly to see this auction.

Other people were dressed extremely simply, but expensively: the really rich did not have to flaunt their appearance. One of the men looked faintly familiar to Oliver, as if Dad had at some time showed his picture on a data-flat.

Oliver tried to control himself. He tried sitting as if he were in the classroom at school. It was difficult. All the time his eyes turned to the books in the glass cabinets. He'd never come so close to the books in the shop. They looked similar to Margaret's books, but they must be somehow special.

Some twenty adults had arrived; Oliver was the only child. At last, the bookshop lady entered. She welcomed them all and gave a short speech on the exclusiveness of her shop and its history. Oliver's hands were sweaty and he just stared at his shoes.

– I shall now present the special articles on sale today, the bookshop lady said.

They all went into the back room; there was again a

new glass cabinet, and they gathered in front of it. The glass cover was opened, one of the guests sighed, and another one cleared his throat loudly. The audience approached quietly. Margaret, too, got quite close to the cabinet.

Oliver didn't know why this event was so important to her, but he could understand the fascination. It was in the atmosphere. Everyone there breathed the air of books, they enjoyed being in the same room with unique objects.

– Today we are selling these three rare individual works, the bookshop lady said and explained how unique these particular books were. Only ten copies had been made of the red-covered book, and the proper numbering was displayed on its flyleaf. This item was number seven in the series. The grey-covered volume belonged to an author who had lived at the turn of the millennium; he had personally, using an antique typewriter, copied every page of his poetry and glued them between the covers. It wasn't known whether exactly the same poems existed in any other book.

The lady also described the third volume. The blue-covered book with its gilded ornaments was the only extant copy, though its flyleaf mentioned a series of twelve books.

The bookshop lady opened the auction. She pointed to the first book, and the customers started lifting their hands at the mention of twenty, thirty and so on. When the discussion was over and the lady tapped at the cabinet, she mentioned a sum that made Oliver gasp. They were talking about tens of thousands. Sums which Oliver would hardly ever see.

The auction of the second book started more cautiously.

Margaret gave a slight nod to Oliver and withdrew a

step from the glass cabinet. He put a piece of candy in his mouth and hid it in his cheek. Then he started coughing very hard. At first nobody paid any attention to him, but then Oliver fell to the ground and started trembling and jerking his leg.

One of the ladies screamed, and soon another one was there by him.

– What’s the matter with the boy? Should we call for help?

The auction offers went on.

Oliver kept his eyes closed and bit on the candy in his mouth. There was a bad taste in his mouth, his spit turned funny, it frothed. He opened his mouth and the foam ran out of his mouth to the floor.

– Just a moment, please, the bookshop lady said.

Hubbub, steps, hands, touching. Oliver pinched his mouth and eyes shut and lay as still as he possibly could. He imagined being Justin who lay on his hospital bed, dying slowly. Oliver could feel the illness creeping into his limbs, making his body limp and infirm. He’d never again be able to stand up. He’d not be able to walk the familiar home street, neither jump nor run...

Then somebody pulled Oliver into her arms.

– Justin dear, what’s the matter with you? Margaret said. – Haven’t I told you a thousand times that you’ve got to take your medicine on time.

Margaret slipped another quickly dissolving piece of candy into Oliver’s mouth. He slowly counted to ten before he took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

Margaret was holding him; her eyes were worried and at the same time, mischievous.

– I have to take him home to rest, Margaret said to the people standing close.

The bookshop lady apologized profusely; maybe there had been something allergenic in the cakes. She seemed to be thinking of what kind of indemnity she'd have to pay if the darling child of an enormously rich customer came to harm.

Then they were on the street and the shop door closed behind them. The guard even wished them a good and safe way home.

It was pitch dark on the street, only a few streetlamps illuminating the scenery. They walked side by side, Margaret striding on and Oliver trying to scamper alongside.

– We didn't get to bid for the book, Oliver said.

– No, we didn't. I wouldn't have had the money to buy it anyway.

– Then why...?

She patted her chest, excited. – It's here... while you were rolling on the floor, I exchanged the book for another one like it.

– Won't they notice?

– No, they won't. The books look very much alike, but mine was just a counterfeit. This is the original.

Margaret was breathing hard and glancing over her shoulder now and then. They were not being followed, at least not yet.

Oliver wondered at how easy it had been. Perhaps the impossible was possible, once you were bold enough.

Only when they reached their home block did Margaret calm down. They slipped in through the gate; Margaret stopped Oliver and showed the book to him.

– I want to show you something more.

She opened the book. It was thin and narrow.

– This has yours and Justin's DNA coded into it.

The pages contained only letters, words that formed snatches of poems.

– It's encrypted like any cipher. Certain recurring words form the codes for alleles.

– Why would anybody hide a code in some book? Won't the data-flats...

– When a certain master-copy was no longer used, its information was archived. Somebody had the idea that a unique object, something like this book, might be a worthwhile hiding place. Then no unwarranted person would be able to access the information. Nobody imagined that the books would end up as collectors' items. The plan was to file them in the government archives, where they would be accessible when needed.

– But now you've got it.

– Yes, and those people there have no idea of its real significance. For them, it's nothing but a rare book.

– What is it then, really?

– This is the only way to cure Justin. And to save you, too. I beg you, tell no one that I told you about Justin. It would endanger you, too.

Oliver nodded.

– According to the law, someone with Justin's illness is so badly contaminated that he must be pulped. His genetic fault is in the only place that cancels the whole system of gene corrections. It's in the gene which identifies the faults. With this original, I can get him fixed.

– I hope he gets better.

– You and Justin are both special, just normal children who are themselves without any special characteristics.

Margaret tousled Oliver's head in a familiar manner.

– Go home now. You have helped me enormously. You shouldn't know any more about this affair.

The next day, when Oliver came home from school, Margaret was gone. She had probably moved out in the morning already. The gate swung open. The curtains were left in the windows, but no light was on in the house. Of course Margaret had to leave. They would soon come to suspect and trail her.

Oliver was exceedingly nervous about what would come of it all.

It wasn't long before authorities in coveralls appeared at the neighbour's. They entered the house and stared quite sternly at Oliver and his father who'd come on the terrace to watch.

– What's this all about? Dad asked.

The authorities didn't answer, they just continued swarming around the house. It seemed at first that this was all there was to it, but after a few hours a neat, bald fellow came to their house; he introduced himself as the investigator from the central police. Dad stiffened up, but he let the man enter.

– We'd like to ask you about your neighbour, Margaret Wood.

– Ask away, Dad said coolly, but Oliver noticed he was sweating.

At the latest, Dad squirmed when the man told of the theft from the bookshop, of Margaret and her son

Justin who had exchanged a book under the cover of the hullabaloo they'd created.

- Yes, I understood she had a son, he mumbled.
- Did you have any contact with them?
- Not really. Hardly enough to say good morning.
- She had exceptionally many books.
- Did she? Now that's interesting. Then she must have been very wealthy.

The man stared at Oliver's father over the table, but Dad kept cool.

- Funny, really, that such a wealthy person would come to live here in an ordinary district, he added. – But perhaps the rich have their quirks which we find hard to understand.

- If you think of something, please contact us.

The man went away and left behind an unpleasant feeling. Dad sat at the table a long time. Oliver sat there, too, since he didn't know whether it was wisest to be as unnoticeable as possible or whether he should just be brave and ask. Finally, he could no longer stay silent.

- Dad, what does pulping mean?
- Abolishing, Dad mumbled.

A few weeks later the doorbell rang, and there was a messenger behind the door. Dad was going to sign for the delivery, but the man said the package was for the young master in the family.

Oliver came to the door and stared at the messenger, amazed. The man handed him a data-flat, and Oliver signed the delivery with his thumbprint. Then he received a large, thick plastic envelope.

Inside there was first a card, drawn by hand, and not on just any material but on paper. There was a seascape in the picture, and two figures walking on the beach. A mother and a son. They were smiling.

Oliver turned the card around.

“Happy rest-of-your-life”, it said. “Here is your life insurance. The most valuable in the world are those who can fulfil themselves by just existing.”

There was something else in the envelope. Dad was bursting with curiosity, but Oliver went into his own room and closed the door behind him. Only then did he take the book out. It had deep-blue covers with gilded letters. He ran his fingers along the embossed figures and smelt the book. It didn't smell old, just of ink and paper.

Oliver opened the volume carefully and read an arbitrary line.

Under the shadow of the rose tree / I stand / and wait for you.

Oliver pressed the book to his chest. He would learn the lines by heart. Maybe they would find the book and take it away from him, but he would engrave everything in his mind. Every single word.

THE OTHERLING

Jooim always wanted to do the ritual during a meeting, even though it found the act somehow shameful: it did not look this-one in the eyes, just wiped its hands on the towel and quickly drew its pants on.

– You are staring at me, Jooim said.

– This-one begs pardon.

– I don't want you to stare.

– As Jooim wishes.

This-one looked away for a moment, but kept observing what happened, sideways. Jooim stretched out and stared at the ceiling. It did that a lot when it was bothered by something. This-one stayed sitting on the chair, quiet, not moving.

Jooim had given this-one a transparent tunic. This-one's thin bony shape was visible through the gauze – Jooim liked to watch this-one and to do the ritual. Afterwards it trembled peacefully and was easier to be with. This-one stared at its sharp nose ridge and broad face, at first so strange, but now already familiar. Jooim had lived thirty-five revolutions of the sun, it had said, but difficult to tell how much that was in the People's time count. According

to the scale of the Humans, that was a prime age.

This-one took the towel from Jooim's hand and sniffed at it; the aroma was strong and sharp, the way Jooim was strong.

– Stop that.

This-one put the towel in the garbage grinder that sucked the fabric within, sent it to be disintegrated and reassembled. The gadget was charming, it worked like the mind of the People but was made by the Humans.

Jooim sighed; soon it would have to return to the starcraft and report to the duty officer. Its own patrol vessel had made a forced landing on the hills and was now under maintenance, would be for several light-revolutions yet. Jooim was a star navigator and there was nothing to do on the ground – patrol duty could not be skipped, however.

– It's a wonder you people haven't been occupied before.

– But...

– Don't start with that bullshit about Firstlings and Otherlings and whatever bloody goblins.

This-one had to remain silent. Some things Jooim just did not want to hear. Maybe they were too complicated. It was enough that Jooim found this-one thin and gentle-voiced. It wanted to see qualities that pleased itself. No matter. This-one was there for Jooim. But this-one was sorry that Jooim was so unhappy. Grief was hurting its whole being and drawing its face into a frown. This-one felt like suffocating in the mouldering taste of the pain, and something had to be done. So this-one watched Jooim carefully and waited for a window of opportunity.

This-one would make Jooim happy. Yes. This-one

knew how to make Jooim happy.

Jooim caught this-one's hand, pressed the hand against its cheek.

– You have slender hands. Cool.

This-one murmured and let Jooim stroke the limb, which had formerly been something more but now was only something called a hand.

– While you stay and watch by the bed, I dream. That's funny. On the ship I never have dreams. And I remember things I thought I had forgotten. The smell of hair. And a woman I loved.

– This-one watches over the sleep, yes. This-one loves Jooim.

Jooim stretched on the bed and this-one stayed close. Jooim's breathing quickly became peaceful. The existence of a Human was so fragile and so appealing.

This-one had chosen Jooim when this-one saw Jooim climbing out of the wrecked sky vessel. The Otherlings had surrounded the vessel and helped the Human back to the star-craft. This-one had gone along, marked Jooim with this-one's scent, and the others had allowed this-one to have the honour. When Jooim's vessel had been brought back to the star-craft for maintenance, this-one had followed and helped to move the mechanism.

Later then, out on the town, it had been easy to take up Jooim's company and ask about the vessel. Finally, this-one had offered to entertain. Jooim had not refused and had allowed this-one to get close. At first, Jooim had smelled strange and sounded alien, even repugnant, but during a few meetings this-one had adapted. One had to learn to sit on a chair and lie on a bed, for Jooim liked everything

that was reminiscent of Human customs and things in the far-away home world. Finally, this-one knew more and got closer to Jooim.

But sometimes, when Jooim had returned to the Humans' star-craft, this-one hung up on the roost head down and purred the sounds and the scents of the People.

The change could be sensed; perhaps in the scent or in the gestures of the passers-by, in the way the many-coloured fabrics swelled in the wind blowing from the desert. The city buzzed with energy and life. Exchangers had put up their booths and were singing to the passers-by. Acrobats were contorting their bodies into the strangest positions while some Humans stood by, amazed. Builders had constructed cottages and carriages in which runners were pulling along fun-loving Humans. Before the arrival of the Humans, the city had been almost empty; everyone had been in the hills shaping the other city, the one that was not a Human city but woven according to the system of the Keruchas.

This-one glanced around at fellow Otherlings, those who carried, helped, interpreted or just followed the Humans around aimlessly. The People had learned the tongue of the Humans, although the Humans "touched" when they talked about the hands and "smelled" when they talked about the protrusions on their faces. The Otherlings could easily produce vowels and consonants, whereas the Humans needed interpreters to tell the meaning of the symbols and etchings on the products. The Humans did not bother to learn the sound and vibration of the tongue. They said they did not have the time.

Everywhere the Humans went they attracted a deserved attention. The Otherlings walked after them so that the space between the booths was jammed. If any Human stopped by a booth and went to a table to take a cup of sahrana, the place immediately became popular. If the Human emptied its cup, it needed not ask to have the cup filled again. If a Human as much as glanced twice at an object of the exchangers, the thing was presented to the Human, and the Human could keep the object by just accepting it. There was no wish the People would not have fulfilled. Sometimes the Humans gave away their own stuff, and the People accepted everything, even when they did not need the things. The Humans had unnecessaries, all kinds of things they did not actually need. But how interesting to study and touch and sniff at them. And soon the booths offered just the kind of objects that were pleasing to the Humans.

Some of the Humans were embarrassed about the attention, but those who had stayed longest by the People were easy to distinguish. They had learned to enjoy the attention, enjoy having their every wish fulfilled even before they had time to state the wish aloud. The People were skilled in observing and learning, and this pleased the Humans.

This-one wandered around, looking for suitable objects at the exchangers, things that might delight Jooim. Everything there was intended for the Humans. This-one exchanged products, finally found some suitable-looking unnecessaries and took a new pillow for the living apartment's bedroom. The colour was the same as Jooim's uniform. The fabric was thin, but this-one knew the

Humans liked soft materials that stroked the sense cells of the hands.

This-one walked in the labyrinth of the simple stone buildings; their round windows looked gently back. The sand caressed the soles of this-one's feet. This-one had a pair of sandals, but they were now swinging from their laces on this-one's back – this-one did not yet quite manage to walk in the sandals, and now as Jooim was away in the star-craft, this-one could abandon Human customs for a while.

A representative of the other kind of Humans went past; this-one had heard about them but not smelled them before. Its scent was strong, almost intoxicating, in spite of an attempt to cover the scent with some artificial perfume. The creature was smaller than an ordinary Human, with a gentler face, broader hips thrust forward, and soft tissue on the chest. The uniform covered and hid the forms, though not completely. Now this-one understood what Jooim had wished to see with its eyes under the gauze. Jooim wished this-one had buds like that, too.

If that would delight Jooim, the wish would be fulfilled.

The street ended at a high domed building glittering darkly in the sunlight. This-one often visited the place and enjoyed sensing how the air around the tower stood still, the sounds died away and the scents faded. This-one stopped at the foot of the building and looked up. The wall surface was not even, but full of curling forms, bulges and knobs. This-one pressed its head against the building and listened to the building's rhythmless breathing. Jooim ought to have this experience! Jooim would have to understand the beauty of the construction, the cleanliness and all the hard work dedicated to the building. Then

Jooim would understand the nature of the People. Jooim would understand what an Otherling was prepared to do.

– What is the other-one looking for? a figure said; it was a darkish individual with piercing eyes and a menacing smell. It had sneaked up from behind, had perhaps followed this-one since the booths.

– This-one is just admiring the scent of the scenery.

– The other-one is contaminated by a Human. Fusty.

This-one was startled and looked closer. Was this fellow Otherling one of those who did not like the Humans, who said that the influence of the Humans was contaminating, that they should never have been named Firstlings and accepted at all? That the Humans did not understand the cosmic balance of giving and taking, but just selfishly wanted everything. But it had always been so that the People who were here first gave place to those who came from the stars. Why should this time be different?

– The other-one should stay away from the Humans, the strange-eyed one clicked.

– This-one says will do no harm. That is the role of the Otherlings. To be the Other. Let the Humans be Firstlings.

– The Humans do not understand, will never understand. The People must stop worshiping such low beings.

– This-one believes the Humans are needful.

– The Humans cannot give anything. They do not even know how to study the People, though they wish to do so. They do not know how to study, they just plead that they have no instruments, and hide inside their sky-machine.

– This-one believes the Humans can give much!

– The other-one should just forget the Human. Not take its scent into the other-one's own cub.

– How does the other-one dare! This-one would never hide its Human!

This-one's tone swayed over to indignation. Jooim was special and behaved properly. This-one felt good with Jooim, wanted to study it thoroughly.

– This-one has warned the other-one, the other-one hissed and sneaked off into the building's shadows.

Had anyone followed? Had anyone noticed? No good came of dealings with such ones; this-one might catch a dirty, filthy quarrel-scent that would cause difficulties with others of the People.

To go around with Jooim anywhere was fine, this-one would do that. This-one would take Jooim to see the acrobats and the builders, and Jooim would feel good. Jooim was this-one's special Human. This-one had marked Jooim and no one would touch it, as long as this-one did not lift its scent off Jooim. The only worry was how to make Jooim understand the People better. That was hard, telling a Human about anything, since a Human did not want to listen and did not sense the same things. Perhaps this-one should give Jooim a gift, even though the giving would bind Jooim. Perhaps Jooim would understand the gift's meaning and would then be able to share better.

This-one went to wait near the sky-base. It was not possible to get close, but behind the fence one could see the star-craft. The Humans had arrived two sun-revolutions ago in their plastic-and-metal craft and constructed a base. This was just a way-station for them; the journey would go on beyond the stars, once they got what they wanted

from the planet: metals and fuel for the star-crafts. Or so they had promised, anyway – now there was talk of a more permanent base, because the mining was taking more time than the leader of the Humans had expected. They had dug themselves into the depths of the earth, burrowing with their machines. They did not let the People close to the star-craft or the mine; that's why there was a surrounding fence that gave a stunning shock.

When the shadows lengthened, it was time to withdraw inside the living apartment. This-one stroked the body and hummed and rocked until the upper body started to grow. When the body had grown small buds, this-one stopped.

Jooim was angry. It puffed and told this-one to look elsewhere if this-one tried to steal a glimpse. Jooim wanted this-one to sit on the chair with legs crossed. This-one left one hand hanging free and kept the other over the buds on the chest. At this phase, Jooim never touched this-one, though it needed the contact. That was hard to understand in the Humans. They were so fragile, wanted to isolate themselves in their loneliness even though they had someone to touch so close.

When Jooim was ready, it sat on the bedside and put its head between its hands. It stroked the top of its head. This-one got up from the chair, curled up behind Jooim's back and sniffed the Human's sweaty skin. Jooim startled at the touch, but soon relaxed.

Jooim was the first Human for this-one, and that was something to be proud of, as one always could be about a first-one. With a first-one, everything was about getting accustomed and all the scents were stronger; with the next

one such surrender was no longer possible because one's own scent had already changed and the connection had been formed.

– Why is Jooim anxious?

– This is unnatural.

– What does Jooim mean?

– Visiting you like this. Yes, they think it's unnatural. The regulations say... Well, they say all kinds of things. Things are different here. You people are different. It just happens with you... because you always want to please and do just as you are told. In everything.

– Giving means receiving.

– You would even submit to beating. But I'm not going to beat you. Some people like to beat others.

This-one does not understand.

– We ought not to get involved with... but I'm not doing that. They are crazy. How would I get involved with you? I just want to be. That's all.

Now the Human laughed. A jerking, nasty laugh that told it was not enjoying itself. When Jooim was unhappy, it wished to hurt itself. That was strange about the Humans, too. Why hurt oneself?

Jooim's head turned suddenly. Only now did it notice the buds. – You have changed. I've heard people say that you look more like us every day, but I hadn't quite believed it.

– One passer-by had these. What was it?

– A woman, of course.

– What is a woman?

Jooim's face got red. – Oh, you sure are something, you people. Well, a female, does that mean anything to you?

- No.
- Of course not.
- This-one is just learning the ways of the Humans.
- And you don't even understand that you are just being used. And all humans laugh at you and your simple-mindedness.
- Not being used.

Now Jooim had the bad expression again, the kind that wanted to hurt even when it was saying otherwise.

- You just keep whoring here for the whole universe.
- What does that mean?
- You sell yourselves to anyone passing by.
- This-one does not understand. The People exchange.
- There've been others, haven't there? Jooim demanded.

It pressed this-one's arm and stared deeply into this-one's eyes. – Have there been others? Before me. How many have you entertained? That's what it's about; you fix yourself to anybody for pleasure.

– This-one swears there have been no others. This-one met Jooim when Jooim came out of the ship...

- I'm not talking about humans.
- What then?

– Other visitors. The Cardinal thinks there've been other species before us. Where else would you have got your present technology? Do you understand? Other species. There have been others, haven't there?

– Certainly there have. The Humans are the sixth Firstlings.

- The sixth!

Jooim snorted and this-one scented it did not believe this-one at all.

– Yes. During The Real this-one has known. First the Naaqui came, those who were slow and tasted of soil, then the Kerucha, the ones who brought the stars close to the People. The last before the Humans were the Kiihani, with them one could not vibrate at all.

– And that's long ago, you claim?

– Since the Naaqui, two hundred revolutions of the People's time-count. This-one had its own Firstling then, too.

– Sure you did. You are lying.

Now was this-one's moment to laugh. This-one had learned to make noises the way Jooim did, but still had to figure out when to laugh and in which way. Laughing had tones like scents. – Jooim thought this-one was young... did Jooim think the People would let a Human be with a young-one?

– You're saying you are old?

– Yes. The People do not allow interference with the lives of cubs. Cubs are safe. Cubs are clean of scents. And the Humans will never see any cores; that is not meant to be.

– I don't know if I ever want to see any cores. I've heard you just split off and that's it.

The scent of Jooim was yellow. Now was the right moment.

– This-one has a gift for Jooim.

This-one got up and went to the trunk in the corner, opened it and gave Jooim a box. The package was big, almost half Jooim's length. There even was a bow; the weaver had skilfully copied it according to a ribbon some Human had lost. A special box; the Humans gave each

other important things in such boxes, hid them first so that the other Human could be surprised when it received the gift. This must be remembered: first hide and then show. That was why none of the People told anything to the Humans before they had asked about things several times.

Jooim smiled. It took the box on its knees and drew off the ribbon, but when it opened the box, it flinched. The box fell on the floor, with the gift.

– Jooim liked this-one's hand? This-one is giving Jooim the hand.

Jooim got up, face white, and left the room without a word.

This-one took up the loose hand from the floor and stroked it. What had gone wrong now? A hand was just a hand, easy to reconstruct from any material, one only needed to command the core. Perhaps the material was wrong?

Or else Jooim wanted something more significant. Maybe a hand was not a big enough gift, not sufficient for showing affection.

Jooim stayed away for several light-revolutions. Each revolution this-one waited for the Human outside the starcraft, never leaving for a moment. Jooim had nothing to do, it was off duty, but it did not come out. Other Humans passed remarks, however. How's things, weirdo? they said. How much? You blow? You like the rough trade?

This-one understood the coarseness was just fear. The Humans talked about things that were forbidden to them, things they simultaneously hated but were attracted to because of the strangeness. The Humans were not capable

of exchanging such gifts with the Otherlings, so this-one did not listen. As Jooim said, the Humans themselves thought they were behaving contrary to their species, even when they sought company. And they claimed an Otherling disgraced its body, submitting itself to gazes.

But this-one had looked into the matter of the females. Female and male were connected to reproduction, like the smell of Jooim's ritual. Jooim wanted cubs, or behaviour connected to cubs made it feel good.

When Jooim finally came to the gate and approached this-one, this-one spoke no more about the hand or gifts.

– Will Jooim want to go to the apartment again?

It shook its head.

– Perhaps Jooim will cheer up outside. Party on the street.

– Some stupid party, sure.

– Not stupid. The People have a party. In honour of the Firstlings.

– Okay then.

Jooim walked ahead. It was common to see Firstlings and Otherlings together on the street. The Humans walked head high, with long strides, and the People tripped along behind, like shadows. Always one step behind, it would have been disrespectful to walk ahead of a Firstling. The People had gathered and sang to the Humans. The People had dressed in fabrics brought by the Humans, walked and behaved like the Humans. The exchangers had produced drinks for the Humans, and the People saw how the Humans talked more energetically and how their scent turned livelier or more peaceful at the same time.

Jooim felt better when it saw other Humans on

the street. It stopped to talk with them. This-one was accustomed to staying quiet, to listening. It was improper for an Otherling to participate, even when it knew what the Humans talked about. One Human, obviously, was a command-giver, for Jooim became reserved and tense.

– I’ve wondered how this place could have been preserved like this, the command-giver stated. – Idyllic. You’d have thought some other species would have stayed here.

– Perhaps the circumstances aren’t so favourable to others here, Jooim answered.

– And hardly to these folk, either, looking at those emaciated figures.

– Still, they are very much like us.

– You shouldn’t fraternize with them too much.

Jooim’s sweat was bitter. – I’ve got this one here for an assistant, it helps to carry my stuff. You know them, they do whatever you ask. And I’m trying to get some sense of this culture.

– Our soldiers are taking this all too lightly. We’ve been stuck here so many months already; we should not let down our guard.

– No, indeed not.

The command-giver looked past this-one as if this-one did not exist. – We’ve autopsied so many of them, the command-giver said. – Every single one of them has that damned stone inside. Even if they look like us, they are far from it. They don’t even care about their dead. Just leave the bodies lying around wherever they die.

Jooim glanced at this-one, but this-one did not care about the words. Of course the Humans tried to study

the People, brought them inside their ship, carried out experiments, cut them open and tried to understand. But what was there to learn that way? The Humans did not understand that bodies did not matter. A body could be constructed from rock, or organic material, or gas. Whatever was necessary.

The command-giver picked up a metallic article from a booth. – What about this?

– That’s a can they got from us, said one of the group.

– No, it’s a copy manufactured by these aliens. They are skilled in constructing all kinds of things; we’ve already noticed that.

When the command-giver and the group had gone, Jooim was silent again.

– We are close to the Edge. This-one will show Jooim a place.

This-one started to tug Jooim by the jacket. Jooim would finally come to understand the stone slab. This-one took a few steps. – Just follow now.

Jooim softened. It smelled of repentance, of warmth. It took this-one by the arm and leaned on this-one’s flank. It smelled the scent of this-one and could not help following.

The way to the stone slab was through a narrow alley. Fellow Otherlings stepped aside for Jooim and bowed, and some followed a stretch and might even have brushed at Jooim’s clothing.

Until there came one who did not step aside. This-one had never seen so strange a member of the People. Its scent was broken and it was reeling ahead as if intoxicated. It did not step aside, it did not slow down, it walked straight into Jooim’s arms.

– Watch where you go; Jooim said and pushed the strange-one away with its hand.

– This-one does not step aside! the strange-one said. – This-one does not step aside, the Human steps aside, you step aside, I do not step aside, I do not, I go first, I, I, it mumbled, eyes bulging. Jooim remained standing.

The hand of the strange-one moved fast, too fast.

Jooim tottered and the pain flashed around.

And the strange-one laughed and laughed and walked past, a burning shine in its eyes.

This-one caught Jooim but Jooim was much heavier and fell on top of this-one. Jooim held its stomach, red fluid was leaking between its fingers. The life of a Human. This-one clambered out from underneath Jooim. Everything was red and screaming; fear and hate and pain and danger rammed into the senses and this-one almost fainted under them.

This-one must do something, quickly. A Human was not able to construct itself. A Human broke and the scent of a Human turned pale and fragile.

This-one lifted Jooim up and ran, ran until the Edge was there and the world was quiet. Here They watched, here They observed the world, were present.

Suddenly one of Them passed by.

This-one said nothing, for one could not speak with Them: They just knew when to come, since They were able to see and observe everything. They were able to sense what anybody felt.

The shadows rushed. The Being came from behind, from the left, from the corner of the third eyelid, where eyes would never reach. In the air, nowhere, but still

obliquely in front was a surface, and bright light grew and came closer. This-one was blue and oval with joy: They came to help, They would not abandon Jooim.

Jooim's eyes were half open. It must have understood what was happening, for the Being kept it awake. The Being could not be seen, only its shadow reflected in this reality. But this-one knew what the Being did: through its own dimension it moved its limbs inside Jooim. It was a small surgeon; for it, the body of a Human was open and legible. But it could not come out of the surface; therefore this-one kept moving Jooim back and forth through the surface. Needle-sharp limbs pinched Jooim's broken bowels together, removed the ruptured cells and burned fast the torn life-gushing veins.

Finally, the Being detached itself from Jooim and wavered close, as much as the surface allowed. This-one placed itself in the interface and purred aloud as the Being floated through, stopped for a moment and warmed the Otherling's cells. This-one promised to help it, to give a part, to give anything, whatever the Being desired. But then the Being was already gone, and once again this-one was unable to achieve an unbroken contact. This-one vibrated and sizzled, but there was nothing to be done.

This-one was shut inside the star-craft and every covering for the body had been removed. Those were just Human unnecessaries, but this-one already knew to miss them. The Humans thought this-one had done something to Jooim, they wanted justice and revenge. They interrogated and demanded to know who else had been involved, but this-one always answered the same: this-one would do

nothing to hurt Jooim. Never. There had been an accident. The strange-one had had a mishap; the reflection of the strange-one had gone all mixed up from everything it had learned. But it was difficult to know whether the Humans believed this-one.

When the Humans were gone, this-one went into the cell corner and curled face down. The skin knew the star-craft and this-one felt more assured than within fabrics. This-one hummed and rocked. Many light-revolutions passed, no Human came to the room. No liquid was brought, so this-one stopped all functions and turned to stone. This-one stopped counting the time. The star-craft's eyes and ears and noses kept observing, but this-one did not care, just wondered about what Jooim had said and what it might really want and how the connection would keep up. This-one went through everything that had been filtered into the mind and reorganized the knowledge into new patterns.

Finally, the room opened and Jooim stood there and the work was interrupted.

– You are free, Jooim said.

This-one was not able to answer anything; Jooim had come so suddenly that the body was still numb.

– Stop that.

This-one managed to move a limb and life started cycling again.

Jooim half walked, half dragged this-one out of the star-craft. This-one was wrapped in a long coat Jooim had given this-one. The limbs would not hold up. The guards stared.

– You'd have been executed but I assured them it was

not your fault.

– What is troubling Jooim? this-one asked, for there was pain on Jooim's face. The Human had been wounded, but that was not the issue, for Jooim had been completely healed of the symptoms caused by the metal. It smelled of examination surfaces, of different substances.

– We are leaving. Completely.

– Because of this-one?

– No. That had already been decided earlier.

Jooim was silent a moment, then whispered. – It's the city on the other side of the planet. The one that's appeared there. It worries the Cardinal.

– But why? The city is fine. Just like the cities in Human pictures. But the city is not complete yet. The Humans have not been studied enough.

Jooim shook its head.

– Is good to know... even if Jooim is leaving, something will stay here.

Jooim looked at this-one, sighed; Jooim tasted the departure in its mouth and drank of that. Everything was not lost; there was still a moment of time left. This-one leaned on the Human and the Human leaned back on this-one. Jooim was warm; it exuded a kind of life of which this-one could only snatch faint notions. There were the smells of metal, plastic, faraway water and crushed stone in Jooim. And of the past: this-one was able to smell Jooim's dam, the one of whose core Jooim had been formed. And the dam before the dam, the whole chain of ages. This-one was not able to see the first core, for the People did not reminisce such things.

This-one vibrated and rocked infinity. This-one

had lost Jooim. The Human Jooim would never return. Perhaps there would be somebody else instead, but that was not the same thing.

This-one stopped the humming and then said it wished to show Jooim something, the very thing that had been left unshown when the accident took place.

Jooim followed this-one to the stone slab. At the base, this-one pointed and looked up high: – Look, see what the People are accustomed to sacrificing.

Jooim looked at the construction, shook its head. – Marvellous architecture, definitely a more advanced technique of stone working than your living apartments. Must have taken years to polish this so smooth and make all those ornaments, but what's this got to do with...

– Feel! this-one said in exasperation and pressed Jooim's hand to the stone.

Jooim went silent, and little by little it experienced that the activity of the stone could be felt. The building pulsed and thought and spoke, and on the stone surface there could still be read what had taken place: even Jooim could discern the limbs of the People, the heads criss-crossing and the figures hanging upside down. All still breathing, all still present.

Jooim quickly drew off its hand.

This-one's voice was soft, just a whisper like the wind. – When the Naaqui visited, the People tried to talk with them, but the Naaqui did not understand. They live a different time than the People. A slower time. That is why the People changed, became like them, dense and protracted, and are still trying to talk with them. Perhaps the meeting will be over in time.

Jooim stared at the construction, horrified. Perhaps Jooim would by and by begin to understand, or perhaps all this had only narrowed the chance of understanding. However, this-one had chosen Jooim because Jooim was more sensitive than the others, not as coarse.

– How could you possibly be able to understand them? Jooim asked.

– The People are used to changing. The People do not care about matter, only about culture.

– What's the use of that?

– The People learn.

– What was that creature, then? Jooim asked. – You know, the one we saw, who came to me when I was dying? Was that a Naaqui? Some kind of an angel?

– That was one of those impossible to talk with. Kiihani. They do try, but They crush the reality of the People and the People crush Their reality. Both have three dimensions, but only two in common, that is why the People can only meet Them at the place called the Edge.

– You have found creatures that live beyond your reality?

– The Kiihani are flat and one can only meet Them at the Edge. They see directly inside a body; that is how They repaired Jooim. The People wish to learn from the Kiihani, but that is impossible with Them. The People are sad about that.

This-one saw that Jooim wished to report to the command-giver what Jooim had heard. Jooim wanted to be capable, to be valuable. The words of Jooim would not change anything, however. The Humans would depart.

– This-one has been thinking about Jooim. This-one

has thought about what Jooim is like, what Jooim is made of. What Jooim really wants.

– Your world is crazy. The Humans become crazy here, just because you don't...resist. Yes... if you'd sometimes resist, it would be easy to hate you. It's easier in space. Everything there is so clearly hostile.

This-one lifted a hand and wanted to offer consolation.

– There was never any future in this, Jooim continued.
– This was never anything real, nothing but a dream. But a beautiful dream.

This-one let Jooim go. Nothing more could be done.

Jooim took a quick look, then turned around and walked away to its craft.

This-one stood and tried once again to reach Jooim's scent in the wind, to save that in memory, to care for that. Jooim's scent was bright yellow and angular. Jooim believed it would never see this-one again. Perhaps that was so, perhaps not. But this-one could do nothing to console Jooim.

The star-craft ascended with a thundering sound. The Human-made enclosure was destroyed. The mine was left empty. Now Jooim would go to space, the place where it had longed to be, where circumstances were cruel and unfavourable to life.

In a way, this-one longed to go there, too – this-one knew that long ago this-one had gone to space after its then Firstling by the Kerucha bridge, had even died there in interstellar infinity. The body had floated outside the bridge, drifted away and been destroyed in space, but the core had been brought back and its memory had rebuilt the

body. The memories had been lost, and even though the others had traced the events to a sense-flow, this-one could not miss the gossamer sun-wings or the strings connecting the stars. One could not miss something completely wiped out; just the things that still had an echo of the delicate scents saved in the core.

When Jooim was gone, this-one returned to the living apartment and stroked the drooping furniture, the silence vibrating in shades of blue; sniffed once more at Jooim's scent on the bedcover fabrics, and hummed to the memory of the Human.

Without looking, this-one saw that outside the window the Otherlings were starting to clean up: the wagons, carriages, scaffolding, fences, chairs and booths were first taken to pieces. Everything happened in a peaceful and orderly fashion. The parts were taken to the hills to be dissolved into minerals and elements. Just one light-revolution, and only the stripped-down buildings would be left.

The Humans would return in time and there would be many more of them than earlier. And they would come with research equipment, destructive weapons, whatever they would build around their fear.

This-one had been asked what the Humans had to offer. The emotion of fear, at least. The People had not been afraid for ages, of no one, not even of the phenomena of the universe. And then there was the peculiar Human way of building one's life on external instruments instead of learning to construct the body and control it with the core. There might come a time when the People would need such a way, too. Perhaps the People would find out

how to communicate with the Kiihani. Then the People would be more skilful and wiser again, and able to receive the next Firstlings.

This-one did not partake in the deconstruction, this-one had another job to do. This-one called the core and told it to give out and bring up a cub core. This-one had carried the cub core along for a long time without knowing what this-one would do with it. Now this-one shaped directions for the cub core, told it about Jooim's molecules, its cell structure and scent. This-one even knew of female and male, now. When the core had been prepared, it remained close by to wait for this-one's work. There were different materials, elements, minerals and particles to be acquired so that the cub could be formed. The living apartment was full of Jooim's cell structure and tracing would be easy. The work would take several light-revolutions, but finally the core would have constructed the cub. It would look like Jooim, but not be Jooim; it would be an independent free individual. Somebody with the core of the People and the shape of a Human.

This-one was happy – this-one would be able to give Jooim a gift, even though Jooim was gone.

When the Humans returned, the People would be ready. Several others had retired and done like this-one. An Otherling learns again to be like a Firstling. When the Humans returned and saw a creature like themselves, a creature that could talk and behave like them, perhaps the Humans would pause. If that was not enough, the People would know how to defend themselves. The People had all the knowledge that had been collected and exchanged from the Firstlings passing by for thousands of ages.

The People were not alone, nor weak. Ultimately, the Otherlings were the Firstlings. The People would manage as always before.

And yet, this-one kept longing for Jooim's scent, for the power that made this-one vibrate and sway upon the whirling currents of the senses.

WHITE THREADS

HELENA

– And how are you today? a female voice is asking.

The bottom sheet feels rough against bare skin and the quilt tangles around my legs like a snake. I blink my eyes open and the first thing I see is a grey plastic table. I'm in my own room again, at home. But there's something strange in the bedroom, however, especially the yellow walls; I've never liked the color yellow.

I turn on my side and stare at the floor. A plastic mat. My head is humming. I know I've slept badly though I cannot remember what dreams I saw. Or perhaps I'm no longer capable of seeing dreams.

– I'll bring you something to eat in a moment, the voice continues and the microphone snaps off.

I sit up; the floor sends cold thrills against my bare toes. It would be easier to stay and sleep the innocent sleep of the unaware, but I've got to wake up. I force myself to stand on my feet, and they carry me to the toilet, staggering. From the mirror the eyes of a middle-aged woman stare back at me with dark circles underneath them. With my hand I brush at the grey ends of the hairs on my temple.

I am Helena. Helena García Luna. I taste the words in my mouth until I feel sure that is my correct name. My memory does not deceive me, then. Not this time.

I open the mirrored cupboard and search a moment among the rows of hairspray bottles and cotton wool tops until I find the toothbrush and tube of toothpaste in a mug. I hold the objects in my hand and for a while I do not know what to do with them. They feel strange, alien, unknown beings that demand something from me. Then I squirt some paste in my mouth and my hands start to move the brush, they remember better than my head what needs to be done. Body memory. The memory of a touch. A soft feeling on my arm, something soft, warm, I miss something beside me that I'm not able to define. The rush of water covers my sobbing. I do not want them to notice I'm different today.

— Who's them? I whisper to myself, and the answers are immediately there for me. My guardians. They do not need to know that Helena is able to think again, that Helena remembers who she is.

I manage to rinse my mouth, but then I need to sit down for a while on the toilet seat and hold my throbbing head. I have to gasp for breath — each inhalation goes hard and when I breathe out I hardly know whether my lungs

will be able to take in any more air.

There's something very wrong with me, that's why they have to watch my every movement. And at the same time I know that it's horribly wrong to be watched, it makes me weak and ill. Fear cramps the pit of my stomach; I turn to the toilet and try to vomit but nothing comes up.

I stumble to the kitchen and take a look at my surroundings. The big green door leads out; I know there's a long corridor outside with doors on both sides. A long downstairs lobby with plants, and behind the glass, outside air. But I'm not going out, not yet.

On the other wall there's a blue door. I open it and see a row of shirts and two-piece costumes on hangers. It's inordinately tidy in the kitchen, as if the room had just been cleaned. Inside the kitchen cupboards there's a coffee set for four, a couple of plates and a drinking glass.

From the window one can see a balcony with a stone balustrade, tiled roofs on high houses, television antennas, a bit of a mountain and the mute sky. The wind is waving the tree branches rhythmically. I cannot see the streets waiting down there, but from somewhere I hear a woman speaking as she greets a passerby: *A good day to you, señor, how are you? ... Very well, thank you señora, I think I'll go and drop in at the butcher's before siesta.*

I sit down by the kitchen table. There are a couple of books that haven't been worn down to dog-ears, a pile of standard writing paper, with writing on the pages, series of numbers, mathematical formulas. I take up the papers and look more carefully at the first one: the traveling salesman's problem with twenty-five cities, a list of localities with distances and traveling times between them. My head

starts to swarm with a series of numbers and answers, but I thrust them aside, I don't want to compute, not now.

There's a calendar on the refrigerator door with no year or any handwritten notes, as if my everyday life were one empty sheet: it has days but the days have no meaning. I remember that when I turned forty, I sold my house on the seaside and moved to an apartment house in the old city center. I used to have a job taking care of animals as a veterinarian's assistant. But I'm not working any more. Something has happened to me that makes it impossible for me to be among other people any longer.

But I still miss the sea smell, the rush of waves, and the rough sand. I used to walk down on the beach in the evenings, when the fishermen were setting up their seats and their long rods on the mole. Again I understand that the scenes of my childhood are somewhere far away in the past, and just as unreachable as a miniature ship built inside a bottle.

I remember things that are far away but cannot remember yesterday or the days before that. Not even weeks, only the indistinct feeling that my life has changed.

The door clicks. I take a few steps back until I feel the table behind my back. After a torturous waiting the door opens and a woman comes in carrying a tray. She has short, dark hair and a white coat, and she looks me cheerfully in the eyes. There is a nametag on her lapel: Rodriguez.

– What day is it today? I ask carefully.

– Tuesday, the woman answers and sets the tray on the table.

– Really? September?

The woman looks patient, but at the same time it

seems as if my questions irritated her. And when I think about it, I really cannot say what difference the weekdays or even months would make. If I do not remember, time has no meaning, either.

The woman sets the tray on the kitchen table; I smell boiled egg and fresh bread. She turns around to look at me.

– Take it easy, there's nothing to worry about.

– I know, I say, and I really do know that the woman doesn't wish me any harm.

– Just call me Mireia.

She has a face one can trust. At least she doesn't want to harm me, I'm in no immediate danger; my life is not threatened. And yet I feel awkward. An unpleasant foreboding comes welling up inside me, from some earlier experience that's imprinted in my body memory.

And then I remember the source of the touch. A cat's deep green eyes flash in my mind and her gaze bores directly into me. She is my only true friend here. She doesn't lie. She doesn't try to profit from me; she protects me from all dangers, instead. I need to find her quickly. But how?

– Do you know where you are? Mireia asks.

– In a hospital.

– Why?

– Because I forget things.

Mireia turns around in my apartment, and my thoughts circle around one single thing. I have a request for her, but I do not know how I ought to present it. I'm not sure of what my position is, whether I'm an easy or difficult patient. I'm troubled with the idea that there are a lot of things I'd never be allowed to have.

– I'd like to have a cat, I tell her.

– A cat, Mireia says and a certain expression comes to her face. – Don't you ever remember?

– Just a little kitten.

– Of course you don't, she says and her voice holds her anger in check. – But this is something new. I can ask, of course, but it's hardly going to happen.

She glances at the papers on the table but doesn't pick them up. The door lock clicks shut after her.

I lift the cover off the tray and notice a tabloid folded beneath the plate and mug. I pick it up without checking the date, since after all, I do not want to know about the passing of time while I've been ill. I open the center page and see a news item about an accident near the Tibidabo amusement park. A child ran into the street after a ball and was hit by a car. He flew some ten meters in the air but fell softly on a terrace awning. The cloth checked the hit and they found only bruises on the child, though he ought to have died from the collision alone.

The news means something; otherwise it wouldn't have come to me.

I lie down on my bed and keep staring through the window at the sky that has already begun to darken. *We have to leave soon.*

MIREIA

I walked to the personnel coffee room and poured a full mug of the coffee the boys had made. Between the coke bottles, computers, and empty pizza boxes, I found some vacant space where I could set my cup and sit down on my

arse. My feet were hurting; I ought to buy a new and better pair of sandals.

Behind the glass there were big black cupboards where videotapes kept running and recording the lives of Helena and the boy. The cupboards were locked, and only Salvatore had the key. We were not allowed to study the tapes before Helena crashed.

No one stood up for Helena's rights and that made me sick. I had started to feel it was my duty to defend her. But how would I do that? I couldn't even talk with Helena about what she really wanted from her life and fate. She just kept talking about cats. Maybe she'd seen the Institute's phantom cat; she talked about cats so often. Or else Helena was remembering her occupation; she loved animals so much she lived more in their world than in the human world.

I was fed up to my ears with the same pattern repeating from week to week. We had tried all manner of things. We let Helena stay in her room alone and recover, without any disturbance. We tried to understand her panic, we treated her gently, without any irritations; and then again, bored with tactfulness, we forced her to start with a situation where she had to try to explain what had happened to her.

After each episode Helena was as helpless as a newborn, but she adapted to her environment with an amazing speed. She drew herself back to a normal state in a couple of hours. The fun just didn't last long. Rise and fall followed each other in a rhythm of two, three days. At the longest, she lasted five days, at the worst, the cycle ran through in twenty-four hours. But the end result was inevitable. She always crashed.

– What's up?

Manuel appeared behind my back and hugged my shoulders. He was a novice recruited by the university, an eager young fellow working in the laboratory.

– Fortunately I'm not on duty tomorrow.

– Helena, is it? Is it that serious?

Manuel sat on the other chair and lifted his feet on the table in a relaxed manner. I had made the same complaint to Manuel before, but no one seemed to be bothered by Helena's fate.

– I suppose you've tried to tell her what's going to happen? Manuel asked.

– It's no help. To begin with, she doesn't believe it, and even if you could convince her, she'll still run away somewhere, stubbornly. We haven't yet found out what drives her.

He kept nodding. He was always very polite to me, because he knew I was related to Señor Cañedo, the director of the Institute. That relationship, however, had not benefitted me as much as many people thought. I got an assistantship but otherwise I enjoyed no privileges. I wasn't even invited to the director's society parties where the university bigwigs promoted their research to the sponsors.

– And she's been here now... what, four months? Manuel asked.

– Just about.

– Basically she seems quite sane.

– She must be suffering dreadfully since she always wants to get away.

Helena was first found drifting on the streets, and was taken into custody by the city social welfare office. Nobody

had reported her missing, as she had no family or close relatives to miss her. She had quit her job just before she was taken ill, so at her workplace they hadn't suspected that anything was wrong, either. We found her by the regular screening, when we were searching for eventual oscillators from institutions and hospitals.

– Helena's condition is no better, then.

I shook my head. – It must be because of her illness, we've found no other explanation. She's not able to control the oscillation. She instinctively starts to oscillate and always crashes with the same results.

– But she is clearly talented, too?

I nodded. – Just wait till she starts again to solve the computing problems we've left on her table. Last week she deciphered the traveling salesman's problem with fifteen cities. You would need a supercomputer to do that. If she didn't have that defect in her brain, who knows what she might accomplish.

I couldn't help it; my attitude toward the patients was awe. In a sense they were omnipotent; in the medieval times their deeds were the stuff of ballads, or they were burned at the stake. I'd even wondered why no military idiot had yet come to the university and demanded Helena for their experiments. But most likely the oscillators were able to keep such probabilities far away from their life. And fortunately, life wasn't a movie.

– The team has already given up, I clarified. – Except Salvatore who still wants to study her case. But then Salvatore is new.

– He's ambitious. If he could prove something he'd be able to get funding.

Salvatore's predecessor had suddenly quit a month ago; they said he'd won a big sum in the Euro-lottery. Salvatore had been in the house for only two weeks and he already expected to be able to find something the Institute's veterans hadn't yet explained. Salvatore thought Helena a freak that ought to be cut into thin slices if necessary to get answers.

Salvatore's predecessor had experimented with tighter control, but irritating the oscillators just led to trouble. Helena had been tied fast in her hospital bed, but even that had not kept her back. If the oscillators were allowed to live as they wanted and research was only done in the laboratory with machines, nothing weird happened to anybody. But who would listen to me.

Everybody except Salvatore was tired of Helena. She was really of no benefit to the research at all. At the most, there was the boys' fun in betting at what stage she'd escape her room again. It was very difficult to define the exact moment, since even our most sensitive movement control devices were unable to monitor her movements. That's why they sometimes bet on the moment the cameras would stop working.

– But you must be excited about that little boy, anyway? Manuel continued.

I sat up straighter. – He has developed enormously, but he's not yet old enough to understand what it's about. Salvatore dares not leave him alone even for a moment, so that his abilities won't develop too far. His parents visit him almost daily.

– I guess they must be shocked.

I shrugged. – They consider it a religious miracle.

– It would be fantastic to get to know him.

The incident had even made the news. In the countryside, they'd found a five-year-old boy who was able to perform miracles. Various small things had happened in the boy's family: a fire started by the gas stove had gone off by itself, and a huge crowd of butterflies had appeared inside the house whenever there was nobody else to watch. Then once it happened that the parents had woken up in the middle of the night because of awful screams downstairs. They found their sleepy son standing on the kitchen floor, and outside the back door, a burglar bawling in pain, one of his hands melted fast with the door handle. The miracle was so obvious and so public that it interested the media only for a week, after all, and the whole matter was accepted as just a tall tale. We were able to contact the family in peace and quiet and convince them of the importance of the research. The parents were so hysterical, they were happy to resort to the Institute. Anything, to cure the boy.

Manuel chuckled. – We haven't achieved any results yet, either, but we've invented new approaches.

– I've heard of it.

– Next, we are going to try blind testing with a comparison group. Everyone will try to affect the random series of numbers the computer will generate.

The lab boys liked to boast of their plans. Manuel, too, always tried to make an impression on me, since he was one of the lucky ones to be chosen as a test person. He let them pump various stimulating substances into his body, and afterwards sit for hours in a closed room observing whether there'd be any changes in him. I wasn't impressed

by experimental research and their boasts about it—it was sheer madness to strive to oscillate. I had watched Helena long enough to know that oscillation wasn't meant for humans. When I'd spoken about my doubts, they just told me Helena's condition was an exception.

When Helena crashed she forgot everything. The boy was quite all right, as long as he stayed inside the Institute and close to the restrictor. And if he crashed, he always remained aware of his special abilities. Helena's problem was caused purely by some memory disturbance, possibly an early stage of hereditary Alzheimer's disease that nibbled at her brain piece by piece and made her forget what she ought or ought not to do.

I shied away from speaking aloud about my doubts. I believed Helena and the boy's condition was impossible to replicate artificially. Oscillation is a mutation only one person in a hundred million carries, and it certainly couldn't be achieved by experimental research. But even in that, there's the damn probability, and probabilities are dangerous.

— Well, see you again, said Manuel. He disappeared into the long corridor that led to the multiple security doors and from there to the rooms of the scientists.

It was like we all fumbled in the same darkness, trying to find a light switch, and maybe the house had no electricity, even. And being blind, we shouldn't even be trying. We hardly knew what kind of bush we were sticking our heads into, and yet we just had to stick the head in the bush. But perhaps I shouldn't always have doubted; after all, I was paid to study the reports of the experimenters and try to see some logic in them.

HELENA

I look again at the furniture in my room, all its details. The cameras have been skillfully planted in the corners. They are small but easy to find. Maybe they haven't even tried to hide them, just made them as unnoticeable as possible so I wouldn't be disturbed and worried.

I don't want to have an anxiety attack, although that's ridiculous, too; who is there to be hurt, even if I cry? But some ways have been engraved in my spine as the only proper ways to behave, and a memory from my childhood surges up to pester my mind. I'm in a bus, traveling to my aunt in the mountains; I desperately want to pee but I dare not go and ask the driver to stop. I dare not, for I've been taught that it simply is not done. Finally I leak under myself and my skirt gets thoroughly wet. I only cry after I've run off the bus, when nobody can see me.

They ask me a lot questions. Do I remember what happened before I was brought here? Sure, I was working, quite normally. What about my giving notice, when did that happen? In my old life, when I was working in the veterinarian's practice. So I do remember the practice? Of course, I specialized in the care of small pets, guinea pigs, mice, but also the more ordinary pets like dogs and cats. Did anything special happen there? I can't say, what are you actually looking for with these questions of yours? Did I feel myself somehow different from others?

I realize I'm now in the condition they call my clear moment. And when I have my clear moment, I'm

something more. I'm able to do things that are impossible for them. If I want to enjoy my power, I have to hurry, but where would I fly? Is this instinctive feeling of mine enough, that even if I'm in no danger, I still have to leave, as quickly as possible?

And how do I escape?

MIREIA

The night shift was informed of the current research situation, and whether any problems were expected. That went with the terrain, of course: unexpected results, unforeseen expenses, and decisions that got stuck in the wheels of the university bureaucracy. The temptation to falsify research results was great. Presented on paper, the results sounded so unbelievable they made the sponsors keen to follow the situation on the spot.

I took leave of my colleagues and went in the dressing room to change. I skipped the shower; I could wash at home before going to bed to watch TV.

At first, I noticed the bowl on the floor. It was filled to the brim with dry cat food, somebody's joke, obviously. Then I saw the cat. She stood at the end of the corridor and stared at me, her tail bristled up. I stopped in my tracks, careful to make no sudden moves. Cautiously I tried to shuffle closer, at the same calling to the cat.

I'd never gotten close enough to touch the cat and now, as always, she flung herself behind the corner. I took a few running steps after her, but to no avail. Once again, the ghost of our Institute had gone on her way.

I took up my bag, signed myself out, and closed both the sliding doors and the courtyard gate behind me. I fastened my bicycle with its shopping basket firmly on the fence. I'd already started to struggle with its cranky lock, but on a moment's impulse, left the bicycle leaning against the railing. For once, I could walk home – it was only a couple of kilometers anyway and the evening was clear. Even the full moon had risen in the sky.

The cat shouldn't have been in the building at all. Señor Cañedo had, of course, accused one of us of keeping an illicit pet in public premises, but I don't think anybody had smuggled her in. Who knows but that Cañedo had brought her himself? Or else she really was just an accidental stray cat that had found an open window (unlikely) and noticed an open door to the inner research premises (quite unlikely), and made her way to the apparatus past all security systems (impossible). When the morning shift arrived, they'd found the cat lying among the equipment. The cat had been approached with extreme care. Even if the restrictor under construction was safe and its radiation not dangerous, the cat might harm the sensors. Sleepily, the cat had turned to look at the arrivals, and at just the moment when she was about to be caught by the researchers, she had vanished without a trace.

The boys named the cat Schrödinger, after the scientist who, in his imaginary experiment, put a cat in a box with a death machine. In the thought experiment, the cat was simultaneously both alive and dead, until an observer opened the box and verified what had happened to the animal. The point was that the wave function of every particle oscillated, and it crashed to a certain position

in the very moment it was observed. Quantum theories had for a long time been just that, theory, with ridiculous inherent contradictions and impossibilities; but we'd got ahold of the things the theory described. We'd found people who were capable of controlling the particle-waves, transporting particles into a superposition state, and choosing the probability they wanted among several branching possibilities.

To our knowledge, the cat was the only animal who was able to oscillate. But it was impossible to test her, or to observe what happened in her brain. When you caught her and started to connect her into the research apparatus, she slipped out of your hands and either disappeared behind the bookcases or literally dashed through the wall. Like the imaginary cat in the Schrödinger experiment, our stray was simultaneously both there and not there, but you could never know where and what she was doing.

It was scary to think about what the cat might be able to do. If she could pass through a wall, she could also instantaneously jump through a person. Fortunately, so far she had been content to just disappear and reappear as she liked. There were employees who hadn't seen her even once, and there were people to whom the cat repeatedly showed herself. I'd seen so many miracles in the Institute that I believed the cat to be real and no delusion. The matter need not even be anything kind of lofty and systematic; perhaps the cat was just playing cat-chess. She wanted to see every one else, but no one was allowed to see her. Perhaps that was why she was such a damn good oscillator.

My steps had taken me to my home alley almost without my notice. I glanced at the wine bar in the corner; the first customers were there already, enjoying the evening and good company. I went through the lower gate to the inner courtyard and closed the gate behind me.

My life was like a sordid replica of Helena's situation. I lived alone, imprisoned by my recurring rhythm; after a day off I always returned to my research room. The only difference was that I remembered every day and that could be painful, to remember one's own loneliness. But that was my own conscious choice, anyway; at least that was how I justified it to myself. I did not care about other people and their company. I'd tried dating, but living together had proved impossible. I was irritated by the other's different rhythm of life, by the clothes left on the floor, by the blue cheese in the fridge, and by the closed bathroom door when I wanted a shower. When you lived alone, you could be the mistress of your own life. Or at least imagine that you were.

I made a cup of hot tea and stretched out on the couch for a while. There was a re-run of a popular quiz on the TV, but I couldn't care less about it. I turned the lights off and climbed upstairs to sleep.

I laid my head on the pillow but couldn't get to sleep. At this hour the environment was still in full sway. The woman next door was nagging her husband to fix the washing machine, a TV bawled aloud, and a cricket kept squeaking irksomely right next to my window.

Maybe I ought to do something about my loneliness.

HELENA

I can't get to sleep; little ants of thoughts are darting to and fro in my head. I have these clear moments and I never understand enough to hide or conceal them in time from other people. It might even be that I have nothing more to hide, that they already know everything about me and just want to verify one of their theories. Who's to know? I'm a feather drifting in the room's air, swaying to and fro but finally ending down on the floor. I can't escape, because I'm too airy even to fly away on the wind, I just idle.

And yet I'd like to have at least a small private moment for myself, when I could be myself with dignity, without anybody's watchful gaze observing me. I do not like to be watched. I want to walk among people without anybody seeing me.

I just stare at the ceiling, at the forms of twilight and the darkness oozing in from the window. The night wind waves the curtains, but it's still broodingly hot: there's going to be a thunderstorm at the sea tonight.

The apprehension inside me grows, moment by moment; it seethes and swells.

What will happen if I somehow get out of the door? How do I? And the answers start to roll open in my mind like a bundle of threads with several differently colored bits. Many of them are dark but there are some white ones among them. I just have to hide all the dark threads and concentrate on the white ones, and the door will open.

But I have to be extremely careful. I'm in danger. I can get out of the door, but never out of the building, unless I carry some protection with me. I'm unable to avoid all

those webs and strands interwoven with me, the thoughts of others and the invisible encounters, unless I protect myself from their crossfire.

And for that I absolutely need the cat. She immediately appears close by and jumps at my calf. She's my grey-furred friend, the disabused foundling whose bruises I treated at the clinic. I laugh with happiness and lift her up in my arms, and she stares past me with complete indifference. But she's there, anyway, as my safeguard.

I stroke the cat's head. She pushes at my cheek and her moustache sweeps my skin. *Hurry no time for hello. Must get away.* Yes, but how? The door is definitely locked and the patio window is so small there's no room for me to sneak through it.

What would be the easiest way to get out of the house? How would I get the door open? The cat stares at me as if waiting for something. Then I decide to try the door; perhaps the nurse has forgotten to lock it. The white threads. Thin, silky strands. I tremble with eagerness, for now at last I'm strong enough to make an effort.

– Let's go, I tell the cat. I snatch a coat off the rack and put it over my simple housedress.

I catch the handle in my hand. I pull at the door and it isn't locked. The locking system is obviously playing up and the doors are open for the moment. There is no one in the corridor, but at any time somebody might open a door and rush into the corridor, in front of me, and then I'd have to go back to my room and they might harm me.

Go they not see us. The cat suddenly makes me bold; she radiates power there in my arms. I feel light, I know no one will come, no one will see me, I just need to walk out of

this building and go wherever I want. I walk the way the white threads show me and let them lead me on.

I hurry to the lift, and from afar I see a white-coated man approaching in the opposite direction along the corridor, but he turns a corner just in time and never notices me. That's how easy it is. Lift downstairs, through several other doors. Elation dances to my pulse inside me.

The gate, inner courtyard, outer gate. Movement sensors and alarms, but they are blind and mute, all of them. I laugh at them.

Immediately outside the building, the situation changes. Out here, there are so many crisscrossing thoughts, feelings, and people who may sense me. I turn to look... there is something in the house that has protected me. The cat lifts her head and sniffs at the environment. *Machine do not worry I protect.*

There's an old bicycle in front of the gate, with a lock even, but that opens easily and falls down in bits and pieces. Someone's been trying to snatch the bike and has broken the lock already, but has been disrupted in the middle of it. I put the cat in the shopping basket, get on the bike, and tread on the pedal.

I drive along the winding streets, through an overflow passage, and walk the bike directly to the water's edge. I sit on the sand, to think. The sea beats at my toes. Lightning embroiders the sky but everything's silent; the thunder stays far off over the sea. The lights of a luxury cruiser are visible somewhere far away. The cat sits on the sand looking important and scratches the ground with her forepaws. She sits down to lick herself, before she steps up beside me. *We go.*

I lift her up in my arms and walk along the shoreline. I approach the city by the wharf; the area is full of empty wooden boxes abandoned by the fishmongers, overflowing thrash cans left behind by the sunbathers, garbage bags deposited on the streets and hungry stray cats circling the refuse.

Hurry this area marked.

– All right, let's find more information somewhere.

People stagger along the streets but they all walk by me, ignoring both the cat and me. I wipe the sweat from my brow and drift to the door of a small café; without noticing it, I'm inside. A man with a black moustache is wiping a table with a piece of cloth and spits on it before he lifts the ashtray up and wipes the surface once more. I sit at the corner table by the toilets. Somebody has forgotten a newspaper and a cup of cocoa on the table. I put the cat down on the opposite chair; she licks her paw and stops for a while to stare ahead.

I stir the drink with the spoon and sip the first mouthful. It's hot and burns my mouth but that eases quickly. I'm hungry and I snatch a croissant from the neighboring table.

No time for play must find.

– Yes, yes, I say aloud.

I pick up the afternoon paper and flip through its pages until I find the announcements. Wanted. On sale. To be given away. There they are: several pets. I quickly check on who wants to give away mongrel cats. All the names feel equally unfamiliar. No intuition to help me on.

Search trust us.

– Alright.

I lift my eyes to the opposite wall and punch my finger

randomly at the newspaper. Then I peek at what my forefinger has covered: an announcement from a lady who wants to give up her cat because of allergy. No mention of the cat's age, but perhaps the kitten is just the right age. The place is close to the Tibidado amusement park, where that little boy was saved when he was run over by a car.

The cat jumps into my arms, pushes at my face, and wipes her mouth on my cheeks so hard that her chin hits mine, sharply. I startle. Now and then the cat seems deaf; I think that's because she's muffling all the sounds around herself – she likes to enjoy peace and quiet.

I step out onto the street. Imperceptibly, night has turned to morning. I walk to the bus stop by the park and bus number 435 comes, well-timed. I enter from the back door and entrench myself in the rear corner. The early birds load themselves in, but the bus fills from the front. I'm left to sit alone.

They must already be feverishly searching for me, but they cannot find me yet. I jump off the bus, walk up a steep street, and everything becomes crystal clear. A little blue tram is creaking down the street, its maw filled with tourists peeking out from the windows. It's exotic, the city's only working tram.

The cat stretches, fretful. She doesn't want to crash, either, because she knows how miserable it feels to crash. She just wants to be home and safe as I do. But there's simply no time for moodiness now. *Must find kittens.*

The kittens were born in the spring. The cat was recuperating from her wounds, and no one in the clinic had noticed either from x-rays or heart-films that she was pregnant. I'd been on night duty when the cat started to

drop them, five altogether, five little eyeless balls.

– We are very close now, I tell the cat, and now I'm actually running. I smile, because now everything is so easy and simple. I know why I'm like this; I know what I want.

Time is against us, but we have to keep fighting, time after time until we overcome. Fortunately, I'm now quicker than anybody else; in my multiple state I'm able to choose any probability, pick out the alternatives I like, and combine them to a reality favorable to myself. But there are so many observers around that I feel their perceptions and eyes battering at my body. The cat protects us both; she has created a space around me where all beings observing us become part of her world.

Every time someone notices me, the cat has to support the weight of one more factor. She knows her business, but she is not indefatigable.

Then my way stops. There's a barricade on the street to Tibidado, and the workmen have drilled the asphalt open. The crossfire of eyes is too much; it's impossible to pass unnoticed. If I want to get on the hill, the only way will be to take a car somewhere or go to the metro station and drive one stop sideways. Underground.

MIREIA

I rang the doorbell, a little nervous. A white haired woman, perhaps in her seventies, opened the door. I shook hands with Senóra Sanchez and she asked me in to sit at her kitchen table.

Little espresso cups had already been laid on the table

and the senóra went to turn on the gas stove.

– So nice for him to find a home, the woman said. – I got him from the house for lost and found animals; I'd have liked to keep him, but it seems I'm allergic. I get short of breath and the doctor recommended that I ought to give up my animals.

The water was boiling and the woman prepared the espresso with a pressure cooker. We drank the coffee and chatted on this and that. Finally, the senóra went to the rear room and brought out a little furry ball to me in her arms. The cat was charming. His eyes were still greenish and he had a black spot on his nose. He was rather small, perhaps four months old. I held him in my arms and he immediately rolled himself into a ball and started purring.

– He's so sociable. And he only approves of canned food.

– I can afford to buy him whatever he needs.

– Fine, fine, the woman mumbled and poured more coffee in the cups. – I think such a fine cat deserves a proper home.

The woman started to talk about why she found the cat unusually intelligent: how he seemed to understand every word, and look so attentively out the window.

– He warned me of the accident to that boy, she said.

– Of what?

– When that boy was run over by a car, she continued.

– He pushed me up here to the window and we both saw how the boy flew. It was me who phoned the ambulance there...

I looked carefully at the cat, but outwardly there seemed to be nothing special about him. I offered money,

but the woman wouldn't accept any. She even gave me a basket to carry the kitten home.

Getting a cat had been a sudden fancy of mine. When I was staying awake through the night, looking out the window at the lightning-streaked sky, I realized there was no need for me to be completely alone. I could always get a pet, and why not a cat. They were independent and easy to care for; a kitten could manage even a long shift in my apartment.

I said goodbye to the woman, and was soon standing in a crowd at the metro station. The kitten kept mewling and turning restlessly round in the basket. I thrust my finger to him through a slit in the basket, but he drew back to the other side. He would soon get used to me.

The station controller announced that the train would unexpectedly arrive on another track. I started walking along with the crowd. I glanced behind my shoulder and bumped into someone. We both fell down. I stammered a quick excuse and stooped to help the woman up. It was Helena.

Helena's gaze turned inwards and her look became distant and absent.

– This can't be happening, I said and snatched at her hand.

A stranger stopped by my side and asked whether we needed help.

– She's my mother, I answered quickly. – She has a problem with her memory.

– I'm sorry to hear that, he said.

I led Helena aside from the crowd and seated her on the station bench. She held my hand, her eyes half shut;

she hardly understood where she was, in fact. I asked her how she was, but she only babbled something. Helena had even forgotten how to form intelligible words.

– Why in the world do you wish to get away? Why don't you stay close to the restrictor where you can be yourself, at least for a while?

But Helena did not answer; she just stared ahead with unseeing eyes.

What must it feel like to crash? In a way she died every time it happened. When suddenly the greatness she must have felt changed over to ordinary life. Perhaps the amnesia was lucky in a way, ignorance of all that she had lost.

I'd now have an excellent opportunity to change the progress of events. I could push her into the first train to arrive on the station, push her towards the unknown and let fate lead her. Or I could hide her in my own home; care for her where other eyes would not see her. If she indeed had dementia, it would eventually weaken her health until she'd no longer even be able to breathe by herself, and she would mercifully perish by suffocation.

– What do you actually want? I asked Helena. – Oh, how I wish you could tell me what you want out of life, yourself.

But Helena did not answer; she just kept swaying where she sat. The passersby were looking at us and I affected a smile at them. It was only then I remembered the kitten I'd acquired. The basket lay by the bench, but the hatch was open and the kitten had disappeared. I didn't even want to think or to feel guilty; the kitten had run away. He had either been trampled by people, or he would join the mass of the city's stray cats.

I fished up my phone and punched the familiar number. After three rings, Manuel answered.

– You can't guess where I found Helena this time.

I told him the place and Manuel promised to come and fetch us. He advised us to stay where we were so that there'd be no surprises.

Helena was still in a state of disorientation; she would not recover before she got under the shelter of the Institute and the restrictor. The restrictor prevented an observer from crashing the wave function. Its field destabilized our one and only reality to a state where an observation had not yet made the event real. The apparatus made it possible for me to observe Helena with my gaze, without her crashing. But we had not yet been able to make the field strong enough to protect our patients outside the building, and every time Helena escaped outside, she had to protect herself alone. She had, however, grown more and more skilled with her escapades.

Manuel arrived in half an hour. I pushed Helena into the back compartment of the van and went to sit by Manuel. He tried to pump me for information about how I'd happened to surprise Helena in action, but I cut my answers short.

We received a cheerful welcome and I had to tell how I'd collided with Helena. Salvatore had already run through all the videotapes, and once again the recording had broken down before the escape. The method of escape was still a mystery. Perhaps it was one of those questions that would never be solved.

– We might try a new kind of test on Helena, Salvatore said.

Salvatore was excited, the research had taken a huge leap forward, he said. He thought the restrictor functioned more stably. I smiled at him politely, said a few trite sentences and went back outside for air. It was siesta time, the screens were drawn shut in front of the shops, and only a few canteens were keeping their doors open. A market vendor had left a pair of unused sandals on the street. I tried them on and they seemed to fit perfectly. I left my old pair lying on the street.

I wandered into a nearby café and ordered a pint. I leaned on the counter and sipped the froth. A shiver went down my spine. The presence of other people felt disconcerting and I withdrew to the corner table, to a place where I'd be in shadow.

Next to me, a man in black was playing the slot machine. He tapped angrily at the levers, finally punching the machine, and then marched out. I walked to the contraption and pushed at the start – the man had forgotten a twenty-cent coin in the machine. With the first spin I got three oranges and the machine gave a cheerful tinkle. I was delighted: since the machine wanted to give me money I'd take whatever I could get, of course!

When the pot reached twenty euros, I took the winnings out and crammed the coins into my pocket. At that very moment something brushed my calf. I startled and turned to look. It was my own kitten, and I didn't even have time to feel surprised before I stooped down to pick the kitten up. Cats seemed to bring good luck!

Want safety where mother? Safety, yes. In a daze I walked back to the Institute, with the cat in my arms. As soon as I got to the coolness of the lobby, the cat jumped off my

arms and vanished in the middle of his flight, and only then did I understand what I had actually found at the old lady's house.

HELENA

I close the window shades so that the scorching afternoon sun will not blind my eyes. The cat purrs in my lap and I caress her head, softly.

– I am Helena. Helena García Luna, I tell the cat, and she stares me directly in the eyes. She understands me; at least that's how I feel.

We need each other.

I hear a meow from the floor and a kitten pushes himself up in my lap, too. Where did he appear from? The door to my room is closed. There is a corridor behind the door, and after that, doors and a lift and alarms and the stairs out. And people one must beware of.

I make an effort, and remember that there are yet more kittens left. They did all survive. The veterinarian said it was a miracle, there were signs of torture in the mother; her fur had been shaved from the crown and the abdomen, just as they do with experimental animals.

But the kittens are all right. Somehow I just knew that whatever happened, those cats would survive. And they dream cat dreams.

Seek next hurry hurry.

– Yes, let's go seek, I say, and at the same moment I see in front of me a bundle of threads with black strands and a few white ones. I choose a thread that has the door to my room open at its end.

The Otherling

published in the magazine *Usva International* (2007)

White Threads

published in the anthology *It Came from the North* (Cheeky
Frawg Books 2013)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Leinonen (b. 1973) is a journalist, editor and author, and active in the Finnish SF/Fantasy community. She is the founder and editor-in-chief of the online magazine “Usva” (The Mist), which publishes Finnish speculative fiction.

Anne Leinonen has co-authored several YA titles with Eija Lappalainen and their trilogy “Children of the Frost” (*Routasisarukset*) quickly formed into their main body of work after the first part was nominated for the most prestigious Finnish children’s and YA literature prize, the Finlandia Junior. “Children of the Frost” is a dystopian adventure trilogy in a vein similar to the works of Ursula K. Le Guin.

Leinonen’s short fiction has also won multiple awards (the Atorox-prize for year’s best sf/f short story three times) and her works are noted for the reoccurring theme of “crossing of the borders of different worlds”.

PRIZES

- 2000, Winner of WSOY’s novel for young readers -contest with “Lokkeja rakastava veli” (In love with the seagulls), written with Eija Laitinen
- 2003 Winner of the Portti writing contest for best sf/fantasy short story with “Valkeita lankoja” (White Threads: Stories from Other Realities)
- 2004 Winner of the Atorox-prize for year’s best sf/fantasy short story with “Valkeita lankoja” (White Threads: Stories from Other Realities)
- 2007 Winner of the Atorox-prize for year’s best sf/fantasy short story with “Toisinkainen”(The Otherling) –
- 2011 Winner of the Atorox-prize for year’s best sf/fantasy short story with “Nahat”(The Skinner) – Atorox is the oldest SF/F prize in Finland
- 2011 Shortlisted for the Finlandia Junior prize, 2011, Routasisarukset (Children of the Frost), written with Eija Laitinen
- Finlandia Junior is the most prestigious children’s and YA literature prize in Finland
- 2012 Shortlisted for the Sci-fi Book of the Year prize, 2012, Routasisarukset (Children of the Frost), written with Eija Laitinen
- 2015 Shortlisted for the Sci-fi Book of the Year prize, 2014, *I Can Hear the Song of the Distant* (Kuulen laulun kaukaisen), written with Petri Laine, Kuoriaiskirjat

NOVELS AND COLLECTIONS

- 2015 *The Brass Woman* (Vaskinainen), Osuuskumma
2015 *The Matchbox God* (Pienen rasian jumala), Atena
2014 *I Can Hear the Song of the Distant* (Kuulen laulun kaukaisen),
with Petri Laine, Kuoriaiskirjat
2014 *The Village* (Ilottomien ihmisten kylä), WSOY
2013 *The Painter of Line* (Viivamaalari), Atena
2013 *Machine Gods* (Konejumalat) Part III of the Children of the
Frost Trilogy, with Eija Lappalainen, WSOY
2012 *Sand Soldiers* (Hiekkasotilaat) Part II of the Children of the
Frost Trilogy, with Eija Lappalainen, WSOY
2011 *Children of the Frost* (Routasisarukset) Part I of the Children of
the Frost Trilogy, with Eija Lappalainen, WSOY
2011 *Iron Heart*, (Rautasydän), with Miina Supinen, Helsinki-Kirjat
2007 *Devoted Souls*, with Eija Lappalainen, WSOY
2006 *White Threads: Stories From Other Realities* (Valkeita lankoja),
WSOY
2005 *Mirror Image Love* (Peilikuvarakaus), with Eija Lappalainen,
WSOY
2003 *Saga*, with Eija Lappalainen, WSOY
2001 *Band with Four Songs* (Neljän biisin bändi), with Eija
Lappalainen, WSOY
2000 *In love with the Seagulls* (Lokkeja rakastava veli), with Eija
Lappalainen, WSOY

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Anne Leinonen is a journalist, editor and author, and active in the Finnish SF/Fantasy community. Her short fiction has won multiple awards, and she moves effortlessly within and between the genres of science fiction, fantasy and horror. Her works are noted for the recurring themes of otherness and crossing the borders of different worlds.

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