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Alexander Pererwa

The Cup of Galfar



Alderosa's Daughter

Alexander Pererva

**The Cup of Galfar.
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«Издательские решения»

Pererva A.

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There are many inhabited worlds in the Universe. Not somewhere there, on distant stars, but very close, in another spatio-temporal reality. Galfar — one of such worlds — intends to establish his dominance in the Universe, using the destructive power of the energy of negative human emotions, which, as it turned out, can be accumulated. Allie, a girl from Earth, involuntarily finds herself drawn into a dizzying cycle of events developing around the eternal struggle of Good and Evil.

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The Cup of Galfar Alderosa's Daughter Alexander Pererva

Dedicated to my daughters – Ira and Katya

Anna Gandy *Translator*

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1. A CURIOUS PET

The sun was shining and sending its luminous rays through the cloudless blue spring sky. It was basking in this crystal-clear azure abyss and steadily gaining in power and brightness. The last remaining islands of snow were shrinking, growing dark, hiding out in the shadows of buildings and dark alleys. Streams of warm air were rising from the ground like shimmering clear pillars, and it was funny to watch the outlines of distant objects break and dance in the warm air.

The air was filled with the twitter of birds, pedestrians' footsteps and voices, the hum of an airplane far up in the sky. All of these sounds were clear and loud, as if someone had suddenly pulled out an earplug.

And then there were, of course, the smells – the smells of melting snow, of moist earth coming awake, of budding leaves. This delicious aroma of spring was flooding the room through the open window.

Allie sighed and turned away from the window. She wasn't feeling particularly happy. How could anyone be happy while sitting at home sick on such a glorious day? Catching a cold in the fall or winter is a totally different story. That's when you can get as sick as you wish. But, catching a cold in the spring was ridiculously bad timing. Although, to be honest, Allie did get sick in the fall and winter too. She couldn't boast of robust health. Her weakest spot was the ears – ear infections followed one after another in quick succession: right ear, left ear, and sometimes both ears together.

Right now Allie sat by the window with a warm compress on her right ear. There was an open book on the table in front of her, but she had a hard time focusing on the reading. There was too much going on in the world outside her window! She heard familiar voices. Allie's third-grade classmates were walking to school. Allie watched them wistfully. Now they would turn the corner and immediately pull off their hats, stuff them in their backpacks and unbutton their coats. Allie longed to join them and skip-hop along the almost-dry pavement with her coat unbuttoned and her face bathed in the warm spring breeze.

Allie sighed again and buried herself in her book. Soon she heard the front door open. Mom was back from the market. She walked into the room unzipping her jacket, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks glowing.

"Allie, it's so beautiful outside!"

"Yeah, I can see that," Allie muttered. "Did you just play a game of hopscotch?"

"No, I just bought a fish! Totally by chance. Imagine, live fish at our little local market – unheard of!"

Allie got up and followed Mom into the kitchen. There it was, in the sink – a fat-looking fish about a foot and a half long, with large prickly fins and bulging red eyes.

"Look, there it is." Mom was putting on the apron. "Got the last one in the tank. Jean was right behind me in line. You can't imagine the ruckus she raised when she was told that they had run out. Unbelievable! She has probably sent them all fishing for more."

Jean, a woman of undetermined age and nondescript appearance, lived in their apartment building and worked either as a building maintenance manager or a concierge (no one knew for sure). She was known for her cranky moods and mean temperament, which earned her the nickname Mean Jean with the neighborhood kids.

"Mom, what kind of fish is this?" Allie tried to pry its mouth open with her finger. "Is it a carp or a silver carp?"

"Doesn't look like it." Mom approached the sink with a knife in hand and gave the fish an appraising look. Then she shrugged.

"Well, could be a Chinese carp or some other kind of hybrid. Doesn't matter really, a fish is a fish. As long as it's not full of bones."

At that moment Allie succeeded in pulling the fish's lower jaw down, and suddenly they could see that its mouth was filled back to the gills with pretty large sharp teeth.

"Wow! Just like a shark!" Allie pulled back her hand.

Mom just shook her head in surprise and turned on the tap, filling the sink with water.

Lemonade walked noiselessly into the kitchen. He was a big fluffy cat with luxurious tiger-striped fur, lazy as can be and always on the lookout for a treat. He gave a big yawn and started his bathing routine, casting a questioning look around him every once in a while. He must have been asleep in the closet, as usual.

"Smelled the fish, huh?" Allie squatted down and gently pulled the cat's ear.

The cat shook his head in indignation and moved aside. His whole look seemed to communicate that he was deeply offended by the suspicion.

Then Mom cried:

"Why, it is still alive! It's moving its fins."

Allie came closer. Indeed, the fish had come back to life in the water: its gills were rising and falling, its mouth was opening and closing mutely, and its round eyes seemed to stare at the people.

Mom tried to pick up the fish, but it wriggled out and fell back into the sink, splashing everyone around with a fountain of cold water. At that point Lemonade lost his patience, jumped onto the stool by the sink, and, standing on his hind legs, put his front paws on the edge of the sink. Just then the fish twisted itself again and jumped up out of the water, slapping the poor cat on the nose with its tail. The cat howled, rolled off the stool and sat down on the floor, snorting and licking his chops. His eyes were focused on the sink and were glowing a menacing green.

"No, I can't do it." Mom dropped the knife. "To skin it alive is just too much for me. We'll have to wait for Dad. He'll deal with it."

Right then Allie had an idea. She could find some use for the fish, that is – some use for entertainment.

"Mom, can I let the fish swim in the bath tub in the meantime?" she asked hopefully.

"Well, I don't think it can swim anymore." Mom shrugged. "But never mind, you can try anyway. Just make sure you don't get yourself wet in the cold water."

In half an hour the tub was filled, and the fish was very carefully transferred there in a plastic bowl. To Allie's great joy, the fish quickly came to its senses and started actively making itself at home, trying even to swim laps in such small quarters. From time to time the fish would freeze, stick out its huge head with bulging eyes, and, gently moving its fins, open and close its mouth mutely as if trying to say something.

"It's time to have some fun," Allie thought and, bringing a pencil, tied a thick string onto one end. It made a sturdy fishing pole. There was no worm to be found in the house, so a piece of candy had to make do as bait. Allie thought that the bait looked irresistible.

At last, the fun fishing commenced. Lemonade turned out to be its most active participant. He climbed onto the wooden rack laid across the bathtub and was watching with great interest the maneuvers of the live silver torpedo attempting to catch the bait. But every time the fish was about to get it, Allie jerked the fishing pole away, and the catch once again escaped the fish. Then the fun started all over again. This whole game reminded Allie of kittens chasing a toy on a string.

Sometimes the fish swam right under the rack. Every time Lemonade would stick his paw through the cracks and try to reach the fish with his claws, but it never worked. The fish would immediately go deeper, making sure to splash its tail on the water and soak the unfortunate fisher. The cat would snort in disdain and shake himself dry. Allie would laugh heartily. In a word, it was great fun.

But then Mom came in, and of course everyone got in trouble. Part of the bathtub water had somehow managed to transfer itself onto the floor and Allie's dress. Allie and Lemonade were firmly told to leave the bathroom immediately.

“And you,” Mom told the fish, “Dad will deal with you tonight.”

Allie’s Dad was a test pilot. Allie was very proud of him because her Dad’s job was so rare and dangerous, a job for real men, as Dad would say. Many kids in her third grade class were jealous of Allie and treated her with involuntary respect, for it wasn’t every day that you met someone whose dad was a test pilot. Allie realized that she shared in her Dad’s fame, and, naturally, she enjoyed it. But she tried really hard not to get stuck up, which made her classmates look up to her even more.

Allie’s Dad loved his job because he loved vehicles and speed. Unlike what most people thought, he didn’t have to fly airplanes very often, so most of the time he had to study in minute detail the construction of the latest aircraft models and train on special flight simulators that imitated a real cockpit. Due to such short hours in the air he had to, in his own words, quench his thirst for speed by racing cars. That’s right, on top of being an ace pilot, he was a first-rate award-winning race car driver. That’s what everyone thought – his friends, coworkers, and, of course, Allie (Dad often brought her along to watch him race). Everyone thought that – except Mom, who said that Dad took part in that dangerous business with only one end in mind – to escape his household duties. However, when Allie saw her Mom’s glowing eyes when she greeted Dad at home after another racing victory, she would start to doubt the sincerity of Mom’s words. She finally decided that Mom was just saying that to help Dad keep his feet on the ground.

That night Dad had no training sessions at the race track, so he was home early – and immediately charged with a fish-cleaning assignment. He reluctantly dropped a handful of fresh newspapers in the chair and meekly made his way to the bathroom, led by Allie who was excited to share the news of the day. Lemonade was following them, rubbing against their legs and casting eager glances at Dad.

“Well, let’s see your shark.”

Dad’s words betrayed undisguised irony. But, once he saw the monstrous fish making lively laps around the bathtub, the irony gave way to surprise.

“Oh wow, quite a curious specimen.”

At that moment, Dad snapped his fingers and his eyes lit up with a familiar gleeful spark.

“Listen, kid, this gives me an awesome idea.”

Allie clapped happily, anticipating some new kind of fun. Dad must have come up with something clever, he was so good at that.

Dad’s idea was the following. Since the fish was feeling well and wasn’t about to pass away any time soon, quite the opposite, there was really no sense in killing it off right then when it would only feed three persons. They could easily wait a couple of weeks and feed it to grow big enough for a whole party of guests at a Grand Fish Feast. Dad immediately summoned the family council and proposed to vote on the suggestion. Allie showed her enthusiastic support – she loved having people over, and offered to be the Chief Fish Feeder. Mom withheld her vote, being doubtful about the success of the plan and expressing her concern that Dad had come up with it in order to dodge his chores again. Lemonade was the only one firmly against the idea. He somehow felt he wasn’t going to enjoy any fish that night, and he was protesting loudly. As a result, Dad’s idea was approved by a majority vote. Allie raced to the kitchen to grab a big slice of bread and took it to the bathroom to feed to the fish. The fish devoured the offering with great appetite.

“Well, looks like it’s going to work,” Dad said. He patted Allie on the cheek and went to read his papers.

That night another thing happened, quite insignificant at first sight. Allie realized its full significance only afterwards, when IT happened... But, let’s not jump ahead of the story.

About 8 o’clock in the evening, when it was already dark outside, their doorbell rang. It was Jean. The visit itself wasn’t that unusual because every once in a while she stopped by to get Dad’s help with replacing a lightbulb in the hallway. That was the reason for her visit now as well.

Dad grabbed a stool and a new lightbulb, and then stepped outside the door and stared at the softly glowing light fixture above.

“Jean, you got mixed up. Everything seems to be working fine.”

“What do you mean, working fine?” Mean Jean unabashedly charged an attack. “That there lightbulb, not replaced this whole month! Ready to go out any minute.”

Dad was about to open his mouth to protest, when the hallway went completely dark. He only humphed in surprise and went back to get a flashlight.

“Just as I said! Would’ve tripped all over yourselves in the dark and blamed Jean, as always.” Mean Jean gave Mom and Allie, who had come out into the hallway, a triumphant look.

“See here, Irene,” Jean turned to Mom, “that there fish today, at the market... Missed out on it... I bet it was good, eh?”

“Well, I haven’t cooked it yet, you see,” Mom nodded towards the bathroom. “It’s taking a bath in there.”

The bathroom door stood ajar, and you could hear the splashing of water inside. Jean popped her head in the bathroom and clucked her tongue, awestruck. Allie piped in then and proudly announced their grand fish-feeding plan. Mom smiled shyly:

“Oh, don’t listen to her. She and Dad, always up to something.”

“Eh, I say. Not bad.” Jean was feeling happier for some reason, and that concerned look on her face had gone away. “Nice plan. Well, then, here you go!”

She reached inside her vest pocket (she wore that vest all year round), searched for a minute, and finally fished out a grubby-looking piece of candy covered in crumbs.

“Will it eat that?” Allie doubtfully fumbled with the candy.

“Eh, but why not? That there, it’s good candy, tasted it meself. If the fish don’t eat it, you eat it yourself,” generously offered Mean Jean.

By that time Dad was done with the lightbulb and was replacing the fixture. Jean popped in to look at the fish once again and reluctantly said goodbye. Mom thanked her for the candy and promised to invite her over for fish. After that, the appeased concierge finally left. The fish swallowed the candy with great delight. You could hear the crunch clearly from under the water.

For the following three days Allie stayed home, although her earache was almost gone. But now it didn’t feel like imprisonment anymore. This new project enthralled Allie so much that she could spend hours in the bathroom playing with her new pet. The fish was so much fun and, Allie thought, so smart, that the girl decided to train it like a dolphin. However, unlike dolphins, the fish had an awful temper. It was clearly carnivorous, and its aggression occasionally baffled Allie. For instance, Allie attempted once to get her pet to swim through a plastic ring. As an encouragement, she was holding a piece of sausage in her hand. She got distracted just for one moment, and immediately the fish jumped out of the water and bit into the sausage. Allie shrieked and let go of the meat; the fish with its catch dropped in the water. Allie could feel its cold hard teeth on her fingers for a long time afterwards. Another half-inch or so and she would’ve experienced their sharpness.

Allie didn’t tell her parents about the incident, rightly thinking that Mom wouldn’t appreciate these developments and would most certainly put an end to the grand experiment. However, it proved impossible to cover up the fish’s malicious tendencies for long. It was all Lemonade’s fault.

During the three days he hung around the bathroom near Allie, jealously watching her and protesting with loud meows every time she removed him from the room because he was in Allie’s way. It was hard to say whether he was curious about what Allie was doing with the fish or the fish itself was of gastronomical interest to him.

One evening, the whole family had dinner in the living room. Unlike his usual manner, Lemonade, who would always be there for an occasion like that, was missing. Dad was mildly surprised. However, a few minutes later the mystery was solved. The dinner was almost over when

there was a loud crash in the bathroom followed by a piercing cat wail. When Dad and Allie flew into the bathroom, they saw a heart-wrenching, albeit comical, scene.

One end of the wooden rack had slipped into the bathtub, so that the rack was standing straight up on its end, halfway submerged in water. The cat, soaked to the bones, eyes crazed, was desperately clawing at the rack trying to climb towards the top out of the water. But he was unable to do it, because his tail was firmly gripped between the iron jaws of the ferocious guard dog who pretended to be a fish. The water was bubbling up around them, splashing up to the ceiling. It was clear that the fish meant business, and had the help been even a little late, things could have gone rather sour for Lemonade.

When Dad finally freed the poor cat from his catch, the cat was so exhausted that he could only whimper pitifully and roll his eyes.

“Some fish hunter you are, aren’t you?” Dad wrapped a blanket around the cat and handed him to Allie.

“All right, that’s enough!” Mom appeared in the bathroom. “This whole thing has to stop today.” She gave Dad a look. He, in turn, looked at Allie and shrugged. Allie knew that no arguments would help, heaved a sigh and went to blow-dry the cat.

She did not go into the kitchen that night. Strangely enough, Allie had gotten attached to the fish over the last few days and was understandably upset now. She was sorry for the creature, sad and even a little mad at her parents. At the same time, she realized that an end like this had been inevitable, but she refused to watch it, not to mention taking any part in it.

Meanwhile, Dad cleaned and gutted the fish, and was released to go watch a soccer game on TV. Mom scooped up the fish’s innards and was about to put them in the trash can when she caught a glimpse of something shiny inside the fish’s large stomach. She cut it open with a knife, and a second later she was holding a transparent cylinder about half an inch thick and five inches long. When she washed it off, she noticed that it was made up of five shorter cylinders apparently glued together. The little cylinder on one end was clear, and the others were softly tinted green, yellow, blue and pink.

Mom raised her hand closer to the lamp. When the light hit the cylinder, it sparkled with a rainbow of dancing colors. Mom felt all of a sudden that she had seen something like that before. She tried to hold on to the elusive memory, but the next moment the feeling was gone. Mom smiled: this little thing, however useless, was quite pretty and would definitely comfort Allie.

Mom went into the living room and announced her wonderful find. Dad just nodded, keeping his eyes on the TV and most likely missing the meaning of what she had said. Allie kept pouting and pretended not to care, but the sparkle in her eyes made it clear to Mom that Allie was hooked and wouldn’t keep pouting for much longer. But she decided not to rush things and just left the cylinder on the coffee table and went back to the kitchen to cook the fish. Everything went just as she had expected, and five minutes later Allie, forgetting her sorrows, was playing with her new toy.

In the morning, fried fish was served for breakfast. Allie refused to eat, while Dad said:

“It’s up to you, kid, but I think you are being a baby. You see, every person faces a choice every once in a while, and it’s important to make sure that the choice we make is the right one. I, for one, believe that it is right that we should eat this fish, not that the fish should eat us.”

Saying that, Dad put another appetizingly crunchy-golden bite into his mouth. His voice was dead serious, only the laughing corners of his eyes gave away his mirth. Allie humphed, and Dad continued:

“Well, Lemonade at least felt its sharp teeth on his own skin. If we hadn’t made it there in time, who knows how it would’ve ended. And then, who would’ve been its next victim?”

Dad made a dramatic pause, and Allie burst into giggles.

Hearing his own name, Lemonade walked into the kitchen and stared lovingly at Dad.

“Ah, there you are, our dearest Lemonade! You are really and truly avenged. The enemy is vanquished, fried and... served up on a plate for you.”

With these words Dad put a plate in front of Lemonade with a big juicy piece of fried fish. To everyone's surprise, Lemonade turned away from the plate and seemed to make a face, and continued to stare at Dad with his green eyes.

“Well, this looks like a conspiracy!” Dad shrugged. “All right, suit yourselves, I need to go to work.”

When he was almost out the door, Mom handed him a container with a few pieces of fish.

“Can you drop this off at Jean's? We promised her some of the fish.”

“Yes, ma'am!” Dad gave Mom a mock salute, kissed her and Allie and left.

At that moment, Allie did not even imagine that this door that Dad had shut behind him would close her off from the familiar real life, a life not much different than any other ten-year-old girl's, and would open a whole new world to her – a world that was vast, strange, and full of wonderful, mysterious and sometimes frightening things. It was a world that could open up to every person in one way or another. However, it was a rare person that would pick up on its subtle signals; in fact, most people, scared by the unknown, would hurry to cut the barely visible thread that was leading them into that world.

And now, the mysterious face of the Unknown was revealing itself to a little ten-year-old girl.

2. OF THINGS TERRIBLE AND MAGICAL

Strange things began to happen one hour later when Dad unexpectedly came home. He looked somewhat dejected. It turned out he had been banned from flying planes that day, because he had not passed a reaction time test. That was unheard of, since Dad's physical abilities were legendary. And now this – he was banned from flying!

Allie was very upset, maybe even more upset than Dad himself. But the most amazing thing about it all was Mom's reaction, or, better say, the utter lack of any reaction. She continued to apply makeup in front of the mirror. Only then did Allie realize that Mom had been sitting in that very spot for almost the whole hour, since Dad had left for work. That was her Mom, who would never spend more than five minutes on makeup (to be honest, with Mom's looks she could easily go without).

Allie just shrugged, perplexed, and went to her own room. At that moment, she was not really alarmed. She just started to feel a tiny bit of uneasiness – the kind that feels like a little pebble in a shoe that makes one slightly uncomfortable. Soon enough Allie forgot all about it. She was playing with her new toy – the colorful cylinder that had been found in the fish's belly. All of a sudden, the seemingly solid cylinder split apart with a soft click, and the blue disk that had been attached to one end floated in the air about an inch away from the cylinder. You could easily stick your finger in the gap – there was nothing there but air. At the same time, the cylinder and the disk retained a mysterious unbroken bond that was keeping them together. Then the blue disk began to glow. At first Allie didn't notice that because she was playing with the toy near the sunlit window. But when she tried (without success) to pull apart the cylinder and the disk and squeezed the latter in her fist, she saw the soft blue light shining in between her fingers. She took the cylinder to a dark corner of the room and placed it on the shelf above her bed where she kept her toys. Then she stepped back, cocked her head and enjoyed the effect. The cylinder with the glowing disk that floated above it looked like some kind of fantastic candle burning with a steady blue flame.

Allie hurried out to tell her parents of her wonderful discovery. And then she felt a new pang of anxiety in her heart. Something bizarre was happening to her parents: the most obvious change was that they seemed not to notice each other, even when they happened to pass right by one another. It looked like they just did not see either each other, or Allie. When she tried to ask them a question, she had to repeat it several times until their eyes, staring past her at something else, reflected understanding. Even then, the answer was usually random. Even their voices seemed to have lost all color and feeling.

Dad was, for the most part, sitting motionless on the couch, staring at the same page in his book. Mom was standing by the window just as motionless. It looked as if she was searching intently for something outside. But when Allie came up to her and, taking her hand, looked up in her face, she saw that Mom's eyes were closed. The girl felt the fear rising in her, and she tried to wake Mom up by pulling her hand. But the hand remained rigid and unyielding, like a piece of wood. At last, Mom opened her eyes and turned to Allie. For a few seconds her eyes were fixed at the girl with a frozen expression, then something moved in them, and a faint smile touched Mom's lips. Another couple of seconds and she patted Allie on the cheek and walked towards the kitchen. All of Mom's movements seemed uncertain, as if caught in slow motion.

Allie felt a little better, but she realized that something was wrong with her parents. Maybe they had caught some unknown virus and she should call the doctor. But, however strange their behavior was, they did not look ill in the least and had even more color in their faces than usual. That is why Allie, trying to regain her composure, kept telling herself: "It's nothing. It'll go away soon. They'll come out of it. I'll just go play in my room for an hour, and then they'll be fine."

But an hour passed, and nothing changed – neither for the better, nor for the worse. The only thing was, Mom and Dad's movements seemed to be slowing down even more. To get away from

this depressing sight, Allie was mostly staying in her room. Lemonade, who apparently had realized something was wrong, was there too. Unlike himself, he was timidly clinging close to Allie. She could not make head or tail of such behavior but was somewhat comforted by the cat's presence.

Evening came. Any hope for Mom and Dad's speedy recovery was gone. For the past three hours, Allie hadn't left her room at all. The last time she did was because of hunger. She went to the kitchen and checked out the pots and pans for dinner, but there was none – no one had cooked it. There were only three pieces of fried fish left in the skillet. Allie put the pieces on a plate and was just getting some bread, when she saw a fluffy striped lightning flash by and heard the crash of dishes. Her dinner was on the floor, covered in shattered plate shards.

"Nasty Lemon!" Allie exclaimed with tears in her eyes and raised the loaf of bread as if to throw it at the cat. Lemonade darted toward the door, trampling on the fish and ruining it altogether.

Allie had to content herself with a piece of bread with apricot jam and a glass of milk. When the hunger pangs were gone, she felt a new wave of anxiety. She was sorry for Mom, Dad and herself. Allie felt a bitter lump in her throat and, unable to control herself any longer, cried inconsolably.

Meanwhile, it was already time to go to bed. Allie was still sobbing quietly, but, judging wisely to see what morning time would bring, began to get ready for bed. When she got under the covers, Lemonade immediately found a spot for himself at her feet. The presence of this warm living creature was comforting to Allie. Her eyes were finally dry, only a few teardrops still hung on her eyelashes. The drops were catching and reflecting the blue light of the forgotten cylinder that was still burning like a candle on Allie's toy shelf. Thousands of many-colored stars were twinkling and shimmering before her eyes. Some of them would begin to grow bigger and take up her whole range of vision, and then all of a sudden they would burst into myriads of sparkling droplets. Allie felt like there was no more room, no more apartment, nothing but the shimmering and glowing space and herself flying through it, bathing in its warm and lovely rays of color. She felt incredibly light and peaceful to the core of her being.

She could not tell how long her wonderful flight lasted – it could have been one minute or several hours. And then something changed. There appeared a black dot ahead that began to grow steadily. The feeling of serene flying was replaced by the sensation of an inevitable fall. Allie had to catch her breath. The black dot ahead was rapidly growing larger and changing its shape. It reminded Allie of something familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Then, in one moment she saw it: with its fins ominously flared and its enormous fang-studded mouth gaping, the familiar fish was rapidly approaching Allie. Somewhere deep inside the thought lurked that it could not be – Mom had already cooked it! But all thoughts were immediately crowded out by the ice-cold terror. The fish kept growing in size with every second. Its unblinking eyes were glowing red and staring at the girl with a menacing, evil look. It made Allie's heart shrink in fear. The fish's mouth was stretching into a nasty grin, reminding the girl of someone. And then she realized who it was – Mean Jean! It was Mean Jean herself, wearing her familiar old vest and rain boots. With the fishy grin on her face, Mean Jean was stretching her arms with long gnarly fingers towards the girl. "Allie's in trouble, deep, deep trouble", it was either Mean Jean hissing, or the phrase was painfully reverberating in Allie's brain.

Then everything disappeared all of a sudden. Allie realized that she was in her bed, clutching her blanket tightly in her hands. Her heart was pounding like a hammer.

"That was just a dream," she thought, relieved. "That's it, I just dreamed all of it, Mom and Dad being sick. It was just a bad dream."

"Allie's in trouble," she heard a voice somewhere nearby, somewhere at Allie's feet. It made her freeze. The funny high-pitched voice sounded pitiful and had a queer wail to it. Allie had never heard it before, but she could swear that it sounded familiar.

"Of course she is in trouble, unless we help her," a different, girly-sounding voice answered.

"But how? What can we do?" The first voice wailed again. "Especially you."

The voice was clearly mocking.

“I don’t know yet. But you helped Allie once, you said it yourself. And now we have this.”

The voices halted.

“I wonder who they are and what they are talking about”, Allie thought, trying hard not to move. “Let them think that I’m asleep.”

Amazingly, she didn’t feel any fear, just curiosity. Very slowly, she opened her eyes.

It was late night, but she could clearly see everything in her room. The room was dimly lit; an unnaturally blue and magical light was pouring from the direction of the toy shelf. Allie immediately remembered the curious cylinder. Then, slowly, she moved her eyes toward the strange voices. There, at Allie’s feet, on top of the blanket, Lemonade was lounging, leaning his head on his paw and squinting at the little blue star with a pensive if not sad expression. The scene looked so comical that Allie couldn’t help but giggle. At the sound, the cat jumped three feet high in the air, flopped back down and pressed himself into the blanket.

“Oh, Lemonade, you are such a coward! But, you might do well if you ever have to compete in high jumps.”

It was the large stuffed monkey talking – Allie’s favorite toy. She’d had it for as long as she could remember and never went to bed without it. According to the family legend, the monkey was given to Allie on her first birthday. The monkey’s name was short and funny – Lu.

Allie had no idea where the name had come from, and didn’t really care. She just knew that she liked it.

And now the toy stuffed monkey was sitting on the edge of Allie’s bed and dangling its feet, as if it were the most natural thing for a stuffed monkey to do. At the same time, it was apparently enjoying looking around, glancing in turns at the cat and at the girl. Allie was staring at her toy with amazement. She was overwhelmed by a whole flood of emotions, but the most intense feeling was, probably, joy that was close to elation.

“Wow!” that was all Allie could say, breathless, sitting up in her bed.

“Oh, it’s nothing much, really,” the monkey made a gesture similar to an actor taking a bow to the delighted public.

“Hey, why don’t you stop playing the sphinx,” she continued, addressing the cat who was still frozen pressed into the blanket, “and let’s try to explain everything to Allie. Everything we know, naturally. And you can listen and try not to be too overwhelmed.”

With these words Lu squeezed Allie’s hand encouragingly with her own soft plush paw.

The cat was still on his guard watching Allie. But, as soon as he saw that she was not laughing but regarding him in a serious and attentive manner, he cleared his throat and said in the now familiar voice:

“Well, what should we say first? In the first place, we need to state that we possess very little information on the matter, because the facts that have come to our knowledge so far do not yet allow us to, shall we say, comprehensively analyze the situation and come to the appropriate conclusions.”

The monkey, who had been fidgeting during this speech, burst out:

“Now, look here, you Stripey, it seems like you’ve spent your whole life studying at the library, not sleeping on top of an old coat in the closet, like you have. You remind me of our principal. Maybe you are him?”

Lemonade snorted indignantly:

“I have always been and always will be a cat. Intelligence runs in my family. Moreover, I have always paid close attention to mass media.”

“That’s true. You have always been good at falling asleep in front of the TV.”

“Lu, Lemonade, dearest, that’s enough. Please tell me everything you know,” Allie joined the conversation so naturally as if she’d been talking with cats and stuffed toys her entire life.

“OK,” said the monkey. “But I’ll be the one telling the story. It’s all because of this thing,” she pointed at the cylinder that was still glowing blue. “Its rays have caused this wonderful transformation that you can witness, both in me and Lemonade.”

“What about Mom and Dad? Did it make them ill, too?”

“In a way, but not really. It’s something different. Your parents... They...” the monkey stammered and glanced at the cat. He nodded. “They are under a spell,” she continued. “That’s what Lemonade and I think.”

Allie started.

“That’s impossible!” she exclaimed incredulously. “A magic spell? Magic doesn’t exist!”

“Well, look at us,” the monkey shrugged.

“But you said that this is different. The cylinder made you talk. It must be some kind of secret scientific gadget. That’s it. Nothing magical.”

The more Allie talked, the less confident she sounded. She wanted to hear the cat and the monkey say that she was right. But those two were silent, and all she could see in their eyes was sympathy.

Allie then fell silent too. She was close to tears, but she didn’t cry and only bit her lip.

“But who did it? And why?” she asked dejectedly.

“That’s the point,” the monkey said. “Lemonade and I have thought about that, and we believe that we know the answer. Do you remember where the cylinder was found?”

“In the fish’s belly.”

“That’s it. I guess you are not naive enough to think this was a mere coincidence?”

Allie only shrugged.

“All right, now think about how that monster appeared in your home. Who put up a fight at the market because your Mom bought the fish right in front of her? Who then paid you a visit and seemed greatly interested in the fish?”

At that moment, Allie vividly recalled her recent dream.

“It was Mean Jean,” she said thoughtfully.

“Correct! She was the one the cylinder was meant for. And the fish was... Well, it was like a mailing box, you understand?”

“Some package it was,” Lemonade muttered under his breath, evidently remembering the fish’s teeth on his tail.

“To make a long story short, it was Mean Jean who was supposed to receive the fish and its contents,” continued the monkey. “I don’t know what went wrong with their mailing system, but, as a result, you and your parents, as well as Lemonade and myself, are now part of this whole mess. And, it seems that your Mom and Dad have suffered the most.”

“It’s all because they ate the fish that was under a spell,” interjected Lemonade.

“Right. It was all Mean Jean’s doing too. She probably did it in order to get hold of the cylinder. It’s a good thing that you didn’t eat any fish. Otherwise you’d have turned into a sleeping beauty by now.”

It was quiet for some time. Everybody seemed to be thinking of what might have been if Allie had eaten a piece of fish. Allie shuddered at the thought. Lu broke the silence at last. She scratched her head with her little paw and, with a somewhat guilty look at Allie, said:

“You know, you can be mad at me, but I’m glad it all happened. Really, I’m the only one who’s had the best of the situation. If not for this whole story, I’d have remained a toy – motionless and dumb, like the rest of them.” She nodded towards the toy shelf with Allie’s dolls. Allie looked there and suddenly was shocked by an emerging idea.

“You mean to say that you are...” she started to say.

“Yes, that’s right. I have not always been what I am now. I used to be a girl...”

“Yeah, of course. But you were bad, didn’t listen to your parents, and an evil witch turned you into a toy monkey.”

“You don’t need to make fun of me. If you don’t want to hear my story, I won’t tell it,” said Lu sadly.

Allie turned beet-red with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Please, do tell your story.”

“OK, I’ll try to remember it all.”

Unfortunately, Lu’s story had many gaps, probably due to the fact that Lu had been in such an unusual state for so long. This is what Allie managed to find out...

3. LU THE MONKEY'S STORY

Once upon a time Lu really had been a girl, just like Allie, only a little older. She was in ninth grade, so she must have been fourteen or fifteen. She was really pretty, even beautiful.

At that moment Lemonade snorted and covered his mouth with his paws, which earned him a slap on the head from the monkey.

“That’s right,” she repeated, “you may laugh as much as you want, but I really was not ugly like you. All the boys at school were crazy about me. But I never made it something to boast about.”

Lu was never conceited and never acted like she was better than other girls, so she had lots of friends. But she only had one best friend. They used to share a desk at school.

When Lu started to tell Allie about her best friend, she realized with horror that she couldn’t recall the friend’s name. There were lots of names from the past whirling around in her memory – Mary, Jane and Rachel, but Lu just didn’t know how they were all related to her. Allie suggested that they call her Lucy, because Lu and Lucy sounded similar. Lu thought for a moment and then declined the offer, saying that Lu suited her better the way she was now, and, besides, she was used to the name.

She had a hard time remembering her parents, too. Not only their names, but even their faces seemed to have been erased from her memory. The only thing she knew for sure was that she had had parents, and also a little brother who was three. There was also a feeling of warmth and love associated with them.

This might seem strange, but Lu clearly remembered everything she had been taught during her nine years at school. She had been an excellent student, and was even now ready to take a test on any subject.

She also remembered well the last day of her normal, human life.

It was late spring, and the weather was summery warm. The tender green leaves on the trees were starting to turn dark emerald, but were still fresh and untouched by dust. The chestnut trees were in full bloom, covered in tall foamy-white pyramid blossoms. The air was fresh and clear, the sky was high and blue. It was that delightful time of the year when every school kid was keenly aware of the fact that there were only a handful more days left till summer vacation.

On one of those lovely days the two ninth-graders went to the city park after classes. A traveling carnival had come to town.

After going on roller coaster rides several times each, and taking a spin on the carousel, and bumping around in bumper cars, the girls finally stopped in front of a sign that read “Cave of Horrors” in blood-red letters. The whole pavilion was painted with skeletons, ghosts and many kinds of monsters. The entrance to the cave was draped in heavy black cloth and looked just like a cave mouth. Miniature cars on miniature rails were waiting just outside the cave. Each had two seats. Those who desired to be “horrified” got in one of the cars, which followed one another with a metallic rattle into the pavilion. There was laughter and there were shrieks, as well as wailing and the pop of gunshots (or more likely, fire crackers) coming from the inside. In a few minutes, the cars, with their excited and disheveled passengers, rolled out of the pavilion. The women were, as a rule, giggling nervously and fixing their hair; the men were smiling condescendingly, trying to look unimpressed. No one gave clear answers as to what was inside the cave, so there were more than enough curious people who wanted to find out for themselves. The cars were transferred back to the cave mouth on the rails that went around the pavilion, and they were ready to take in more visitors.

After a moment’s hesitation, the friends gave in to the temptation and went to buy the tickets.

Taking their seats in the car, they gripped the handles and were carried off into the “cave”. The black curtain fell behind the car, and the girls found themselves in a dim space that was lit by colorful blinking lights. A few feet in front of them there was another car that had entered the “cave” a few

seconds before they did. The car jerked and made sharp turns and sometimes dropped a couple of feet down. Lu and her friend's car repeated the same maneuvers several moments later. It felt as if the cars were moving down a cleverly designed maze. There were "horrible" things happening all around them: glowing and dancing skeletons would jump out of a gaping tomb; enormous bats would plunge down from somewhere above, brushing the girls' faces with their leathery wings; a medieval executioner in a red hood rose his huge glistening axe that then fell on the visitors' heads, but missed every time as the cars would always manage to carry their passengers past him. It would go suddenly dark, a menacing roar would rumble and some furry paws would grab the passengers' arms and shoulders. After another sharp turn the car would roll into a dinosaur's gaping mouth. Terrified shrieks and yells continued non-stop. It was great fun.

The two friends were also yelling and shrieking, fighting the furry paws and dodging the bat wings. They didn't notice when the car ahead of them disappeared. Only, when they popped out of a pitch-black stretch of the track again, the other car was gone, and they were rolling along between giant stalactites – enormous icicles hanging down from the cave ceiling. Some of them had reached the floor and turned into picturesque pillars. The rail tracks made their way around these pillars. The cave was dimly and mysteriously lit. The girls could see no light source, and it seemed that the ice pillars themselves were glowing, shimmering and sparkling with bright colors. They couldn't see the size of the cave, but judging by the 50-foot-tall pillars, the tops of which were hidden in the dark up above, the space was truly colossal.

The girls were so awe-struck by the magnificent ice kingdom that they did not at first feel scared or surprised but only looked around in amazement and admired the magical dancing lights inside the blue crystals. It was the icy cold that brought them to their senses. They realized that something bizarre had happened. The cave was, no doubt, a real cave: the car had been rolling along for five minutes now, and there was no end to it in sight. The two friends grew anxious. They decided to jump out of the car and make their way back, but, no matter how hard they tried to unbuckle, the belts would not budge. The girls were trapped in the car that continued to slowly but inexorably roll down the track into the unknown. The cave was gradually becoming narrower; its walls and ceiling were closing in on the girls. Finally they saw a rocky wall ahead with a gaping black hole of a narrow tunnel into which the tracks disappeared.

Lu's heart was frozen with fear. The dark hole that was fast approaching exuded menace. The girls, eyes wide with terror, exchanged glances and held on to each other. The next moment the darkness swallowed them.

Lu could not be sure whether the following events really happened or existed only as her hallucinations, or maybe both. She only remembered that she found herself surrounded by silent figures dressed in long hooded cloaks. She tried to talk to them and ask them questions, and look under their hoods. She still harbored a hope that it was all just a silly practical joke, a part of the ride, and that everybody would burst out laughing now and take off their hoods, and her fear would evaporate.

To bring this about, Lu quickly reached out towards one of the figures and pulled off its ridiculous hood. The nightmare continued: a hideous toad face was staring at her, its bulging web-covered eyes blinking on top of its forehead, and its enormous half-open mouth studded with small sharp teeth.

Lu felt sick to the stomach and fainted. Then she remembered being carried somewhere on a giant animal. Half-awake, she felt the rhythmic trod and, when she opened her eyes, saw herself lying down on satin pillows inside a lacy canopy on top of the animal's wide back. Her friend was lying next to her on the pillows. She was motionless, so she must have been asleep or unconscious.

That was the last thing Lu remembered about her human life.

The memories that followed were all related to Lu the stuffed monkey. She remembered her box being opened for the first time; remembered being taken out of the box and placed on the shelf

at the store next to other toys; remembered a price tag being pinned to her belly (that didn't hurt but still felt somehow offensive).

Then Allie's Dad bought her, and Lu moved in with their family. The monkey watched Allie grow, and it surprised her, because time seemed to stand still for herself. She still remembered herself as the same fifteen-year-old-girl, and she lived off those memories although they were fading fast.

And then – a blue flash that felt like waking up from a dark nightmare, where you cannot move your limbs or escape approaching danger.

“The cylinder rays literally brought me back to life. I can move and talk now. I feel, I am absolutely positive, that I will eventually remember everything,” Lu said enthusiastically. “Maybe I will be myself again. What do you think?”

She looked at Allie hopefully.

But Allie was so fascinated by Lu's narration that she missed her last question. The whole story was so incredible that Allie wouldn't have believed a word of it, if she'd heard it from somebody else. But this... this was the living proof of the monkey's words. You could reach out and touch it. Allie did just that: she touched the monkey's soft plush head and petted it. Lu clung to her hand gratefully and sighed. Then she pulled away with determination and said:

“All right, we have no time for all this touchy-feely nonsense. We need to help Allie's parents. And, I'm sure, Allie's in danger too. Lemonade, what do you think?”

The cat had been lying down that whole time with his head on his front paws and his eyes closed. He didn't respond to Lu's question, and the monkey grabbed and pulled his ear:

“Wake up, sleepyhead! The food's almost gone!”

Lemonade shook his head, yawned and stretched:

“I believe those mice come from the same hole,” he murmured.

“Oh, come on, there are no mice here. Wake up already!”

“I wasn't sleeping. I was thinking.”

“Oh really? What were you thinking about?” Lu asked mockingly.

“I was calculating how old you are. You know what I think?”

The cat went silent and started to lick his paw.

Lu slapped his paw impatiently. Lemonade looked at her in surprise and met with an expectant questioning glare.

“Oh, right,” the cat continued. “Allie is ten now, isn't she? When you got in all that trouble, you were fifteen. Which means...”

“Which means that you are twenty-five years old now, Lu!” Allie finished Lemonade's sentence, feeling excited and horrified at the same time.

“Not exactly,” pronounced Lemonade, unperturbed. “This would be correct if we knew for sure that Lu got to the toy store right after she stopped being human.”

He paused for effect and gave them a sly look.

“But, we do not know that. What if there was a year in between? Or ten years? She could be as old as my own grandmother now.”

“I used to pull such grandkids by their tails back in my days,” Lu was getting hot under the collar.

However, Lemonade's arguments seemed pretty reasonable.

“Well, I don't feel old, even twenty-five years old. I feel like a girl, just like I used to be.” Lu shrugged, puzzled.

“Pull by their tails,” muttered Lemonade, whose feelings were hurt. “Just look at yourself.”

“Guys!” Allie pleaded, “Let's not start a fight. We've got more than enough trouble on our hands. Let's better think what we should do next.”

That was hard to argue with. Putting their petty disagreements aside, the strange little group began to plan their further actions.

4. LEMONADE GOES SPYING

Dawn was already breaking when the friends were finally done discussing all potential courses of action and settled on the one that seemed the most safe and doable. They agreed on the following facts:

Number one: Mean Jean had put a spell on Allie's parents so that she could get hold of the magic cylinder, which had been meant for her use in the first place.

Number two: According to Mean Jean's calculations, Allie would be under a spell too; Mean Jean had no idea that Allie wasn't, and that was good.

Number three: Mean Jean also had no idea about Lu and the fact that one of the magic cylinder's properties had been discovered. That was also good.

And, finally, number four: Mean Jean had no idea about the secret plot against her; that was wonderful as it gave the friends certain advantages.

The plan was to keep secret the fact that Allie was not under the spell like her parents. For that reason she was not allowed to leave the house, answer the door or the phone. Moreover, it was decided that Mean Jean should be followed in order to gather more information about her magic activities.

"She might have some kind of magic books," Lu was saying, "where you can find out how to break the spell. Or maybe we can learn how to use the cylinder for that purpose. You never know what you can find... Anyhow, we need to send a spy into the enemy's lair. I will go."

Allie and Lemonade protested unanimously. Their reasons were simple and persuasive: how can a stuffed monkey climb into somebody's window in the middle of the day unnoticed? On the other hand, Lemonade was an ideal candidate for a spy. After some brief arguing with Lu, he was finally appointed for that role.

When the plan's details had been all worked out, it was already morning. A sunbeam sneaked into the room in between the closed curtains and fell on the shelf that held the cylinder. The blue light was dimmed, but the cylinder sparkled with a whole rainbow of colors.

Allie got out of bed and reached for the cylinder. And then something happened that showed that this magic object was not only the source of good, but also of danger when handled by clumsy or careless hands.

When Allie picked up the cylinder, she accidentally pressed on top of the blue disc, and it joined the cylinder with a soft click, becoming part of it like before. Allie heard a dull thump behind her; she turned around and saw that Lu was on the floor, with her arms and legs bent awkwardly. Lemonade was sitting nearby with his head tilted, looking at Allie with reproach.

"Oh no, what have I done!" exclaimed the startled girl and began to pull on the blue disc to unclick it from the cylinder again.

Her hands were sticky with sweat, her fingers felt awkward and clumsy, and it happened so that instead of one disk two clicked off the cylinder – the blue one and the yellow one.

A bright green beam shot out of the cylinder, stretched across the room like a taut thin line and hit the armchair in the corner by the floorlamp. One second later, the chair... vanished. That is, Allie thought so at first. Only later, when, panic-stricken, she placed the disks back and the beam disappeared, she saw next to the floorlamp a tiny little toy chair – an exact copy of the big one that had just been there. Now it was only fit for the smallest of Allie's dolls. Allie just shook her head and cautiously turned the cylinder in her hands, checking it around. Then, very slowly and carefully, she managed to pull off just the blue disk. Lu stirred and sat up. Then she turned her head from side to side, moved her arms and legs and finally looked at Allie and said in a stern voice:

"You might want to be careful next time. Try not to do that again, OK?"

Allie assured her that she would never-ever do that again. More than that, she suggested that Lu should keep the cylinder. The little zipped pocket on Lu's overalls would be perfect for that. It was just the right size. The suggestion was accepted, and the cylinder was moved to Lu's pocket.

"Well," mused the cat as he touched the little chair with his paw, "it would be nice to have a manual for this toy. I mean the cylinder."

"Well, then why don't you go find it, Lemonade?" said Lu. It's time for you to go scouting."

"I believe it is," agreed the cat. "I'm going then."

"Be careful out there," Allie petted his head and scratched behind his ear.

"Listen, Lemonade," the monkey said suddenly, "you never told us your story. How come you can talk now?"

"What is there to tell? Always been a cat, just a smart one. I've always been able to talk, it's just no one could hear me."

With a shot of his green eyes, Lemonade made his way to the door.

A large tiger-striped cat slowly walked into the sunlit courtyard. Squeamishly making his way around the puddles, he headed toward the playground where some young moms were watching their kids. After he picked a good spot, Lemonade (it was, of course, him) made himself comfortable on the bench, drawing all his paws under his belly. He looked as content as could be, and an unsuspecting observer could have easily have thought that the cat had fallen asleep in the warm sun. But that person would be far from the truth. Lemonade's eyes were indeed almost closed, but he had an excellent view of everything that was going on around him. So, when Jean emerged from the building and left for her usual morning rounds, the cat got up, stretched, jumped off the bench and slowly ran off in the opposite direction, as if on his own feline business.

Jean lived on the first floor. Both of her windows faced the courtyard, so Lemonade had no trouble picking the right moment to jump through the open one into her house.

The interior of the apartment puzzled the cat. To tell the truth, he had expected to see a dark dingy room overrun with cobwebs, perhaps a hearth and a boiling cauldron with some magic potion in it. Nothing of the sort. The studio apartment was unexpectedly spacious on the inside and very tastefully, and even elegantly, furnished. He saw massive polished dark-wood furniture that was clearly not from a regular furniture store. Lemonade was especially surprised to see the high-tech electronic gadgets around the room. He was even doubtful whether it was the right apartment, but, thinking about it, decided there could be no mistake. He was also surprised to see the heavy dark-green velvet drapes on the windows that made the room dim, almost dark. Lemonade could have sworn that from the outside it looked like the windows were covered with light tulle curtains. However, the darkness didn't bother the cat, quite the opposite.

Lemonade began with exploring the whole apartment, but didn't find anything suspicious or interesting. There were no magic books, but even if he'd found some, it was hard to say what he could've gotten from them.

Half an hour passed. The mistress of the apartment was supposed to come back soon, and Lemonade decided to look for a good hiding place. He decided to crawl under the couch, which would allow him not only to hear but also see all the happenings. He got under there just in time. It wasn't two minutes later when the key turned in the front door. Mean Jean was back. She spent a few minutes in the hallway, then there was the noise of running water in the bathroom. In a few more minutes the door opened, and someone entered the room.

Lemonade peeked out cautiously and almost froze to the spot. It wasn't Mean Jean, or, at least, not the Mean Jean everybody knew. The woman who entered the room was stately, clothed in a long black-and-red dress made from some kind of heavy opalescent fabric. Her long black hair, parted in the middle and braced with a silver diadem, fell on her half-bare shoulders. Silver jewelry shone on her neck and arms.

Lemonade, forgetting caution, peeked out even more in order to get a good look at the woman's face. It was definitely Jean, although it was hard to recognize her now. She always looked elderly, if not old. No one would dare to call this woman old. There was not a single wrinkle on the strong haughty face. It was even beautiful; no one would call Jean's face beautiful. But, it was the same person none the less.

The woman sat down in the chair by the coffee table and lit a long brown cigarette. She was smoking with her head thrown back and her eyes half-closed. Sometimes her face twisted into a crooked grin; she even laughed quietly a few times. The laugh sent a shiver down Lemonade's spine and made his hair stand on end.

A couple of minutes passed. Cigarette smoke filled the dim room, curling into fancy patterns in the air and slowly falling to the floor. A stream of smoke reached Lemonade's sensitive nose and made it itch intensely. Lemonade covered his nose with his paw and carefully scratched it.

Finally Mean Jean looked at the clock, put out the cigarette and turned on the TV. The newscaster on the screen was reading a long announcement. The woman was sitting upright on the edge of the chair, looking straight at the TV. She was drumming her fingers nervously on the polished surface of the coffee table and threw an impatient glance at the clock from time to time.

Lemonade missed the moment when everything changed; he just felt suddenly that the person on the screen was saying something weird. The cat pricked his ears, trying to catch every word.

"This is the end of our morning program," the person continued to mumble monotonously. "Please do not forget to turn off your TV set. I repeat: everyone except Corgy, turn off your TVs, or else... I'm going to count to three and then burn everyone's TVs, except Corgy's of course. Corgy, Corgy, wake up! I'm here. You need to focus. You seem distracted today."

The person was saying all of that, looking through the TV screen straight at Jean. She, in her turn, was looking at the screen mesmerized and unblinking; then she shook herself awake and bowed her head.

"Oh master, you are unpredictable as always. You manage to trick me every time," Mean Jean's words were clearly flattering.

"Never mind, let's get down to business," interrupted the person on the screen.

The picture twisted and blurred, and then the screen vanished. In its place there was a black hole in the middle of the TV, and behind it there was icy emptiness. Lemonade felt its cold breath on his skin. Then a dark figure emerged from the emptiness surrounded by a fiery red glow. The long robe, the hooded head and the eyes burning with a yellow fire – all of that reminded Lemonade of something. But he had no time to dwell on that. He heard a low harsh voice, very different from the newscaster's.

"Corgy, today you will talk to Hannagh, the Second Guard of the Cup. The Guards are concerned about your case, the Supreme One has heard of it and ordered a thorough investigation."

"But, Teacher, I have explained everything," Corgy's voice trembled, betraying her fear.

"If you are not to blame, you've got nothing to fear. Talk to Hannagh," the voice of the one Corgy was calling "Teacher" sounded insinuating.

The robed figure disappeared and was replaced by a three-dimensional picture of a man seated on a tall carved chair. The angle was thus that it looked as if Jean and all of her room were at his feet. He was wearing a dark red velvet waistcoat with golden embroidery and matching trousers tucked into tall leather cuffed boots. The white lace cuffs and collar contrasted with the tan face and hands. The face itself, framed by long blond curls, was quite handsome, but the dark, burning and piercing eyes inspired a fear that amounted almost to panic.

Corgy hastily averted her eyes and bowed low. Hannagh – that was apparently him – leaned forward and looked at her for some time. Then he leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and said in a voice quite pleasant and not scary at all:

“Corgy, you were honored with supreme trust: you were granted a higher position and presented with a personal viamulator. How did you, a Second-Degree Adept, manage to lose it?”

“My lord, I followed the instructions exactly. Evidently, there was some mistake in your – our – estimators’ calculations. And, may I add, I have the whole situation under control, and will soon have the viamulator.”

“There could have been no mistake. If you are telling the truth, then the whole story seems rather strange, I’d say, suspiciously strange. I will need to conduct a thorough investigation.”

“My lord, do you suspect somebody’s interference?”

“Quite right. Who got the grumba? What happened to him?”

“Dead. Cooked and eaten. He was taken by a woman who lives in our building. I know her well. An ordinary woman. A children’s books illustrator. Nothing outstanding, except perhaps her looks.”

“Family?” asked Hannagh.

“Has a husband, who is a pilot, and a daughter, Allie, who’s ten,” Corgy fell silent for a few seconds, thinking. “No, an ordinary family, nothing interesting for us. I’d have noticed if there was anything.”

“OK, let’s leave them for now. Think about everything that happened that morning. There must have been something unusual, some little thing that you overlooked.”

Hannagh bored his burning eyes into Corgy. She looked away again, unable to bear it. Then she was struck by a memory: the flash of sunlight. How could she have forgotten? Just like she did now, she had to look away, blinded momentarily by the flash of light and balance with her arms spread out not to end up in an icy ditch. Then it took a few moments to yell at the boy who was running away with a little mirror in his hand. As a result, she was late getting to the market, and the grumba with the viamulator went to the wrong person.

Corgy told Hannagh about all of the circumstances of her trip to the market.

“What did the boy look like? Describe him,” Hannagh was instantly alert.

But she could tell him nothing specific, just that the boy looked ten or twelve.

Hannagh was quiet for some time, deep in thought and his burning eyes dimmed. Then he continued calmly:

“All right. Tell me more.”

“Well, the grumba got in Irene the artist’s hands. And they decided to keep it in the bathtub and feed it. They thought it was a regular fish.”

Hannagh raised his eyebrows:

“Keep the grumba in the bathtub? How long did they keep him there?”

“Not long. There was no time for a real transformation, but he did manage to cause some trouble. Anyway, two days ago he was cooked.”

“What about the viamulator? They found it?” Hannagh’s question sounded like a statement.

“Yes,” Corgy lowered her eyes. “I saw Alex, the pilot, yesterday. So I questioned him carefully. He said yes, he hadn’t seen it himself, but his wife and daughter had found a trinket in the fish’s belly. So, for them it’s just a trinket.”

“Are you sure that they won’t guess what it is or turn it on accidentally?”

“They won’t have the time,” Corgy’s voice sounded subtly triumphant. “I got all of them. I was able to put a spell on the grumba, and now, having eaten him, they are all under the spell now.”

“What kind of spell did you use?”

Corgy was apparently expecting this question. She straightened up, and her lips spread in a triumphant smile.

“Oh, this is an entirely new and very exquisite kind of magic,” she said proudly.

Lemonade pricked his ears and leaned forward.

“I affected the speed of electrical impulses spreading along the nerve fibres. It is a known fact that human brain controls every function of the body with these impulses. So, I made the speed of these impulses gradually and inevitably slow down, and in nine days it will go down to zero.”

“And they’ll die?”

Lemonade started at Hannagh’s words.

“Oh no. Not at all. What do we, I mean, you need dead bodies for? And these are, I assure you, high-quality bodies, young and beautiful. In nine days they’ll turn into dolls, motionless live dolls. If now it takes them three hours to take one step, in nine days they will freeze completely. And then we can easily take them to Galfar and separate the ‘aenous’ from the shell. And I will get the viamulator. We kill two birds with one stone this way.”

Corgy finished speaking and looked at Hannagh triumphantly. He was staring vacantly into space, leaning his chin on his crossed fingers. His mouth was twisted in a slight grin. He seemed to have missed everything that had been said. Corgy was waiting, her triumphant look slowly replaced by a grimace of disappointment.

“Very well!” Hannagh’s unexpectedly loud exclamation startled Corgy. “I like it. But, is there any guarantee that no one would break the spell? I have heard that there are people even on Earth who are able to manipulate subtle energies.”

“You are talking about so-called mediums. You don’t need to worry about them, they are not powerful enough for that kind of magic. I assure you, my lord, that no one here on Earth can break the spell, and in nine days it will be impossible, I beg your pardon, even for a Guard of the Cup to do.” Corgy bowed her head again.

“Well, in that case check the old ‘window’ today. We will do the transfer through it.”

“But it has long been closed. After several accidents the whole complex was closed down. It is sealed now.”

“I said, use the old one,” Hannagh interrupted her harshly. “It never had any glitches.”

“I hear you, my lord,” Corgy bowed low again.

At that moment Lemonade felt an intense itch in his nose. It was unclear what caused it, whether the cigarette smoke or the dust under the couch. It didn’t really matter; what mattered was that Lemonade, hard as he tried, couldn’t help but sneeze into his paws. At that moment there was a pause in the conversation, and, although the sneeze was muffled, it was clearly heard in the quiet room.

The woman and the person she was talking to turned their heads simultaneously in the direction of the couch. Hannagh’s face looked angry and almost furious, Corgy looked surprised and startled.

Lemonade pressed himself farther under the couch, rolled into a tight ball and prepared for the worst. Most of all now he wanted to fall through the floor, but the floor was sturdy, and there was nowhere to go.

Corgy got up quickly, approached the couch, kneeled down and looked under. Lemonade saw her wary face up close, her startled eyes were darting in all directions. He bared his claws, ready to swat the hand that would reach out for him. But something strange happened. Corgy searched all under the couch with her eyes, and they never stopped on the cat frozen in tense expectation. Then she got off her knees, shrugged and said with disappointment but also obvious relief:

“There’s no one. Might have been a couch spring, it happens sometimes.”

Hannagh, who was still staring at the couch suspiciously, snapped:

“I don’t like any of it. Please deal with your couch springs. Just remember, there’s no room for mistakes now.”

And then he vanished.

The room went back to its regular look. The TV screen was off, and it looked like any other TV now. Corgy sighed with relief and left the room, fixing her hair as she walked. Lemonade decided not to test his luck anymore, he’d found out enough information, and he darted out the window. In a few minutes he was home, where Allie and Lu had been waiting with hopeful impatience.

5. THE CHASE. IN AN ICE TRAP

Lemonade made it back just in time. Allie was almost losing her mind with worry and concern about her parents. When Corgy had said it would take them three hours to take one step, she wasn't far from the truth.

Indeed, their movements had slowed down so much that at a first glance it seemed that the two adults were playing the children's game of "Freeze". It was unclear whether they realized something was wrong with them. To Allie's parents, the world around them must have accelerated enormously. The night must have passed by in a couple of minutes, which was confirmed by the surprised look on Mom's face turned toward the window. All of Allie's movements, who was just walking around the room, must seem so fast to them that they weren't able to see their daughter, just as we are unable to see a flying bullet. All of this made Allie quite desperate. A few times she tried to call the ambulance, but Lu talked her out of it.

When Lemonade saw Allie's tearful eyes and found out what was going on, he firmly announced:

"No doctors! It is absolutely useless, and potentially dangerous. They'd start treating them for who knows what, and might only harm them. We've got nine days to act. Just listen to this."

Trying not to miss any details, Lemonade told Allie and Lu about everything he had seen and heard at Corgy's apartment. He only left out the last episode of his adventurous sortie, deciding not to puzzle them with yet another mystery.

"Well, girls, it seems like it's a real sorcerers' hub in there," he concluded his story.

Lu, who had been impatiently pacing the room, stopped and said:

"No, it seems that the hub is elsewhere. Corgy looks like a mere pawn in the game, and all of the big figures are..." the monkey stopped there, scratching her head. "What is Galfar, by the way? The word sounds positively familiar. Well, there are more mysteries than there are answers. But we found out the main thing: it is possible to break the spell that your parents are under, although we've only got nine days to do it. The trouble is, only Corgy herself can do it."

"Or the ones she calls the Guards of the Cup," added Lemonade.

"That's right, and them."

"I will go to Mean Jean and ask her to remove the spell," said Allie decidedly. "I will give her the cylinder, or... What's it called? – the viamulator. That thing is the cause of all this trouble."

"You won't help your parents and will ruin yourself," disagreed Lu. "As soon as Corgy gets her viamulator, she will do everything to get rid of all witnesses to her dark secrets. I hope you don't think I'm trying to talk you out of it just because I am a concerned party here too."

"Oh," exclaimed Allie. "I completely forgot, I'm sorry."

"It's OK, really. At the very least, we can save that for a last-resort option. We'll just have to make clear to her our one condition – that we won't give her the viamulator until your parents are back to normal. Now we've got nine days to try something else."

"But what?" Allie looked at the monkey with hope and admiration.

"We will follow Corgy. Today she is supposed to check some kind of 'transfer window', remember? We should follow her and find out what kind of 'window' it is. And then we'll see. Shall we go?"

"Let's go!" Allie agreed.

"I'm ready," announced Lemonade.

"Good. Then you, Lemonade, will go outside and watch her door carefully. Allie, put on some hiking clothes. It'd be best if Corgy doesn't recognize you. But what should I do?" Lu thought hard. "I can't be walking around just like that in broad daylight."

"Let me carry you," offered Allie.

“No, that wouldn’t work,” objected Lu.

Indeed, she wasn’t heavy but still quite a large toy. Allie looked around the room and noticed her brightly colored school backpack. She emptied it and opened it up for the monkey.

“Jump in.”

Lu didn’t hesitate long and a moment later was safely tucked inside the backpack with only her head sticking out.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m quite cosy in here,” she said, pleased. “I think people in Japan or China carry their babies this way.”

“Well, it’s not China here, but your name sounds rather Chinese. So there,” said Allie, rummaging through her clothes in the closet. In a little while, she put on jeans, a light but warm and waterproof jacket, and leather running shoes. She accessorized her look with a toboggan pulled low over her ears.

“Great job,” approved Lu. “One might take you for a boy.”

“Let’s hope that Mean Jean won’t recognize me,” said Allie, putting on her backpack. “You try to stay quiet in there.”

She threw one final look around her room; somehow she knew that she wouldn’t be back for a long time. Allie also said goodbye to her parents, giving each a hug.

“We’ll save you, I promise,” she whispered, fighting back her welled-up tears.

They made it out of the house just in time. As soon as Allie sat down on the bench next to Lemonade who was basking in the sun, Corgy emerged through her door. She had also made an effort to disguise herself, and did an excellent job. Allie would’ve never recognized her in that slender young woman dressed in an elegant light-colored coat. But Lemonade, who had already witnessed her powers of transfiguration, was impossible to fool.

The sorceress crossed the yard, turned the corner onto the sidewalk and made it to the tram stop. Allie followed her about a hundred feet behind, trying to hide behind people’s backs but keeping Corgy in her line of vision at the same time. Lemonade, on the contrary, was running to and fro, sometimes almost catching up with Corgy, and at other times lagging behind. Because of him they almost lost Corgy. Allie noticed the tram that came around the bend, and also the fact that Corgy quickened her steps. That’s when Allie set out running, too, and made it to the tram stop in time; some passengers had exited, and others were just starting to get on the tram. Corgy entered the first of the two cars, and Allie was standing in front of the second one and looking around: Lemonade was nowhere to be seen. Allie realized that the tram was about to go, and the thin line of hope for rescuing her parents would snap. She grabbed the hand rail and took a step inside. The tram started moving. Allie looked back one more time, and at that moment Lemonade flew through the closing doors straight into her arms, knocking her over.

She couldn’t help herself and pinched his ear.

“I’ll deal with you later,” she said quietly and moved up. She found a good observation spot for the whole tram as there were few passengers this time of day. That made their spying task easier.

Corgy got off the tram at the “Polar Pioneers Park” stop. Right by the stop there was a massive stone gate covered in sculptures of polar explorers and polar bears. Behind the gate stretched the park that was known simply as “Three P’s”. It was located on the edge of town and bordered with a forest. That is why, in addition to rides and other various amusements found in any park, it boasted splendid oak lanes, cheery birch groves, sunny grassy areas, and even a large and well-kempt pond. It was no wonder “Three P’s” was the townspeople’s favorite recreation spot.

That was where Corgy the sorcerer had unwittingly brought Allie and her friends. Allie felt that their destination was close, and she was right. Corgy walked along the central park lane and then turned off onto a side path. In another five minutes she was at a metal fence that closed off a pretty large area crowded with various types of amusement rides. There were swings, carousels,

bumper cars, and many other rides. The chipping paint and rusty beams gave away the fact that all this equipment hadn't been used for quite some time now. The large rusty padlock on the metal gate was the ultimate proof of that.

While Corgy fumbled with the lock, Allie hid behind a tree, took off the backpack and let the monkey out. Lemonade was right there too, he was trying to keep close to the girl. The friends huddled and briefly discussed the situation in soft whispers. Lu suggested that she and Lemonade should do the rest of the spying and that Allie should find a good hiding place and wait for their return. This would present fewer opportunities for Corgy to notice the spies, the monkey thought. Allie flatly rejected the plan and promised to be extremely careful. Everybody agreed on that.

Corgy opened the gate, entered and without hesitation made her way around the rusty metal frames. The friends followed after her, Lemonade leading the way and ready to warn Allie and Lu of any danger ahead. He was the first to notice Corgy's destination.

"Just what I thought," he muttered under his breath when he saw the sorceress slip into a run-down pavilion with a sign that read in faded red letters, "Cave of Horrors".

In a few seconds Allie and Lu joined him.

"Why, but that is..." the monkey never finished the phrase, looking at the pavilion in astonishment. The cat only nodded.

"At least we know something about this place already," Allie said. "Is Corgy in there?"

"She is," nodded Lemonade. "I can sneak in quietly."

"No, that is too dangerous," disagreed Allie. "Let's wait till she comes out, and then we'll go see what's inside."

So the three of them hid behind the carousel that offered a good view of the pavilion entrance. In a few minutes there came a low hum and a metallic rattle, and a little car that was waiting first in line outside the pavilion rolled into the "cave". It was noisy inside the pavilion for some time, and then all was quiet. Presently Corgy exited the pavilion and, checking around her, walked fast toward the amusement park gate. The friends waited until her light coat disappeared and carefully made their way into the "Cave of Horrors".

It was utterly dark inside the pavilion, and it took Allie a couple of minutes to adjust a little. Gradually she began to see the outlines of objects around her. Allie took a step forward and almost tripped over the rail tracks.

"Watch out," whispered Lu, "be careful, or you'll hurt yourself."

"Well, I am being careful, but I can't see anything," Allie said in frustration. "Too bad we didn't bring a flashlight."

"You can't see?" Lu sounded surprised.

It turned out that she had excellent night vision, and, naturally, Lemonade did, too.

"Oh yes," sagaciously pronounced the cat, "humans are imperfect beings after all. Lu, you should be happy that you are what you are now. You can see in the dark like a cat, you cannot be hurt or even, possibly, killed. Advantages all over, in one word."

"No, Lemonade," sadly objected Lu. "Being human is a great thing. But you wouldn't understand. I'm glad I've got this viamulator now, but..."

"The viamulator, of course!" exclaimed Allie. "Let's take it out. It'll be our flashlight."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Lu sighed as she unzipped the pocket and took out the magic cylinder.

It cast the familiar unnaturally blue light around it. Lu gave the viamulator to Allie, and she started walking along the tracks with the cylinder in her hand like a candle burning with a steady blue flame.

All around them they saw the “horrible” things Lu had mentioned in her story. There were skeletons, bats, the red-hooded executioner and many others. They were all made with paper-mache, faux fur, plaster and cardboard and covered with a thick layer of dust and cobwebs.

The little scouting brigade was slowly making its way forward. The tracks made occasional sharp turns. Allie felt that the place was a little spooky, but there was nothing supernatural about it yet. But then, at one of the turns, the tracks split up and went in two different directions: one went left and downhill, and the other turned right and seemed to go straight into a solid wall. Like the real train tracks, the rails had a miniature automatic rail switch. Its cable stretched across the floor to a nearby wooden pole that supported the pavilion roof. There was an electrical switch lever on the pole. The little car that had just entered the “cave” was sitting on the tracks that went right. Allie came up to the pole and put her hand on the switch lever.

“Shall we try it?” She looked at the cat and the monkey questioningly.

“Let’s do it,” agreed Lu. “But be careful. Turn it off immediately if something goes wrong.”

Allie hesitated a second and then pushed the lever down. They heard the familiar hum and rattle, and the car began to speed up toward the wall.

“There’ll be a small crash now,” the cat impishly rubbed his front paws and watched the car’s inevitable approach to the wall.

“No, there won’t be,” retorted Allie, turning off the switch. The car screeched to a stop about three feet from the wall.

“That’s right,” agreed Lu. “We don’t need a crash. We need to explore. Maybe there’s a secret passage there.”

So the friends set out towards the wall with a pioneering zeal. But when they reached the car, there came a bright flash of light from behind. With a cry of surprise, Allie turned around and covered her eyes. A bright flashlight or spotlight was shining in her face, blinding her and not allowing her to see anything. Then a tall dark figure stood in front of the light. Black itself, it stood as if in a bright halo like the sun during a total eclipse. But Allie thought that it looked familiar: the long hair, the familiar cut of dress. When she heard the voice, although the manner of speech was strange, there could be no doubt. It was Corgy. Fear like a steel ring squeezed around the girl’s throat, arresting her breath.

“So that’s who was spying on me,” Corgy was saying with a tone of slight surprise. “So it seems you didn’t get to taste the fried fish. Too bad, your Mom is an excellent cook. How naughty of you to treat her like that when she tried so hard for you. Well, who else do we have here? A cat, very well. Only makes sense, if there’s trouble, look for a cat.”

At those words Lemonade shivered and jumped on top of the car to hide from the bright light and Corgy’s eyes.

“And who is that scarecrow? Looks like an old friend of ours. Must be one of the transported,” Corgy said that, looking at Lu.

While the sorceress was talking, Allie calmed down. The gripping fear was gone. The girl picked up the monkey and stepped behind the car. Corgy, in the meantime, kept talking:

“Listen, Allie – that is your name, isn’t it? If you don’t want to end up like this monkey of yours, better hand over the viamulator. You’ve got it, I know. The pretty colorful cylinder. Be a good girl.”

“All right,” Allie’s ringing voice sounded firm. “I will give you the viamulator, if you help Mom and Dad.”

“Of course I will, don’t you worry,” quickly assented Corgy. “Well, give me the viamulator, just throw it to me. I’ll catch it.”

Everything else happened so fast. Allie couldn’t explain why she acted the way she did. She just knew one thing: she didn’t have a clear plan at that moment. Allie took a step forward and stood on the car. Putting Lu down on the seat next to Lemonade, she stretched her right hand with the viamulator towards Corgy. The blinding light wasn’t hitting the girl’s face now, and Allie was able

to see the sorceress clearly now. She was standing next to the switch lever pole with one hand on the switch and the other extended towards Allie. Her eyes were gleaming with victory, her lips drawn apart in a sinister grin.

Suddenly Allie's fingers made a subtle movement, as if on their own. There was a soft click, and a bright green beam of light burst out of the viamulator and hit Corgy's face. Almost at the same time the car jerked forward, almost throwing Allie off. The girl held on to the seat. The last thing she saw was the tiny squirming figure of Corgy that was hanging off the switch lever and squealing.

Then all went dark.

The car rolled out of the dark into an enormous cave. Gigantic icicles were hanging down from the ceiling that couldn't be seen; some of them had reached the floor and turned into ice pillars. Thousands of colorful sparkles were playing on their crystal surface, and flames of cold light pierced the thick ice from time to time.

Lu was looking around with agitation. The cave was familiar to her. It seemed like it was just yesterday when she had gone down these tracks in a similar car. Allie, judging by her face, was utterly raptured. It was one thing to hear someone else's story and quite another to see everything with your own eyes.

Lemonade was not moved by the beauties of the ice kingdom. He stretched out his neck and was intently looking ahead and sniffing the air with his sensitive nose.

"It's so beautiful," Allie whispered, delighted. Despite the rattle of the wheels, her voice sounded very clear. It seemed to resonate and amplify against the giant ice pillars.

"Yes it is," muttered the cat. "But, if I remember Lu's story correctly, there are much less pleasant and beautiful things ahead of us."

Allie and Lu turned their heads and looked at what Lemonade was pointing at.

The car was on the home stretch now before a tunnel in the cave wall. Its mouth was a gaping black hole into which the rail tracks vanished.

"Everybody, jump off now," quickly ordered Lu and lead the way, leaping off the car. Allie and Lemonade followed her. They watched their empty carriage disappear into the dark tunnel, and then looked at each other.

"Well, what do we do now?" inquired Allie.

"I believe we need to go back," Lemonade suggested half-heartedly.

"But Corgy is there. She is probably waiting for us, unless she has set out on a chase," said Lu.

"I shrank her," Allie interjected modestly.

"You did... what?" Lemonade asked in astonishment.

"Remember that chair in my room? That's what I did to her."

Allie flung the viamulator, which she had been firmly gripping in her fist, into the air. And now she saw that all of the disks, including the blue one, were tightly pressed together and made up a solid cylinder. Therefore, there was no light coming out of it, that is, it was turned off. Allie looked at the monkey, concerned. But she was sitting on a rock, resting her head on her hands, as sound as a bell.

"How are you feeling, Lu?"

"Just fine, what can be wrong with me?" the monkey answered carelessly, but was suddenly suspicious: "Why are you asking?"

"That is why!" Allie showed her the viamulator that was off.

Lu stared at it for a few seconds, but when she realized what was going on, she yelled out happily and hugged the cat.

"Yippee! This means something is changing in me for the better, if I can do without this thing now."

"Don't be too hasty," Lemonade reasoned with her, "it might be just the cave."

"It might be," Lu the happy monkey refused to stop, "but a fact is a fact."

“All of this is well and good,” interrupted Allie, “but we should think what we’ll do next.”

After a short counsel, they decided to turn back.

They set out and made their way around the rocks and ice pillars. After a few minutes’ walk they turned a corner and saw a solid rock wall. The tracks disappeared into it, but there was no tunnel or passage in the wall.

“I was expecting something like that,” Lemonade said with a mixed feeling of satisfaction and despair.

“What do we do?” Allie patted the cold rough surface of the rock and looked at her companions, perplexed.

It was rather cold in the cave, and, despite her warm clothes, the girl was beginning to feel it. Seeing that, Lu turned to Lemonade:

“Kitty, dearest, please let’s find an exit, or else we’ll freeze to death here.”

Lemonade looked at the stuffed plush monkey dubiously, but didn’t argue. He turned his head this way and that way, sniffed the air and, telling them to wait for him right there, disappeared behind the closest ice pillar.

“What do you think would’ve happened to us if we’d gone further?” Allie asked the monkey.

“I don’t know what would’ve happened to me, but you probably would’ve ended up like me a while ago.”

“Lu, do you remember how it happened? How did they turn you into a toy? And why a toy?”

“No, I didn’t. But Lemonade’s story about what he heard from Corgy made me think. Remember, when she talked about your parents, she mentioned a shell and a ‘noose’ or something, if Lemonade told it right. And then, the way Corgy called me ‘transported’. So, I think I know what it’s about. Then it’s easy to explain my transformation...”

But then Lemonade appeared, and Lu stopped mid-sentence.

“Well, what did you find?” Lu and Allie exclaimed together.

“I think there’s a way out. Follow me.”

Lemonade led the girls down a path only he knew. For a few minutes it was easy to walk on the even floor of the cave. Then they had to climb over piles of rocks and go around huge boulders. But the hardest thing to do was to climb up a rock to a small crevice that opened up pretty high in the cave wall. The climb was steep, and the uneven surface of the rock was iced over. Lemonade flew up the wall easily. Lu, strangely enough, also turned out to be a nimble rock-climber. But Allie had a hard time. She had to plan out her steps very carefully in order to avoid slipping and falling down. Several times her foot slipped on the icy rock. It seemed that she was close to falling, but then the girl would miraculously pull herself up and continue the climb. Finally she made it up to the crevice. It was completely dark, but now she knew that she could use the viamulator as a flashlight, and she didn’t hesitate to turn it on. The crevice was very narrow, too narrow for two people to pass by each other, and sometimes the walls were so close together that Allie had to squeeze through sideways.

“Lemonade,” Allie asked, feeling anxious, “are you sure that we are going the right way? Is there really a way out ahead?”

“There must be. I feel a stream of fresh air.”

That’s when Allie realized that she had been feeling a light cool breeze on her face for some time now. “So, I didn’t imagine it”, she thought with relief.

Meanwhile, the walls of the cave almost closed in, and the only way forward was to crawl on the floor through the hole that opened at the very bottom. Lemonade and Lu didn’t have to crawl, but Allie’s progress was slow. Fortunately, she didn’t have to crawl for a long time, otherwise she’d not only have torn her jeans, but also skinned her elbows and knees on the sharp rocks on the floor. The passage ended a few feet ahead, where a large boulder blocked the way. Its edges were not completely flush with the walls, and there were broad gaps on the sides. Gusts of cool air burst into

the crevice through the gaps with a low humming sound. Sometimes the gusts were stronger, and the hum sounded more like whistling.

Allie put her hand on the boulder and felt it move slightly. She tried to push it, and it clearly made a little lunge forward.

“Well, guys, I think this is the exit,” Allie turned to Lu and Lemonade. “Let’s push.”

They leaned on the boulder together. It gave way and then suddenly lurched forward and downward. None of the three friends expected that, and they tumbled after the boulder into the dark.

There was a real storm outside: the wind was howling, the rain was beating down heavily, from time to time blinding flashes of lightning, orange and green, pierced the darkness, and then peals of thunder shook the sky and the ground. There was a burning smell in the air.

Allie had tumbled down a rather steep rocky slope and was now on the ground, clutching the branches of some kind of bush. Fortunately, she wasn’t hurt by the fall – her Dad had trained her well for all kinds of emergencies, and, while falling, she’d been able to draw her knees up and roll into a ball. None the less, she still had a couple of bruises on her arms and legs.

But it wasn’t the bruises that troubled the girl at the moment. Lu and Lemonade were missing. Allie tried to call them, but her cries were drowned by the rain, wind and deafening thunder. The lightning strikes came with surprising regularity: first green, then orange, and then green and orange again. It looked as if someone had turned on a gigantic strobe light up in the sky that accompanied the violent melody of the storm.

Allie kept holding on to the bush with one hand and covered her face with the other, and then looked around. The flashes of lightning were brief, but she managed to see that she was lying at the foot of a mountain the top of which was covered in thick, low stormclouds. The slope was less steep towards the bottom, there were trees growing there, and further down she saw a real forest. No matter how hard she looked, she couldn’t see Lu or Lemonade anywhere near, but she did notice something alarming: from time to time here and there rocks rolled down the hill. Most of them were small, but some were large enough to cause trouble. Allie realized that it was unsafe to stay there any longer. She let go of the bush and carefully climbed down to the trees. Catching her breath under one of them and trying to call the cat and the monkey, the girl made her way towards the forest. Lu and Lemonade might have taken cover there.

The forest was moaning in the wind, broken branches were snapping and crashing all around. But the peals of thunder seemed more muffled. Allie scrambled through the thick undergrowth and kept calling her friends. It was all in vain; the only answer was the howl of wind in the trees. Once the girl thought that somebody answered her calls. Allie froze and listened hard; indeed, there was something else out there besides the storm. It was a distant sound, powerful and measured, like the breath of a giant animal. But her friends were still not answering.

Allie didn’t know how long she’d been wandering around the forest. She was completely lost and stumbled along, almost completely exhausted. Finally she tripped over a tree root and fell down onto the wet grass. She was close to fainting. “I can’t go any further”, she thought. “Too bad, I’m gonna get an earache again.”

And then Allie felt the earth move under her. It seemed that its surface was rippled by waves like the sea, and the waves were growing with every second. Allie was scared and tried to get up, but then she felt the ground leap up beneath her. The girl was thrown into the air, and then she fainted.

6. ALLIE MEETS UNCLE ZAND

Allie opened her eyes and closed them again: the golden sun was shining straight in her face. Trying to hide from it, she sat up in bed. Yes, she was on a bed, or, rather, a small wooden settee with a nice carved back. It sat by a window in a spacious sunlit room with the same kind of carved wooden furniture. The window was cracked open, and the lacy curtain was moving slightly in the fresh morning breeze. The golden sunray broke through its delicate pattern and cheerfully danced on the pillow.

“That’s what woke me up”, Allie thought and smiled. She felt peaceful and rested. Looking around, she noticed that her clothes were clean, dry, and neatly folded on a chair near her bed. Allie dressed quickly and went over to the table by the other window. There was a skillet with steaming fried eggs and pink juicy-looking ham. Next to the skillet she saw a big sliced loaf of fresh golden-yellow bread with an appetizingly crunchy crust, a big mug of milk and a bowl of jam. Only then, looking at this bountiful spread and inhaling its divine aromas, Allie realized how starved she was. Unable to wait any longer, she sat down and dug in. She reasoned that since she’d been so well taken care of, then surely the breakfast was meant for her, too.

When she was full, the girl came up to the window, drew the curtain aside and opened the window wide. For a moment she froze in astonishment and delight: the window faced a real garden, but what a garden it was! There were flowers of all shapes and colors right by the window. A little further down, there were short bushy trees, some of them covered in blossoms, others – in young green fruit, and still others bent down their heavy branches laden with ripe fruits. The fruits were of unusual kinds: round, diamond-shaped, flat like a wheel, pear-shaped, and even some that looked like big striped doughnuts.

The garden was filled with such fragrant aromas that Allie felt a little dizzy. She went to the opposite window and stopped, stupefied: it was the land’s end. That is, she could see an empty grassy area with some shrubbery here and there. It ended about two hundred feet away, and there was nothing else beyond it, only a strangely-colored sky.

Just then Allie realized that she’d been hearing the familiar rhythmic breathing she’d first heard the night before. Only now it sounded like the breathing of some big, good-natured creature. The girl was struck by a sudden epiphany. She ran out of the room, down the porch and toward the land’s end. The breathing sounded louder, and the sky came nearer. Then Allie stopped – she couldn’t run any further. Entranced, she was looking at the thing in front of her. Here it was, alive and breathing, huge as the sky. The sea!

“The sea!” Allie yelled in delight and waved her arms to greet it.

She had been at the sea before. Her parents had taken her there twice to treat her ear infections, but she was too little then and didn’t remember much. Most of her knowledge of the sea came from books and movies. And now she was looking at it, up close.

The cliff she was standing on was quite tall, about a hundred feet above the sea level, but its slope was gradual enough to go down without breaking one’s neck. Allie saw a path that went down to the wide beach that stretched along the sea from left to right. The sand of the beach was bright yellow, almost orange. Here and there rusty-red smooth stones peeked out of the sand.

Yellows and oranges dominated the landscape. The sky was blue only in the west; straight overhead it was yellowish green and turned bright yellow toward the east around the large sun. Right at the horizon it melted into rosy caramel.

Taking a good look, Allie realized something: the sun wasn’t as bright as always, so she could easily gaze directly at it. But it was clearly larger than normal. There was something uncanny, even unearthly about it all.

Nevertheless, the view that stretched before Allie was indeed splendid. The most marvelous thing of all was, naturally, the sea. It was dark navy in the distance, turned delicately azure towards the shore, and right at the shoreline blended together many hues of green, from bright grassy green to an almost transparent bottle-glass green. Gentle waves rolled lazily towards the shore. The golden-orange sun was playing on their glossy backs. They curled up with foamy pinkish white-caps near the beach, then spilled onto the sand with a quiet hissing sound and left wisps of foam all over. It didn't have time to melt as the new wave brought more foam. This went on continuously.

Allie couldn't help herself any longer. She ran down the path and toward the sea, her feet sinking in the sand. The sun, albeit not very bright, was hot, and, although it was still morning, the sand had already heated through. It looked like it was high summer season.

Throwing off her clothes, Allie carefully touched the waves with her toes. The water was warm, and the girl threw her doubts aside and dove into the sea. She played in the pink foamy waves, forgetting about everything else in the world, even about the fact that she only had eight more days to save her Mom and Dad.

When she had played in the water to her heart's content, Allie found herself a spot on a warm rock. The girl basked in the sun, soaking up its gentle warmth. The waves broke against the rock, and Allie could feel their pleasantly cool spray on her hot skin and taste the salt on her lips. A light breeze was playing with her already dry hair. The sea sparkled in the sun. Allie was taking in the sight of this shimmering emerald-colored marvel and couldn't get enough of it. It mesmerized her; she forgot about time and felt like she could sit there forever.

Looking at this peaceful sea, Allie had a hard time believing that just a few hours before that awful storm was raging. The very thought of it made Allie shudder. There was only one reminder now: far away at the horizon, where the sky met the sea, she could see a ridge of black stormclouds. They didn't look scary but rather picturesque at this distance, especially that one spot where the biggest stormclouds towered high above the rest of them. There was a rosy golden halo of sunlight around the clouds, so this stormy mass looked almost dreamlike, and the green and orange lightnings that lit up the clouds from time to time only added to the impression. In the light of one especially bright flash Allie noticed a swarm of black dots in the sky.

"Must be seagulls," she thought.

Engrossed in this fabulous view, Allie didn't pay attention to her surroundings. That's why she didn't notice when a stranger approached the rock she was sitting on. It was a short stout man dressed in a light-colored loose tunic and matching short trousers. His gray hair hadn't been cut in a long time and stuck out in wisps. A shaggy curly beard framed his round smiley face. He looked old at first sight, but his smooth tan skin and merry blue eyes under the bushy eyebrows belied the impression.

"Aha, I thought I'd find you here," he said in a pleasant low voice.

Allie started and looked at the stranger, feeling uneasy. But his open good-natured look soon put her at ease, and she smiled back.

"Good morning, sir. You must live in that house over there?"

"That's right," said the bearded man and sat down beside her. "Call me Uncle Zand. And what might your name be? And how did you get here, little traveler?"

"My name is Allie, sir. I'll tell you everything, but first tell me, how did you find me? And did you see anyone else? The thing is, my companions were a cat and a monkey."

"That's right, a cat!" exclaimed Uncle Zand, slapping his forehead. "Of course, it was a cat! Why didn't I realize that? Well, it's one thing to see a picture, and quite another – to see a live one. Well, it was that cat who woke me up last night and brought me to the spot where you'd decided to take a nap. But there was no monkey."

"My dear Lemonade," whispered Allie, moved. "It was you who saved me."

She suddenly felt ashamed that she'd completely forgotten her friends as she played on the beach.

“Uncle Zand, where is the cat now?”

“Early in the morning, while you were still asleep, he got up, had breakfast and left. But you promised you’d tell me your story.”

“Yes, of course.” Allie gathered her thoughts. She decided to tell him everything, or almost everything that had happened over the last few days. She didn’t seem to have much choice. Also, she felt she could be candid with her new friend.

“Well, it all began with a fish,” Allie sighed and began her story.

As she talked, Uncle Zand listened with attention and looked her straight in the eye. At the very beginning of the story he began to seem concerned. His good-natured serene face suddenly showed signs of surprise. Then he got up and started pacing restlessly around the rock. Finally he raised his arms in the air and stopped the girl:

“Hold on, little girl! Wait. Where did you live before you got here?”

Allie told him his address.

“No, no. Not that. I mean, which sphere is your home?”

Seeing her puzzled face, Zand added impatiently:

“Well, what is your planet?”

“Earth,” Allie said in a dismal voice.

Zand looked at her intently, then nodded and sat down again, suddenly regaining his composure.

“You can continue.”

Allie continued her sad and fantastic story. Any minute she was expecting him to laugh at her words, but Uncle Zand was listening with great seriousness and never interrupted her. Allie finished her story with her falling down in a faint in the middle of a storm-torn forest the night before.

“That’s all. And then I woke up in your house. Thank you for everything, sir.”

“Well, thank you’s can wait,” said Zand with a concerned look. “Everything’s not that simple about this whole thing.”

He stared at the sea and stroked his beard, silent. Allie didn’t want to interrupt his thoughts and was sitting quietly and looking at the stormclouds on the horizon.

“Looks like a fairy castle,” she said in a low voice, as if to herself.

“Huh? What castle?” Zand shook himself and, following her gaze, nodded.

“Oh, that thing. You are not too far from the truth. Castle or not, but there is something interesting there. I’ll show you. Follow me.” He rose and walked toward the cliff.

Allie quickly put on her jeans and T-shirt, grabbed her shoes and sweater and ran after Zand.

“Uncle Zand,” asked Allie when she caught up with him, “what’s this sea called?”

He looked back over his shoulder:

“This one? It’s the Forsifian.”

“What’s that? For-sif-i-an? Never heard of it.”

“Hmm, never heard of it. Does this lead you to any conclusions?”

“I think I know.” Allie stopped, and then burst out, “We are not on Earth, are we?”

“You are a smart girl,” said Zand kindly. “And also brave. Well, that makes it easier for me to explain some things.”

Talking like that, they walked up the path to the top of the cliff. When they got there, Allie saw the neat little house made with rather large blocks of pinkish stone with golden streaks. The flat sloped roof made the house look like any regular modern cottage on Earth.

To the left of the house was the garden that Allie had seen from the window; to the right there was a tall round tower. It was no less than ten feet in diameter, and at least fifty feet tall. Not far from the house was the edge of the forest where Allie had wandered the night before. Further to the right she could see forested hills that gently sloped up towards picturesque rocky mountains.

The tower was made of the same kind of stones as the little house. A sturdy metal steeple on the very top held a big windmill with slowly rotating blades. Just under the tower roof there was a glass-sided observation deck.

And then Allie saw something that made her give a happy yelp and run toward the house. There, on its porch, sat Lu and Lemonade. They looked rather beaten up, especially Lu. She was covered with mud, one side was torn with the stuffing sticking out, her left arm was barely hanging on one thread. All in all, she looked so pitiful that Allie was ready to cry. She picked up the monkey and held her tight, whispering comforting words in her ear.

After the initial excitement had subsided, Allie cleaned Lu with a hard brush that Uncle Zand had found. He also found a needle and some thread, so Allie didn't have any trouble patching up the monkey.

While she was busy doing that, Lu and Lemonade hurried to tell her what had happened to them the night before. It turned out that they had been pinned down by a large boulder. They didn't know whether it was the same boulder they together had pushed out of the tunnel or a different one. They just felt that they were falling into the darkness and held on tight to each other. That was what saved them. When the heavy stone crashed on top of them, the monkey was on top and softened the blow for Lemonade. He was just pushed into some loose gravel.

When he came to his senses, Lemonade began to dig himself out from under the boulder. The storm was raging all around them. The cat was trying to call Allie, but realized it was all in vain in such noise. Then he tried to dig the gravel from under the boulder to set Lu free. She was unable to move, but other than that inconvenience didn't feel any pain or discomfort. She and Lemonade could even easily talk to each other. That is why when Lu heard the cat digging, she insisted that he go find Allie first. She assured Lemonade that she'd be just fine, while Allie could be in grave danger at that moment. Lemonade found her arguments quite convincing and, making no delay, rushed to find the girl.

He spent a long time wandering through the dark groaning forest and finally, thanks to his night vision and keen sense of smell, found the girl lying senseless on a forest clearing. He himself couldn't help the girl; fortunately, he smelled a human dwelling in the vicinity and didn't hesitate to rush there, led by a pet's instinct. That's how he found Uncle Zand's house, woke him up and led him to Allie...

When the girl was out of danger, Lemonade drank some buttery sweet milk and fell asleep in the big soft chair. But he woke up with the first gleam of sunlight. He didn't want to wake Allie up, because she needed more rest, and went to rescue Lu by himself. He easily found his way back to the mountain and the boulder. It was only a matter of time to dig Lu out...

7. ANOTHER WORLD

While Allie was fixing the monkey and listening to Lemonade's story, Uncle Zand was watching them with interest and some surprise. Allie noticed that and asked:

"Uncle Zand, sir, you must think this is all so weird?"

"Well, how do I say this? For instance, it's really the first time I've seen a real cat, although its image is on our kingdom's coat of arms. And, it's been at least a decade since I last saw a dummy." Zand nodded towards Lu. "And, I've never seen one that can talk."

"What did you call her?" It was Allie's turn to be surprised. "A 'dummy'?"

"Well, yes, a dummy, or pseudolife, as our learned magicians call it. There used to be a lot of them around these parts before the war with Galfar. Only they couldn't talk. But you don't know anything about it, of course. I believe it is my turn now to tell you some things."

Zand stopped, gathering his thoughts, and then began his story:

"I'm not a magician or alchemist of any kind. That's why I'm going to tell it all simply, just how I see it, and only what I know for myself. You, Allie, guessed correctly when you said we're not on Earth. That's true. This land is called Ameron. I'm sure no one on Earth knows about it."

Allie just shrugged.

"At the same time," Zand continued, "Earth and Ameron are so close it's hard to believe. To be more exact, they exist in the same space and at the same time. For example, we are now sitting in my house, and the very same spot on Earth would be, let's say..."

"Three P's," muttered Lemonade.

"What's that?" Zand was confused.

"Three P's' means 'Polar Pioneers Park', " explained Allie.

"The place where the 'Cave of Horrors' is."

"That's right." Lemonade said. "We get it. Parallel worlds or multi-dimensional space, we've heard something about that."

Uncle Zand stared at the cat with a mix of astonishment and respect.

"I've never heard those words, but I feel that you understand what I'm talking about. It is truly a pleasure to talk with you. Well, then, I will go on. One time-space continuum can hold not just two or three, what did you call those, parallel worlds, but, farlan only knows how many. Here in Ameron we are aware of at least ten such worlds. We call them spheres. The spheres are sort of stacked into one another, and all together compose a Spheroid. One Spheroid can hold, according to some wisemen, two dozen spheres, or, according to others – an unlimited number of spheres. It is a complex issue, and we have no time to dwell on it. The main thing is, it is not difficult to move between the spheres. There are natural 'windows' between them, and also an experienced magician can create such windows for a short time. The only limitation is, the spheres are placed in a certain order in relation to each other, and from any given sphere you can only move to a contiguous, or adjacent, sphere. Ameron, for example, borders with Earth on one side and Galfar on the other. The sphere that borders with Galfar on its other side is Norba, and the next contiguous sphere for Earth is Vildi. I forget the others, and it doesn't really matter."

"Sounds like a nesting-doll," Allie said, as if thinking out loud.

Zand gave her a quizzical look.

"Those are hollow wooden dolls of different sizes. And they stack into one another," the girl explained. "In order to get to the smallest one, you need to open each one in turn."

"Well, it's a fitting comparison. In order to get to the farthest sphere, you need to travel through all the spheres in between."

"Now I see why the car from the 'Cave of Horrors' can only get to Galfar through the icy grotto," Lu, who had been quiet so far, joined the conversation. It seemed like she felt shy in front

of Uncle Zand because of the way she looked. “We were really lucky that Earth’s adjacent sphere is Ameron, not Galfar.”

Zand stared at Lu in amazement. She felt embarrassed and clung to Allie.

“Oh, Uncle Zand,” Allie said with reproach and shook her head.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t get used to a talking dummy.”

“She is not a dummy, she is a real girl like me. Only under a magic spell.”

“Put on her in that same Galfar, by the way,” added Lemonade.

“I apologize again, Lu. Please don’t be mad at me.”

Zand extended his hand to Lu. She hesitated a moment and then put her soft plush paw into his large palm.

“Well, kids, I see you’ve got many charges against Galfar,” Zand looked at the strange group with sympathy.

“Uncle Zand, why are they doing all of that?” exclaimed Allie hotly. “What do they want from us, from Earth?”

“I can only guess,” said Zand pensively and stroked the girl’s head. “Galfar’s dealings are shrouded in mystery, and even here in Ameron, a sphere that’s contiguous with Galfar, we know very little about it. They say that our ancient chronicles bear witness to the fact that there used to be no Galfar, at least not in our Spheroid, and Norba was Ameron’s adjacent sphere. No one knows how Galfar came to be or where it came from. At least no one among us ordinary beings. There are rumors and speculations, but the sure thing everyone knows is this: Galfar bears evil in itself, and all doings of Galfarians and their Supreme Guard of the Cup are destructive and bring only troubles and tribulations. Naturally, to other spheres. Galfar itself must be getting some profit from that. Galfar’s treachery became evident ten years ago, when it waged open war against us. Before that we’d been pretty good neighbors, there was even some trade going on between us. For instance, those dummies came from Galfar, and there used to be lots of them here before the war. They were toys and servants, and even laborers. After the war some wanted to destroy them, but then it was decided that, since they hadn’t done any harm to us even during the war, after Galfar’s defeat they couldn’t cause any trouble either. So they were all exiled beyond the mountains, to the Free Lands. But, I’m digressing.”

“Uncle Zand, your story is so interesting, but we really do have very little time. Can you just tell us who those Guards of the Cup are?”

“There is strict hierarchy among Galfarians. A Guard of the Cup is a kind of title that designates the hierarchical rank of this or that Galfarian. The highest rank is the Supreme Guard of the Cup, then there are the Guards of the Cup of two ranks, then it’s the two ranks of the Adepts, and at the very bottom are the masses – the Unattained.”

“So, what is this Cup then?” asked Lu. Allie and Lemonade nodded. Everybody wanted to know.

“Oh, that. Well, there is a legend that says there is a Universal Cup of Evil in Galfar. All evil that is committed in all spheres is collected, drop by drop, in this Cup. When it is filled to the brim, Evil will rule the Universe. No less and no more. To the Galfarians it must be some sort of sacred symbol, if you can say that about Galfar, that they worship.”

“Well, it seems that this bowl of theirs is not full enough yet since they couldn’t take over Ameron,” said Lemonade and scratched behind his ear.

“That’s true, they didn’t, but, honestly, they were really close. Those were very dramatic events. Fortunately, Ameron was fine in the end, although the circumstances of that victory might seem rather strange and inexplicable. But that is a different story. To cut it short, Galfar’s armies were defeated and expelled from Ameron, all ‘windows’ between our two spheres were sealed and blocked by Shelengh the Great and his assistants. After that there were no more dealings with Galfar...”

“And Galfarians now deal with Earth,” Allie finished his sentence.

“I think they were interested in Earth long before, it’s just that after their defeat in Ameron their influence on Earth increased. I should also mention some peculiarities about Earth. In some ways it is even more mysterious to us than Galfar. A long time ago, several centuries back, there was a close bond between Ameron and Earth. There were many natural ‘windows’ between the two spheres, and people could quite easily move between them, sometimes without even noticing. But gradually, due to some unknown causes, the ‘windows’ became fewer and fewer. People of Earth visited Ameron less and less, and those who continued to visit other spheres were persecuted and sometimes even killed. Evolution of life on Earth went in a totally different direction than here in Ameron, a direction strange and incomprehensible to us. Centuries went by, and Earth forgot about other habitable worlds, not on distant stars, but literally within arm’s reach. Moreover, in their stubborn pride, people of Earth not only lost connection with us, but refused to believe in the existence of any life other than their own.

That is how, in a few centuries, Earth’s humanity completely lost the ability to travel to other spheres. That is why I said that Earth is farther from us than Galfar. Do you understand?”

Allie silently nodded.

“That is why Galfarians feel so much at ease on Earth,” continued Zand. “It is very easy to hide in a place where no one believes that you exist, and do your dark business. They don’t dare to come to us anymore, although, it turns out, they still use our territory for their Galfar-Earth ‘window’. That’s what I think about all this.”

“Uncle Zand, sir,” pleaded Allie, “so what do we do now? How can I help Mom and Dad? There are only eight days left.”

Zand scratched his shaggy beard.

“I’ve given it some thought. I’ll say what: you’ll need to go to the capital, to Eleont, to see the First Royal Magician, Shelengh the Great. If he cannot help you, no one can.”

Seeing Allie’s trembling lips, Zand hastily added:

“But he’ll definitely help. He is learned in all mysteries of magic science.”

“Where is Eleont? And how do we get there?”

“The capital is far, and not easy to get to,” Zand sounded concerned. “But it can’t be helped. There is only one way to get to Eleont in time. Allie, are you afraid of heights?”

Allie shrugged.

“I don’t know. When I was little, I climbed the diving tower all by myself, they barely made it in time to take me down. I guess I’m not afraid then. Probably.”

“That’s good. Then it should work. You’ll ride on a ‘carpet’, it’s their flying season now.”

“A carpet?!” exclaimed Allie and Lu at the same time and looked at each other.

“Yes, definitely a ‘carpet’, ” Zand smiled slyly at the puzzled friends. “But it’s easier to show than to explain. Follow me.”

He went to a small door in the side wall of the house. Behind the door was a narrow winding staircase that led upward. Allie remembered the tower with the windmill. Of course, they were inside the tower. Zand and the whole gang went up the stairs to the observation deck with glass windows all around it at the top of the tower. The view was excellent: they could see the whole surrounding area. But Allie was interested not in the view of the surroundings, but the interior of the tower. There was a huge telescope mounted on a special platform. There on the platform was a small chair and a table. The eye of the telescope was on the same level with a person sitting in the chair. In the center of the ceiling there was a metal shaft with a pinion. A complex system of gears made up of different cogs, wheels and pulleys connected the shaft with the telescope platform, and there was a special board with switches and levers. Apparently they controlled this whole mechanism.

“Well, do you like it?” asked Zand, noticing the girl’s surprise. He added, his hand on the telescope: “It’s all my handiwork. Pretty much everything here was made with these hands of mine.”

“It’s really cool,” Allie answered and walked around the mysterious construction. “What is this for?”

“I’ll tell you if I have the time. Now look to the south. No, not at the sea, the opposite direction. There, by the forest. See?”

Allie, and then Lu and Lemonade, looked in the direction Zand was pointing. There, about nine hundred feet from the tower, on the edge of the forest, something weird was happening. From time to time some flat objects rose from the ground, ascended forty to fifty feet above the tree tops and, undulating slightly, began to glide through the air, gradually picking up speed, until they disappeared behind the distant hills. It was impossible to figure out what those objects were and to estimate their size. Allie couldn’t understand whether those were birds or some kind of flying machines.

“Uncle Zand, what are those?” she asked, staring at the forest edge.

“Sit down here,” Zand pointed at the chair.

Allie did just that and sat down by the telescope. The chair was hard but comfortable. Zand stood near her and moved a switch on the board. The cogs and wheels started turning, and the whole construction, telescope, Allie, Zand and all, started rotating slowly. When the telescope faced south, Zand stopped it, bent down, looked through the eyepiece and turned some knobs on the switchboard. A minute later he said with satisfaction:

“There. Now you look.”

Allie looked, and saw a meadow, covered with thick soft grass and bright flowers. It was so close that it seemed she could reach out and touch the flowers. The grass had grown very tall, at least waist-high. Only a few random patches shaped like circles or ovals with rough edges had short, dark, intensely green grass. It looked as if it had been trimmed by a lawnmower. Suddenly Allie saw a wave ripple over one of those patches, like the wind that sways the stalks in a wheat field. But the wind couldn’t have stirred such short grass, besides, the tall grass growing just next to it was absolutely still. There came another wave, then another, and now the whole lawn looked like tumultuous sea. Then something happened that Allie had been expecting: the undulating round lawn about twelve feet in diameter slowly took off the ground and up into the air. It stayed in one spot for some time and then started moving away due south.

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