

karlabyrinth

Myrie Pliers

The Symmetry Of Snowflakes

Das Buch

Es handelt sich hierbei um eine Science Fiction Utopie mit den klassischen und ein paar ergänzenden Fantasy Spezies. Es ist außerdem eine Coming-of-age Geschichte über einen neurodivergenten Hauptcharakter. Content Notes befinden sich in einem zusätzlichen Buch, das auf meiner Homepage <https://www.karlabyrinth.org> zu finden ist.

Der Schreibfisch

karlabyrinth schreibt, um Gedanken und Gefühle auszulösen, die heilen und zu mehr Inklusion führen. Das Ziel ist kein geringeres als die Welt zu verbessern.

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ROMAN

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische
Daten sind online unter <https://www.karlabyrinth.org> abrufbar.

Impressum

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Lektorat: Siehe Danksagung

Cover: karlabyrinth

Illustrationen: karlabyrinth

Buchsatz: karlabyrinth
gesetzt mit *SPBuchsatz*

Maren Kaluza
Hofer Straße 19
04317 Leipzig

Druckerei: OsirisDruck, Inh. Dr. Dietmar Bsonек
Karl-Heine-Str. 99, 04229 Leipzig

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Prologue

Heddra stumped through the deep snow. The sky had one of these wondrous grayish and reddish shades, that appear to be dark but still gleam. One could not distinguish separate clouds, rather there was a single diffuse cloud layer, that could not decide, when it stopped being a cloud layer but was sky instead. For each step she had to heave one of her legs that were sunken nearly knee-deep into the bright snow out of the cold clammy snow layer and to sink it down again through the frozen layer before her. There was a breaking and then the familiar creaking sound of snow being compressed. It was laborious and beautiful.

The child on her back found the whole thing to be not even moderately agreeable. It was two weeks old now and had complained quite some time during the hike. Quite near to Heddras ear, quite loud. And Heddra, who preferred it to be still, had decided after only a few days that raising a child would stress her out too much. Probably it would also be better for the child if she wasn't the one to do that. She considered herself to be fairly inappropriate to raise a child. She tramped around, liked adventures and the solitude. Only occasionally she enjoyed visiting someone but most of the time she preferred being alone.

The father would be suited considerably better for that task. He was a sensitive, warm-hearted man, who just let people be. One of the very few, whom Heddra liked to have around for some time once and again. He didn't expect regularities nor minimum times of stays. He didn't make cynical remarks like »Oh, you are back again, finally.«. When she came, she came, and he was glad about it, and when she had to leave as it itched in her feet then it was fine, aswell.

Heddra loved him and she smiled having that thought.



The place had to be somewhere here, she thought. The mountains, she had passed everytime to reach the village where the father of the child lived, were beautiful. She had a really distinct sense of direction and could relocate every path that she had scaled or crossed once only. This time she took another path. In the past she had taken considerably steeper paths. But for the child she wanted to avoid such a climbing tour and decided to take a less dangerous route. It would have been a lot more pleasant and easier. On the cliffy hillsides there was less snow.

Dusk was falling and a line of violet light gleamed along the horizon above the snowbound fir trees whose branches hanged heavily, as if they where tired. A romantic picture. Heddra stopped to admire. No snow was falling at the moment which lightened up the child's mood a bit.

When they arrived on the next hill at the edge of the mountains, she finally saw it. A village, a few more than 40 houses perhaps. A wide brook or slim river, which meandered inbetween them. A small, wooden bridge that arched over the stream. A really lovely bridge made of dark wood and with a decorated balustrade, evenly distributed planks and nicely turned stilts. The village had the suitable name Byrtingen and the stream that burbled around was the Glukka.



When Heddra finally reached the village, it was after midnight. The lights were extinct, nothing moved. It was comfortably silent. Heddra walked along the main street and then turned into the Wooden Way. She moved as silently as possible to not disturb the calm. The last house in the street had a garden bordered by a beautiful wooden fence. It was fabricated in the same style as the bridge that led across the Glukka. The wicket was dark and reliefs of animals where carved into it. She especially liked the

detailed dragon. She had only once seen a real one from afar and years had gone by since then. She ran her fingers over the carving.

The wood shined due to being sauced and smelled good for that reason. The smell spread across the whole estate and Heddra loved it. This was another reason why she came here again and again. And also because the man who lived here had a sense for such a thing. He was calm, patient and friendly. He engaged in her odd behavior and kept silent when she needed it to be quiet. During summer the garden was full of scented plants, mostly flowers, but also herbs.



Heddra knocked at the front door and it appeared to her that she destroyed the magic laying on the estate with that action. Adding to that misery nobody reacted. A few minutes later before the magic would have sneaked back, she knocked again, this time vigorously. It required some time but then steps could be heard approaching the door and it opened. And Vadime stood there in the doorway. He only reached up to Heddra's hip and he layed his head back to look into her face.

»Heddra!«, he said in his deep, mild voice, »Come in!«

He held open the door for her, – of course a nicely labored wooden door –, and Heddra bent down under the doorway to move into the workshop. It was comfortably warm in here. The walls isolated quite well. A warm, orange glow lightened up the room from a wall in just a way that the contours of the work benches and chairs could be seen and one could orientate oneself. With a gesture Vadime turned up the light a bit, so Heddra could better see his face. But of his face she could still not see as much. Above his dark eyes there were bushy, brown eyebrows and the forehead revealed his firm, reddish and brownish skin type. The rest of the face was hairy. The full, brown beard though was not of that

common type of beards with strong hair, but tremendously fluffy instead. Heddra reached out with her hand and grabbed it. The beard was neatly trimmed and felt just wonderful on her skin. Vadime grasped her wrists, not to pull away her hands. His firm hands were marvelously warm and stroked over her forearms and the balls of her hands.



They stood there for quite a while without speaking until the child on Heddras back became noticeable with a whimpering. A bit bewailed Heddra let go of Vadimes beard and untied the child from her back. She gave it into Vadime's arms who immediately started rocking it back and forth and looked at it caringly. The child stopped whimpering and looked back, from huge gray eyes. Heddra rummaged in one of her pockets and fished out a crumpled piece of paper, flattened it and put it onto the stomach of the child in Vadimes arms. »Myrie« was written on it.

»Myrie«, murmured Vadime in a low voice but Heddra shook her head.

»That is not a long i. The name has three syllables, not just two. Unlike your name the e is not mute.«

»Myri-je?«, Vadime asked and Heddra nodded.

»You are the father.«, said Heddra bashfully, »Will you raise her?«
Vadime smiled immediately.

»Of course!«, he said. He pressed the child blissfully a bit more to his body and one could clearly see that he was pleased. Heddra was pleased aswell. She had assumed that it would work out. That he would take the child. But she had not been quite certain that he would be so happy about it. He already raised three children and this was definitely a burden. But it was better this way. And Heddra felt reassured of her assumption that the child would be better off here than with her.

She turned around and headed for the door.

»I always appreciate when you come!«, Vadime said. He wasn't trying to hold her back but it sounded differently than when he had bidden farewell in the past. And Heddra understood that he had appraised her behavior better than she had done herself. She would not come back soon. She was afraid that her own child would not like her or would be angry with her because she had left it. The fears might have been foolish. Heddra still feared it already. She turned around again and kissed Myrie and Vadime both on their foreheads one last time, gently and carefully. Full of love. Then she stroked Vadime through his beard a last time. She was not the only one doing this anymore. The child had put its tiny hands into Vadime's beard for quite a while and Vadime had to pay attention that it would not pull.

Then she left the house, the garden, the village and vanished from Myrie's and Vadime's lives. It saddened her but on the other hand she was glad that the child with Vadime and Vadime with the child were certainly well off with each other. Vadime didn't miss people that much and the child would probably not even remember her and could not miss a person that had never been there. Especially if it had everything it might need as it was the case with Vadime.

Omantra

Myrie was five and a half years old when two events changed her life:

Her grandmother died at the age of 111. That was not considered to be an old age. Usually dwarfs would become 300 years and older, most of them at least 250, if it was not due to an unnatural death. Also, natural death were rare. Usually great-great-grandparents would live to see their great-great-grandchildren but rarely had contact to them. In the majority of the cases two or three generations would live together, then their children would move out and start a family of their own or live in a shared apartment with their favorite company without starting a family. As a result dwarfs would usually be confronted with death without respawn not before becoming fifty or even a hundred years old.

Of course there were exceptions. Families living together with more generations than usual, to name an example. Or cases, in which an apartment would be shared between really old and quite young people. There were suicides. And rarely there happened to be deaths caused in an accident, in particular affecting people who would choose a risky life style.

Anyway, children at the age of five and a half would rather not be educated about death without respawn. And Myrie only marginally had heard of it at all.

Myrie sat at the dining room table together with her three siblings and her father eating lunch when she got informed about it. The table was made from dark solid and polished wood, like most of the furniture in the house. Its four legs were not equally sized and it therefore wobbled a bit.

»Gran Lorna died. Died without respawn.«, her father had said, »That means, we will never see her again. Neither here nor in any virtuality.«

He looked disturbed, Myrie assumed. And she could relate to that. She tried to imagine to never see Gran Lorna again. A strange and unpleasant thought. She liked Gran Lorna. She told nice stories. She used to tell nice stories, Myrie corrected herself in her thoughts. And that also felt strange.

It was snowing. It was autumn. The ground had been frozen for a week now and it was the first snow that did not instantly melt. Tiny white snowflakes scampered in front of the window outside. Myrie loosened her stare, that quite intensely stuck to the blowing snow this time, and left, aiming for her gaming room. It was a narrow bald room with a net of thin wires on its walls.

»Ocean. With air.«, Myrie said, pushed her VR glasses down her nose and the soft headphones over her ears. The room vanished and water was everywhere instead. Mighty waves, blue sky with a few clouds, mighty whooshing noises. One wave raised her from the floor and she floated in the ocean. She would have had to paddle with her arms to not sink but she refused this time and sank below the water surface. The streaming stroked her skin with comfortable coolness. She turned in a way her head pointed slightly downwards and slowly began to swim. The calm and stillness grew while she gained depth. Also, the displayed air bar shrunk. She barely could remember having it activated. She must have turned it off in the distant past but a nearly faded memory drove her to activate it again.

The air bar flashed before it was consumed completely, and the flashing stressed her. She wanted it to become empty even though, and when it happened she could not move her torso, only her head and her extremities. She felt quite comfortable in this position. In a reachable distance the respawn button appeared and was also announced by an electronic voice that said »respawn«. Below the button she could see a short text that was read aloud by the same voice:

»Please do not try this in reality. For further information please press the button below or say >further information<.«

She could remember to have heard that text before quite often but she never had asked for further information. To be honest, she could not even remember when she had heard it for the first time or when she first dived into the ocean. The ocean was her favorite virtuality, when she wanted to be alone. Most of the times she dived deeply until it was oppressively still and she could feel the weight of the water, lonely fluorescent creatures floating around her, calming and fascinating.

»Further information.«, she said. A longer text appeared on transparent dark background so the contrast to the water behind it was high enough to read it properly. And, as always, the text was read out loud. Myrie could not read properly at that time.

»Diving in reality: In reality there are bodies of water, as well. There are lakes, rivers, the sea and the oceans. Unlike water bodies in virtualities one needs to hold ones breath when diving in water in reality. Otherwise water might access the respiratory system. Do you want to find out how long you can hold your breath?«

The reading was interrupted so Myrie could answer.

»Yes«, Myrie said.

»Breathe in deeply, then hold your breath and hold a finger underneath your nose.«, the electronical voice said. Myrie exhaled deeply, then inhaled and hold her breath, moving her gloved finger underneath her nose. She counted in her head, thankful that the reading still halted while she was concentrating. When she arrived at 32 she started feeling uncomfortable and at 34 she exhaled again.

»36 seconds.«, the vice said, paused shortly before continuing with the main text.

»The air bar in the ocean virtuality lasts for 40 seconds. Assume, you would dive longer than you could hold your breath. Then you would have to breathe water. The water would than flow though your respirational system into your lungs which can lead to death without respawn. If

you want to dive in reality you therefore need to have proper training of your breath control. The recommendation would be to not swim or dive in reality or to carefully learn it with explicit instructions. If you want to learn to swim in reality you should do so in a course with an experienced person or, when you grow older, you might be educated with your educational AI. Do you now prefer a summary of the problems of diving and swimming in reality, detailed information on that, do you prefer to be informed about death without respawn, or would you like to leave the menu?«

»First I want to hear a summary about the problems of diving in reality and then I want to hear about death without respawn.«, Myrie said. She had the feeling her voice sounded insecure.

»Your pulse is raised. Your choice of topics is unusual. Do you suffer from a loss?«, another, new voice asked, while a new page of text appeared. The new voice sounded less electronic than the first one, nearly familiar. It sounded female to Myrie, warm and although it was not sounding like the voice of her grandmother in any way, it reminded Myrie of her. And she did not like it at all, that there was this voice, that sounded like it would care for Myrie. A voice in a world Myrie would withdraw to when she wanted to be alone. The electronic voice from before that phrased the text had no emotion and only informed. That was okay. But a voice that would ask personal questions, that was not okay at all.

»Go away.«, said Myrie harshly. The voice said nothing, and Myrie hoped this was due to it being gone. The other voice had started to read the text but Myrie had not been listening because she was so agitated. She restarted the reading:

»Real temperatures belong to the main further risks of diving in reality in less civilized regions. Due to a protection mechanisms temperature in virtualities can never sink below 8°C. In addition temperature in virtualities raises when you are cold for too long. Both does not happen in reality. Water bodies persist in their temperature even if the bathing person would start freezing. Dependent on the saltiness the temperature

in reality is only limited by the freezing point at 0°C, when water becomes ice.«

Myrie already knew that. She had hold her feet into the Glukka and sometimes she had broken the ice cover to do so.

»The Glukka in Byrglingen currently has 4°C. Longer bathes without training would lead to hypothermia and acute pain and can lead to long-term or irreversible damage of the real body. In extreme cases it can lead to death without respawn.«

»One can train that?«, Myrie asked surprised.

»I could provide such a training fitting your needs.«, the unfamiliar voice said again that she had heard earlier. Myrie squinted her eyes with anger.

»Why are you still here?«, she asked.

»You asked a question. I am your educational AI. Your stage of development is at a point at which it might be feasible for you to start with your education.«

Myrie had heard about educational AIs from her siblings. They were there for schooling and specifically designed for the needs and requirements of their pupils. Some children would get only one, some would have more. Some educational AIs were teaching more than one child. Most children gathered in learning groups and were educated together with other children who would learn in a similar way. Myrie had feared this for quite a while. She had never felt comfortable meeting other children in virtualities so far. But her father had soothed her, telling her that she would not have to learn together with other children, if it would not work out for her. He told her about her mother who was educated all by herself until she turned twelve. Then she had tried visiting a learning group for half a year but snapped again. And she still became a well educated wise woman. There was nothing objectionable about it.

Her father liked telling about Heddra. Myrie never had met her mother personally and still had a clear vision of her character. She liked listening to the stories her father told.

She sometimes asked herself if she would have more than one educational AI or just a single one, and if she could cope with an AI. Sometimes she even had been looking forward to it. But then, in particular now was not the right time to first meet an educational AI. There was a reason she had withdrawn herself to the ocean virtuality.

»Go away.«, she repeated, and to the other voice she said »Start again at >Without further training<, please.«

She again had not been listening.

»There are no air bars or other options of intervening in reality, which is another problem of diving in reality. The remaining air is not visible and you cannot change places using teleportation or accelerated swimming spontaneously. Even in case of exhaustion it is only possible to reach the bank or shore actively swimming. This is similar to going home after a visit in the amusement hall or after visits in a restaurant or cafe, where home can only be reached actively walking. Streaming can also be dangerous. The current in the Glukka near Byrglingen is not dangerous. It becomes dangerous down flow where there is water supply from other streams and the water body gets wider and deeper. The current there becomes so strong that you cannot swim against it. It pulls you below the surface and leads to suffocating.«

That was not precise, Myrie thought. When she had visited Bwalin's Bar before, her father had carried her home when she became sleepy. Myrie was a bit disappointed due to the inaccuracy of the text.

»Water bodies outside of civilized regions are a home to dangerous animals. The stingling for instance is a fish that can be found in the sea close to uninhabited coasts, hiding in algae. Stinglings have a pointed spike on their back. If a person touches it, they shoot a poison into the body, as mosquitoes do. The stingling's poison however is a strong neurotoxic substance that causes fever, nausea and vomiting and requires a medical treatment. Without proper treatment the poisoning can lead to death without respawn on people who are very young, very old or are immunocompromised.

Would you like to have detailed information about the risk of diving, be informed about death without respawn or would you like to exit the menu?»

»I already said that: death without respawn.«, Myrie answered. The text updated.

»Death without respawn: death in reality is often referred to as death without respawn. The naming points out that there is no respawn. In case of death in reality the affected person loses all their body functionality, including the functionality of the brain. The person is not able to move, to think of anything or even to imagine or to sense anything. This process is irreversible. It can not be undone. It is unknown whether the person can experience anything without their body.«

Myrie felt a bit dizzy trying whilst imagining to not being able to imagine anything. She also miserably failed. Then she did not miserably fail imagining that another person might be in that position. Gran Lorna could not think. And although that might be strange, she did not even miss it, because missing was a manner of thinking. Gran Lorna did not know that she lacked an ability because for that experience she would have been able to think. Myrie realized that she also would never be able to talk to Gran Lorna again. She would never again be able to listen to Gran Lorna's voice because Gran Lorna was not able to use it any more. It was a body function. And Myrie always had liked that voice. The familiar sound of it. Gran Lorna used to knit and Myrie often had relaxed on her gurgling stomach staring at the knitting and listening to the voice for hours, when she had talked to her father. Warmth.

Tears appeared in Myrie's eyes. That rarely occurred. Her throat ached and she could barely breathe like it was unwillingly suppressed. Almost. She could breathe with strain and it hurt. At the same time it was scary and comforting. It felt real somehow.

»Would you like to know why snowflakes have this symmetry?«, the new voice asked.

Now Myrie also became angry but only for a short moment. She

had enough anyway and wanted to leave the house. She stripped off her headphones and her VR glasses and the ocean vanished.

Myrie ran outside into the snow. Without shoes. She always was bare feet inside. She liked the sensation of the timber floor boards at her soles and her feet never became cold. She had thick, leather-like skin with a grayish olive greenish tint. Still, she could feel the coolness of the snow with her soles. She ran to the stream. Small stones on her way pressed against her feet. It hurt a bit and with each pebble she sensed she felt more grounded. That was good. She ran down the Wooden Alley to the Main Street, which only earned its name because it was the widest street in the village. All streets in the village consisted of hardened gray sand, interspersed with small stones. The Main Street just was a bit wider than the other alleys.

Myrie reached the bridge her father had built and climbed down the small slope towards the Glukka. The Glukka had a width and a depth of about three meters. Myrie stripped off her outer wear, hesitated and then also took off her EM suit. It was a well fitting thin overall, even with fingers, close to a second skin, that made possible to experience virtualities.

Buck naked she grasped a chock of the bridge and dipped her feet into the water, one after the other. It was freezing, which she liked at first and then it started hurting. On the other hand that was comforting in a way, as well. And it made her stop thinking somberly about Gran Lorna or her father's disturbed face. She fully focused on the cold instead, and onto the dragging pain and the growing of stiffness. She focused on the beautifully sparkling, streaming water surface, onto the snowflakes dancing around and then again onto the feeling in her feet. At first she still felt the streaming of the water but than the sensation slowly faded away. Quickly she plunged her body into the stream up to her hip and than she lay down into the snow layer at the bank. Maybe her father would search for her soon. He usually let her and her siblings freely explore. He had explained quite a few times what to be careful about, let it be that they should not jump into the Glukka. As soon he could trust on them

they could move around like they wanted to. Nothing dangerous ever happened in the village. Myrie's older brothers, the twins, often played with other children from the village. Ahna, her oldest sibling, used to go for a walk with Myrie, such as visiting Gran Lorna, who lived at the boundaries of the village. Had lived. Myrie's eyes started producing fluid again. She did not know this time, if it really was about Gran Lorna or just due to the cold.

Myrie's father had developed a feeling if something happened. Once, when Myrie went home from Gran Lorna she tripped and her knee was bleeding terribly. Ahna could not carry her home since Myrie was far too heavy. Not even a minute passed until Myrie's father appeared, comforted her and carried her home to take care of the injury. Or rather let take care of the injury by one of their medical robots.

Some other time Myrie had wanted to play with her brothers and their friends. But the other children made fun of her, because she had no beard and because she needed quite some time to understand the rules of the game. They left Myrie behind crying, and then again, her father appeared unexpectedly and comforted her. He argued with the twins and took Myrie to Gran Lorna who told her stories. Gran Lorna with that wondrous telling voice. And with her very own special scent. Myrie would denote it neither as good nor as bad, but it belonged to Gran Lorna and she would not smell it quite often anymore. Maybe it would remain a bit in her belongings, but scents disappeared with time passing by. She most likely would forget it.

When Myrie had asked Gran Lorna if it was something bad not to have a beard, she had shaved off her beard. With this Myrie was not the only beardless in the village, anymore. Her father proposed to also shave to demonstrate that there really was nothing bad about not having a beard but Myrie disagreed. She always liked his beard for its fluffiness.

But from that day on Gran Lorna shaved herself every day. Quite a few people in the village backbit about it but she did not care at all. She persisted that they had no clue. Beards just were an ideal of beauty people

were used to but if one would look into a beardless face for a while and the first surprise and doubt faded then a beardless face would seem equally beautiful as any other.

Although the cold bit Myrie badly by now and she shivered heavily, she could not stop herself thinking about her grandmother's wrinkly face. She had been right. At first even for Myrie it had been strange to see her beardless. Initially. She barely had ever seen a mouth. And Gran Lorna had quite a lot of moles in her face, a big round one at the right side of her chin. The face was soft and more grayish than her father's and one could spot the pores. She found it to be beautiful when she got used to it, in the end.

In addition to the trembling Myrie also started sobbing and raised into a sitting position. Tears ran into her mouth. She thought about running away from home. Maybe she should climb into the mountains. Her mother had done this often, her father had told her. He also prohibited it because it was dangerous. But Myrie did not care for risks at the moment. Maybe she could meet her mother in the mountains. Maybe she also was beardless.

A snowflake touched her leg and did not melt. It lay there on the olive greenish grayish skin of her thigh. Nobody else in the village had such a strange skin color.

Never before had a snowflake remained on her, they used to melt because she usually was quite warm. Now she seemed to be cold enough to be buried underneath a snow layer. Myrie took a close look at the snowflake. It was partitioned into six pieces which all had the same pattern. Close to equal, to be precise, there was one piece missing but she knew exactly how the pattern would look if it had been complete. Why do snowflakes have a symmetrical pattern? It had not been the first time, Myrie realized it, but this was the first time this question phrased in her brain. No wonder, the AI had asked that very question before. Myrie defiantly tried to stop thinking about this question but failed. She had used to ask Gran Lorna this kind of questions when they arose and Gran

Lorna had answered all of them. Maybe not always detailed but still all of them.

Myrie stubbornly did not move for another moment but then struggled to her feet, fetched her clothes and walked home naked straight through the village.

Her father already waited in the entrance, about to leave to find her. He did ask nothing and also said nothing. He embraced her and his amazing warmth passed over to her slowly. He did not even say that she never should do that again. He took her into the bathroom and turned on the warm shower. Although he and his clothes became dripping wet he stayed with her until she was warm. Then he wrapped her into a large towel and carried her into her bed, even though it was just early afternoon. He stayed a while and stroked her hair. Then Ahna called him. Ahna appeared to be crying, as well. Myrie could catch that from her voice. That might have been the reason it had taken her father so long to finally start searching for her. All of a sudden she pitied him awfully. His mother had died and his children were so much in need of his attention, while nobody was taking care of him.

Myrie leaped to her feet and embraced him.

»I want to take care of you if you are sad.«, she said.

»You are already comforting me with your very existence, because I love you so.«, he grumbled and smiled. Myrie saw the wetness in his eyes. He stroked again her one strand of hair and then left to visit Ahna. His face expressed a strange mixture of happiness and grief.

Myrie fetched her VR glasses from her gaming room and laid down onto her soft bed. Then she slit them over her eyes.

»Beach.«, she said.

Without the EM suit and corresponding EM field she still felt her soft bed around her, but she saw the sand and the sea with its waves whooshing onto the beach, never reaching up to the place where she lay. There were some seagulls flying in the distant sky she barely could hear.

»Why do snowflakes have that symmetry?«, Myrie asked.

»That is not an easy question.«, the very same voice from before answered.

»But you asked if I wanted to know.«, Myrie complained.

»I thought you might be interested. I also can teach you to answer that question piece by piece.«

»I have time, I suppose.«, Myrie suggested.

»Snowflakes consist of a solid form of water that you also know of as ice. Water consists of very small particles. You might imagine a chaos of puzzle pieces that are not connected to each other. When you swim you push yourself between these particles. When it gets cold, the puzzle pieces start to sort. They can only be put together in specific ways. Under certain circumstances the puzzle pieces water consists of can only form symmetries with six symmetry axes.«

The voice sounded calming and explained patiently. It paused at good positions and now, after this short section, it halted, so Myrie could think and imagine puzzle pieces. After a while Myrie started drawing puzzle pieces into the air above her head. She first drew a hexagon and with surprise she realized that her fingers left a trailing line in the air. She adjusted the borders of the hexagon in a way it had a hook on one side and a fitting bulge at each of the other edges.

»Can I have many of them?«, she asked.

»Of course.«, the voice said and copied her puzzle piece so she had a pile of them right next to the original one. She tried to fit one of the hooks into one of the bulges but it did not work out because she had drawn imprecisely. She smoothed the lines until it fit and started enjoying it. There was something deeply relaxing about it. And when she was ready, and her puzzle pieces were uniformly built and perfectly fit into each other, she created snowflakes out of them.

She spend the whole evening on it until she got tired. Then she stood up again to have dinner with her father and Ahna. The twins slept already. Ahnas face showed signs of her crying and her beard was wet. After dining

Ahna asked Myrie if she would want to join her in her bed and Myrie agreed.

They lay awake for quite a while and then slept a bit. They both woke up at sunrise and thoughts of Gran Lorna overcame them both. Then they cuddled and exchanged what they would miss for hours or silently hold each other as tight as possible.

It took quite a while until Myrie did not steadily have to think of Gran Lorna. Her father also needed a while until he walked upright again or glared. After a few days he had started carpentering again and sawed or shaped, smoothed or carved constantly. Myrie was used to him doing it quite a lot but not continuously like now. He finished a new garnished drawer for the neighbors made from bright recycled wood, and a long dark table board with fine carpentered patterns for Bwalin's Bar. It was a masterpiece, the best he had done since the bridge and the bridge was older than Myrie herself.

Yet he did not do anything about the wobbling of their dining table. About once a month, whenever he gripped a grinding machine, he would say:

»And I finally should burnish the legs of the table.«

But he seemed not motivated enough or another request appeared more important or exiting to him.

So, the dining table kept wobbling and the wall clock retained a little asymmetry and the mark stayed in the kitchen tray, that one of the twins, Minke, had hit with the ax. Myrie's father had not been angry about the damage but he was relieved that nobody got injured.

Whenever Myrie had to think of Gran Lorna and the feelings grew strong, she ran through the snow with her bare feet, would maybe plunge them into the Glukka, or her legs, as well, and than she asked her educational AI that very question, that would be explained each time a little more precise.

»Why do snowflakes have that symmetry?«

»It seems, that question starts to become a mantra for you.«, the educational AI once answered when she asked.

»What is a mantra?«, Myrie asked, bathing her feet in warm water in a virtuality to warm up.

She liked extreme temperatures but never again had stayed cooled for so long that she heavily shivered like back then. She would go so far as her educational AI would assume healthy. Myrie trusted in the AI, that it was not overprotective about her, like some of the educational texts before had been. She was confident that the AI had a reasonable idea of what actually would be too much.

»A mantra is some kind of prayer, a thought or a maxim, that someone would say to oneself and that would help to focus on what heals or comforts.«, the AI said.

Myrie not only learned about snowflakes. She improved her reading ability and learned how to spell correctly, she learned basic arithmetic and several things about history and technique. Often, when she asked about snowflakes she ended up learning something completely different and the snowflakes were only the starting point. The AI now continued explaining the term mantra, educated her about different roles of mantras and prayers in diverse religions, explained what the meaning of well known mantras or prayers was and which religions existed. And like Gran Lorna, the educational AI elaborated every single of Myrie's questions as deeply as Myrie wished or needed.

Myrie liked learning a lot. She was slow and thorough. She especially learned quite a lot about nature and the hazards and risks in the close by environment. She started with body exercises, learned about the animals living close to Byrglingen and learned that most of them were harmless. She learned how to couch and observe them. She learned quite a lot about her own body and how to climb trees. Actually she learned the letter all by herself but previously the AI would inform her about what might happen.

When she turned six she got some kind of sweatband with which she could take her educational AI with her where ever she went. In addition

she had headphones she could take with her, to always be able to listen to the AI. Her excursions drove her away from the village further and further and she climbed steep paths into the mountains.

It was a sunny and warm evening in spring when she sat on a branch of a linden with a nice view downhill into the village. She could see the bridge behind the houses and hear the silent clinking of the anvil. Birds chirped and she smelled the linden's blossoming. There were not many lindens close by. It was a region with mainly coniferous woodland. Yet her father had planted a few fast growing trees so he now and then could use wood that was not the recycled kind of wood. It smelled differently in the end.

»Do you have a name?«, Myrie asked her educational AI for the first time.

»You can choose one, if you like.«, it answered.

Myrie brooded over it for quite a while, following the movements of the grass between the rocky ground with her eyes that moved in the warm wind. Myrie could glaze at these movements for hours.

»Omantra.«, she finally decided.

Myrie's Characteristics

The other drastic event that changed her life when she was five and a half years old was concerning her appearance. Nearly a year had passed since her grandmother had started to shave and Myrie still lacked any sign of a beard. And now again she was the only one with that attribute in the village. In a village, where children typically were born with fuzz in their face already. Also, the lack of a beard was not her only unique feature. Apart from one stand of hair growing from the middle of her skull, where others would have a parting in the hair, she was bald. She also was not able to nourish the hair in a way it would pass her ears in length. It thinned out a few centimeters above her ear-cup and only a few hairs would tickle her ear now and then.



Myrie decided to comb it to one side only. She felt, if she would part it equally onto both sides of her head she would act like she wanted to hide her otherwise bald head. As much as she wished for a mane like everybody else had, as much as she wished to only have a temporary growth disturbance, she still did not want to act as if there was something that did not exist, after all.

Each day she combed it to the other side than the day before. She did not want to treat the both sides of her skull unequally. Some of the children in the village found that behavior to be hilarious. Myrie

felt hurt because of it, but still would not want to treat the sides of her skull unjustly, despite of what the other children said. Also, whatever she decided to do with her hair, her family always validated it. Hence, she just avoided to be with other children.



Only a few month after Gran Lorna's death Myrie reached the same size as her older sister Ahna. Ahna was 11 years old, already.

She often had asked her father and Gran Lorna, if something was wrong with her, but both always had made clear that she was totally fine. She was different, but that would be nothing to worry about, they said. But when she compared her body size with that of her sister, and found out to be two centimeters taller, she ran into the workshop, built up in front of her father, her hands pressed into her hips.

»Am I adopted?«, she asked.

Her father turned off the grinding machine, put it aside and murmured into his beard: »Actually, I finally should burnish the legs of the table. I really should.«

Then he also removed the earmuffs and glanced at her.

»Again, please.«, he said.

»Am I adopted?«, Myrie repeated.

»No, you are not. Well, your mother brought you here, when you were little, and I raised you, but you are my biological daughter. Even though I think that is not of any importance. I loved you the first moment I saw you and that has nothing to do with me being your biological father or not.«

»Maybe she lied to you.«, Myrie said.

She typically would not claim that somebody lied.

»There was no reason for her to do so. What causes that assumption?«
Her father frowned and thereby his forehead darkened a bit.

»I am so different.«, murmured Myrie and drooped, »I have no beard, hardly scalp hair and I am huge! I think, I soon will be taller than you. I am taller than Ahna, already!«

Her father stopped frowning and smiled all of a sudden. Myrie could see it from the corner of her eyes and made her face express irritation.

»That comes with Heddra being an orc. I come up to about her hips. You therefore are half dwarf and half orc. Most likely, you will grow taller than me. Although, probably not as tall as Heddra. I suppose you will exceed my height by one or two heads, but I can not say for sure. There are not so many of your kind, being half dwarf and half orc.«

With this, her father destroyed any perception of her mother she ever had. Well, she never had an explicit one to begin with. She often had conceived her mother to be hairless. There had to be roots for her appearance after all. She had a difficult time imagining a mother who was so tall her father only reached her hips. She succeeded with some effort.

»Is there an image of her?«, Myrie asked.

Somehow, it was a relief to her to know what was the matter with her, finally. Her father shook his head.

»She is rather insecure and would not like that. I once thought about carving her face but did not, because I feared she would not approve of it.«, he ruminated a bit, »But I think, if I did it just for me and would show it to you once, because you are her daughter, she probably would not mind, if I would not expose it somewhere.«



Years passed by. Taking into account her recent knowledge about herself, she tried to befriend with orcs in virtualities but unsuccessfully. She learned that she could create a whole new appearance for herself in virtualities, following her wishes. She even could meet dwarfs without them knowing that she had no beard and hardly hair at all. She could choose whatever beard she preferred. She also could choose her body height.

Omantra taught her how the principles of virtualities worked. The current running through the wires generated an electromagnetic field. The force field interacted with her EM suit like magnets interacted with other magnets or iron. The EM suit was called an EM suit because it contained a really thin meshwork of wires, as well, that generated another repulsive force field against the original one. With this, the two repulsing force fields could induce physical pushbacks and invisible walls. The VR glasses then synchronically showed a matching vision. Hence, the walls were not only physically present but also visible.

When people met in virtualities, the EM suit transferred the local data of one of the persons, where they were and how they moved, to all the other participants and the electromagnetic field induced a physical representation of their bodies in each room based on the data. During the transfer any manipulation was possible, like a change of the physical representation such as the size or height.

But even though, Myrie could meet others who did not know about her differences in physical appearance she never managed to befriend someone. Even worse, sooner or later she attracted attention with a behavior that annoyed the others. She often could not figure out what it was. Sometimes Omantra could explain a bit, but she either would not agree on it or it was something she could not change about herself. Be it that she needed quite a time to answer questions. Also, sometimes if somebody said something interesting, she needed to think about it for a while and lost track of the ongoing conversation.

Hence, Myrie stayed on her own, or she observed wild cats or once in

a while a herd of mountain goats. Then she was drawn to the mountains more and more.

Bit by bit she collected items for an equipment she always carried around and sometimes she stayed outside all day, dangling in some branches of a tree, while Omantra illuminated her thoroughly and with plenty of long breaks. At first she listened to Omantra using her headphones. She did not like it that much because with these she could not listen to the twittering of the birds, the noise of the wind and all the other sounds of nature. She finally decided for behind ears. These kind of headphones were placed onto the skull behind the ear cup and generated sound inside the cochlea superposing impulses the behind ears gently transferred. With this, she could hear Omantra but nobody else could, even if another person would press their ear directly to the behind ears.

Her sweat band was powered with excellent small solar cells. She also could talk to Omantra all day thanks to quite new technology discoveries and developments regarding spin-currents, that were essentially more energy-efficient than former used electron-currents. For the latter electrons had to move while with spin-currents only the magnetic orientation of the molecules had to be transported. When Myrie roamed at night time, she suspended Omantra nonetheless to spare energy, and only rarely waked her.

With time passing by she also added quite a few useful hooks and carabiners to her collection, as well as a bowshot gadget to reach distant spots which were appropriate to attach her hooks to. She also added a self vapping rope and a likewise self vapping sleeping bag, a small drone that she could pilot with ease, a remotely controllable rock drill, binoculars with a camera feature and clothes with as many pockets necessary to fit all her stuff into. Her clothing also provided lotus technology and therefore always stayed dry. She always had packed a battery for warm-ups, that she could connect to her EM suit in case of need to warm up herself once. Finlay she had a neat, simple lighter and an amazingly versatile pocketknife.



On a nice Tuesday morning, one of the first days in spring without frost, Myrie climbed a cliff for the first time that had three times her body size and even had a bit of an overhang. When she finally reached the hardly steep platform she was breathing heavily and the muscles in her arms ached pleasantly. She shivered a bit due to exhaustion, rolled onto the platform and relaxed. The sun warmed her back and a gentle wind dried her sweat. The enthalpy of vaporization comforted her. Myrie pressed her arms against the cool rock where she lay and felt pleasure. She also embraced the time she had. It was not limited in any way. She smelled her own sweat and the moss growing on the rocks, and the smells springs brought along. She closed her eyes for some time.

Then, when she eventually was breathing smoothly again and felt entirely relaxed, she raised the upper part of her muscular body and dangled her legs down the cliff, staring into the village below her. She never had seen it from this height before. She noticed that the view was not all clear as it would have been the case in virtualities. She remembered having observed that phenomenon before but now it was utterly obvious. A certain haze washed out the colors in the village.

»Omantra, are there very thin clouds inbetween here and Byrglingen?«, she asked.

»There is a certain moisture in the air, so you could express it that way, indeed. But the phenomenon you see would also occur if that was not the case. Air is not invisible, but just very transparent.«

»Right, the air consists of something. Otherwise I would not sense the wind. What does air consist of then?«

With calm soft voicing Omantra started to explain about what air consisted of and about the underlying processes of breathing. During education Myrie stared into the valley and asked herself if she would prefer the view in real life or in virtualities. In the letter she had the choice

how much haze she would prefer. Exactly fitting her desires. But on the other hand she liked not to be in control.

Omantra fell silent a while ago, while Myrie still dangled her legs. She sensed a cool wind breeze that told her, evening there to be soon. She should start moving before the clamminess came and climbing would become risky.

Her sweatband housing Omantra became warm. That was the sign Omantra used to announce a conversation. Myrie wanted to be able to adjust.

»Omantra?«, she said.

»Your interest in science is great. You appear to be inquisitive. Maybe some time in the future no AI will be able to bring you further with your knowledge of science. Maybe you will once ask questions, nobody has answered before.«

Omantra paused shortly for Myrie to think, then continued:

»It may be beneficial for your development to try visiting a school once again.«

»A school.«, Myrie repeated distrustfully.

»A special form of learning group.«

»No.«, Myrie said in a harsh voice. It was not the first time Omantra had suggested something like this. The first time they had, Myrie had visited an educational virtuality with three other pupils. It had turned out to be a hopeless disaster. As always.

However, the arguing had changed from back then. At that time Omantra had assumed she should get to know social competences as part of her education. It was assumed to be desirable but not required. She should try. Now, however, the assumption was more...

»You mean, there is another necessity? You mean, I eventually will not be able to get any further studying without others?«

»Yes and no. AIs do have a certain state of knowledge. It is limited especially with regard to research on nature and technique. If you want to gain knowledge beyond that limit you have to come to conclusions

thinking on your own or you are in need of other methods. You can have AI assistance but no AI can explain to you how to use it exactly. In each case you would need to either come up with ideas by yourself or to work with other people. There are only few succeeding on their own. Therefore I warmly recommend you to try a school.«

»What is so special about a school? What is the difference to a common learning group?«, Myrie asked.

»Most essential: the pupils meet in reality in one place and not only virtually. The main advantage would be that safety precautions can be reduced. Also nature can be experienced together with other pupils and teachers.«

»That sounds exiting. But then, being with strangers never turned out to be a good idea.«, Myrie elaborated.

»That would be one of the educational objectives for the others, as well. You did not try in a long time. Children of your age are older now, like you are, and might be more accepting about who you are.«

Omantra patiently waited for her to consider. Myrie indeed had not tried in a long time. When Ahna had been her age she actually had been nice to her and had felt comfortable with Myrie. At least according to her memories. Then she wondered how old she herself might be.

On the other hand her trustful relationship with her sister was not based on age but on siblinghood.

»Might Ahna come with me?«, Myrie considered.

»Probably not. And if so, she would be part of other groups, because she already had way advanced education compared to you. Ahnas interests also are others than yours. She probably would not choose a school with focus on science.«

That was true. Ahna was rather interested in arts. She liked to model virtualities with colorful patterns and geometric structures. She worked with different sets of colors and symmetries. This type of art was often referred to as roomandala, a combined expression from the terms room and the old term mandala. Some of Ahna's virtualities were white with

black edges and the walls would turn colorful in reaction to gentle touch. Myrie liked to visit sketches of Ahna's virtualities in the evening before going to bed. She chose colors and ran her fingers along the walls. She liked those roomandalas with various kinds of surfaces that she could distinguish with only the sense of her fingers, in particular. Haptics was the word for that sensation, she learned. She liked that word a lot.

There was something really calming about roomandalas.

»Maybe there might be someone like Ahna.«, she said to herself with hope.

»Maybe. An idea behind this would be that you do not run away, immediately. Other children might need some time to adopt to you. Think about it like this: you also needed some time to get used to beardless Gran Lorna.«

»However, even though it took me some time until I appreciated her appearance, I never have been mean to her. Never.«, Myrie bursted out. A painful emotion spread her mind. Strong and horrible and Myrie could neither classify nor control it. She crossed her arms before her torso and grabbed her naked shoulders forcefully. It did not hurt but that also was not her intention. It helped.

»True.«, Omantra answered, »You know the feeling of being harassed. You also are quite sensitive. And there is nothing bad about that. Only occasionally this leads to misinterpretation of harmless or neutral behavior, that only reminds you of mean behavior, but was not intended as an assault in the end.«

This time it took Myrie quite a while to absorb and process the message. Maybe Omantra was right, in the end. Actually Omantra was right almost every time. But if it was the case this time, times would certainly get hard. Each time she assumed somebody was mean to her she would first have to wait, to take a deep breath, to reconsider if the person actually had bad intentions with her. Let it be, that somebody would mention her lack of beard or hair, or that she looked weird, this was not automatically

an offensive comment. It only reminded her of what people said who actually had been offensive.

Myrie took several deep breaths. Even the role play in her head was exhausting.

»So, you think all this is worth it? Are you sure?«, she asked still almost breathless.

»Nothing is ever certain. According to statistics you stand the best chances to find one or two friends visiting the Ehrenberg boarding school. If it works out, I am convinced, that you would benefit from friendship.«

Somebody like Ahna, Myrie imagined. But maybe someone who would also like to walk and climb in the mountains. Somebody like Omantra only with a physical body. That would be nice. Somebody who would embrace her if she was sad, like her father, but maybe younger. From time to time she actually had wished for somebody in the past, who would be a bit like her. But she never could find another person who was half dwarf and half orc, not even when she tried to find one on the internet. On the other hand she herself also had no public information about herself online, that would reveal that her mother was an orc. There might be another hybrid. Or at least another peculiar creature that would not fit anywhere. A sudden wave of courage took her and for some strange reason it was mixed with great fear.

»Okay, I will try. I think.«

»An additional problem you should think of is the physical distance to your family. As mentioned you would physically meet other people. Therefore you have to move physically apart from your family. Of course you can decide on returning any time. The train ride however takes six hours from the Ehrenberg boarding school to Byrglingen and there are only direct connections every second day. You would miss classes and this is not appreciated. Although, in case of any emergency it is always accepted.«

At first, Myrie discarded the idea again. But then she reconsidered: she

already had slept in the mountains for a few nights and she never minded being away from home and seeing Ahna and her father only the next day.

»But I can go home on weekends?«, Myrie asked as a precaution.

»Every weekend, if you like. Sometimes there are excursions on weekends but you would have to apply for these separately and nobody expects you to take part in it.«

That would be at most five days at a stretch, she would not see her family. Four nights. And she was not bound to it. If she suffered, she could abort. She considered although, if she accidentally annoyed others and left without agreement, then she most likely would abort going to school for good. Still, the possibility of leaving reduced her fear.

Her pulse raised with her thoughts about school more than it had during her rock climbing. Omantra permanently measured her pulse and blood pressure with sensors in her sweatband and recommended some relaxing breathing exercises with closed eyes. That helped. When Myrie opened her eyes again, felt the cold air on her eye balls and her arms still slightly shivered. She should wait a bit longer and watch the birds flying in the sky before she would descend. Then she had not much of a chance to calm down and relax, when her sweatband again warmed up far too early.

»Omantra?«, she induced the conversation.

»Your sister Ahna is calling.«

»Okay.«, Myrie sighed.

»Can you be home in two hours?«, she heard Ahna's voice transferred to her ear. She appeared to be excited.

»Three hours, I assume.«, Myrie considered, »What is the matter?«

»I have a surprise for you!«, she said, and Myrie could clearly hear her grin, »A small one!«, she added hastily, because she knew Myrie did not cope with big surprises too well.



Again, Myrie sighed and stared straight down the cliff for the first time. She wondered about a good strategy to climb down. It turned out to be quite easy. She just could abseil with ease after placing some hooks in a smart way. Where the ascension had been easier, the descent was more difficult but that phenomenon was not new to her. In case a cliff was far from being vertical, simple abseiling was impossible. She secured her climbing on these shallower plains, as well, with care. She would have cut herself badly in case of slipping off. The rocky edges tended to be quite sharp. She descended quickly. Her body ached for workout after the long break and she felt legendarily good about her body control.

Her estimated time of arrival was quite accurate. She reached the shallower part of the region after two and a half hours and walked the remaining path to the village alongside the Glukka. However, she postponed the last part of the route. She took another break to clean her equipment in the stream and to pack it properly, fold it, stick it together, put it into her pockets to the right places. She had pockets everywhere in her trousers and her vest. Then she washed herself. The water was ice-cold, but Myrie's energetic circulation warmed her up fast.



When she finally reached the village dusk was already falling. When she turned into the Wooden Alley she smelled a tasty, unutterably good scent and she asked herself why she had not realized before how hungry she was. Worth mentioning her father's house was the source to that terrific smell, leaking through the kitchen window. Myrie sprinted the last meters in excitement, leapfrogging through the window into the kitchen. Her sister stood by the printer and operated on its touch screen.

»You are ten minutes early, I am not ready yet!«, she said nearly disap-

pointed without looking up. Her face expressed that she was highly concentrated while her fingers swiped over the screen. Steam welled out of the printer and through fogged glass panes Myrie could see the moving tubes with their tips that printed something like a cylinder with several geometrical pits. It looked alike one of Ahnas roomandalas, Myrie thought, but was crafted of food. Food with an extraordinarily good combination of taste her sister had wisely chosen, judging by the scent.

»You have to create a printer's pattern from it and save it, I guess.«, Myrie murmured moonily. Her stomach announced with a growling noise that the meal was misplaced outside of it.

Ahna smiled about Myrie's commenting. Finally she turned around and embraced the sister.

»I wish you all the best to your birthday, Myrie.«, she whispered into Myrie's face.

»Oh, it is my birthday? How old am I now?«

»Disoriented as usual. You become eleven. I need to say that your stomach will have to wait another moment. The cooking is not finished, yet.«

»Is that my birthday child's voice?« Her father had found his way out of his workshop into the kitchen and also embraced Myrie.

»Who did not enter the house using the door, obviously.«, he added murmuring.

»Papa, I would like to try visiting a learning group once more, namely a school.«, declared Myrie.

Her father stopped midway in his embracing movement. Myrie pushed herself free to see his face. The expression appeared to her rather worried than happy. He slowly nodded.

»That might be good. I can not foresee that. If you want to, you for sure are allowed to go.«, he finally said.

»A school is a learning group that is elsewhere in reality than we are, is it not?«, Ahna asked.

Myrie nodded.

»You are leaving us?«, she asked in shock.

»No! Well, I do, during the weeks, but each weekend I return!«, Myrie exclaimed.

»I would rather assume, if you bear up more than half a year you will visit us at most some weekends and during holidays. If not I assume you might find it to be appalling after at most half a year and you might back forever.«, her father revealed his thoughts.

He confused Myrie with this statement. Why would she eventually stop coming home every weekend. The second possibility sounded more realistic to her and she loved her father for being open and point-blank about it.

»There is no shame to leave or in giving up, even after a weak. Even after a single day. Nobody will be angry with you, I promise. But if you really want to know if school turns out to be an option for you, I recommend you, if it is not awfully terrible, to stay at least one or two month. You mostly need quite a while to adopt to the new. Even for the things that you turned out to really like you had troubles embracing at first. That was the case for several virtualities and will most likely be the same with school.« His thoughts were very much alike Omantra's, that they had said before.

The next days were exciting, not necessarily in a positive way. At first she reviewed her decision with Omantra, Ahna, and her father a couple of times. Usually she kept to decisions when they were made, and it was not different this time.

Then her father settled the formalities. At least, there was not much to do. Myrie had to accept the house rules of the Ehrenberg boarding school, decide on subjects from a list and register. She also was provided a map

of the school and its ground and a date of start. Omantra booked a train departing on the evening before her classes at the Ehrenberg boarding school started, and Myrie found that to be thrilling, as well. Byrglingen's train station lay more or less two dekameters below ground, underneath the village. Myrie had been there quite often, watching the trains that would slide through the tunnel silently, and to fetch arriving recycled wood for her father once in a while. But she never actually had mounted a train.

»You simply have to reach the train station at the time of departure, likewise when retrieving purchase orders. But this time you enter the train, and follow the instructions which capsule or capsules are headed to the Ehrenberg boarding school.«, Omantra explained and made clear: »I booked the train, therefore there will be at least one capsule headed there. But since more pupils will travel there, most likely there is more than one. Maybe you will meet future classmates on the train, already.«

»I would prefer having a capsule just for me.«, Myrie ruminated, »I hope it is sufficient if I will try and befriend others only there.«

»If you reject an invitation to sit with others or would not let anyone near you on the train this could be interpreted as rude, or at least as inaccessible which you might be, in fact. If you want to befriend with someone I would probably advise to try to be as open and welcoming as possible if somebody approaches you. Certainly only if you are not stressed out by it too hard.«

Even the thought of it stressed her out. However, she took Omantra's advice to the heart and tried to adjust to the situation, tried to not let take fear over. Each night before falling asleep she trained in her mind to be friendly to others, maybe talk to them. That started to work out fine in the beginning, but as soon as sleepiness overcame her she lost control over the mind game and the hypothetical situations took a horrible direction. Her imaginary dialog partner would ignore her then, or make fun of her, or they perceived a specific behavior of her's as a no-go. One night she woke up all of a sudden and remembered that she only had few hair

and she could not hide that fact in school. She ran to her father's bed and contradicting her mannerism she overthrew her decision. She told her father that she did not want to go to that boarding school and asked if there was a way out. Her father embraced her and said in a calming voice »Of course«. But he also said, she should wait until tomorrow. He assumed her opinion could change again during the night. Myrie slept in his arms, feeling his warmth and protection, safe from being judged for her lack of hair. And in fact, the other morning she gained confidence again. She also gave up on making up scenarios in her mind. She had tried long enough to be certain that she was not able to make up realistic scenarios, anyway.



The day of departure was end of summer and she embraced the summer with all her heart. She improved her climbing skills, trained her body more specifically. She in particular exercised falling in non-harmful ways. Omantra had recommended this form of exercises since she had climbed a tree for the first time. These exercises had helped her quite a few times already.

She studied the house rules and learned the map by heart. There were only few strict rules in the list of house rules, but a rather long code of conduct. Rules that were appreciated but not required, such as not coming late to not interrupt classes. Not sticking to these rules would never result in an admonishment or a punishment. A stern glance if she would not explain such a behavior would be the worst case scenario.

But what was a good excuse or explanation, Myrie asked herself.

One of the few fix rules was the prohibition to enter the forest or climb the mountain without explicit permission, which both were located pretty close to the ground. On disobeying this rule one had to expect a

reprimand and on repeated ignoring one would get thrown out of school. There was a metal fence of 2,5 meter height around the ground they were allowed to freely explore. There were some rooms for experiments in school that they also were only allowed to enter if a teacher had explicitly given permission.

And that was it. Well, she also had to keep in mind the rules of the nation, such as, never harming another person physically without permission or if it was not an act of self-defense. But these rules were only referred to and not listed again in the house rules.



On the day of Myrie's departure Ahna reprinted her birthday cake. Ahna appeared to be depressed which Myrie understood. On the other hand she was so excited that there was no room in her mind for being depressed herself.

The cake was more of a main dish but Ahna called it birthday cake, nonetheless. Myrie preferred hearty and tasty food and having the tastes separated. Ahna's cake was made for that purpose. There were different unicolored regions with their own consistency and their own taste. For instance one could spoon a sap green creamy part out of a red foamy one. And that is what Myrie did. She always decided for one color and ate it up before touching another one. She asked herself, when she would eat something so gorgeous again, and what food in the boarding school would be like. If tastes were separable there, as well.

Merlin

Myrie's father, Ahna, and the twins were with her when she was waiting at the train station. She was half an hour early due to being so nervous. She bounced up and down the entire time to somehow fight her stress, but without success. And finally, the train slowly slid from out of the tunnel, nearly silent. Myrie hurried embracing each of her family members once again and then ran into the train, so it would not leave without her. Yet, she knew that it would stay for a while to unload orderings and resources. Omantra even had tried reassuring that the train would ask about her whereabouts if she would not signal her presence herself.

»I am Myrie and I would like to travel to the Ehrenberg boarding school.«, she said and felt very weird about it. Then she hastily added her full name: »Myrie Pliers.«

»Please turn to the left, walk the aisle down to capsule eight. The capsules eight, nine and ten will arrive at Ehrenberg boarding school. You can find the numbers above the entrances.«, an electronic, high voice announced directly using Myrie's behind ears, so that only she could hear it. How convenient, Myrie thought. She followed the instructions and walked down the long aisle through the train. The capsules had diverse sizes. Most were not designed for transporting people but contained commodities, mostly fluids, such as vacuum-packed refill for the food printers. Myrie knew that these refills were transferred into the cooking cartridges for the village, when they ran low.

Yet, inside some rather small capsules people were sitting. Most of them relaxed in their seats with VR glasses on, some of them gesturing with their hands now and then. They probably were reading and scrolling text.

The motionless probably listened to something. There was one capsule occupied with three old wrinkly orcs chatting. They stared at Myrie when she passed by.

»Look, I have never seen something like this before. You really see the most wondrous creatures on a train ride.«, murmured one of them.

Myrie hurried to get away from there.

»Hey, no offense intended, kid.«, another one called.

She reminded herself what she had tried to keep in mind the past weeks: sometimes she would perceive something as an insult that was not meant as such. If these orcs could have been future classmates she would have turned around but they were not seated in capsule eight or one of the following and therefore were aiming somewhere else. They probably also were too old to go to a school but Myrie would not judge on that. Nobody ever completed education, some started education rather late and some would just look old but were not.

Finally she reached capsule eight. She found an elderly man there, a human, wearing VR glasses and laying back in his seat. Myrie shooed forward before she remembered that she could have placed herself next to him. Capsule nine was empty and Myrie settled.

The train already had gently started sliding through the tunnel for a while now. The seats were tremendously comfortable and fleecy. She could fold away the armrests. The armrests also contained a cover and Myrie could not resist opening these. Underneath the lid she found a small touch screen showing the velocity of the train. The number amazed Myrie. Without even noticing acceleration the train had gained a considerable velocity. Yet she never had traveled fast in all her life until now.

Using the touch screen she could adjust the light. Myrie turned up the previously dim light a bit, so she could probably perceive and recognize a face if somebody should join her. Of course, nobody joined yet. She had been the only one entering the train in Byrglingen and the train had not stopped a second time yet. Three capsules with six seats each also most likely were generously calculated. Following that assumption not

so many people were expected to travel to the Ehrenberg boarding school with this train and on a six hours ride she might have to wait a while until the next person heading there would enter the train.

Myrie thought about using her VR glasses, as well. She would probably choose a beach and sea virtuality to calm down but she was excited in such a peculiar way that most likely nothing would help her calm down anyway. Everything was new to her and she lacked an outline of what was there to come. She also was afraid to miss a train stop and to then not be focused on being friendly and mindful when a new person appeared.

She pulled her feet onto her seat and played with her toes, embraced her knees and put her chin in the gap between them. She rubbed her shins with her hands, up and down and up and down and hummed softly to herself. She spend an hour like that and the train had stopped in two other villages.

When it started moving again a person entered her capsule. A human about her age Myrie assumed. His hair was had a color that was as close to orange as it was to blond, thin, and curled into large, about equally sized curls. The hair was long enough that the curls could make exactly one circle on average. It made a silky and less fleecy impression than dwarf hair tended to be like in Byrglingen. The face showed some freckles. He maybe was one and a half head taller than her and he trailed a heavy trunk on rolls. Myrie estimated the size of that trunk and the height of the luggage rack to be fitting. She realized that she had started rocking the upper part of her body forth and bag since he had entered the capsule and stopped it immediately.

»Are you also headed to the Ehrenberg boarding school?«, he curiously asked.

»Could there be another reason for me sitting here?«, Myrie asked broodily. There had to be another reason but Myrie could not think of one.

»May I sit next to you?«, the human asked.

»I do not know. Who decides on that?«, Myrie asked, confused by now. She also had not finished thinking about the first question.

»Well, actually your desire alone. To phrase it differently, would you feel comfortable if I sat next to you?«

»No.«, said Myrie. That was an easy one. The human nodded and headed to the next capsule trailing his luggage.

»Wait!«, Myrie called. All her thoughts disarranged into a mess. By no means she had wanted him to leave. He paused and looked into her face patiently until she got herself together and wrangled to express her concerns:

»Going for my desire I would like you to take place next to me but I would feel uncomfortable.«, she slowly phrased.

»So, you would like to have me here although you feel uncomfortable with it. In other words.«, the human said.

Myrie nodded and smiled. How uncommon, she thought, when she suddenly and for the first time she could remember felt sympathy for a stranger. And at the same time she felt her well-known fear to behave in a wrong way the very next moment.

»Shell I put your luggage up there?«, Myrie hesitantly asked and rose.

Standing upright she reviewed her idea again, because she could not even reach the luggage rack when she tiptoed and stretched her arms. She climbed the seat and tried again. Now she could reach it with her thenars. That should work. She jumped onto the floor again to lift up the human's luggage as soon as he would signal his consent.

»Maybe you might help me but it is really heavy.«, Merlin considered. Myrie grasped the handle of the trunk to try and lift it and almost tripped backwards with the luggage following. It was not exactly light as a feather but judging from the human's struggle and his warning Myrie had assumed about thrice the weight.

»It is light enough for me to manage.«, she assured. The human helped her anyway.

»Careful! The stuff in there might be thoroughly packed but it is still

delicate.«, he said breathing heavily while he stretched to get a grip on the suitcase. Meanwhile Myrie balanced the trunk almost all by herself. She was careful. She was, although being truly nervous, but she directed her attention onto that act until it was finished and until the luggage was properly stored. Only thereafter she let her mind wander again.

»Thank you.«, the human said, then added, »By the way, I am Merlin. It is my first half year at the Ehrenberg boarding school and I never was visiting a school before.«

»Same. Well, I am not Merlin. But everything else. But, can we go back to the question, if there could be another reason for me to be in a capsule headed to the Ehrenberg boarding school if not aiming there?«, she probed, now that there was time for it.

Merlin sat down onto one of the soft seats and Myrie placed herself opposite of him, rested her feet onto the seat again. Merlin looked at her feet with irritation and then looked round the capsule. His facial expression turned grim with each moment before he answered her question.

«The capsules stop in many train stations before arriving at the Ehrenberg boarding school. It could be that you wanted to go to a place before that. Also you could just wait here temporarily for somebody headed there.

»Oh, right.«, Myrie said and nodded.

Merlin sighed, glancing at some place right of her.

»What's the matter?«, Myrie asked.

»Right next to your tier there is a convenient, low, empty luggage rack. We went through all that struggle to no purpose.«, he said.

»Oh. I am sorry. I did not see that.«, Myrie said, now looking there herself.

»Hey, I did not see it, either!«, he said and shook his head with a grin about that.

»As long as we manage to get it down in time, there is no need to worry.«, he added.

They sat there still for a while, staring at each other. Merlin wore

trousers made of dark, velvety cloth making a robust impression. The trousers legs widened towards his feet. Underneath were his shoes, dark violet shoes with yellow stars on it. Myrie instantly liked these shoes. They appeared to be robust and filigree at the same time. His upper body was dressed in a long sleeved dark green shirt and a woolen slipover with a red and white pattern. Myrie could spot maple leaves and acorns, and some other types of leaves she could not assign to a tree. They could even be invented, or just were not to be found in Byrglingen.

»There would be two other questions I would like to ask.«, Merlin said and with that interrupted the silence. Myrie nodded slowly, still staring at the pattern of leaves.

»What is your name?«

That was an easy one, how convenient.

»Myrie. Myrie Pliers.«

»Is it okay if I call you Myrie, or would you prefer if I used your full name?«

Myrie looked up, after all, right into Merlin's eyes, thinking briefly.

»Myrie is okay. Merlin is okay for you, or did I misinterpret?«

»You didn't.«, Merlin said.

He had light brown eyes and his skin color was brighter than any skin color Myrie had seen before outside of virtualities. And even visiting virtualities these type of bright skin had rarely shown up to her.

»When you answered with ›same‹, if you remember, did yo mean, you also have never visited a school before?«

»Yes.«, Myrie said after a short while, during that she had called back the memory of that snippets of conversation.

»And at least temporarily the last question: where do you store your luggage?«

»At my body.«, she answered.

His face turned all skeptical. That made her feel anxious.

»Do we need something?«, she asked and felt an unpleasant pressure in her chest.

Then, all of a sudden, all she felt was panic. That very emotion she had tried fighting during the last weeks now broke free. She clutched her knees with her arms tight and started rocking back and forth again to calm down.

»Hey, don't panic!«, Merlin said out loud but soothing, »Even if you left something home I can borrow you the most, until somebody sends it to school for you. And maybe you even are right and you do not need more than you have at hand.«

Myrie breathed in and out for a few times and finally winded down. She put her chin again into the gap between her knees and looked right into Merlin's face. It was most expressive, currently friendly and calming. Myrie liked that feature. She inhaled and exhaled slowly a few more times, before she had the strength to say something again.

»What is in your trunk?«, she softly said.

»Well, divers clothes, some for the night, other for different temperatures. A pair of slippers, a bathrobe, a pair of sandals for the summer. A towel and a fleecy blanket, in which I wrap myself in case I feel lonely. A stereo system and a mixer, since I like creating music. A fagote, which is a wind instrument, and Olja, my stuffed shark.«

With each item on that list Myrie felt more relaxed. She was not so much in need of such things.

»Is it okay to sleep naked?«, she asked as a precaution.

»I think so.«, Merlin assumed, »There is no rule against it, I would know of, except you were cold and would not want to. But actually you look like a person who can stand cold temperatures. Also the rooms will be heated if it is cold outside, or you could use your EM suit to warm up. You have an EM suit with you, haven't you?«

Myrie nodded. She had it in one of her numerous pockets in her trousers, neatly coiled up to a small bundle. The pocket buckled a little which she disliked. She preferred everything to be flat and tight to her body. But more important she liked to have her hands free and her arms

naked. At least the pocket on the other side was filled with her VR glasses, so the problem with the bulges was symmetrical.

»My main concern would be, that you don't have any shoes. We most likely will go on excursions into the grounds. There might be pointy stones and sharp edges. But we certainly will not have one on our first day. So still you can let somebody send your shoes in time.«, Merlin considered.

»I never wear shoes. And I often am away on stony grounds.«, Myrie answered.

»On rocky terrain, as well?«, he asked.

Myrie nodded.

»Is the skin on your soles thick to such an extent that nothing ever happens?«

»Rarely I hit an edge, that was so sharp that I bled a little. But that didn't occur in years.«

»And, you never have cold feet?«

»You need to keep them active.«, she said, stood up and bobbed up and down on her toes. Then she curled her toes and did some other exercises. Merlin nodded and smiled.

»May I ask you something personal?«, he asked with a hint of anxiousness in his voice.

He certainly now will ask why I lack a beard, she thought and admonished herself that this would just be a question, that actually would not have to be an offense. Besides Merlin seemed to be nice so far.

»It is totally fine if not.«, he said, »We only know each other shortly. I was just, well, curious I think.«

»My mother is an orc.«, Myrie burst out.

»Wow, and your father?«, Merlin asked in surprise. There was nothing dismissive or arrogant at all in the way he asked.

»A dwarf, of course.«, Myrie answered. And then she remembered, that this was a known fact only within her village and one could not see that the same way as one could not see that her mother was an orc. Maybe

people would likely assume that her parents would have been troll and gnome. Or a hobbling. Hobblings also usually had no facial hair.

»A dworc, so to say.«, Merlin said and grinned, did not even mind her gruff reaction. Myrie hesitated but then burst out laughing.

»Dworc. That is good.«, she said and giggled for quite a while. Merlin had started laughing with her. But now he just watched her silently smiling.

»Did nobody come up with this before?«, he asked.

Myrie shook her head and rocked with another fit of the giggles.

»How odd.«, noted Merlin.

He turned his head to his left to the wall of the capsule. Then he repeated what Myrie had done before and opened one of the lids she had found within the armrests, and tapped on it. Landscapes flew past at the capsule's sides now. Myrie inhaled startled.

»These huge screens show us where we currently pass by.«, Merlin explained.

But Myrie saw nothing. Flushes of light burned her eyes and she squinted. But still she perceived the rapidly changing brightness. She hid her face in her hands and began whimpering.

»I'll turn it off.«, Merlin said and the flushing vanished.

Hesitantly Myrie opened her dazzled eyes behind her fingers and spread them a little. Certainly she had displeased him. Certainly he desperately wanted to see that landscapes. But Myrie could not cope with it. At least not now, by no means at all.

»Too fast.«, she said soundless.

»That indeed was quite fast. But now it is off.«, Merlin said and he again spoke in that calming voice.

»If I would use my VR glasses, you can turn it on again.«, she said and moved her hand towards the corresponding pocket to fetch her glasses, but Merlin shook his head.

»I prefer to look at you. I can have a look at that landscape later in a

virtuality, if I like. Now I would would rather like to hear, what virtualities you use to visit, if you might tell.«, he suggested, »Only if you like.«

»Beach.«, Myrie said.

She would have chosen the beach virtuality now If he had not stopped her.

»A game a the beach? With pirates?«, he asked.

»No, just beach. I usually don't play games. Laying on the beach with seagulls flying and listening to the waves is calming.«

Even imagining this helped her breathing more freely. The memory of warm sand on her skin. The imagination to grasp sand with her hand and let it tickle slowly onto her arms and legs.

»Sometimes I visit a sand shower, where a thin stream of sand tickles onto my back from above. Also the stream moves.«

»Sounds relaxing.«, Merlin said, »But I'd prefer to also have something different. I need variety. Action, as well.«

»I usually have action when I climb.«, Myrie replied.

»Taking into account what you just said, that you don't play games, is it a pure climbing virtuality then?«, Merlin considered.

»Sometimes I visit those to train and get used to new techniques. But most of the time I climb outside in the environment.«

»Wow!«



Merlin asked quite a lot about her excursions into the mountains around Byrglingen and listened with admiration. Myrie hoarsened soon. She never had talked that long to a person all her life. She realized that it was always her answering questions and she herself had none. It was not due to a lack of interest in Merlin. She would have listened to him gladly, what ever he would have told, but she just did not know what to ask. It

appeared to her as if he was like a smooth stone. A lovely stone but with no edge to take hold of it.

Time passed by. The train stopped below several other villages and cities, but they did not pay attention to it. Myrie coughed due to her croakiness and Merlin paused the questioning. He took off his fantastic shoes and crossed his legs, as well. Then he again looked into Myrie's face. Myrie monitored his socks. They were striped, blue and green. Myrie considered, if she ever would wear socks then she would choose striped socks, too. She wondered, if others would find her simply dark green clothes to be boring. On the other hand though colorful clothes would draw away most animals.

»You remind me of my lady friend. She also loves the mountains.«, Merlin said into the silence.

Myrie was a bit perplexed about the phrase ›my lady friend‹. She rather had expected ›a friend‹ or ›a lady friend‹, or maybe the phrase ›my lady friend‹ combined with a name. But ›my lady friend‹ was oddly specific.

»Do you have exactly one female friend?«, Myrie asked. Thinking of it, that was not so unlikely, after all. At last, she had no friends at all, unless she counted Ahna.

»Actually, I only have one female friend up to now. But even if I had more, she would still be special. I meet her every day and I like her a lot.«, he explained and became all moony about it.

»How do you like other friends then and where is the difference in the way of liking?«, Myrie wanted to know.

»That is hard to explain. I like to meet some other friends in virtualities to play a game. And I also like seeing the the others from my learning groups. But I actually don't know if I would appreciate meeting them somewhere else apart from gaming or learning together. From time to time I meet one of the other students from my learning groups, Hermen, to do homework and sometimes we talk about this and that. By the way, he will also visit the Ehrenberg boarding school starting with us. But with Fadja, that is my lady friend, it's different. We also often spend

time together in silence. And I often have the urge to touch her. We like cuddling when we go to sleep. And when we talk it tends to be philosophic. She is pretty wise.«

He stopped talking and watched his socks deep in his thoughts. He looked beautiful then, sitting in this position, Myrie thought. Somehow happy, Myrie could sense it in a way, and she herself began to smile softly. She also felt a bit flattered. If she reminded him of that lady friend, his perception of her's could not be that bad, or could it?

»Sometimes we kiss.«, Merlin added, »I usually don't proclaim that. People say, I was too young. I just have the feeling, I could tell you without fear.«

»Why do people think you were too young to kiss? My father kissed me when I still was an infant.«, Myrie said in confusion.

»That's different. There are different kinds of kissing. There are these tender kisses, you receive by close people, meaning that they strongly care for you. And there are kisses that feel all different, where you get really warm and excited.«, he explained.

»Hmm.«, Myrie mumbled.

Her sister had told her about something like that before, and that she dreamed of such a thing. She had shown a movie to her, where two people fell in love with each other and kissed. This kiss had appeared to be mainly wet and excessive to Myrie. But when people liked it that way, why not. The way, Merlin put it however, that there was an additional feeling apart from that kiss, still confused her but was also more comprehensible to her than the impression people would just lick each other's faces.

Myrie slowly nodded. Perhaps she should try once, after all. Should she ask Merlin? But she decided against it. This was a topic people tended to get huffy about. She might probably offend him too easily.

»When Fadja loves the mountains like I do, how comes that you don't know how to climb from her already?«, she asked instead.

»Fadja and I are more attracted to the view than to the activity. So we know only a part of what you described. We mostly meet in a virtuality

with mountains where we spawn on the tip of a huge mountain and enjoy the sight.«, he explained.

»The view most likely is even better than in reality. In fact, air is not invisible but really transparent. And if you are far away from something, this something appears to be, um, faint and diffuse.«

»Yes, Fadja said so, too!«, Merlin said with joy, »I would appreciate comparing the view in virtualities to that in reality myself, anyway.«

Myrie sensed the smooth acceleration implying that the train had stopped recently. She wondered how long she was traveling already and astonished recognized that she totally had lost track of time.

Just then another human entered the capsule through the door. Maybe that person was not a pure human, Myrie thought, when her eyes wondered to his slightly pointy ears. Like Merlin he had luggage but he did not trail it. It followed him on six small legs with rolls at their lower ends.

»Is one of you Merlin?«, he asked when he came in.

»Yes!«, Merlin exclaimed excited and sprang up to his feet, »Hermen?«
The other person nodded.

»Awesome. I just send you a message asking which capsule you sit in. But you never answer.«

»I was in a conversation and didn't keep track of my messages. This is Myrie!« Merlin pointed at Myrie.

Hermen looked at her closely now for the first time following Merlin's gesture. He apparently had not assumed that she could be Merlin, in the first place.

»And you are?«, he asked looking real skeptical.

»Myrie.«, she answered irritated.

Hermen made a sound of despair.

»What kind are you. Not a troll, obviously, for that you are several meters too short.«

Myrie briefly lost the ability to breathe. This was the kind of conversation she feared. The again she reminded herself that it could be harm-

less. Maybe he just asked for information and was a bit on edge because she had failed to apprehend immediately. And there was nothing wrong about being a troll to begin with. She forced herself to take a deep breath.

»A dworc.«, Myrie said.

Having that word back on her mind she again started grinning and giggling.

»Dworc.«, repeated Hermen and after a brief thought, »Half dwarf, half orc. That's good.«

»Merlin made it up.«, remarked Myrie to be fair and flapped with her hands towards Merlin.

»That's so him. Classical.«, Hermen said.

His eyes wandered from Merlin's seat to the empty seat next to Myrie and then to his luggage that had parked itself next to him. All of a sudden Merlin started giggling, as well.

»If you want to, Myrie and I can help you lift your luggage onto the luggage rack.«, he proposed.

Hermen had another look at Myrie.

»Well, it's quite heavy.«, he pointed out and again looked skeptical and dismissive, causing Myrie to try and convince him that she could. Although it was complete nonsense to freight the luggage into that upper rack and Myrie had no idea why Merlin had made that suggestion.

She rose from her seat and lifted the case. It was heavier than Merlin's luggage, indeed, maybe three times as heavy. She lifted it above her head, then put the case down again.

»I could.«, she said and sat again.

»Is she dumb?«, Hermen asked Merlin who still chuckled and just shook his head to answer.

»You nearly reached the luggage rack but then put it down onto the floor again?«, he addressed Myrie again.

But his luggage answered the question by lifting itself into the luggage rack next to the seats. Hermen snorted and now also laughed.

»You both are dumb.«, he said amused. Now Myrie finally understood. Merlin was just being joking badly. She again started to giggle.

Hermen sat opposite of Merlin right next to Myrie and instantly she stopped giggling and froze. Hermen seemed not to notice.

»So, here we see each other for the first time in real life.«, Hermen said.

He and Merlin examined each other for a while before they started talking about something. Myrie did not get anything of what they said. She was still occupied with the event that a person was sitting right next to her whom she had not invited to do so, and who had never asked. In addition, a person who had called her dumb. Even though they had laughed about it in the end but still, in the beginning it had sounded quite serious. Myrie sat there bolt upright with closed eyes and tried to breathe steadily. And so it came that she needed quite a while until she noticed that Merlin and Hermen had stopped talking. She opened her eyes again and looked directly into Merlin's worried face.

»Are you back again?«, he asked carefully. Myrie nodded hesitantly.

»I wanted to ask you if music was too much for you, as well, but then, well, somehow you were there only physically. What's the matter?«, he asked.

Oh dear, how could she communicate that it was wrong that Hermen sat next to her. But there was also another question that was easier to answer.

»Music. Depends. If it is slow or there are obvious patterns then it is good.«

»What a strange way to establish criteria. You wouldn't define a genre but a form instead. You are indeed comical.«, Hermen remarked.

And that was too much, finally. Myrie sprang up to her feet and left the capsule, entering the next. The next was capsule 10. Unfortunately it was not empty either. Three children sat together, interrupting their conversation and staring at Myrie. Myrie turned around going back to see if the human in capsule 8 still was wearing the VR glasses. But in that

capsule there was a new person, as well. An elf Myrie assumed, maybe female, making an older and stern impression. The human did not wear the glasses anymore and had talked to the other person whilst Myrie had entered. They also halted their conversation when Myrie came in. Myrie turned around again and again entered the capsule with Hermen and Merlin who in the meantime had started to lift down Merlin's trunk from the luggage rack.

»I'll search for her when we have finished this, I think. Oh, there she is again.«, she heard Merlin strained voice.

Instead of reacting she placed herself next to him to catch the trunk together with the other two, when its position started getting unstable and it tilted over.

»Thank you.«, Merlin said addressing her.

He opened the trunk and rummaged in its content. At first Myrie thought the clothes inside were spread randomly but then she noticed that they were placed as a suspension to protect some devices. And Olja, the shark, lay across all the stuff. Merlin interrupted the search all of a sudden, grasped Olja and gave her to Myrie.

»You want to? But be careful!«, he offered.

Myrie accepted Olja and looked into the fish face of that huge dark-blue shark with its white stomach. Olja seemed to be harmless. Myrie curled herself up at the edge of her seat, squeezed to the wall pulled her legs tight to her body and entangled Olja. She closed her eyes and placed her face onto that fluffy fur of Olja's. That felt pleasant.

She missed how Merlin closed the trunk again and how he put it into the luggage track, the lower one this time. She also missed how it started but suddenly there was music in the capsule. And it was the best music she ever had listened to. There were gloriously uniform patterns, multiple shifted rhythms, a simple and dramatic melody and a beautiful sonority. The music helped Myrie to focus on something different than Hermen or what they were talking about. So she remained in that position until Omantra heated up her arm to pronounce that they were about to reach

the destination in half an hour. It was not that Myrie would need a vast amount of time to get ready and collect her belongings but she appreciated to be able to adjust to the upcoming event.