

GROZDANA OLUJIĆ

THE ENCHANTED STAR

A Novel

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**"In the sky
I am walking.
A bird
I accompany."**

Chipewa Indian Song

THE FIRST CHAPTER
and in it

**ABOUT THE WALNUT, A CERTAIN MINGA
AND THE REST**

Sticking his head out the window, Marko opened wide his eyes in surprise.

What was going on? Where were the streets? Where was the river? The mountains behind the river?

In front of the boy's astonished eyes the tips of the concrete and glass high-rises were floating by like transparent celestial boats. Everything else was swallowed up by the fog. At moments even the tips of the neighbouring high-rises vanished, only to re-emerge from the fog looking different and strange.

"Maybe I'm not awake yet". Marko rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands but still all he saw were patches of fog and the shimmering tips of urban towers like his own.

The fog, the loneliness, whatever, made the silence of his room in the clouds seem even more terrible to him. Yes, the key was around his neck. The parents had locked him in and gone off, as usual. The boy sighed. If only a mouse would jump out from somewhere, an ant crawl out, a black devil, anything! He was tired of playing by himself, of talking to himself, of waiting for his parents who wouldn't return until dark.

"Hey, what's that?" The boy jumped. From somewhere came the sound of tapping, stamping, laughter. "Who's that laughing?" Marko looked left and right. Nobody anywhere. "Maybe there's somebody at the door", he thought and rushed to unlock it. But, there was nobody there. "And what did you expect?", he scolded himself. "A monkey with wings? A polar bear? Who would climb up to the seventeen floor?"

Marko locked the door again and took stock of his surroundings.

Silence crept into the corners of the room, while the city bustled down below. If he leaned out the window he would see only the tops of the cars, and people looking tiny and lost, like nails stuck into the concrete, he would see electricity poles and the rows of chestnut trees. The faces of the

passers-by he would not see. From the top of his Tower he could see only the tops of their heads. What else?

Driven by curiosity, Marko leaned out the window and shouted:
"Where are the trees?"

Through the white curtain of fog all he could see were the cars, the electricity poles and the passersbys. There were no trees. Even the rosemary bush on the balcony had vanished! And the tall poplar on the street corner! And the linden tree!

The disappearance of the trees made the boy uneasy and then scared him. What if his Tower had broken away from its root and was now sailing off to who knows where? Where was that tapping, stamping and laughter coming from? And where were the birds? At this hour the birds and clouds usually flew past the window of his Glass Tower. Sometimes he felt as though he were flying with them.

His father's voice usually interrupted his flight.

"Stop fidgeting with your food! Sit up straight! You're not a worm. Can't you see you're nothing but skin and bones!" The worry in his father's voice would give way to reproach, and then to disappointment. What had he done to deserve such a son? The puniest, the most timid in the class. He was already nine but nobody would give him more than seven. He had to exercise, to eat, if he didn't want to stay a midget!

Marko would secretly cover his ears not to hear his parent's words of rebuke. But, it was even worse when they hurried him up with his meal by just looking at him, not saying a word. The palms of his hands would sweat and he would gag on his food.

Didn't they understand? The boy hung his head in despair. Didn't they realise that he wanted to be different: braver, bigger, taller? Why didn't they love him the way he was?

Marko frowned and leaned out the window again. Perhaps he had been wrong? Perhaps he had simply overlooked the birds and the trees? No, he hadn't! There were no trees, no birds, and there was still that stamping, tapping and laughter. The boy felt himself go weak, then shuddered. If only his mother would spend a little less time attending meetings, with his father on duty all the time. His eyes strayed to the table. Yes, there was the note. He didn't have to read it. It was bound to say: "Lunch is in the fridge. Don't be late for school! I'll be a little late tonight..."

God, had they forgotten? Why, today was Sunday! Ah, if only he were in school, even if the other kids did avoid him because the teacher kept saying: "Look at Marko! Marko knows! Marko's homework is again the best!"

"Well, next time it won't be!", the boy decided. But, how would he face his father then?

He thought he could see his father's face looking at him through the fog, but he wasn't wearing his usual scowl, he was smiling, and full of tenderness. The only time his father ever had that expression was after PTA meetings when the grades were read out. Marko was always the best in the class. The best in math, the best in composition, the best... His father had been the best at school in his day. And he was the best now, in the factory. Everybody said so. But his mother merely smiled.

"That isn't important", she would shake her head. "People are best in different things..." Marko remembered how his mother would laugh sharply somehow and his father, blushing, would lower his head. Then they would shout at each other, and without turning around each would go his own way...

The memory of it made the boy sob. A salty lump grew in his throat, making him want to throw up. "Why?", he asked himself. Nobody forced him to do anything. Or yelled at him. "Why?". He gripped the window with his cold, clammy hands. A tear trickled down his face. He was about to wipe it away when a faint voice said:

"Let me go! I'll do it myself..."

"Who are you? And what will you do?" Marko looked all around but there was nobody in the room. "I must have imagined it, like those other voices a while ago, the stamping, the laughter...", he thought.

"Are you sure?", the same voice asked tauntingly.

"Of course!", the boy snapped back.

"Then look out the window..."

"Hey, what's going on here?", Marko muttered going up to the window. Then he stood stock still, unable to believe his own eyes. Swaying mockingly on the other side of the pane was the lush tree-top of the walnut tree, and jumping up and down between its boughs were laughing green dwarfs, so small he could put them in his pocket.

"Come and join us, boy!", waved one of them no bigger than a pinecone. "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid. Look how little you are..."

Scared though he was, Marko laughed, and the little division of dwarfs gaily rattled on.

"Look, why they're coming out of the walnut!", he said in amazement as he watched one green dwarf after another push open the green shell and jump out of the walnut, squealing and somersaulting, waving their hands. The boy rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

"I'm just imaging all this", he thought fleetingly. "Dwarfs exist only in books and the walnut tree at Grand-Ma's house was cut down three years ago. There's no house anymore either. Or Grand-Ma! And only clouds could reach the top of his high-rise. There was no way a walnut tree could reach him up here..."

"That's what you think!", he heard the same mocking voice say.

"This is ridiculous!", Marko said to himself angrily. "It's not enough that you talk to yourself, now you've started imagining you see dwarfs!" The boy pinched himself on the arm, sure that by the time he counted to three both the walnut tree and the green dwarfs would disappear.

He counted to three, and then to ten, but the walnut tree still swayed within reach of his hand. Green dwarfs leaped from branch to bough. There were so many of them! They stamped, chattered, stuck their tongues out at each other, called him, then forgot about him engrossed in their own game.

Everything on them was green: their clothes, faces and hair. And all but one, who sat perched on top of the tree, had little red caps and boots. He alone had a silver cap and boots and he alone was still, observing the boy quizzically.

"You're dreaming all this!", the boy scolded himself, when that same little voice said:

"You're not dreaming, Marko Divats! And don't play the fool. The walnut tree is here, and so am I!" The voice suddenly fell silent. But, a few seconds later there was a soft silvery laugh.

Now he really didn't know what to think. Who was that making fun of him? Where was he? Muttering, Marko scanned the corners of the room. What was the matter with him? The key was around his neck. The apartment was locked. He had seen for himself only a little while ago that there was nobody at the door. Whom was he talking to now? Who could come through a locked door?

Marko gazed down at the palm of his hand and was struck dumb. Glistening in the middle of his palm was a teardrop and in it stood a little girl, transparent, light-eyed, fair-haired, smiling.

"Can that be her talking?" Marko bent over and looked carefully at the teardrop in his hand. Suddenly the teardrop burst and out leaped a little girl, smaller than the boy's smallest nail.

"Minga! You can call me Minga!", said the little girl with her silvery laugh, nodding her head confidentially. Then she jumped down onto the floor so quickly that the boy didn't even have time to be surprised.

"So you, then, are from the walnut too?", he stammered uncertainly. He hadn't seen her among the dwarfs a few minutes ago. She didn't have green skin or green hair, but still!

The little girl scowled at him.

"Remember where I came from!", she said sternly, and then stepped over to Marko before he had time to notice how she had grown (or had he shrunken?), or how they had reached the gently swaying bough of the walnut tree...

"What little devils!", said Marko as he gazed in amazement at the green dwarfs whose voices echoed through the tree-top, fading and returning. Hop and up! Hop and down! The dwarfs hopped everywhere inviting him to join them. Their little red caps and boots flashed through the green leaves like sparks. Only the silver-capped dwarf remained still, silently observing the boy. Amidst all those vivacious, cheerful faces, only his was serious and tense.

Marko felt as if all of eternity was watching him. Suddenly, the dwarf hopped down from the branch where he had been sitting and was beside the boy in the twinkling of an eye.

"Come with us, Marko!", said the dwarf, offering his hand and smiling.

"Who are you?", asked the startled boy. "Who told you my name?"

"Did anyone have to tell me?", said the dwarf, giving him a friendly wink. "I've know you since you came into this world, over there in that house under the walnut tree."

"That house no longer exists, and the walnut tree was cut down long ago..."

"That's why we came, Marko! We had to come. We lived in the fruits of that walnut tree. At night, when the moon was full, you watched us hop around..."

"I thought those were the walnuts rolling around. What's your name?"

"Wally Walnut. I'm the eldest and I have two names. All the others are simply called Walnut!" The dwarf knowingly placed his hand on the boy's foot. "Now, here we are..."

"How did you know where I was?", asked Marko, suspiciously cocking his head. Grand-Ma's house had been at the other end of town, across the river. "How did you find me?"

"Why, you called us! You kept repeating in your sleep: the top floor of the tallest Glass Tower in town..."

"All these towers are the same..."

"Never mind, we found you!", said Wally Walnut with a sad kind of smile. "We had to find you. You're the only one who can save us..."

"Save whom, for heaven's sake?"

"Us! The trees, birds, squirrels, everything alive..." The sadness in Polly Wally's voice was so poignant, so sudden, that it frightened Marko, and gave him a start. "Don't you see that ever since glass and concrete started bearing down on the land, we have been dying! First the flowers, because they are the most delicate, then the trees, then the birds..." Wally Walnut fell silent. A tear glistened in his eye. To hide it he laughed. Then he said: "The Great Council of Trees has decided that we should leave town. But, where are we to go when the entire Earth is contaminated?" The sadness in Wally Walnut's voice turned into despair, and a lump grew in Marko's throat from the pity he felt.

So, it wasn't just his imagination that the row of chestnut trees had disappeared, that the linden, and poplar, and rosemary had vanished, that there were no birds... But, Wally Walnut was exaggerating things! Clouds go away, and then they come back. The trees and the birds would come back one day too...

"They will not come back!" Wally Walnut sighed as if reading the boy's thoughts. "This is just the beginning..."

"The beginning of what?", asked Marko with a start, and the dwarf looked at him sadly.

"The beginning of the end..." said the dwarf stopping. Then he hesitantly went on: "The trees, birds and people were once brothers. Now people have forgotten that and poisoned everything around them..." Wally Walnut fell silent, and everything around them went still: the rustling of the leaves, and the voices of the dwarfs, and the noise of the cars down below.

Finally, the green dwarf composed himself and said:

"That's why we've come, Marko Divats! You're the only one who can find the Silver Rose and in that Rose a forgotten, lost word on which the fate of all of us depends..."

The boy lowered his head in bewilderment. Didn't Wally Walnut know that he was the weakest, the most timid boy in his class? That even his own father said he was good for nothing and would never amount to anything...

"You think so?", Wally Walnut roused himself to ask. "I don't", Wally Walnut smiled softly. "Every one of us has a strength he doesn't know about... The Silver Rose is far away and the path leading to her is treacherous, but you'll find it!"

Marko could barely stop himself from sobbing. Didn't Wally Walnut realise that he was the wrong person for such an exploit? Didn't he see? The boy gave up.

"What if I don't find her?"

"One by one the trees will disappear, then the birds, and then people..." Wally Walnut's expression turned hard and darkened like a leaf in flames. "The only memory of them left will be the poisoned air, earth and water..."

The green dwarf fell silent and Marko raised his head.

"Well, I'll try", he said. "Where is the Silver Rose?"

THE SECOND CHAPTER
in which

**THE SEARCH BEGINS FOR THE SILVER
ROSE**

The rustling leaves of the walnut tree suddenly went still. The happy laughter of the dwarfs could no longer be heard, and the red glow of their little boots stopped flashing from branch to bough. Standing off to the left, Minga was silent. Marko repeated his question:

"Where is the Silver Rose?"

Wally Walnut shrugged in embarrassment.

"That I can't tell you", he sighed. "The winds and the birds may know...", the green dwarf broke off. Then he nodded in confidence and said: "It's a long journey past several gates of heaven to the star where the Rose is. But, that's not all. All the gates have guards, and the Rose is hidden in a little chest made of light, which is inside a chest made of gold, and the gold chest is locked inside a chest made of stone. From the outside, it doesn't look like a chest but like a rock overgrown with moss.

That rock opens only once in a thousand years. Yet another thousand years must pass for the gold chest to open. The chest of light never opens. Because, to open it must be touched by an unhappy child, and on the star where the Rose lives all the children are happy..."

"Why he's talking about the enchanted star!", Marko thought as through his mind flashed one of Grand-Ma's old stories about a star where all the children remained children forever. But, did such a star really exist, and if so where was it?

His grand-mother had never answered his questions.

"That's a starry secret!", had been her brief reply. He hadn't had time to ask her what kind of secret, because just then his mother had walked into the room and scolded the old woman for filling the child's head with stilly stories: there were no magic stars and no starry secrets!

Marko looked misgivingly at the dwarf. Could his mother have been right? If the Enchanted Star and the Silver Rose on it really did exist, then surely somebody would have already found and claimed it.

"The Silver Rose cannot be claimed, Marko!", said Wally Walnut as though reading the boy's mind. "It is given..."

"I don't understand you..."

"You understand. Catch!" From the highest branch he tossed a tiny ball and Marko reached out... Look, here it was! He had caught it. He, who couldn't catch a ball thrown only a meter away, had caught the walnut's silvery fruit, hardly bigger than a cherry.

"Take care of it!", Wally Walnut smiled. "It's name is Chand, and it will help you to get to the Silver Rose..." Wally Walnut vanished like a wisp of fog. Marko squeezed Chand and was amazed: "What is this heat coming out of him? And how come he's so small, yet so heavy?"

Holding Chand in the palm of his hand, Marko suddenly felt himself become transparent and light. Then slowly he started to lift up and fly. High, higher, even higher!

"Hey, why I'm flying, Minga!", he cried.

"We're flying!", Minga said, tugging at his arm, smiling. "Can't you see?"

No he couldn't. The crown of the walnut tree drifted in front of him, and the tips of the city towers sailed in the fog. Oh, how carefree and easy everything looked! He soared up like a dandelion. "What will Father and Mother say when they see I'm not there?" he wondered.

And then suddenly he thought he could see them looking for him, crying. Let them cry! Nobody's parents quarrelled as much as his did, or left their boys locked in and all alone. Let them cry... Secretly, Marko wiped away a tear and flew after Minga.

Oh, she had gotten far ahead of him! He could barely make out in the fog the glow of her hair and fluttering hem of her dress. Suddenly, both the hair and the dress disappeared.

"Catch me, if you can!", a bell-like voice that could only be hers called out from far away.

"I will too!", shouted the boy defiantly.

"You can't catch her that way!", one of the dwarfs warned him. "You have to latch on to the sunray, the way she has..."

"And I will, too!", retorted Marko doggedly. But that was easier said than done, because as soon as he neared the sunray its tail would whip him in the face harder than a nettle.

One such lash left him completely stunned and he could feel himself falling.

He had been falling for who knows how long! He thought the end was near when he caught sight of the dwarfs waving at him, cheering him on.

"Don't worry, Marko!", he heard Wally Walnut's voice say. "You'll catch up with her, but never approach the Sun Pony from behind..."

Marko took a closer look at the sunray, and was astonished. It wasn't a ray at all, it was the Sun Pony with his golden mane and blazing tail. He felt goose-pimples break out on his back. Wally Walnut had given him Chand, but in vain! He would never get away from Earth. He would never reach the Silver Rose. Why, he was even too scared to jump the wooden horse in the school gym... How was he supposed to mount a living fire?

Far down below, Marko saw the tips of the high-rises, and high above them the top of the walnut tree, from which came a chorus of squeaky little voices:

"Hurry, Marko, hurry! across the sky scurry..."

The dwarfs' song seemed to lift him higher. Marko flew and faster than lightning soared onto the back of the Sun Pony. Then he rushed to catch up with Minga.

"What do you know, our hero was scared!", her mocking laugh rang in his ears.

"We'll see about that!", the boy retorted, put Chand in his pocket and waved at the little detachment of dwarfs: "Good-bye, my friends! I'll be back..."

"Bye", murmured the chorus of voices in the boughs of the walnut tree. "We'll be waiting for you..."

The voices of the green dwarfs now reached Marko only as a whisper, like the rustling of leaves. The crown of the walnut tree was far down below. Then it completely disappeared.

The Sun Pony climbed higher and higher and higher. All around the boy the clouds rustled and parted, the fog evaporated. Finally, they broke out into the clear, sunny blue sky.

"Hurry, hurry, across the sky scurry" ... he again heard the voices of his little friends, softer than a breath of air, and then everything fell silent.

All that reached him now was Minga's distant silvery laugh, and then it too slowly faded. Straight in front of him Marko saw gigantic copper doors rise up; they were so huge they hid half the sky. Even the clouds stopped rustling.

He was all alone in front of the Gates of Heaven. He approached them slowly, step by step. Then he stopped, unable to believe his own eyes...

From a distance, the Gates had looked so tall that they seemed to reach the roof of the sky, but when he got closer Marko saw that they were made not of copper, but of flames which arched right and left, leaving a passageway in the middle that kept changing width. Minga had probably raced through there. But, how was he to pass when the space between the two flames kept shifting?

Hesitating, Marko stopped. The tongues of the flames hissed and crackled, deafening him. Yet, he thought he could hear a voice, somebody's barely audible call for help. Could that be Minga? Marko pricked up his ears. No, that wasn't her voice. He strained his eyes to see who was calling out. But, down below he saw only the mist, and in front the flames of the Gates of Heaven. Who could that be?

When he thought that the tongues of the flames left a wide enough opening, the boy spurred the Sun Pony, it took a few steps and then the little horse reared back.

The boy stroked its mane, he begged the pony, but it wouldn't budge!

"What's the matter, Blaze! We could have made it..." the child scolded, but the little horse would not move.

"Thank you for the pretty name, Marko!", it suddenly said, speaking in a human voice. "Don't you see that you can't pass through those doors?"

"Let's try", said Marko, again calculating the width of the opening, but the Sun Pony again refused to move. "The doors are open, look..."

"All the same, you can't pass through them!", the Sun Pony shook its golden mane. "You'd better go back to where you came from..."

"How did Minga get through?"

"Are you sure she did?", the pony retorted abstinetly. "No one has ever yet gone through that door!"

Marko himself no longer believed in his own bravado, when suddenly there was that voice again. It was perfectly audible this time.

"Save me, Marko. What are you waiting for?"

The note of despair in the voice of the invisible supplicant was even more pronounced, stronger. It must be in tremendous, immediate danger. Marko was overcome with pity, and then with shame. He had to do something! But, how could he help when he couldn't see who it was that needed help, or where that person was...

"Hey, I'm behind the door... What are you waiting for?", said the imploring voice, becoming fainter and fainter. There was no time to lose. Marko spurred the Sun Pony and steered him toward the gates. But, Blaze again refused to budge.

"Oh, you scarredy-cat!", said the now barely audible voice. "How long are you going to wait?"

"I'm not waiting!", said Marko, lowering his head in shame. "Can't you see that it's impossible to pass through the Fiery Gates of Heaven?"

"Who says?", Minga's laugh floated out of nowhere. "Doors exist to be passed through..." Minga's voice suddenly vanished. Then the other chiding, urging, pleading voice faded too. In the total silence only the fire hissed, only the flames moved.

What was behind the flames? A void? The magic garden of the Enchanted Star? Something terrible? Something wonderful? Certainly not! Blaze had a reason for backing away, but still! Marko stared at the gigantic Gates of Heaven, but all he could see were the undulating flames.

The undulating became monotonous.

Through the window of the Glass Tower, as though through a barred cage hanging from the clouds, he had often watched the endless expanse of the sky. But, something was always happening in the sky: winds rushed by, birds and clouds fluttered. In winter the stars shivered from the frost but in the light evenings of summer they descended almost within reach. The tips of the high-rises twinkled mysteriously in their glow, and the air was full of a strange kind of humming.

Were those the stars singing? Or invisible birds flying through the sky? Marko couldn't decide.

"That was a dream, Marko!", his mother laughed when he confided to her that there are stars in the sky that sing. "You'll tell me all about your dream tomorrow..."

Tomorrow came and she was rushing off to work, after work to a meeting, after the meeting on a trip, and later even he came to believe that it had been just a dream.

"Maybe I'm dreaming now?", thought Marko, putting his hands over his eyes. Then he opened them, sure he would find himself in bed, within the walls of his room, locked in. But, he could close and open his eyes as much as he liked: the Glass Tower was far away. Before him blazed the Fiery Gates of Heaven. The first gates! But, where was the guard Wally Walnut had told him to watch out for? Marko carefully scanned the flickering space in front of him, when somewhere from inside him he heard Minga's admonishing voice:

"What do you want with the guard? The fear inside you is more dangerous than any guard. Just look how immense it is!"

Before Minga had even finished, out of the flames and smoke came a Dragon with blazing scales and tail. Seeing it, the boy felt himself shrink, as though he were sinking into the ground.

"Now do you see?", he heard Minga's voice say again.

"What should I see?", retorted the boy, convinced that by looking into the eyes of the monster he was in fact looking into the face of his own death. Just one clout from its claw would be enough to turn him into a mound of dust, into nothingness.

"Take a closer look!", Minga urged him.

"At what, for heaven's sake?"

"At your fear!", the little girl laughed out loud. "Can't you see it?"

"She's gone mad, I swear", thought Marko. "Or doesn't she see how the monster is eyeing me? How it is becoming more and more terrifying, bigger and bigger?" Beside himself with fear, the boy stepped back, shocked by the tinkle ripple of Minga's laugh.

"You're doing everything the wrong way round. You should have stepped forward, Marko! Go ahead, try it..." Minga said no more and Marko felt a shiver run down his back. What was she trying to tell him? He eyed the monster questioningly and inadvertently stepped toward it. That very same instant the Dragon drew back and seemed to become smaller. Astonished, Marko stopped. The monster stopped too. "Why it depends on me!", Marko whispered after the monster had drawn back yet a third time.

"Of course, since it is your fear!", laughed Minga. "Now do you see?"

"I see!", the boy mumbled. "But, I can't pass through that door, because even without the monster, there's that fiery coil of snakes. Don't you see it?"

"Yes, I do. But, those snakes pose no danger. You can get past them if you make up your mind. Uh, you bore me with you doubts!" Minga's voice faded and the hissing increased.

He was alone again in front of the Fiery Gates.

He felt the Sun Pony tremble beneath him. The curtain of flames opened one minute, and closed the next. The Dragon was gone. Now there were fiery snakes there instead, hissing, coiling and uncoiling. How come he hadn't immediately noticed that in front of him were not flames, but coils of snakes slithering left one minute, and right the next? The Sun Pony was right! Who could pass through such a door? But, how had Minga gotten through?

"She didn't hesitate, she didn't wait!", Marko heard a voice say from close by, the same voice that had begged him for help, that had urged and called him. "Don't wait". This time it sounded like the voice of someone with little strength left.

"We have to help him, Blaze!", said Marko. He spurred the Sun Pony as hard as he could, but the horse kicked and reared back.

"I don't have to do anything!", it neighed. "You go on your own..."

"And I will, since you're not ashamed to leave me in my moment of need!" The boy almost burst into tears, but the horse snapped back:

"Why should I be ashamed? Did you ever ask me to come with you? Or, thanks to Chand, did you simply jump onto my back?" The Sun Pony bucked, trying to throw the boy, who whispered:

"I'm sorry I didn't ask you! I'll go on alone..."

Patting the golden pony on the ear, Marko started sliding down. But, before he even reached the ground, Blaze said:

"Where are you off to your own? Don't you know that friends can get angry sometimes, and quarrel? Come on, stay put. Maybe we'll make it..." Blaze lunged at the Gates, but the space between the two tongues of fire was suddenly narrower than the blade of a knife and he jumped back. All at once, Marko didn't care anymore. Minga could say what she liked, Blaze was right. They should give up and go back. That was the best, the smartest thing to do...

"The easiest, maybe! But, certainly not the smartest!", he heard a mocking voice say. Marko strained his ears. No, it wasn't Minga. He listened again, but except for the hissing of the fiery snakes he heard nothing. Had he maybe imagined the voice? Marko looked all around: there was nobody! And yet, a tiny, frightened voice kept calling for help.

Somebody behind the coil of fiery snakes was in trouble, while he stood riveted where he was. Any other boy in his place would have been on the other side long ago. Marko felt his cheeks burn with shame, and his ears echoed with his father's chiding voice: "You won't amount to anything, Marko! Not anything..."

Gripping Blaze's mane, the boy almost sobbed from humiliating shame, when suddenly he saw the fiery tongues part. He rushed forward without giving it a second thought...

Who know how long Blaze ran? A second? A day? Eternity?

Suddenly, it looked to Marko as though there was no passageway, as though he would burn in the flames, like a moth, and he shut his eyes in fear. "This is the end", his ears buzzed. "And so what! Nobody needs me anyway!" Marko stopped waiting for the flames to devour him. But, they drew back.

When he opened his eyes, the Fiery Gate of Heaven was far behind him, back there on the other side.

But, where was the Sun Pony? Where was Minga?

THE THIRD CHAPTER ***and in it***

NOUR'S PRESENT

Marko tried as hard as he could to understand where he was: a fairy island, an unknown star, a dream?

Everything around him was dazzling and white, so white that it hurt his eyes just to look. Shooting out of the gleaming pebble sand was a white tree whose smooth trunk and branches were so transparent they looked as though they were made of glass or icicles. Sprouting from the shiny, transparent branches were tiny transparent leaves, and when they fluttered in the breeze, a light silvery sound could be heard, like the tinkle of little pieces of crystal. The birds in the trees were also snow-white and transparent.

Spellbound, Marko watched the snow-white birds fly away, their wings turning to all the colours of the rainbow. Taking no notice of him, the birds left behind a gleaming trail and the light, barely audible, lulling tinkling of the leaves. Suddenly, Marko wanted to stay in this forest forever, to simply close his eyes, curl up and go to sleep. Fatigue oozed from every pore of his body. His head was heavy and he could not keep his eyes open. The Fiery Gates and loneliness of his Glass Tower were far behind him. It was pleasant and quiet in the white forest. Nobody reprimanded him for anything. Nobody quarrelled. But, where were Blaze and Minga, where was the voice that had called for help?

Marko looked down and saw a small bush protruding from the ground. It reminded him of white sprigs of coral. So this was where they were hiding, this was where he would find them.

Like the trees, the bush had twigs that were white and transparent, tipped with large star-like flowers which changed colours in the Sun. They were the colours of the rainbow, full of joyous, lulling radiance.

The soft tinkling of the leaves, like the barely audible chiming or invisible bells, made him drowsy. But, there was something that kept him from falling asleep. He couldn't figure out what it was, until he noticed a pair of shining, curious eyes peering out of the bush.

Oh, look at how many eyes there were! They peered out of the bush, out of the white pebbly sand, out of the glassy blades of grass, following his every move. It was quite some time before he realised that these eyes belonged to some kind of tiny, translucent creatures. "They're probably afraid of me", he supposed. "Of course they're afraid when they're so tiny!"

He hesitated for a second and then cried:

"I'm not dangerous", and the echo resounded against the white tree, shaking the leaves and the star-like flowers of the bush. There was a humming, a ringing as though invisible hands were moving millions of crystal bells.

At the sound of the bells, as if on command, a flock of tiny, gleaming creatures jumped out. "Could they be dragonflies?", the boy wondered. But, upon closer inspection he saw marching toward him were endless numbers of tiny, vivacious little girls dressed in white, gleaming little skirts. Their faces were white and translucent and long silvery tresses fluttered around their tiny little heads. For a moment he thought that a cluster of stars was descending upon him, like the time when he thought he heard the stars singing...

But, these are not stars, he thought, watching the little minxes wink at him. Were they fairies perhaps? Some kind of midget fairies? Only fairies could be so quick and light! But were fairies so pixyish?

One of the silvery little girls tugged at his hair, another tried to jump onto the palm of his hand, a third nibbled at his ear, and the entire bunch tried to crawl up his trouser-leg, laughing and squealing gaily.

They kept calling him to join their swirling dance. But, Marko didn't have the strength even to move. He stood there and watched them tumble, leap-frog, slide down the blades of grass, disappear and emerge in bigger and bigger groups. Some of them spoke to him, but he couldn't understand what they were saying. The sound of their voices reminded him of the clinking of crystal glasses. Some of the voices repeated themselves. Were these perhaps words from an unknown language? He was so tired he could

barely stand on his feet. "Why not lie down for a bit?", he thought. "But, where am I? Where is Minga?"

Some of the transparent little girls rode tiny white stags, their antlers sprayed with silvery powder. Every time they leaped some of the powder would fall off and waft past the boy's eyes. The sparkle of the silver powder quickly put the boy to sleep.

Who knows how long he slept?

Opening his eyes, Marko noticed that the stags and the little silver-haired girls were so tiny they could fit onto the palm of his hand. Yet, he could not but admire their game. Up and down, hop, hop! Over hill and dale, among the bushes, up on high! The silvery little girls kept swirling and swirling before the boy's very eyes. "It would be nice to be one of them, to be with them. It's pleasant and quiet in this white forest, why should I keep looking for the Enchanted Star and the Silver Rose? If the Rose exists at all. Why shouldn't I take a little rest?" Marko slowly started to sit down when he heard a voice say:

"Help, what are you waiting for?"

It was the same voice he had heard on the other side of the Fiery Gates, but now it was very near. Marko turned toward the voice, but all he saw was the greenish peak of the glacier glittering in the clear, strong light.

"It can't be the ice talking", he thought and took a hesitant step toward the glacier. "I must imagined it..." Marko stopped a few steps away from the glacier and scrutinised the spot where the voice had come from. But, when he stepped closer he saw a pair of eyes watching him from the glacier's transparent tip.

Ah, so somebody is there in the ice!

"Minga, is that you?", he whispered, and the same voice, now softer than a leaf rustling in the wind, said:

"You can see for yourself that it isn't Minga. Set me free!"

"Who are you? All I can see are your eyes..."

"Look a bit closer, and you'll see the rest..."

"But, I don't see! Who are you?"

"Nour. The millionth prince of the Lizard family."

Marko could barely control his laughter.

"Why, you don't exactly look like a prince, or like a lizard!"

"Not, yet. But, set me free and you'll see...", a tear glistened in Nour's eyes.

"Huh, what a proud little thing he is!", thought the boy, crouching in front of the green tip of the glacier. But, all he saw were Nour's eyes and the shadow of a tiny head, no bigger than his fingernail. It could have been the head of a worm, a tadpole or a caterpillar. It was hard to tell from its shape.

Only upon closer inspection did Marko notice the shadow of tiny claws, and the barely visible outlines of a tail. The little thing hadn't lied when he said he was a lizard. But, how could he extract him from the ice?

"With your hand and your breath!", said Nour, as though reading the boy's mind. "But, be careful you don't get trapped in the ice yourself... I've been languishing here for ninety-seven years, and waiting for me on Mamura, is, ah, I can't tell you who's waiting for me there..." Nour shyly lowered his head, and Marko smiled. It must have been a lovely female lizard from Mamura, but who knew whether she was still alive!

"Lizards live a long time!", Nour muttered, as though apologising. "They live long and have a long memory. Lizards were the first to come into the world and it looks as though they will be the last to leave it!" Nour fell silent and Marko remembered Wally Walnut and the Silver Rose.

"If trees, birds and people disappear, Nour, will lizards survive?" whispered the boy thoughtfully, but Nour smiled confidently.

"They'll survive. Lizards and turtles will survive, don't worry. I've been trapped in this ice for ninety-seven years and I wouldn't be in such a hurry if Mamura didn't have a law saying that a betrothed can wait for her fiancé no more than one hundred years..."

"You still have three years left, Nour. Is Mamura that far away?"

"It's far away", Nour replied wistfully. "On the other side of the sky it's different from Budavara Lo..."

"What is Budavara Lo?"

"The star we're on now. It's also called the Ice Forest of Memory, although it looks more like an ice trap. Stop dawdling, Marko, I'm in a hurry..."

"You think I'm not in a hurry? The Enchanted Star and the Silver Rose are far away. Have you ever heard of the Silver Rose? You lizards know everything..."

"Why, yes we do, but I haven't heard of the Silver Rose. Kirilian of Timbava may know, but Timbava is a dangerous star..."

"Where is Timbava?"

"I don't know. Lizards don't go there..." Nour fell silent. Marko placed his hand on the tip of the ice and that same instant he saw a flock of transparent, shining little girls leap toward him. One of them, wearing a silver crown in her hair, was especially delicate.

"She must be the Fairy Queen!", the boy cried out in amazement, but Nour laughed at him.

"Can't you see they are flakes", he said, and Marko stared at the flock of little pixies, shocked. Where were his eyes? Why, even a fool could see they were not little girls, or fairies, but flakes that were so big, so bright, their sparkle made you lose your breath. "And so what if they are little flakes", he scolded himself, enchanted by the sight. They were so gay, so fragile. But, the gayest and most fragile of them all was the one with the crown on her head.

"She is the Fairy Queen after all!" he whispered, admiring her graceful walk and movements.

"You're wrong, Marko!", said Nour gravely. "That is the Dancer Flake. The world of flakes has neither king nor queen. They are a nation of dancers. The best dancer earns the right to wear the crown, until somebody better comes along. Come on, pull yourself together... They're clever little minxes. It's because of one of them that I've spent these ninety-seven years in ice..." Nour lowered his eyes in shame, and Marko smiled. The lizard had one waiting for him over there and he was waiting for another over here... What a little devil!

Nour said nothing, lost in memories that were not for sharing. Then he looked carefully at the boy. The gleam in Nour's eyes reminded the boy of Minga. Where was she now? Where was Blaze? Marko sighed. Nour warned him not to wait. Waiting was dangerous on Budavara Lo...

Full of pity for Nour, Marko leaned over the glacier. But the ice was stronger than his breath and his hand.

Nour looked at him sadly, and said:

"I was afraid the ice would be stronger than you. Get away from here and have a safe journey..."

A tear gleamed in Nour's eye, and without thinking Marko leaned his bare chest on the tip of the glacier. There was a roar in his ears. But, he was surprised that he, sensitive as he was to even the slightest change in the weather, didn't feel the cold.

How long did it last? Marko couldn't say. He was half-asleep when Nour's voice roused him.

"Oh, oh!", cried the little lizard. His head and front paws were free. Marko drew back and looked carefully at the tip of the glacier. The back claws were out, too. Only the tail was still caught in the ice. Marko remembered how at school they had been taught that when the ray of a starfish snapped off it would grow back again and sometimes even multiply. He couldn't remember about lizards, though.

"Do you mind being left without a tail?", the boy whispered.

Nour muttered that he didn't mind: for a while he would be a lizard without a tail, but it would grow back again by the time he reached Mamura.

"Come on, pull!", Nour cried, and Marko, terrified, gripped him with two fingers and pulled.

"Oh, oh", moaned Nour, and he was out, his tail scraped but in one piece.

Marko put him in the palm of his hand and smiled. Then he leaned his cheek against the glacier and closed his eyes. The glow of the branches, twinkling of the flakes and sparkling of the silver dust hurt his eyes. Nour would have to forgive him, but he was so sleepy...

"See you later!", the boy mumbled drowsily, but Nour pinched him, first on the eyelid, then on the cheek, warning him to get up quickly, without delay.

"If you stay another second leaning against that glacier, you'll remain here forever...", Nour fretted, pinching him. "Open your eyes and look! In every little piece of ice you'll see the shadow of somebody who once strayed here long, long ago..."

"Listen, leave me alone!", Marko waved him away in irritation. "I saved you, now go away. I'm sleepy..."

"I can't leave you!", Nour kept pinching him, one minute on the cheek, the next on the eyelid. "I was sleepy once too, and the result is that I spent ninety-seven years trapped in the ice of Budavara Lo. Come on, get up! It's time for me to go. Here, here is my skin. If you rub it, it will grant you three wishes, provided they're not stupid or evil..."

"Three wishes", Marko mumbled drowsily. "If they're not stupid or evil...", and for a second he opened his eyes. Nour's skin gleamed on the palm of his hand. It looked like Nour but was as empty as a soap bubble. "Now go, I'm sleepy..." Marko closed his eyes, sure that Nour was already travelling between the stars, when he felt the abstinent little creature pinch his eyelid again.

"Get up! You must get up!", Nour kept repeating, until Marko got up and rubbed his eyes, hardly able to believe that in the ice he really did see the shadows of trapped little girls and boys, and a cluster of flakes floating above, blinding him with their whiteness and brightness.

One of the trapped creatures was Minga.

"Hey, Minga!", Marko cried, but the little girl neither moved nor opened her eyes. "Minga, do you hear me?", shouted the boy at the top of his lungs, but still she didn't move. The boy's voice swept through the brightness of the ice forest, arousing the sleepy crystal bells, at the sound of which thousands of little dancers began to twirl.

"Don't wait!" Nour warned him. "Touch Minga with Chand. Only Chand can help her!"

"Oh, I've lost him!", the boy sobbed, searching his pockets.

"You must find him!", Nour said sternly. "Look around! I'll help you..."

"What if he stayed behind on the other side of the Gates?", Marko whispered, having searched for some time. He was ready to give up, to curl up beside Minga, close his eyes and go to sleep.

But, Nour was not somebody who gave up.

"Chand can't be on the other side. You wouldn't have made it here without him. Let's look again..." Nour, himself so sleepy he could barely keep his eyes open, went from bush to bush. Marko followed him just a few steps behind, dazed by the brightness of the ice flowers and the glow of rainbow colours on the birds' wings.

They searched for who knows how long.

Marko was so tuckered out he couldn't take another step, when he heard Nour's happy voice:

"Hey, here's Chand!"

Half-buried underneath an ice bush lay the magic walnut fruit, no bigger than a cherry. How did Nour know about the walnut? Marko hadn't told him about Wally Walnut or about Minga. How did he know about them, then?

"Radiating between everything that exists - stars, plants, people, stones, beasts - are invisible ties!", said Nour as though replying to the boy's thought. "Nothing exists for itself alone. You and I have already met once before, but then you didn't come from Sitlo Sika, and you were much happier..."

"For heaven's sake, Nour! What are you talking about?", Marko smiled. "Now all I have to hear is that I was once a lizard, too..."

"No, you weren't. It was a long time ago and we were friends. You and Minga were one and the same being and didn't come from Sitlo Sika, from what you call Earth. Now hurry. Minga is in danger, you have to rescue her..." Nour mysteriously fell silent and Marko ran toward the glacier where he had seen Minga's trapped shadow. But, when he got there, there was nothing.

All the bushes and all the glaciers were identical. Marko and Nour ran around in vain. Minga was nowhere to be found.

By now they were so tired they would have happily curled up and gone to sleep, but they didn't have the strength to interrupt their search. They walked and walked, forward, back, then in a circle, but there wasn't a trace of her.

"Well, Millionth Prince of the Lizard Family", said the boy stopping, "what now?!"

Marko was just about to suggest giving up, when Nour cried out:

"Here!"

That same instant Marko saw Minga's confined body. She was lying there with her eyes closed, motionless, like the first time they had laid eyes on her. The boy leaned over and put Chand against her face, and with the twinkling of an eye the ice slipped off her face like veils.

"Was I sleep for long?", Minga rubbed her eyes drowsily. "Where is my Sun Pony? And who is that?", she said sternly, turning to Nour.

"A friend!", smiled Marko.

"Since when are lizards friends of yours?", Minga laughed rudely, and Nour, blushing, disappeared that very instant. Only his little shirt, more transparent than a cobweb, now glistened on the palm of Marko's hand. The boy stroked it tenderly and put it lovingly into his pocket. Minga looked at him in surprise and said:

"Who was that?"

"A friend!", the boy whispered, having made up his mind to say no more. Let her feel sorry, let her wonder. Nour was his secret.

"Until Mamura", he heard Nour's tiny voice say.

"Until the next time, my friend!", he whispered, and Minga frowned. Whom was he talking to? She wanted to ask him, but this was no time for questions. They had to hurry, find the sun ponies, and get away from the White Star.

But that was easier said than done.

The sun ponies were so deep inside the ice that they were barely visible.

"Maybe Chand could save them", thought Marko, when from the little ball in his hand he heard a firm voice say:

"Maybe I could, but we lose too much time. Put me down, Marko!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER
in which

AKIDA IS A THREAT

"Hey, Chand can talk!", the thought flashed through the boy's mind. "Why didn't Wally Walnut tell me?" Marko stopped not knowing what to do. That same instant, like a sparrow, Chand hopped off his hand and began spinning so rapidly that fluff flew like sparks all around. When he finally stopped, Chand was no longer a tiny walnut fruit, but a huge shining ball.

The ball suddenly opened and Chand said:

"Since the sun ponies are trapped, I'll take you the rest of the way. Step inside slowly, one by one..."

Inside, Marko had the impression that he was in total darkness, all alone, locked up, captured for who knows what reason. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the change and for him to realise that it was not dark, at least not entirely dark, inside Chand. Minga's hair shimmered in the half-darkness.

As suddenly as it had opened, so the ball began to close, as though somebody had drawn a curtain over it. and then a crystal plate appeared at eye-level, and through it the boy could see outside. Slowly, with effort, Chand pulled away from Budavara Lo.

The white, transparent forest still glistened all around them. Birds flew through the tree branches, their feathers changing colour from soft pink to purple and violet. The shadows of the captured sun ponies were no longer visible. Somewhere beyond Marko's range of vision was the green peak of the glacier in which Nour had been languishing for ninety-seven years, and the little girl with the crown in her hair, but the boy still imagined he could see her happy little face shining in the endless whiteness.

"Maybe we could have taken her with us", Marko thought, a tear glistening in his eye.

"No, we couldn't. But, it doesn't matter, Marko. She will never leave you. The people we remember are with us always...", Chand whispered enigmatically, rising higher. Now all around them was only the infinite black space of the sky and moving in the darkness of this infinity were stars of different shapes and colours. Some were lighter than a dandelion. Others were so fat they could hardly move, their old bones creaking from the cold. Still others laughed more mischievously than the bouncing little girls. And there were those that leaped across entire slices of the sky in just a few steps.

Far down below were Budavara Lo, the coral forest and the glaciers.

Marko frowned. Why hadn't he listened more carefully to Nour? "Everything is connected", Nour had said, "and travelling in the infinity of the sky, through eternity, is the stardust, turning into a flower, person, bird, or something else, never permanently, but always wonderously, in constant movement and rotation..." Marko remembered that Nour had been silent after speaking these words, and then had added: "And, remember, Marko, that is the most beautiful thing of all! Nothing exists for itself alone, everything is connected. That is the only way Minga could come out of you tear, out of your sadness, or Wally Walnut out of your yearning to have a friend. That is how I called you..."

Confused, the boy looked at Budavara Lo. It shone like a silver grain in the depths of the sky. Had Nour perhaps been joking? Minga existed, Wally Walnut existed, and somewhere on the Enchanted Star there was the Silver Rose and in it a forgotten, a lost word. He had to find that word. But, how?

Marko looked carefully at Chand's uneven wall. Protrubences gave way to hollows. What did that remind him of? He couldn't remember until Minga said:

"Why, you used to make boats out of walnut shells and put ants in them..."

"They were passengers for the South Sea..."

"You wanted to be the Prince of Clouds. Now you're a passenger for Timbava, which is the same thing...", Minga's laugh tinkled like a bell. "Do you remember now?"

"Remember what? The ants were in the walnut shell..."

"And we were in the walnut shell. What is Chand? Come on, snap out of it!"

Marko flinched. Why, she was right. Chand really had turned from a walnut into a celestial ship, just as Minga had turned from a tear into a little girl... Was that what Nour had meant when he said everything was connected? He had to think about it... "And I will", he promised himself.

Minga's light hair contrasted sharply with Chand's dark walls. Silently, she watched the circling stars, amazed by their brilliance and number.

A cluster of stars rushed by straight in front of them, squealing. The little stars' eyes were red. They left behind them a bright trail, like a long tail. It was only when he took a closer look that Marko saw the little stars were chasing somebody.

"We've just passed the Little Foxes", said Chand.

"What did you say, Chand?", Marko said with a start. "Don't be silly. Foxes exist only on Earth..."

Chand laughed good and loud.

"Well, they also exist in the sky. They're shrewd and cruel and nobody is safe around them, Marko. Darn it!", Chand grunted, trying to change course. Something was pulling him toward a large violet star.

They were flying at tremendous speed. Comets whizzed past the crystal plate. When one of them falls, his grand-mother used to say, you make a wish and it will come true. His mother would laugh, but all the same Marko remembered that every person is born with a star and dies with it.

"Which is my star?", Marko wondered, gazing at the bright expanse around him, but Minga reproached him.

"Our star, you mean. Hey, something is wrong..."

Trembling, Chand tried to change course, and flew straight into the cluster of Sleepyhead Stars, the strangest of them all.

At first they barely noticed a thing. The Sleepyheads crossed the skies singing, as though lulling themselves to sleep, covered with veils, their eyes closed. Even their silver hair was tightly plaited, as if they were afraid that the slightest ray might give them away.

"I thought stars liked brightness", the boy muttered in amazement. "What's the matter with them? Have they gone mad?"

"No, Marko", replied Chand. "Their safety is in darkness. If the Little Foxes were ever to spot them they would devour every Sleepyhead from first to last."

Chand fell silent and the shocked boy thought: "Aren't stars something bright, eternal, delicate? Only beasts devour one another..."

"Stars shouldn't do that, Chand!", Marko said and bit his tongue. Why, he was talking to a walnut, a special, enchanted walnut to be sure, but a walnut all the same! The boy blushed, and Chand said somehow melancholically:

"Nothing is dead, Marko! Every star, stone and plant has its language, although they don't understand one another. I think that's what Nour told you, didn't he? And he must have also told you that they talk to one another. Once in a million years. You should be proud that it was to us that this happened here and now. And don't worry about the Sleepyheads. They multiply so quickly nobody can wipe them all out..."

"But, all the same, the stars are evil!", Marko bowed his head sadly, and Chand laughed, saying that things weren't the way they seemed. Some stars are gentle, others cruel, still others are indifferent. There are noble stars, but there are also the other kind...

"Akida is an evil star!", said Chand, a spark of fear in his voice, and Marko remembered Nour's warning. But that warning had referred to Timbava.

"Who is Akida, Chand? Were going to Timbava. Maybe Kirilian of Timbava knows..."

"We started out for Timbava, Marko. But, Akida steered us off course...", said Chand. Then he added how they had to be careful: the inhabitants of Akida considered themselves masters of the universe, although nobody knew what they really were... Chand suddenly changed course, swerving so abruptly that Marko felt faint and almost collapsed on the floor.

For a time they flew so rapidly that there was a humming in his ears. He could see nothing through the crystal plate. "We must have escaped", the boy thought, smiling, sure that the danger had passed.

But a few seconds later Chand stopped, not budging.

"What's happened, Chand?", Minga asked with a start.

"We've entered the web of Akida's rays", Chand said forlornly.

"Nothing is lost yet, don't be sad..." Minga whispered, trying to cheer Chand up. "Maybe Akida is a good star."

"I don't think so. Great strength without wisdom is not good. But, I couldn't avoid her...", a note of anxiety rose in Chand's voice.

To Marko the anxiety seemed exaggerated, almost funny.

The star on which they alit was shrouded in a purple mist. And when he took a closer look, he saw that everything else was light or dark purple, too, from the clouds to the huge purple hills girdling the meadow where Chand had landed.

The grass in the meadow was purple. Above it big purple flowers swayed as they sang. Spellbound, Marko stopped to look at them. The gentle voices of the flowers wafted quietly through the purple half-darkness.

Then suddenly, everything went still. All he could hear was the beating of his own heart. He was gripped with mounting fear.

"Who would ever say that such a scarred-cat was an explorer of the ocean depths, possessor of the grass of eternity, voyager of the stars, Prince of the Clouds?", Minga teased him, laughing.

Marko could not get over his astonishment. How in heaven's name could she know that he had thought of travelling among the stars, and in the depths of the ocean? Who had told her that he wanted to become Prince of the Clouds? He had never confided that to a living soul. How did Minga know?

"You've forgotten where I came from, Marko...", Minga whispered reproachfully.

She was right, of course. Perhaps she was also right about Akida. How silly he was to be afraid! Around him was only the purple light and the silence of unknown stars. The voices of the flowers were gone, and the fluttering wings of the birds, and the rustling wind in the grass. What was he afraid to? The inhabitants of Akida were unlike those of other stars: they didn't titter, they didn't hide, they didn't chase one another... What if there was nobody at all on Akida? Marko strained his eyes to see. But, all he saw were the purple hills in the distance and the grass beneath his feet. Nothing stirred. "This is a silly star!", the boy whispered, and that same instant, he heard an ominous voice behind him say:

"Who invited you? Intruders and traitors, how dare you come to Akida?"

And the voice vanished as suddenly as it had come. Everything was again shrouded in purple semi-darkness and silence.

Marko held his breath, waiting for the Akida to speak again. She wasn't very nice, that's for sure! But she must have known that they had come because they had to, not because they wanted to... He didn't have long to wait. the voices of Akida, hollow and deep, echoed from all sides:

"Look how ugly they are! Has anyone ever seen such ugly two-legged ants? Who invited them? Send them away..."

"Uh, how funny the White Ant is!"

"The dark one is even funnier!"

"They're really ugly! Disgusting! What shall we do with them?"

"Let's wait for the Supreme and Wisest One!", said one of the Akidas. "Let him decide."

"Why wait?", another cried impatiently. "I say a trial!"

"We're the wisest! The most beautiful! Masters of the universe! The brain of the world...", the Akidas all spoke at once, but in the chill purple darkness Marko couldn't see them, or even guess what they looked like. Still, nothing stirred.

"Her Majesty, the Supreme and Wisest Akida, the First and Foremost, left!", a voice thundered. It could have been an order or a command, or a plain statement of fact. "Don't knock when she sleeps; perhaps she isn't even here. Other stars are interesting as well! She'll be back in three centuries, maybe thirteen. All the same, don't knock! Akida, the Supreme and Wisest, does not allow anybody to wake her!", the voice suddenly faded as though sinking into the sand. Minga laughed.

"Hah, they're crazy! Where would we knock? Why, there are no doors here, or even houses..."

"You think so?", a muffled voice sneered, and another still more sneering and muffled voice added:

"Why, they aren't just ugly, they're stupid to boot! Put them on trail!"

The voices of the Akidas became increasingly impatient, clamorous. Suddenly everything went silent and an official voice announced:

"The Master of the Universe is coming. Bow your heads!"

Marko could not tell whom the command was addressed to, but, just in case, he bowed his head. He did not see the one they called Master of the Universe, the Supreme and Wisest, nor did he hear any steps.

The Akidas were conferring over something. Their voices were deep and grave but he could not understand the words they spoke. It was some unknown, ominous language in which the same, sharply uttered words

were repeated over and over again. They were probably conferring about what to do with them. What? The boy inadvertently touched Nour's gleaming skin.

"Ah, if only I could understand their unintelligible language!", he whispered.

That same moment his hearing seemed to sharpen. And the boy began to understand the language of the Akidas. The devils! They weren't kidding! Whoever is different is an enemy. Enemies should be destroyed. Whoever is not with them is against them... One of the Akidas wanted death for the Little White Ant. Another was for destroying the Little Dark Ant as well. The sooner the better! All but one agreed that there should be no delay. Then they put it to the vote. Finally, one of the Akidas asked:

"What do the illustrious sisters propose?"

"Death!"

"Death!"

"Death!"

Only one voice was against the death sentence for the two-legged ants.

"The Little Dark Ant and the other one may be spies working for our enemies and that makes them our enemies too. But, that should be verified. There is time for them to be destroyed", the dissenting voice sounded moderate and reasonable, but the other Akidas did not listen.

"You forget that you are no longer the Supreme and Wisest. You forget that the Master of the Universe took away your house and that you do not have the right to vote until you get your house back and become the Supreme and Wisest again!", shouted the Akidas as one. The ground under the boy's feet trembled from the force of their voices.

"Anyone different from us has no right to live. Death to traitors! Death to the Little White and the Little Dark Ant!", a firm voice said.

Then everything fell silent and the boy heard the vein in his neck pulsate. Yes, he had heard them correctly. He understood them correctly. But, where were they? How come he could not see them?

Tall purple grass grew; it stretched as far as the eye could see, was the same as when they had landed on Akida. But, what had happened to the hills? They couldn't have moved! Who had ever seen hills that walked? Marko rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands, sure that he had imagined the walking hills. But, when he looked again at the purple hills

he saw that they really had moved a bit closer, if he remembered the distance correctly. How could hills walk?

"Why, they aren't hills!", he heard an admonishing voice say. "Take a better look!" The voice fell silent, and Marko wondered whom he was talking to. The Akidas had mentioned two-legged ants. It must be one of them! Who else could it be? But why couldn't he see him?

"Listen, there are no mirrors here!", said his invisible converser. "And without a mirror it is hard to see oneself."

What did she mean by that? That he and Minga were the two-legged ants? That's ridiculous! But, thanks! He was the only one who sounded least slightly amicable. Marko pricked up his ears to hear what the Akidas were saying. There was no more dissent. Everybody shouted in unison:

"Death to the two-legged ants! Death! Death!"

"What are they talking about, for God's sake?", the boy asked his invisible collector and that same moment he noticed that the hills were now barely a dozen steps away from them. "So, those hills do walk, after all", and the sense of foreboding pierced the boy's heart like a knife.

"Of course they walk", he heard the invisible voice sneer. "Only, they are not hills...."

"If they're not hills, what are they?", cried the boy.

"Help me get my house back and become Master of the Universe, and I'll tell you!", whispered the Invisible One.

"How can I help you", Marko asked with a shrug. "I don't have any power..."

"You have, you have...", whispered the invisible Akida. "Rub Nour's skin and tell it to give me a house. You still have one wish left..."

"What are you talking about? I haven't used up any yet!", the boy muttered angrily, and the Akida laughed.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER
and in it

THE GREAT COLLECTOR'S EMPIRE

"What are you laughing at, you fool?", Marko said, red with fury. Nour had given him three wishes. All three were still three...

"Only two, Dark Little Ant!", laughed his invisible collector... "You asked for and got the unintelligible language... Now ask for a house for me, I can't help you otherwise..."

"What a little blackmailer! You help me!?", the boy spluttered.

"Ask Chand!"

In the purple dusk Marko saw something like eyes glittering on long, supple sticks. But, their owner was not there. All around there were only the dark purple hills, smooth and sinuous, without trees, shrubs or grass.

"Do what he asks!" said Chand softly. "We have no other choice..." Sensing in Chand's voice a mixture of fear and despair, the boy said:

"Nour claimed there was always a way out of everything..."

"Nour is far away now. Do what she asks...", said Chand, falling silent.

Behind them the purple hills pressed in. When and how had the hills moved? They hadn't seen or heard a thing. When hills moved there should be a rear like an erupting volcano! But here there was nothing to see or hear. How come? Marko felt a vague, inexplicable fear grip him. He touched Nour's skin and said:

"Forgive me, Nour! Let whoever she is have the house she's asking for!"

Before he had finished speaking, he saw one of the little nearby hills start to grow toward and beyond the purple clouds. At the same time he

noticed the hill behind him shrink as if it were losing height because of the other hill's growth.

"Thank you, Little Dark Ant! I, Master of the Universe, the Supreme and Wisest, my house and ruling crown now restored to me, hereby command:

"First: Let my subjects open ranks!

"Second: Let them pay tribute to the Little Dark Ant and his escorts! As of this day I am in his debt. Let no Akida do him wrong!

"Third: Make way, do you hear me?"

"We hear you, wisest of the wise, supreme and only one!" The voices of the Akidas sounded humble and ingratiating in the purple semi-darkness. But, who were the Akidas? What hoe and crown were they talking about? Why, except for the bare, smooth hills there was nothing here! The boy thought the voices he heard came from these very same hills. Nonsense! How could hills talk?

Marko listened. The Akidas were again discussing the ants, but there wasn't a blasted ant within miles. Maybe the Akidas were dreaming.

"They're not dreaming, Marko!", the voice of the one who claimed to be the supreme and wisest interrupted his thoughts. "If you had a mirror, you would see...", the Akida broke off, but the boy said in a muted cry:

"Hey, why I'm talking to a hill! What's the matter with me?"

"You're talking to me, Marko! And I'm not a hill! Perhaps you just see me as a hill, the way I see you as an ant. Take a closer look and tell me what you see."

Marko raised his eyes, but he could not see up to the top of the hill. It was so tall, so horrifying. The smooth, metallic purple slopes were shrouded in a purple mist. Or did they perhaps release the mist themselves? He couldn't tell.

"What do you see, Little Ant?", asked the invisible Akida, and, hesitating, the boy stammered:

"A gigantic purple hill. Behind the hill, pale purple clouds."

"You didn't look properly! All the same, thank you for the house! Akidas, fall back! I, Master of the Universe, king of kings, the supreme and wisest, order you to fall back!

Noiselessly, just as they had approached, so the hills began to fall back. Soon the purple meadow was again girdled by the distant purple hills. Purple flowers grew on it, singing, just as when they had arrived. The slopes of the biggest hill were smooth and bare, sinuous, bright purple. The

other hills were smaller, but just as smooth, sinuous, and purple. They looked like something he had seen once before. They reminded him of something. But what?

Chand lifted off so suddenly that there was no time for any questions. He could still hear the voice of the supreme and wisest Akida. It thanked him and wished him a safe journey. And yet, the boy could not shake off a vague feeling of fear. The supreme and wisest one, what was she really? He had no idea.

Only after Chand had emerged from the purple clouds did Marko look at the purple, sinuous hills and cry out:

"Why, the Akidas are... the Akidas are..."

"Gigantic snails!", Chand finished his sentence, warning him not to laugh. "Had they moved just one more step – we would be no more. What is it? What are you muttering?"

The boy shrugged. He wasn't muttering, he simply didn't believe that snails, even purple snails, could be Masters of the Universe.

"Do you believe it, Chand?"

"The Akidas believe it. And when you believe you are something, then that is what you are! Remember, Marko! That is what you are!" Chand said no more and decelerated.

* * *

A star, consisting of three rings, was coming toward them.

Nearest them was a huge yellow ring. Inside it was a red ring, and in the red ring was a blue ring. But, the yellow periodically turned blue, and the blue turned yellowed than a dandelion, then redder than an apple and finally, back to blue. Connecting the rings were different coloured bands. Stars hopped over them like little girls skipping rope. Every so often the stars would disappear only to reappear later on the other side.

"Not all of them!", Minga observed.

"Does Timbava devour stress too?", asked the boy in surprise.

"This isn't Timbava!", Chand said curtly.

"For heaven's sake, Chand! We're heading for Timbava!" Marko gazed in delight at the Triple Star with its changing colours. He was surprised that Chand remained silent. Well, let him be silent! In just a few seconds they would be with Kirilian who knew where to find the Enchanted Star and the Silver Rose on it...

"This isn't Timbava!", Chand snapped.

"Won't we ever get there?", asked Marko, almost crying with disappointment.

"We'll get there. Now let me remember the name of this star. I used to know its name... Ananuency, Nuency, Ency, ah yes!", Chand laughed softly, and said no more.

Marko was dumbstruck. Was it possible that Chand had already searched for the Silver Rose? That he had been on Budavara Lo, on Akida, on the Triple Star? But why then had Wally Walnut sent him to look for her again? And why hadn't Chand said a word when they set out their trip?

"What difference would it make to know that one of our distant ancestors had tried to find the Silver Rose?", said Chand reproachfully, as though reading Marko's mind. The boy shook:

"What are you trying to say?"

"That we Walnuts are different from people, Marko. We remember what happened to whom and when... If we didn't remember, misfortunes would keep repeating themselves..." And Chand fell silent.

The Triple Star was quite close now, but Chand did not even try to get away. What was happening to Chand? Why was he again turning off course? Had they been captured by some Akidas again? Where did this wall come from?

"This star isn't very hospitable!", Minga said. "And it isn't even inhabited. You didn't have to land just to show us a wall, Chand..."

"Where there are walls there is a door!", a ringing voice jeered. "Find it!" The jeering voice suddenly faded, but soon reappeared. Marko ran after the voice and saw that the wall went on as far as the eye could see, straight, smooth, yellow and bright, as though made of gold.

"Ah, that's impossible, the boy whispered, chiding himself. "Who would have so much gold!"

"We have...", said that same ringing voice and Marko was surprised to see that it came from somewhere on high. He looked up and high above, on the wall, he saw a tiny creature running. It looked like Wally Walnut.

"Look, Wally is with us, Minga...", the boy said and that same moment he heard Chand laugh ironically.

"Take a better look, Marko Divats!"

"And I will!", the boy retorted. But when he again looked up at the high yellow wall nobody was there. However, smack in front of his nose was a door.

"Hey, it really is gold!", cried Minga, running toward the door. "But there's no handle..." Minga stopped in front of the gleaming, gold door, banging on it as if she expected it to swing open at the touch of her hand. But, the door did not open.

Standing behind Minga, Marko saw that indeed the door had no handle, but there was a keyhole near the bottom.

"If there's a keyhole there must be a key!", Marko laughed out loud, as though taunting the mocker, but this time the mocker neither appeared nor spoke. The boy turned left. The wall was the same height everywhere, smooth and a bit crooked. But, nowhere was there a key or a door. He could no longer hear Minga's footsteps. "Perhaps she stopped to rest", the boy thought, when suddenly, above his head, he heard light, rapid steps. The mocker was obviously playing hide-and-seek.

"Hey, I'll catch you!", Marko shouted.

"So, catch me!", said the same voice, quite close now.

Marko ran. But, the faster he ran the farther away were the Hider's steps. "I should be dead tired, dead hungry from all this running!", thought the boy.

Dusk was already spreading like yellow powder, but the boy kept running. "If my father could see me now, he wouldn't believe it!", Marko cried. "He would be happy, or at least pleased." Marko, who couldn't even walk for half an hour was now running for an entire eternity. But, where was Minga? Where was Chand? Where was that little scoundrel? He couldn't hear any steps anymore. Oh, dear, which way should he go?

Marko looked to the right and looked to the left. Nobody anywhere. But he was bound to come across somebody, he thought, and continued to walk. The wall beside him was barely visible now. Not wanting to lose it, he put his hand out every so often. Yes, there it was! So, he was walking in the right direction. But, how come the wall kept curving? Finally he realised he was walking in a circle.

Where was the door in that circle? Where was Chand? Minga? Marko ran back. Then in horror he thought: what if Minga had gone after him? For an instant he saw himself and Minga chasing each other around the ring, never to meet. The boy trembled, inadvertently touched the wall and felt a hollow under his fingers. Why look, there was the door! It was open. That's why Minga hadn't gone after him. Marko stepped inside.

A long, semi-dark corridor stretched out in front of him.

He went down the corridor, but the problem was that it kept forking. Should he go left or right? He hesitated, and then proceeded at random, following somebody's echoing light footsteps, convinced that they were Minga's.

It was only when he stopped to rest that he noticed the footsteps had faded and realised he had been following the pounding of his own heart. Here where he had stopped the corridor forked again. "Left or right? Right or left?", wondered the boy, when the jeering voice rang out.

"Left!"

In the yellow half-dark of the corridor, Marko saw a tiny creature flit off to the left, and he ran after it. But, again, he couldn't catch up with it..

On, and on, and on he went, but the tiny steps kept eluding him.

The corridor suddenly fanned out. A light flickered in the distance. He headed for it and found himself in a room of gigantic proportions. A gigantic golden flower shone in the middle. The flower was the source of the light he had seen from a distance. But, where was Minga? Chand? Where was the Hider whose steps had led him here? Marko looked searchingly at the Golden Flower and let out a muted cry. Sitting among the swaying stamens was a little girl. Golden-eyed. Golden-haired. Gleaming.

"Welcome!", said Goldie. "You must have spent a long time looking for me."

"Well, it wasn't exactly you I was looking for!", the boy stammered. "Who are you?"

"I can't tell you if Im not the one you're looking for..." The little girl was silent and then said: "But you were looking for somebody? Who was it?"

"A little girl. Her name is Minga. And a walnut. It's name is Chand. And a dwarf... I don't know its name."

"I do!", whispered Goldie uneasily. "He told you: where there's a wall, there will also be a door... Then you kept hearing his footsteps..."

"How did you know?"

"Centuries ago I heard them too..."

"Who is he? He looks small and sweet..."

"That's how he may look!", Goldie sighed, "but that's not what he is..." The little girl suddenly fell silent as though listening to something, and then said: "He's still far away, I hope he can't hear us..."

"Are you afraid of him?"

"Every prisoner is afraid!", Goldie smiled. "You'll be afraid of him, too..."

"But, I'm not a prisoner! I came on my own..."

"It's all the same! You're a prisoner just like the others. In the Great Collector's Empire everybody's a prisoner..." The little girl abruptly fell silent, hiding behind the golden petals. Rapid Footsteps could be heard from afar.

"What others?", asked Marko in surprise. He spread open his arms and said: "There's nobody here..."

"That's what you think!", Goldie laughed softly, leaning over the petal of the Golden Flower. "Look behind those doors...", and with her little hand she indicated the walls and the boy saw barely visible doors lined up all around. "Minga is there somewhere, but that's all I can tell you..." Terrified, Goldie kept a look out and Marko felt his throat go tight with pity.

"What are you so afraid of?", he asked quietly.

"The Great Collector. You'll soon be afraid of him, too..." Hiding behind the petal of the Golden Flower the little girl said no more and Marko saw the stamens tremble and realised that was because she was trembling. The light, rapid footsteps were quite close now.

"Can I help you?", the boy whispered.

"Climb up here! If he catches you won't be able to help even yourself...", Goldie smiled, stroking the Flower.

That very same second, like a golden hand of salvation, one of the petals unfolded to the ground, curled itself around the boy and lifted him up.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER
and in it

ARUNTI'S SECRET

The one Goldie called the Great Collector was already at the entrance door. But he looked neither terrifying nor dangerous. He looks funny more than anything else, thought Marko, staring at the dwarf whose long scrawny neck could barely hold his enormous head. "How could I have even thought that he looked like Wally Walnut", wondered the boy, noticing chicken feet peering out from under the dwarf's cloak. "Anybody with feet like that can't be dangerous! "

"It only like that! ", Goldie murmured.

And she fell silent as suddenly as she had spoken. The Great Collector cocked his head as if he had heard something. Steps echoed far away. "Could that be Minga?", Marko wondered, trying to peek out from behind the petal of the Golden Flower, but Goldie pulled him back with a trembling hand. What was she so afraid of? The dwarf with chicken feet? Something else? Far below, at the foot of the Flower, there was a commotion and the Great Collector commanded:

"Find him! He couldn't have gone far..."

Then the voices and the footsteps vanished. Goldie breathed a sigh of relief.

"Whom are they looking for?", the boy asked in surprise.

"You, What's-Your-Name, it's you they're looking for! Don't you understand?"

He began to understand. But, where was Minga?

"You'll find her later...", said the girl, leaning over her golden leaf, her face almost touching Marko's. "What's your name?"

"Marko. But, I've also been called Butter-Fingers and Little Dark Ant..."

"Well!", Goldie smiled. "My star and I have only one name. We're both called Arunti", the little girl gently touché one of the stamens of the Golden Flower and from it came a sweet lull-a-bye.

"Where is your star, Arunti?", asked Marko curiously, looking at her translucent little face. He was surprised when Goldie, caressing the petals of the Golden Flower, said that this was her star.

"But, that isn't a star, Arunti! Can't you see that it's a flower that sings?", the boy whispered, fatigue spreading through his entire body.

Arunti smiled enigmatically.

"Stars have different forms, Marko! You must have noticed that by now. Mine is the flower that sings."

The boy jumped up.

Did she think he was a fool? How could a star be a flower? And one that sang, yet?

"For goodness sake, Goldie, stop inventing!", the boy erupted. "What is Arunti?"

"A star! O told you...", said the offended little girl, biting her lip and saying no more. All that could be heard in the golden semi-darkness was the sweet song of the stamens. Arunti's mysterious eyes looked at Marko out of her tiny, translucent face.

"What are you?", he barely dared to ask.

"I'm a star too!", Arunti smiled.

"Stars don't look like little girls, they don't have golden hair, they don't talk...", Marko stubbornly shook his head, but Arunti told him that only the inhabitants of Sitlo Sika still believed that.

"Nour mentioned Sitlo Sika, Marko muttered to himself. He tried to remember when Nour had mentioned Sitlo Sika. And what Sitlo Sika was.

"That's how we call Earth!", said Arunti pensively. Marko asked her what the name Sitlo Sika meant. Arunti's answer, that it meant Unhappy Star, shocked the boy.

"What do you call a Happy Star, then?"

"Sitlo Sika!", Arunti answered briefly, and the boy exploded:

"Sitlo Sika can't be both a Happy and an Unhappy Star! What's the matter with you? You forgot something, or got it mixed up."

"You think who?" Lightly, almost casually Arunti touched the stamens of the Golden Flower, and the Great Collector's Empire rang out with a song about the wind of memory and the wind of oblivion.

Enchanted by the song, Marko forgot where he was and closed his eyes.

He was falling asleep when from somewhere nearby he heard the voice of the Dwarf with the Chicken Feet. He was threatening somebody. Shouting.

"Haven't you found him yet? What is it?"

"We'll find him!" a chorus of tiny voices piped up. "We always find everything..."

"Listen to them boast!", Marko scowled.

"They're not boasting!"

What was that supposed to mean? Offended, Marko said nothing. Would she let them find him? Tell them where he was?

"That's an ugly thought, Marko! I'll try to forget it..." Arnuti fell silent and the song about the wind of memory and wind of oblivion filled the entire room. Should he cover up his tracks? Make the Great Collector stop the search? Arunti wouldn't say, just as she wouldn't say, just as she wouldn't confide to him how she had come to the Great Collector's Empire.

"Were you waiting for somebody, Arunti?", asked Marko, gently touching her cheek with the tips of his fingers. "Was somebody looking for you, is somebody perhaps still looking for you? Who?", asked the boy, his eyes on the little girl.

"Let that be my secret!", Goldie said, stroking the boy's arm with her tiny hand. "Thank you for coming, but be careful! If the Great Collector touches you with his wand you will be his slave for the rest of your life. Do you hear that knocking underneath the roots of the Golden Flower?", asked Arunti. She passed her hand over the stamen and the noise quieted down.

"It's true, something is knocking!" Marko listened but Arunti lost her temper.

"Not knocking, Marko! Working! Day and night in eternal heat and darkness... Remember! Underneath Arunti's roots are the Great Collector's mines and his helpers. Those he captured and cast a spell on are mining gold down there for the wall that circles his empire..."

"Why don't they rebel or run away...?", asked the boy going pale. "I would run away..."

"Are you sure?", Arunti looked at him sadly. Whomever the Great Collector touches with his wand forget who he is and where he came from. He thinks he is mining the gold for himself and doesn't even dream of running away..." Arunti was silent for a moment and then added that the Great Collector collected not only slaves, but everything within reach: mountains, clouds, orchids, ships, rare birds, nails, stars, fragments of sentences, eels, dreams...

"What does he do with it all, for heaven's sake?"

"Nobody knows. When he goes to inspect the mines, open one of the doors and you'll see..." The little girl broke off her sentence and warned him to keep still.

Marko listened. She had reasons for her fear and for her warning.

Light footsteps were running down numberless corridors. A bird's? A rabbit's? Minga's, maybe?

"No, not Minga's!", Arunti whispered. "She is somewhere behind one of those doors until the Great Collector decides whether to turn her into a miner or a smelter..."

Marko secretly smiled, remembering the tiny little girl Minga had been when she came out of his tear.

"Before she became a little girl, Minga was a tear. She can't be a smelter or a miner..."

"All the worse for her! Then she'll become a little nugget of gold...", said Arunti, and Marko felt his hair stand on end. "A little grain of gold embedded in the gold wall..."

"You talk as though the Great Collector was all – powerful!", sighed the boy. "That's how the Akidas thought of themselves. But they were gigantic purple snails. You must have met them.

"I've been here for centuries..."

Marko looked at Arunti askance.

"Hasn't anybody ever tried to destroy the Great Collector's Empire? What supports it?"

"The root of the Golden Flower. If somebody were to free Arunti, the Great Collector's Empire would collapse. But, the only ones who know how to do that are the Dwarf Who Forgets and the Dwarf Who Records... To reach them you have to pass the mines of the Great Collector and the

doors guarded by the One-Eyed Spider, and nobody has ever yet succeeded in doing so."

"Perhaps we'll succeed..." Slowly, hesitantly, Marko articulated the idea as it took seed in his head. But, how could he discover which were the doors concealing Chand and Minga? Or be sure that the Dwarf Who Records isn't even crueler than the Great Collector? The boy shook his head uncertainly.

"I'm no longer sure it's all possible... Forget what I said, Arunti! You'll never get out of the Great Collector's Empire and I'll never see the Enchanted Star and the Silver Rose on it...", the boy's voice trailed off and Arunti touched his face with her tiny hand. His face was damp.

"We could at least try...", she said. "When the Crow-Dwarfs come to seize the gold from the Great Collector, and he and his helpers go to war with them, go down and look for Chand and Minga. Then hurry and find the Dwarf Who Records..." Arunti was quiet for a minute and then added: "It might take years, but unless you try you'll never get out of here..."

Marko worried about what to do if the Great Collector returned in the meantime. What if the defeated the Crow-Dwarfs and come back?

"Arunti will keep him here with a song all about him. It's the only one he listens to carefully. And I will..." A tear glistened in Arunti's eye. Marko asked her doubtfully whether she was quite certain the Crow-Dwarfs would come.

Goldie laughed through her tears.

"Am I certain? Listen to me! Where there's a wall, there are doors. Where there is gold, there are thieves..." Arunti spoke with such self-confidence that Marko felt the Crow-Dwarfs would appear any second. But, he had a long wait in the golden semi-darkness before he heard their war cries, which sounded like cawing.

Was it a day he had waited in the petals of the Golden Flower? A year? A hundred years? He couldn't tell. He was not hungry or thirsty, or even sleepy. But his mind got a bit muddled and every so often he thought he saw Minga instead of Arunti, and Chand winking happily at him instead of the tiny little sacs on the tips of the stamens. Once he even thought he saw his father's concerned eyes watching him from one of the stamens. And then he heard his voice:

"Are you hungry, Marko? Are you cold? Where are you? We're waiting for you!"

The voice was so full of sadness and longing that the boy trembled from head to foot.

The trembling shook the stamens of the Golden Flower and the Great Collector's Empire rang out with a song that sounded like the ringing of countless little gold bells.

"What happened, Marko?" Arunti leaned her glowing face on the boy's shoulder. "Tell me..."

"I thought I saw somebody..." The boy composed himself and said no more. Underneath the Golden Flower's stem there were rushing footsteps, countless doors opening and closing through which came fragments of sentences, curses, cries, laughter. The Great Collector was inspecting his realm, mumbling:

"All present and accounted for?"

A chorus of tiny voices replied:

"All present and accounted for!"

And then the Great Collector said:

"We have inspected six thousand seven hundred and ninety-eight rooms. Are any left? If there are no vacant rooms, then build new ones and add another padlock to each door, you never know..."

Completing his round, the Great Collector ordered all the rooms to be inspected again. He had to know exactly what was in them and who would be assigned to the mines, to the foundry and to the smeltry... The Great Collector clapped his hands and the dwarfs, tiny and humped but quick on their chicken feet, began opening the doors of each room.

Marko thought he heard Minga's voice behind one of the doors, and his heart was heavy with sorrow.

"I know how you feel... sometimes I think I hear a voice too..." Arunti went pale and said no more. She was silent while the dwarf with the chicken feet made his terrible rounds.

Whose voice had Arunti heard? Whom was she waiting for? Marko didn't have the strength to ask. Minga's voice was still ringing in his ears when he noticed something strange happening.

First the Golden Flower stopped singing, its stamens ceased humming, the dwarfs' voices, the pattering of the little chicken feet, and the sound of the opening and closing doors faded. In the total silence Marko heard Arunti breathe unevenly as though she were afraid of something. Of what? The boy listened. Somebody was locking a door. He

clearly heard the key turn in the lock. Then he heard the dwarfs bolting the approaches which led to the central space where the Golden Flower was.

"Ah, it's the Golden Flower they want!", he heard the Grate Collector babble. "They want to be masters of Arunti, guardians of the Supreme Secret..." Then the Great Collector's voice became unintelligible and Marko turned to Goldie.

"What is he talking about?"

"About me and the Crow-Dwarfs... They have been trying to abduct me for centuries. The Great Collector has been at war with them for centuries! Now he'll start collecting an army, and when he leads to the western exit, you go down and try to find Minga, and then the path that leads to the mines and to the Dwarf Who Records..."

"And if I don't succeed?"

"You will!" Arunti squeezed his hand and smiled encouragingly. In the squeeze of her hand Marko felt a mixture of fear and confidence.

She believed he would succeed... He had to succeed! Marko pricked up his ears and from the depths of the corridor he heard the Great Collector deploying his troops and ordering them not to give up or it would cost them their lives. Without thinking, he would personally kill anybody who tried to run away...

Cawing, the Crow-Dwarfs were banging a heavy object against the door. Suddenly, the stalk of the Golden Flower bowed down and Arunti whispered:

"Hurry, Marko! And keep to your left, but at the seventh fork turn right, and then at the ninth, turn left again..." Arunti gently pressed her face against Marko's, her lips brushing his cheek. She whispered: "Hurry and be careful... I'll wait for you..."

Marko ran off and began opening each door.

It was not until the three hundred and sixty-seventh that he found the tear-stained faces of Chand and Minga. But he had neither the time nor the energy to explain anything to them. The pain and horror on the faces of the Great Collector's prisoners divested him of his last ounce of courage, but also made his blood boil. "Somebody has to rescue them, to destroy the Great Collector's Empire", he muttered to himself, turning around to see whether Minga and Chand were coming. They were running. All the same, the road back to the Golden Flower took longer than he thought it would.

"Take care of them, Arunti!" Marko stroked the stalk of the Golden Flower, and Minga looked at him in astonishment.

"Whom are you talking to, Marko? Have you gone out of your mind?"

"Take care of them, Goldie", the boy repeated as though he hadn't heard Minga, and the stalk of the Golden Flower bent over. One of the petals wrapped itself carefully around Chand and Minga and lifted them up.

"Left, keep going left until the seventh fork, and then turn right... When you pass the mines of the Great Collector you'll come to the castle of the Dwarf Who Records and the Dwarf Who Forgets. Guarding the door is the One-Eyed Spider, but he isn't terrible, so don't be afraid..." There was concern and sadness in her voice. "The door is more dangerous..." And Arunti said no more. Marko ran, not quite sure what that pounding in his ears was: the echo of the Great Collector's footsteps or the beating of his own heart.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER
in which

**ONE DWARF RECORDS, THE OTHER
FORGETS**

He ran and he ran. He ran for who knows how long.

Left, then left, then left again, but which fork was it? Marko stopped: he should have counted more carefully. What now? Go back? Start all over again? Various possibilities crossed his mind. Then he decided to continue the way he had started, although the corridor looked more and more terrifying, and longer and with each passing second.

In the yellow semi-darkness he sensed a menacing eye waiting for him at the end of the corridor. Was it the One-Eyed Spider? Nonsense! The One-Eyed Spider stood guard in front of the castle of the Dwarf Who Records. What was it? The gigantic head grew larger and larger and a huge voracious eye was staring straight at him. Beside himself with fear, the boy stepped back, about to turn around and run back. And then he thought: what if this is the same monster that at the Fiery Gates of Heaven had retreated every time he moved forward and had attacked every time he stepped back?

As if to test himself, Marko ran forward, and the gigantic eye sank into the depths of the corridor and disappeared.

"So, that's what your fear looks like", he heard Minga laugh teasingly somewhere off in the distance.

"My fear?", he said as if in reply, although he knew that Minga was far away and that the voice he heard was a voice from his own memory. "Look, it's true, my fear!", he said to himself, noticing that the menacing eye behaved like the Dragon at the Fiery Gates: it drew back when he stepped forward and stepped forward when he drew back.

Which fork was this? The boy stopped. The seventh? Eighth? He wasn't sure. One moment he thought he had passed the eighth fork, and the next that he hadn't yet reached the sixth. What if he made a mistake? Fear ran through him like an electric shock, and the gigantic eye again appeared in the depths of the corridor.

"Take the right-hand side, and let come what may", Marko ordered himself and ran; the gigantic eye disappeared. The air in the yellow semi-darkness of the corridor was heavy and stifling. He was losing his breath and his desire to turn back grew. The only thing that drove him on was the fear that he might remain forever a prisoner of the Great Collector. Marko almost stumbled in fatigue, when he heard a light knocking sound and cheered up. So he hadn't taken a wrong turn! The mines of the Great Collector, the flame and smoke were discernible in the semi-darkness. What if somebody noticed him?

"let come what may", he thought. He was overcome with fear and fatigue. He would just rest against the wall for a bit, he decided, but that same instant he heard Arunti urge him:

"Later, Marko...later..."

Arunti's voice woke him up. Ahead of him was the sixth fork, then the seventh. And then the corridor became narrower, the blows of the picks nearer. Look, the path was descending! How much farther down would it go? Marko saw a flame down below and headed for it. He heard a sharp voice, the swish of a whip and a scream. Paralysed, Marko flattened himself against the wall and saw a host of crouching apparitions barely recognisable in the smoke and dust, who were banging their picks into the rock, chipping off pieces of ore and passing them to another group. The other group carried the baskets of ore to the furnaces for melting. A third group received the baskets and tossed the ore into the furnace, but every so often one of the diggers or carriers would be tossed into the furnace along with the ore.

"That makes the gold shinier and the wall stronger!", said the one holding the whip, whom Marko could not see from his hiding place behind the wall. "Has he got chicken feet too?", he wondered, but did not dare peek out. The diggers, carriers and smelters looked like human beings, but he couldn't tell for sure. From his vantage point he saw only their thin shadows hunched over the picks or stooped under the baskets.

Nobody stopped to take a rest or to wipe the sweat off their brow... "Has no one ever tried to escape?", he remembered asking Arunti and her replying that no one had ever even thought of it.

That was why the Great Collector's Empire was eternal, he realised. That was why no one had ever even tried to find the Dwarf Who Records! Marko swelled with pride that it was he who was now embarking on this road, but at the same time a doubt arose: "How do you know? Maybe it's just that nobody ever returned?" The doubt almost riveted him to the wall. He hadn't the strength to go on or to turn back. "You can't just stand there until the end of the world. Make up your mind!", he scolded himself, but he did not budge.

Who knows how long he would have stood there like that had he not heard an agonising scream from deep down in the mine, and seen a wisp of smoke curl out of the furnace. "They've tossed somebody into the furnace with the ore again!" The boy bolted like lightning. He had to find the Dwarf Who Records, he had to free Arunti, Minga, Chand, these poor wretches down here, he had to, he simply had to...

Marko heard voices threatening him from behind. They ordered him to stop, to surrender, immediately.

He ran faster. He was almost out of breath, when he noticed that the racing footsteps were getting fainter. One by one they faded and then stopped following him altogether. When had they discovered him? While he was standing behind the wall? Or when he had made a run for it? He had no time to wonder. The road ahead plunged down, and then suddenly started to climb. At the same time, the walls, of the corridor became lighter, and the pick blows fainter.

At the bottom of the corridor the boy noticed a twinkling blue light. The path was leading him straight to it. What was behind it? Did the Dwarf Who Records have chicken feet? A beak in place of a nose? Or, like Wally Walnut, did he look like a little boy? And what about the One-Eyed Spider? He tried to imagine what it looked like so he wouldn't be frightened when he finally saw it. But, in his mind's eye the One-Eyed Spider kept changing shape and size, and the boy was seized with uncontrollable fear.

He tried to turn back several times, but the thought of the one with the whip drove him on.

He continued like that for a long time, until he noticed that the blue light was getting stronger, that it was turning into a dazzling blaze, into a

blue flame and behind it he could discern the palace of the Dwarf Who Records and the Dwarf Who Forgets. The palace was made out of transparent blue stone that was so bright he couldn't look at it. The doors of the palace were made out of blue light or blue glass, he wasn't exactly sure. "Arunti was wrong!", the boy thought. "There's nobody in front of these doors!"

He had barely completed his thought when he saw a shadow move away from the door and grow. It grew so rapidly he could barely follow it. "Look, it's covered the entire sky", the startled boy thought, "and I still can't see what it is!" As if in answer to his doubts, a voice said:

"Don't worry! You'll see!"

Whose voice could that be? Marko looked around carefully. There was nobody anywhere. The indistinct swaying shadow was still rising, like a mist, spreading, contracting, then growing again.

It was some time before it shaped itself into a spider with a huge head and stunted little feet. The head, bigger than a wardrobe, bore a single eye that ejected a flame.

To his immense surprise, Marko realised that he was not afraid of the flame, but that the sight of the stunted little legs made him nauseous. No, he wouldn't, he couldn't run between those horrible little legs, even if the imperial crown was waiting for him in the palace. The boy stepped back and heard Migna's taunting laugh:

"Look at our hero, he's running away!"

He turned toward the voice, but Migna was nowhere to be seen. He knew then that the voice had come from his memory, but he answered it, anyway: "You'd be afraid and run away too". He had decided to run for it, when he felt the touch of Arunti's tiny hand on his arm. That same instant the ugly little legs of the One-Eyed Spider seemed less terrifying to him. She told him to run through them as soon as the Spider looked up. Hey, it was looking up now! He should run for it now! The boy dashed as quick as an arrow. Faster than the clap of two hands, he found himself on the other side of the door.

"But, what's happening to me?", he gasped in shock. "Why, I've turned into a spider!" On one of the door-wings, smooth and shining as a mirror, Marko saw the One-Eyed Spider, and then a second one. The huge head and ugly little legs were reflected in the gleaming plate on the left side of the door. On the right side he was being watched by a dwarf with a long, bird-like nose and short, fat legs ending in hoofs. A whale, made of

flames, peered out from behind. If it opened its mouth he'd be swallowed up like a speck of dust...

Then the entire picture changed. Now the spider's legs were so long there was no end to them, and the long-nosed dwarf turned into a bird with the claws of a lion. Only the head was the same, with its long nose and big sad weeping eyes. The boy wanted to ask him why he was crying, but he did not have the energy. Was this the dwarf? Or was it still a spider? What was it? What did it want at the Gates of Heaven? Look, the doors were revolving, showing different faces every time. Which was his face?

In horror, Marko realised that he no longer knew who he was, what he was or where he was going. The door, made out of transparent blue crystal, kept rotating. Observing him from the left side of the door was now a winged horse of the steppes, and from the right side a cat with the head of a little girl and eyes that kept changing colour. "Look, why there is a cat with black eyes!", the boy thought just as the colour changed again and the eyes turned a golden hue. "Look, the cat has become golden-eyed! The cat has turned into Arunti!..."

"So, you remembered", a soft voice reached Marko's ears, and the doors stopped turning. "If you hadn't, the doors would have kept revolving, flashing different images at you, until you forgot who you were and where you were going..." A tiny creature, blue and transparent like a flitting blue flame, took the boy by the arm and led him inside.

"Are you the Dwarf Who Records?", the boy stammered.

"No", laughed the transparent blue dwarf. "I'm the One Who Forgets. Over there, by the One-Eyed Spider, you forgot too. Oh, how the Dwarf Who Records would have laughed had he been able to see you..."

"Couldn't he see me?"

"Of course he could", the Forgetful Dwarf said, shrugging his shoulders. "But, I'm the one who is to take you into the palace, if you remember who sent you..." The blue dwarf suddenly fell silent and walked faster. The boy looked in wonderment at the cluster of different coloured and shaped butterflies lining their path.

"What are they doing here?" Marko stopped over the butterflies in amazement. They were laid out at regular intervals, their wings spread out, motionless.

"They're drying", the blue dwarf shrugged. "Can't you see?"

"What are they doing? What did you say they were doing?"

"Just what you heard: they're drying... they're drying their wings. There are messages and wishes inscribed on their wings and the ink hasn't dried yet. The Dwarf Who Records has to work very quickly. If he were to stop for even a second, the world would be lost", said the Blue Dwarf enigmatically.

"Why would it be lost?", asked Marko. The dwarf walked faster, saying nothing for a long time. Then he spoke.

"Whatever is forgotten - is lost! That's why the Dwarf Who Records works non-stop. Because, whatever is not recorded is sooner or later forgotten, and whatever is forgotten - is lost..."

"Good gracious!", cried the boy, not believing his own eyes. Why, the butterflies wings really were inscribed. "What is on them?"

"Wishes, I told you", the Blue Dwarf sternly shook his head.

"Whose wishes?"

"Those of everybody alive, and others too... The wishes of those awake on the brown butterflies. The wishes of those asleep are on the blue ones". The dwarf was walking so quickly Marko could barely keep up with him. The path they were taking kept forking left and right. The Blue Dwarf turned left. The path, like everything else, like the palace, the trees, the clouds, and the dwarf, was blue.

"Naturally, since we are in the blue ring of the Triple Star", said the Dwarf seriously. "Have you forgotten? You passed Ananucy, the yellow ring. Below that, where the Great Collector's mines are, was Nuency, the red ring. Now you are in Ency, the blue ring..."

At the next fork, the Blue Dwarf turned right. The transparent blue path snaked its way ahead of them, but instead of butterflies, there were now round pebbles, big and smooth, like the gigantic eggs of some extinct bird. Marko was surprised to discover that on the smooth surface of the stones were the letters of an unknown script. The lines were repeated at regular intervals and so were the letters in the lines.

The Blue Dwarf smiled as he followed the boy's gaze. Only then did Marko notice that the dwarf had a very young, child-like face. But all the books said that dwarfs were wizened little old men. As with Wally Walnut, he did not know what to think. Maybe dwarfs were children, after all? Eternal children? Maybe he did not have to search for the Enchanted Star? But, he did! The Great Collector and all his dwarfs, from first to last, were old men!

"How come you have the face of a child?", Marko asked the Blue Dwarf.

"Because I forget", muttered the Blue Dwarf in shame. If I don't try to retain something in my memory, I'll soon turn into a newborn infant, and then into nothingness..." The Dwarf shivered in horror, and then said: "That's why there are orders and reminders on this stone..."

"For whom?"

"For me". The dwarf bowed his head, muttering: "I keep forgetting, something is always slipping my memory. Through these notes the Dwarf Who Records reminds me..."

"Reminds you about what, for heaven's sake?"

"To get up, to wash my face, to go to the door of the One-Eyed Spider and see whether anybody is there..."

"That's all?"

"Well, no... of course not! Wait, let me remember... You see, I've forgotten again". Confused, the Blue Dwarf looked at one of the round pebbles, and then said: "I knew that wasn't all. Of course! You see, it's written here: If the person standing in front of the door does not know who he is or where he is going, leave him there. If he does know, take him to the Dwarf Who Records..."

"I didn't notice that you left anybody there", Marko laughed, but the Blue Dwarf stamped his foot angrily.

"Nor could you notice. When the doors revolve a thousand times, those who stand in front of them turn into air, into nothingness... The doors turn very quickly. That's why you didn't see anybody..." The dwarf fell silent and the boy felt the blood in his veins turn cold. If he hadn't recognised Arunti in the eyes of the cat, and remembered, he would now be... No, he wouldn't be anything..." Marko followed the Dwarf quietly, asking no questions, not even surprised that the journey was taking so long.

The sand they were treading was scribbled with notes, the leaves of the trees they passed hummed with recorded songs. One especially sweet tune was about blossoming rains and the ripening rainbow..."

They walked, who knows how long they walked, past the blue birch trees whose roots grew together with notes about the stars, past the clouds that carried messages, past the mist that carried oblivion, past the rain that carried sorrow...

Without saying a word, they entered a room that resembled a huge blue, transparent building block. All the walls were lined with shelves and the room might have looked like a bookstore had the books not been made out of thin golden leaves instead of paper.

On the round table in the middle of the room shone the Golden Book, so thick and so big it could take a lifetime just to read a dozen of its pages. The Dwarf Who Records was not in sight. But letters flew like golden flies, imprinting themselves through the nib of a pen on the gigantic pages of the Golden Book.

The Dwarf Who Forgets stopped in front of the Golden Book, turned to Marko and said:

"Well, we've arrived! Ask what it is you have to ask. The Dwarf Who Records will answer you..."

"Hey, don't play around with me, Forgetful!", the boy shouted angrily. "There's nobody here..."

"Absolutely nobody?", he heard somebody laugh unexpectedly. "What do you see?"

"A pen! And I'm looking for the Dwarf Who Records..."

"Well, you've found him! I am the Pen, but I am also the Book, and the Dwarf Who Records. Ask!"

"I'd like to see you! To open the Golden Book..." The boy tiptoed toward the Golden Book, staring at the Pen, whose nib dripped words that imprinted themselves on the golden pages.

"That is impossible, Marko Divats!", said the same soft voice. "The book you are looking at is the book of secrets. It contains everything: what happened, what was dreamed, what will happen..."

"All the more reason why I would like to open it..."

"You can't open it, because it opens only when somebody is dying, and you still have many years to live. Ask..."

"Ask what?", the boy stammered in confusion.

"What you came for...", Marko saw inscribed on one of the little gold plates. "You did not stop at the doors of the One-Eyed Spider, you ran under its legs..." The pen wrote quickly, quickly. "So, you know why you are here."

The Blue Dwarf raised his eyes looking searchingly at the boy, and the Pen stopped, waiting for an answer.

"To save Arunti and Minga, to find the Enchanted Star and on it the Silver Rose and in the Rose a forgotten, a lost word... The Great Collector

captured us all. Can those he captured be freed?", asked the boy in a one breath. "Can his empire be destroyed? The poor wretches in the mines be freed?" Frightened by his own boldness and the silence broken only by the words dripping from the Pen, Marko stopped talking for a second.

The Pen almost flew about the little gold plate, and then a message appeared on it:

"No evil is eternal! Find the Elf! The instant you touch his veil, Arunti's root will break from the chain that rivets it to the mines of the Great Collector. Arunti will soar up to the stars and be free, and the Great Collector's Empire will collapse..."

"If it collapses, what will happen to the diggers and the smelters?"

"They'll be free..."

"And Minga?"

"You'll see. Call Chand to help..." The Pen waited a moment and then wrote: "The Elf and his veil are far away..."

"Where?" whispered Marko, so excited he thought he would faint any minute. "Where can I find the Elf?"

"On Bangalora Bin. In the Birch behind the Seven Hills..." The Pen stopped as if to think or count, and then the following appeared on the little plate: "Whoever touches the Birch will touch the Elf's veil! Go back the way you came. At the ninth fork turn left..."

"And the Spider? The Bird-Dwarf? The Whale?"

"They are inside you. They came out of your fear and went back inside you. Don't waver! At the ninth fork of the corridor turn left..."

Marko stared fixedly at the tip of the Pen, waiting for more information to appear on the gold plate, but the Pen did not move.

"You heard what there was to hear, Marko Divats!", the Dwarf Who Forgets touched the boy on the shoulder. "Now go."

That same moment, the Blue Palace began to dissolve like a wisp of fog, the Golden Book vanished, the Dwarf Who Forgets and the Dwarf Who Records evaporated. Only the Pen still remained for a while, writing a message he could not read in the mist, and then it too disappeared...

He was again alone in the yellow, semi-dark corridor, and Chand was in his hand. How had he managed to get here? The boy did not have the time to wonder. He had to count the forks in the corridor, turn at the ninth, but which way? When he had been going to the Blue Palace what was now to his left had been to his right. The right was now the left. Which had the Dwarf Who Records meant?

THE EIGHT CHAPTER
and
THE RULES OF SUNARANGA

Marko stopped, wondering which way to go. Left or right?! The boy struck out at random, following what was now the left side. He went left, left, and left again, expecting the mines of the Great Collector to appear in front of him. Every now and then he even thought he heard the picks banging at the rocks and saw the reflection of the fire. But, no! He was in the deserted corridor which kept forking.

At the ninth fork the corridor suddenly opened up and the boy gazed upon the Yellow City. "Am I dreaming?", he wondered. The streets curled in rings around the circular plaza, the houses began with roofs and ended with basements. The trees grew yellow cakes instead of leaves. And everything else was yellow too: the clouds, grass, trees, the inhabitants no bigger than corncobs, all of them serious, all of them hurrying.

"Hey, am I on Bangalora Bin?" Marko stopped the first passer-by whose smooth child like face had a gray beard and mistrusting yellow eyes. He barely came up to the boy's knees.

"You're on Sunaranga!", said the little towns person sharply. "Where do you come from?"

Bowing politely, Marko told him that he came from Earth.

"From Sitlo Sika? Ah, you poor thing!", the little Sunaranga waved his hand dismissively. "Sunaranga is the Center of the Universe, the most powerful and wisest of the stars..."

Marko shrugged, replying that he had heard that once before. The Akidas thought the same thing... The little yellow person scowled, and said that was impossible. Who were the Akidas?

"Purple snails!" Marko held out a friendly hand. "What's your name? I'm Marko!"

"That's a funny name! Like our star, we are all Sunarangas! And now excuse me, I'm in a hurry..." Tripping over his own beard the Sunaranga sniffed impatiently and rushed off, and Marko wondered where they were all rushing to. They all had beards on their smooth child like faces and they were all in a hurry. The boy tried to stop first one and then another passer-by. Nobody had time for him.

At a bend in the street, the Traffic Light Sunaranga was standing on its head, shouting:

"Red light, cross!"

"You cross when it's green!", Marko corrected him.

"On dumb Sitlo Sika, maybe! On Sunaranga the rules are different! Don't bother me! Three thousand seven hundred and eighty-three million birds and elephants and another two hundred and sixty-seven million..."

"Heavens, little fellow! Why, there are no birds or elephants here!"

"There could be..." The voice of the Traffic Light Sunaranga could still be heard from afar, while flying in the air were not birds but cakes and cookies.

"Take a bite, try me...", one of the cakes said flying past Marko's face. "I'm tasty..."

And indeed it was tasty. Marko gobbled down half the cake in three bites, and was sorry his father wasn't there to see him...

"Well, thank you!" Marko licked his lips. "Do you know where the Elf is?"

"That nobody knows. Excuse me, I'm in a hurry..."

"Where to, darn it?", shouted the boy in anger. His thought: what if this is the Enchanted Star? Everybody here is small. They look like children. But, then, they are not children. They have beards."

"To boast to the other cakes!", said the cake, apologising. "For seven hundred and seventy-seven years no child on Sunaranga has ever taken a bite of cake..."

Remembering his father, Marko frowned. Maybe their parents fussed too much over their eating and so the little Sunarangas shunned even cakes.

"Oh, no!", the little cake smiled. Sunaranga children think we are unworthy!" The cake flew off as though carried away by a yellow wind, and Marko gazed at the passers-by. They were all rushing, tripping,

hurrying on. A street full of shop windows slid toward him. Toys peered out from behind the glass panes. He thought he heard somebody knocking on the pane from inside.

"Hey, you there!", he heard a voice say.

"Are you talking to me?" Marko turned around and saw a doll winking at him and saying something.

"Find me a little girl!", he finally realised she was saying. "I'm tired of playing with little old grand-mothers!" The doll lept out of the shop window and ran toward the boy, imploring him: "Find me a little girl! Find me a little girl!"

She ran after him for three full circling streets. Only at the fourth did he manage to escape from her...

There were no boys or girls in the streets. He saw them behind the building windows using computers, typing, he saw them driving trams.

"What kind of city is this", he wondered, "and who rules it?"

"We rule it!", said one of the Sunarangas, walking too quickly, tripping over his own beard and falling down. That same instant the beard dropped off, showing a smooth child like face. The flustered Sunaranga laughed. "It wasn't glued on well!", he said. "I must find a better glue..."

Marko laughed in spite of himself, and the Sunaranga blushed.

"Don't laugh", he said. "Beards are a serious matter..."

"For heaven's sake!", Marko cried. "What are you? And what are they over there?" he said, pointing to a group in the distance that was busily kicking a ball.

"They are adults, of course!", said the little Sunaranga indignantly. "Only adults can behave so frivolously..."

They were adults, alright, almost old people. Some could barely move from gout. Others kept stopping every minute, to catch their breath. If one of them fell, guards would run up and take them to the chalk-marked Penalty Area. At least there they'll get some rest, Marko thought, but the little Sunaranga said: "Would you like to rest on one leg?"

"Why on one leg?"

"Under Sunaranga rules there's no cheating, no falling! The one who fell won't be allowed back in the game until there is another violator to replace him in the penalty area. Until then he's punished by having to stand on one leg...", said the little Sunaranga sternly, stroking his beard. "Seven hundred and seventy-seven years ago adults complained how difficult we were. Then we switched roles and now we work and they play and obey

our orders. Those are the rules of Sunaranga. Everybody must abide by them!" The little Sunaranga clapped his hands and shouted: "A fifteen minute break! Lunch! The Great Cook orders you to wash your hands and open your mouths..."

Marko looked around curiously.

"But, there's nobody here except you and me! Where's the Great Cook? Where's the food?"

"I'm the Great Cook!", said his little host seriously, clapping his hands once again. That very same instant plates of food started to fly in.

"Ugh, groats again!" wailed a little old man, trying to duck from a bowl of groats.

"What did you say?" The Great Cook cocked an eyebrow, looking ominously at the protesting little old man.

"Nothing, nothing... I was just...", he mumbled.

And then, in the absolute silence, all one could hear was the sound of slurping, munching, crunching.

"Come on, open your mouths!" squealed the bottles of cod liver oil floating around the players' heads. "Open wider! Don't be difficult!"

Marko shivered uneasily. Every evening his father made him drink cod liver oil. Would he have to drink it here too, and at noon yet? The boy turned pleadingly to the Great Cook, who giggled. Who says it's for Marko? He's a boy and his bones are strong. The bones of old people are brittle and would snap like twigs if they didn't take cod liver oil three times a day.

"Does the Elf drink it too?", Marko asked, and the Great Cook started. What Elf? Old men drink the oil. He didn't know the Elf!

"But, I've got to find him. I've got to free Arunti!", the boy sobbed. "Where is the Elf?"

"I don't know!", the little Sunaranga shrugged. "But, the teacher may know. Everything is written down in the secret yellow books. Hurry up, if you want me to take you to him!" The Great Cook started walking so quickly that Marko could barely keep up with him.

The sound of pens scratching came through the office windows where boys and girls were diligently writing. Surprised, Marko asked what the mothers and fathers were doing? Where were the police and soldiers?

"Wars and hunting are banned, and mothers and fathers play and go to school, I've told you!", the little Sunaranga nodded his importantly and stopped.

"This is it! The teacher may know where you can find the one you're looking for...", the Sunaranga cook said, leaning against a tree from which little cakes broke off, crying:

"Eat us quickly! What are you waiting for!"

Marko thought he could hear his father's commands in the reprimanding voices of the cakes, and he cringed.

"It's not you they're ordering, what are you shaking for?", said the Great Cook in admonishment. "Ask the teacher what you wanted..."

"But, where is the teacher? Where are the students?" Marko looked in disbelief at the sigh in front of him. It said: SCHOOL. But these bearded old men couldn't possibly be students? Who was the teacher?

"I am the teacher!", a little Sunaranga who could not have been more than eight or nine years old piped up angrily, climbing onto a tree stump in order to be more or less the same height as his students. "Now, let's see your homework!", he bent sternly over the notebook of a little yellow old lady.

It was a neatly penned notebook: one line slanted, the next straight. They did not learn the letter "a" until the third grade and the Sunarangas completed their schooling with the letter "s". Marko remarked that "s" was not the last letter of the alphabet. If they didn't learn all the letters how could they read and write?

"They know how to read and wrote. That's not what is required of them!", said the stern little teacher.

Marko couldn't understand why they studied anything, then.

"Because they are in school", the teacher said, his eyes flashing in anger. "Do not disturb my class. Tell me why you have come? We here do not like giants!"

"Oh, I'm not a giant! I'm a boy, and I'm looking for the Elf from the Birch Tree behind the Seven Hills...", Marko stammered. The teacher told him to let him know when he found him. He had never heard of the Elf. And he could try his story about being a boy on somebody else. Anybody three times bigger than the Sunarangas was a giant! The teacher raised his stick threateningly and the boy went out with the Great Cook down a street which kept getting narrower and narrower. At the third bend the Sunaranga Cook said:

"You won't find the Elf in town. Look for the Yellow Forest. So long!" The Cook disappeared as though whisked away by a yellow cloud

and the boy started inquiring where he could find the Yellow Forest. None of the passers-by knew the answer.

The Traffic Light Sunaranga raised his eyebrows to the top of his forehead.

"What's the matter with you? Sunaranga is the centre of the world. Why would you want to leave here? Stay so we can have at least one giant..."

"I can't!", Marko shook his head firmly. "Goldie is waiting for me in the Empire of the Great Collector. I have to rescue her. I have to find the Elf. How can I get out of town?"

The Traffic Light Sunaranga told him to do twenty-two laps and then follow the stream to the field. Behind the Field he would find the Yellow Forest.

One lap, two, three... The boy could hardly walk by the time the field appeared and in the distance the shadow of the Yellow Forest. Slowly, arduously he made his way through the tall yellow grass, when he saw somebody teetering toward eyes.

"Now I really am dreaming!", Marko rubbed his eyes. "Who ever saw a rabbit limping like a little old man in the park?"

"Are you the Great Hunter?", the rabbit bowed respectfully, and then, raising his eyebrows to the top of his forehead, said: "Well, are you or aren't you?"

"I am Marko, a boy from Earth. What do you need that stick for?"

"To limp with!" The yellow rabbit coughed disconcertedly, almost losing his balance. "Are you the Great Hunter?"

"No, but I could be. As soon as I buy a cap and gun..."

"You are not the Great Hunter! You are not the one I'm looking for...", and a big, heavy trickle down the Yellow Rabbit's face. Teetering through the tall yellow grass, he headed for the forest.

"Hey, wait!", shouted Marko, "What do you want the Great Hunter for?"

"To remember how to run!", the Yellow Rabbit muttered and lowered his head in the grass.

"First you have to get rid of that stick", the boy said.

"I have to what?", cried the Yellow Rabbit. "But, I can't walk without a stick. I'd fall down at the first step..."

"No you wouldn't. Just try... And don't worry, you'll find the Great Hunter. One always finds what one is looking for in the end...", the boy

added ruefully, remembering Nour. The Yellow Rabbit looked at him curiously.

"What have you been searching for so long? The Great Hunter?"

"Ah, little friend!", Marko smiled sadly, "not everybody is looking for the Great Hunter..." The boy smiled apologetically. "I am looking for the Elf or the Birch Tree behind the Seven Hills, but you probably don't know him..."

"No I don't!" The Yellow Rabbit waved his stick dejectedly. "But, the Heavenly Tiller knows, although it's a long way to Bangalora Bin..." The Yellow Rabbit hesitated. "Are you sure I can walk without a stick?!"

"I'm sure!", Marko smiled gently. "All rabbits walk like that. Try. You won't know unless you try..."

"What about you?", asked the Yellow Rabbit, a note of sadness in his voice at the thought of parting.

"I'll try too!", the boy said. "Although Bangalora Bin is far away..."

"It's not that far!", Marko heard Chand's voice say close by. "Have you forgotten me?"

"How could I?", the boy said in a choked voice, blushing. He had forgotten him, it had completely slipped his mind that he had Chand in his hand when he left the Dwarf Who Records. But, what about Arunti? Was the war still on in the Empire of the Great Collector? Perhaps the Dwarf Who Records had only been joking... Perhaps there was no Elf or Elf's Veil...

The memory flashed through his mind of the moment when the Golden Flower's petal leaned down, embraced Minga and lifted her up, as she looked at him in reproach. He shouldn't have left her! Marko felt his throat go tight with sadness, when he heard a tinkling laugh.

"No, you didn't leave me! I wouldn't allow it!"

Standing next to Chand in the tall yellow grass was Minga, laughing. But, she was so tiny he could barely see her.

"Why did you become so small?", the astonished boy asked.

The little girl laughed out loud.

"How else could I enter Chand on the palm of your hand? What are you so surprised about? I was even smaller the first time you saw me..."

"And Arunti?", the boy stammered. "You shouldn't have left her..."

"Arunti can take care of herself! She knows where I came from. She knows I am a part of you..."

Minga smiled precociously and the boy looked at her in surprise.

"How come I can see you then? If you are a part of me..."

"And what did you see at the Fiery Gates of Heaven?", asked Minga with a mischievous wink. Marko blushed and bowed his head. Does she know about the eye, too? He had no time to ask her. Chand was spinning in a circle, rapidly growing bigger and bigger. When Chand's doors opened, Marko noticed that the Yellow Rabbit had vanished.

THE NINTH CHAPTER
and in it

THE HEAVENLY TILLER

"Did he ever find the courage to throw away the stick?", he wondered as he soared up with the speed of lightning.

The question kept nagging at him as he travelled through the shimmering cluster of stars on the Western Side of the sky. One moment he thought he could see the Yellow Rabbit throwing down the stick, running joyfully, and the boy smiled. The next moment the Yellow Rabbit was leaning on the stick, staggering through the tall yellow grass, and the boy's expression turned glum.

The stars whizzed past the crystal plate as though they were racing each other. Some were shiny, happy beings. Others twinkled reluctantly. A red star winked at them and whistled.

"Look, the Heavenly Pirate!", said Minga. Marko was sorry he had not asked the Dwarf Who Records for the Heavenly Map. Then he would at least know where they were.

A cluster of greenish little stars was heading straight for them, twinkling fearfully as if they were running away from someone. "Little fools", the boy thought. "Why, nobody is chasing them!"

It was only when one of them asked Chand to hide her that Marko saw she was being tailed by a big green star with a huge eye in the middle of its forehead.

"I know you...", she hissed. "You are unreliable, irresponsible! Hey, you over there!" The one-eyed star lunged at a terrified little star. "Did you think I wouldn't report your offence! I know you...and I have you all right here!", the one-eyed star tapped a big ragged book and shouted: "Troops, put her in chains!"

The One-Eyed Star raced off, burning with fury. But, Marko did not see whether the troops rushed in or what happened to the little green star.

Smack in front of them was an unknown star, silvery, gleaming, smooth.

"Bangalora Bin!" cried Chand, slowly starting his descent.

The light of Bangalora Bin was enchanting. But, when they touched down, the boy was shocked. Silence slid down the silvery, smooth rocks. For miles and miles around there was not a sign of life: no birds, or little beasts, or flowers!

"Why, there's nothing here!", Marko cried out in disappointment, and a little voice piped up:

"And the path? Do you see it?"

A path wound its way between the barren silvery hills. But there was nobody there either. Marko turned around curiously to see who it was that was talking, but Minga muttered teasingly:

"If there is a path, then there will be somebody going down that path..."

"If there is a path, then there will be somebody going down that path..."

"Hee, hee, hee! W go down it!", said the same voice and the boy saw three silvery, prickly little balls roll down the path. Neither their eyes nor their nose were visible. The boy could not but wonder who they were?

"And who are you?" asked the smallest little ball curtsy. "What are you looking for?"

"The Heavenly Tiller... The Elf of the Birch behind the Seven Hills!", the boy mumbled, and the smallest little ball laughed and unrolled itself.

"Really? Both the Heavenly Tiller and the Elf? Just like that?" The silver little porcupine jumped up. "What does the Eldest Brother say? Shall we let them through or send them back to where they came from?"

The Eldest Brother's decision was to let them through, but first he wanted to know who they were.

"What should we tell them, Minga?", Marko leaned uncertainly toward the little girl. "The Akidas saw us as two-legged ants. The Great Collector as material for his wall. Who are we? What are we?" Marko stared helplessly at Minga, wondering whether he was still the same boy whom Wally Walnut had sent off to look for the Silver Rose. The three little porcupines waited.

"What are we?", Minga smiled enigmatically, squinting. "Wandering stars like them, like Nour, like Arunti, like everything that moves between heaven and earth, what else?"

Marko shrugged uncertainly and the Smallest Porcupine laughed:

"Hee, hee, hee! They don't know who they are." Then the Middle Brother laughed. The Eldest simply nodded his head quietly to show that the answer was satisfactory.

"Can you take us to our house?", he asked. "We're tired."

"If you pull in your quills!" The boy picked them up in his arms and was stunned. They were small, but so heavy that he could barely hold them. "Where is your house?"

"Behind the second hill, hee, hee!", said the Smallest Porcupine. "Don't tickle me!" The little porcupine squirmed in the boy's arms, and Marko giggled.

"It's you who is tickling me. Left or right?"

"Left!", explained the Eldest Brother. "To the right are the orchards of the Heavenly Tiller... Ha, ha, ha! Hurry up, we're hungry!"

"I'm hungry, too, so what?", the boy snapped back, thinking how the little things were lying. Where were the orchards?

"You'll see them, you'll see!", cried the Smallest Brother. "Where are your quills?"

"Little boys don't have quills!"

"Oh, poor things!", said the Eldest Brother feelingly, and the Smallest Brother generously offered the boy a quill that looked like a little silver needle. The Middle Brother offered two little needles and announced that they had arrived. They were at the entrance to a silvery hollow.

"What am I supposed to do with the quills", cried the boy, surprised by the speed with which the little porcupines scrambled into the pit.

"Hee, he, hee. You really are blind! Can't you see that they aren't quills, they're little rings? Put them on your finger and your wish will come true, but every time one of the little rings will disappear!", said the Smallest Porcupine, vanishing. "The orchards of the Heavenly Tiller are to the right. What are you waiting for?"

"To see you one more time!", said the boy. That same instant the porcupine's cute little head popped out of the hollow, and one of the rings disappeared.

"That was stupid. You wasted a wish!", said the Smallest Porcupine and slid back down into the hollow. "Hee, hee, hee! Don't be sad!", his voice echoed. "Have a good journey!"

Suddenly both the voice and the hollow disappeared. Puzzled, Marko looked at his hand. Two rings gleamed on his finger, and a silver path wound its way in front of him. He turned and went right. Minga skipped beside him and Chand sang as he rolled along. Right, right, right... Hey, what was that? Off in the distance the boy saw a giant with a plow slung over his shoulder and a sack slung over the plow. Boy, he was enormous! The boy gasped. The giant could step on them like ants without even noticing it. Look, he was turning around!

"Let's get out of here, Minga!", the boy shouted, and in two steps the giant reached them, stooped to get a better look and, staring at the ring, said:

"So, you got past my guards, did you? Why run? The more hands there are the more work. Gets done. There is a lot of desert land on Bangalora Bin..."

"Why ... it's all desert...", said Minga.

"You think so?", the giant smiled gently, and his entire face lit up as though somebody inside him had turned on a lamp. He had as big as a hill, and his face was furrowed. Both of them could fit in the palm of his huge paw, it was so big. "The fruits are asleep under the rocks...", the Giant said in such a gentle voice it was hard to believe it came out of his gigantic throat. "They're waiting for our hands to wake them up..."

"Well, you've found him!" The Giant tapped his plows here and the boy instantly realised who it was standing there in front of him. "And now - give a hand..." The Giant stood beside a valley among the boulders, a light hovering over it, and began to move the stones. "You to the left, you to the right!", he muttered, moving boulders that were bigger than wardrobes. Underneath was silvery sand and jutting out were lots of stones as sharp as dragon teeth. They sprouted as though an invisible hand had sown them. "Come with me and remove the stones...", he said.

Marko cried out that it would take a million years to clear all this away, but the Heavenly Tiller laughed.

"You may be right, son! But, if everybody does as much as he can...", the Heavenly Tiller suddenly broke off, looking ruefully at the silvery, barren hills of Bangalora Bin. Then he took a handful of seeds out of the sack and asked them which fruit they'd prefer.

"Cherries! Cherries!", Minga clapped her hands in delight, watching a cherry tree sprout out of the seed tossed in the sand.

"And you!, asked the Heavenly Tiller turning to the boy, who was frowning in silence, wondering how much more had to be cleared away before they reached the Elf.

"Me? What about me?", Marko said with a start. "I'd like apples!", and before he had finished his sentence a tree laden with apples sprouted out of the sand. "Oh, I've wasted another wish!", he thought and saw that another ring had slipped from his finger. On one side of the treetop buds were flowering and on the other fruits were ripening, sparkling with a silvery glow. The Heavenly Tiller chuckled softly and dropped a shining silvery fruit into the boy's hand. It smelled like an apple.

"This one you keep", he said, "and this one you eat!", and from the top of the tree he picked a large red apple, and smiled again.

Marko looked around in amazement. The valley, which only a few seconds ago had been imprisoned by boulders, was now suffused with blossoming fruit trees, ripening cherries and quince, and the purple hue of plums. "I must be dreaming!" Marko rubbed his eyes. "How can a fruit tree blossom and ripen at the same time? That only happens in dreams..."

"Not only in dreams", came a soft laugh from the silvery cup of the pear flower. Suddenly a tiny, silvery creature flew out of the flower and landed on the palm of the boy's hand.

"What's your name?", the boy asked, enchanted by the gentle features of the fairy's face.

"Silverbell!", said the tiny flower fairy. Marko sighed. She looked like Arunti's silvery sister. Her smile was like Arunti's, and so was her soft melodious little voice. At the thought of Arunti Marko ached with pain. If only she were here just for a moment!

"That's a stupid wish, Marko Divats!", Minga scowled at him. "A star can't be kept or appropriated. Remember that. Be sensible for once..."

The scent of the fruits wafted through the air of Bangalora Bin and the tiny flower fairies flitted between the branches. Everything hummed with their tiny voices. Lurking among the leaves were elves. To escape them the fairies would transform themselves into flowers. Had he not been looking closely Marko might have thought they really were flowers. Silverbell teased him with her tinkling laugh.

"Stay with us... You'll be able to smell, to love your butterfly, to ripen. That is, of course, if you're not afraid of Melhiore, the terrible green caterpillar Melhiore..."

"Boys aren't scared of caterpillars!", he said. "I'd love to stay with you but Arunti is waiting for me in the Silverbell...", Marko touched the little fairy softly with his lips and Minga angrily stamped her foot.

"You forget I'm here too, Marko Divats!", she stamped, and the tiny flowery creatures scattered in all directions. Cowering in the boy's hand, Silverbell covered herself with the cloak of the flower and sobbed.

"You poor little thing!", said Marko, looking sadly at the fairy in his hand. She was like a sleeping flower, like a frightened butterfly, indeed that's maybe what she was...

That same instant, he saw Minga become more and more transparent, paler and paler, like a cube of sugar dissolving in a glass of water. Soon only her shadow stood there before him.

"Minga!", cried the boy. "What is it, Minga? Don't leave me..." He quickly placed Silverbell on the apple leaf, grabbed Minga in his arms and brought his lips to the shadow of her cheek.

"I thought you didn't need me any more, Marko Divats! That Arunti and this one were enough...", the little girl mumbled, as her body became lighter and lighter and her voice faded.

"Stop dissolving, Minga...", moaned the boy.

"I can't!", Minga slowly shook her head. "When a friend is betrayed then that friend turns into a shadow, vanishes from the mind, from memory... And in the end, is no more..." "Hold me tight, Marko Divats, so that I don't vanish altogether..." Her eyes were shut. She looked as though she were asleep although the flower fairies were flying around, squealing.

"Quiet, you little devils! Minga is asleep...", Marko waved his hand to still them, but the noise got louder.

"Our laughter doesn't bother her!", said Silverbell. "Nothing bothers children or love while they're growing...", Silverbell said, and flew off with a flap of her wings. Marko carrying the sleeping Minga in his arms, followed the Heavenly Tiller.

They walked for who knows how long... They stopped who knows when...

"How do you know where to drop the seeds?", asked Minga, opening her eyes and jumping out of Marko's arms. "How can you tell?"

The giant looked at her in surprise.

"By the light I see above the rocks. It's with the light that the golden germs call me to wake them up..."

Marko said angrily that even though the giant was the biggest creature he had ever seen, he couldn't be everywhere at once. The giant smiled. His duty was to do as much as he could, not to judge. The Heavenly Tiller's face looked grave and thoughtful. The boy flinched, whispering that he knew of a star where everybody judged everybody. And there was another which did nothing but take note of the sisters' mistakes.

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"That must be an awfully unhappy star!", the Heavenly Tiller frowned. "Forget it. Think of others..."

"I'm looking for an enchanted star and on it the Silver Rose. Do you know where it is?", Marko looked at the giant questioningly. But the giant just shook his head and said:

"In your heart, Marko Divats! In Goldie's heart, in Nour's heart and mine, there is an enchanted star sleeping in the heart of every being. It only needs to be awoken, the way today we woke up the golden germs! Do you understand me?"

"Not entirely." The boy became absorbed in thought. "When will we reach the Seventh Hill?"

"Why, we're there!", the Heavenly Tiller happily spread out his hands. "This is where we part. When I throw the seeds with my left hand, I'll think you're throwing them, Minga! The right hand will be Marko's... That way all the fruit-trees of Bangalora Bin will be yours..." He placed his hand on the rock beside them and a birch tree sprouted up. "Inside is the Elf you're looking for, Marko. The bark is his veil. You ask Kirilian about the Silver Rose..." The Heavenly Tiller touched the boy's cheek gently and a voice from the birch tree said:

"Your home is waiting for you, Master!"

The tree suddenly spread open. The giant slowly went in, waving one last time, and then disappeared. The only trace that remained was the crack on the back where he had disappeared. Drifting at the bottom of the Birch was a small piece of bark resembling a veil. Marko stood there and watched spellbound. He wondered whether the Heavenly tiller and the Elf were not one and the same person. Then he jumped and ran to catch the Elf veil... That same instant a terrible crash could be heard in the depths of the sky, as if a volcano were erupting.

"That's the Great Collector's Empire collapsing and Arunti becoming free!", a soft, friendly laugh came from the trunk of the birch tree. "Look to your left and then hurry! War and peace never last long between Timbava and Bimbava..."

THE TENTH CHAPTER
and

KIRILIAN'S ONLY FLIGHT

Gazing into the infinite depths of the sky, Marko saw a star rise up left of Bangalora Bin and turn into a huge Golden Flower. That same moment he heard a humming, and sensed Arunti's golden eyes watching him from somewhere in the distance.

"Hey, Arunti!", the boy shouted, waiting for a reply. Tiller (or was it the Elf?) urged him to hurry. Peace between Timbava and Bimbava never lasts for long. Onh, what did he care about Timbava and Bimbava when Arunti wasn't there with him? He shouldn't have ever left the petal of the Golden Flower... Marko put his hands over his face to hide his tears, when from far away he heard a gently reproaching voice say:

"How would you have freed me if you hadn't left, Marko?"

That was Arunti's voice. Marko gazed up at the sky. But, where the Golden Flower had shone just a few seconds ago now there was nothing.

"Don't look for me in the sky", Arunti whispered, "it's you I'm inside...", and just as suddenly as it had appeared so Goldie's voice vanished. A bridge appeared in front of the boy, it was more slender and more transparent than the wing of a dragonfly. It's white furrow led to a star that looked like a plum fruit. The furrow divided into two parts: one was red and the other blue. Maybe that was Timbava! Marko gazed carefully at the unknown star. It looked innocent, almost asleep. Why had Nour and the Heavenly Tiller it was dangerous?! But, how was he to get there?

"On foot! Over the bridge!", he heard Arunti's voice say, and smiled. Only somebody as translucent and light as Arunti could suggest something like that. Didn't she see that the bridge was thinner than a cobweb?

"But, it's not a bridge!", Minga muttered. "It's a rainbow..."

"Honestly! Who would ever cross a rainbow?" Marko stopped.

"We will cross it!", said Minga, pulling him along.

The unknown star's pull was stronger than a magnet. They were almost running toward it, with Chand rolling furiously behind them. "Timbava! Bimbava!", he shouted. "Timbava is Bimbava's twin. But, why do they war against each other?"

The sharp blued boulder blocked the view, and there was no path. It was not without reason that Minga had said this was an uninhabited star. Not even a turtle would be able to survive here, let alone Kirilian. How long would they have to keep searching for him?

"Why this is the crater of the star!" Minga stopped at the very edge of the abyss. A bluish mist, smoke, whatever, poured forth from its depths. "Look, moving stars!", Minga cried out, and that same minute vanished.

"Where are you?", Marko yelled at the top of his lungs.

Only the echo of his words came back: where are you? where are you? where are you? And the blue mist thickened. He could no longer even see the spot where Minga had stood.

"Oh, if only my eyes were all-seeing!", Marko said, touching Nour's little skin, and the fog began to lift.

He was already on the first moving stair, when he heard Nour's voice.

"You could have made a smarter wish, my friend! But, good luck with it, Marko Divats, although it's better to see less, not more..." Nour's voice faded and Marko felt himself plunging into the depths. Minga was two steps in front of him. One floor, two floors... down and down they descended, passing glass towers illuminated by a piercing blue light. Behind the glass walls moved the shadows of beings who looked like people. Who had built this underground town and why? The doors to the skyscrapers (starscrapers?) were nowhere to be seen, if they existed at all. Marko happened to hold out his hand and look at it. It was transparent. Blue blood flowed through the blue veins. The bones on his hands were also an eerie blue.

"Take them to No. 8!", a muffled voice said.

As though the order had been addressed to the stairs, they stopped moving for a second and then turned right. Everything else was the same. They continued to plunge down past the bluish glass towers and the shadows moving behind their walls. Marko felt as though somebody

hiding behind his back was pushing him forward. He turned to see who it was and his mouth dropped open in horror. There was nobody behind his back, but he felt the coldness of a heavy hand on his shoulder. The doors of a huge circular room opened ahead of them.

"Oh!", cried Minga.

"So, how do you like it?", a deep voice said. "You're not exactly perfect! In fact, you're at the lowest level of development, but we'll make something of you yet... You people from Sitlo Sika always look pathetic at the beginning, but we'll fix that... You like it here, huh?"

"Fool", the boy thought. "What's there to like? Walls are walls. Only the light is different. Silvery. Why can't at least somebody accept me as I am?" Suddenly, his father's disappointed face flashed before Marko's eyes. "When will you ever change?", he seemed to be saying. The boy bowed his head in shame.

"Don't move!", said a worried voice. "The supreme repairer has stepped out for a minute. You must hide before he returns..." A crack appeared in the wall in front of the boy. It was barely big enough to let through a feather. Then the crack began to open and out stepped something that might have been human had its hands, legs, head and chest not been made of a shiny blue metal. The only human thing on its large metal face were the eyes, which were ordinary, brown. Those eyes watched them compassionately. Why? Marko shivered.

"And so, now you're here!", the iron man muttered. "What in the devil are you looking for on Timbava?"

"Should we tell him?", Marko asked, turning to Minga. "Why tell him? We're looking for Kirilian, not an iron monster..." Marko stopped and the light in the room changed. Tramping, heavy steps were coming nearer and nearer, and then the walls began to move apart.

"I am Kirilian!", said the metal man. "Be careful...", he warned them, more with his expression than his voice, indicating the bunch of little metal beings jumping out from the opening left in the wall. He indicated for them to hide behind a wardrobe, and then he stood in front of them.

With incredible speed, the room filled up with little metal creatures who communicated with each other by the twinkling of little lamps. Kirilian was taller and bigger than all of them but he was not as quick or as agile. Numbers flashed on and off on the wall above the opening: 1, 000,

999, 998, 987.. The bulging eyes of the little metal beings flashed on and off with the numbers.

There was some kind of sequence to the succession of numbers and they progressively diminished in value.

"When they reach zero, the Timbavians will, they will..." said Kirilian in a dead, monotone voice. Wasn't Kirilian a dwarf or an elf? A kind of magician? Why hadn't the Heavenly Tiller told them what he was? The anxiety in the iron man's voice told Marko that whatever the Timbavians were planning, it had something to do with them.

"What will the Timbavians do?", Minga asked anxiously, but they did not hear the answer. The long, piercing shrill of a siren rebounded off the walls and roused the iron people, obviously calling them somewhere. The little lamps flashed excitedly. There was a stampede of metal footsteps. Everybody was to take up arms. No pulling back. The Supreme Repairer was about to issue a proclamation. Anybody who pulled back even a step was a traitor... Fast! Faster! The commotion and rattling of weapons made Marko think that war had broken out on Timbava. "With whom? Who would go to war with little metal beings barely a meter tall?", the boy wondered, almost flattening himself against the wall.

"The Bimbavians!", said Kirilian in his hard voice. "Ssh!"

The little metal creatures' footsteps faded down the corridor. Zoom the last one disappeared from the circular room. With a nod of his head Kirilian instructed them to come out of their hiding place.

"And now we must hurry!" He bent down and picked up Minga and Marko in his arms. Then he took Chand and placed him in the boy's pocket. "What a curious little ball!", he shook his head. "He scampers after you like a puppy..."

Kirilian ran and Marko's chin knocked against his metal shoulder. Why was he running? And how come he could talk like them? Where was he running? With round eyes the boy took stock of his surroundings. They were running down a corridor lined with transparent blue walls. Behind them were rooms like the one they had just left. Above the doors the little lamps flashed on and off, the numbers changed and tottering between the walls were creatures which the boy could not identify: monkeys, sheep, birds, metal balls, aircraft, or what? Their limbs were of one species, their torsos of another and their heads of a third. The body of the sheep had the feet of a bird and the head of a fish. The body of the fish had the wings of a bird, the head of a monkey, and joints made of metal springs.

"Do these things walk?", Marko asked, shuddering, pressing against Kirilian.

Kirilian looked down.

"It's hard to say anything for sure. They've only just started experimenting with them... The Supreme Repairer still hasn't decided what final shape to give them..."

"Experimenting?", the word flashed through the boy's mind. "Is that what the Timbavians plan to do with us? With what right? And who is the Supreme Repairer?"

"You'll see him! Oh, dear! Why did you come here?"

"We had to find you. We didn't know you were..."

"Like this?", Kirilian bowed his head. "Hurry up! The Timbavians and Bimbavians are never at war for long!" Kirilian ran faster. Rooms like glass cages flashed past the boy. In each were several of those strange creatures. They all had something familiar, but none of them had anything human. They probably hadn't managed to get a hold of a human. "Man is the crown of the world", thought the boy with pride, but Kirilian gave a muffled laugh.

"That's what they think on Sitlo Sika..."

"What do you know about Earth?" the boy fired back.

"I wish I didn't know anything, and I think the Timbavians wish that too. Then I would be completely theirs..."

A siren wailed from the depths of the corridor. Kirilian said with a start that the Bimbavians were quite close now. There was a mixture of caution and worry in his voice. Who were the Bimbavians? Marko was just about to ask when Minga beat him to it.

"Little metal people like the Timbavians..." Kirilian cocked his head as though listening for something. "But the metal they are made of is red and they have the ability to fly. Am I squeezing you?"

"A little!", Marko smiled.

"Metal, red, they fly and communicate with flashing lights...", the words rang in the boy's ears. But, Chand flew too, didn't he?

He was confused by the world of the Timbavians – blue, perfect, made without a helping human hand.

"But, with the help of human memory", Kirilian corrected him. "Memory which the Timbavians would prefer didn't exist, but don't know how to destroy..."

"That's ridiculous!", the boy sputtered. "When somebody dies memory dies with him...", Marko smiled remembering the Dwarf Who Records. "There's a dwarf who never rests for precisely that reason..."

Kirilian muttered that it wasn't all so simple. If the brain becomes eternal, then memory does not die. The Timbavians had managed to stop the aging and dying of his brain. Which was why his memories were eternal...

"What is he talking about?" Marko felt himself break out in goose pimples, and barely managed to say:

"Aren't you a Timbavian?"

"I wish I were. On the outside, I am. Except for the eyes and memories, I'm a Timbavian..."

Marko looked at him in astonishment, softly crying out:

"And the eyes? The voice? The memories? Whom do those memories belong to?"

"To a boy from Siberia..." Kirilian broke off, and then whispered, drawing out his words syllable by syllable: "Twenty-six thousand years ago he entered a walnut and flew amongst the stars..."

"He's lying", the boy thought. "Nobody lives that long! "

"The Timbavians do!", Kirilian frowned, as though hearing the boy's unspoken thought. "You can believe me. The Timbavians are the crown of the world."

"You talk like one of the Akidas!", Minga sputtered. "You may even have met her. She claimed to be the one and only Master of the Universe!"

"That's what the Timbavians say about themselves That's why they go to war with the Bimbavians! And the Dragonfly Star says the same thing, although it's so small not even a butterfly could alight on it..." Kirilian chuckled, and then with a sadness in his voice inquired whether the birch trees still grew in Siberia. Did the Yenisei still flow? Did the little girl Galya still laugh?

Marko blushed. He had never been to Siberia. But, he had heard that when Siberian children see a falling star they say it is Kirilian lighting the candles in the sky. Or that Kirilian is having a snowball fight with the stars. And there is a little Galya who weeps... And the birch trees? Yes, the birches still grow in Siberia and the Yenisei River still flows... Marko became flustered and fell silent, wondering whether that hadn't been Arunti speaking from inside him.

Tears trickled down Kirilian's metal cheeks and underneath the metal armour his heart beat like a bird against a cage. Marko touched Kirilian's cheek with the tips of his fingers. The metal man flinched and said they had to get away and reach Amarna as fast as possible, because the Timbavians always strike a bargain with the Bimbavians in the end. The ones are Masters of the Universe from morning till night, and the others from night till dawn...

Kirilian ran and at the next juncture again turned right. Passing one of the glass cages, Marko screamed. Was that really the body of a fox with the wings of a bird? The boy turned around to look again. The bird-fox was trying to fly. But, after only three flaps of its wings it faltered and banged into the glass wall.

"If they had to turn it into a fox", Marko said, his voice a mixture of choked sadness and anger, "why didn't they at least destroy its memory that it was once a bird?"

"Why, that's exactly what the Timbavians need. Its memory that once it was a bird, my memory of Yenisei, your memories... oh, let's hurry up!" Kirilian pressed the boy against his chest, trying not to hurt him, but all the same every bone in Marko's body ached. "They won't look for us here..."

The enormous room where Kirilian hid them was nothing but a storehouse for different kinds of creatures. On the one side there were the yawners. They were bored, really bored. Their mouths practically hung open from yawning. On the other side were the wise men. The Timbavians used them instead of memo pads. On the third side were the liars. They lied so much they had long since forgotten that occasionally the truth could be told. Hanging above them was a little lamp. It was supposed to light up every time somebody lied, and it was always on. Bouncing around the liars were their lies, squealing like happy little mice. Minga laughed out loud:

"Look at that little one, Marko! It claims to be you and says nobody is braver than he is. He mentions Chand and me. What do you say?"

The perplexed boy shrugged his shoulders. So much had happened that anything was possible.

"Maybe he is me, and maybe I'm a flying giraffe, Minga!"

Kirilian laughed.

"Don't overdo it, Marko Divats! And hurry up if you want to reach Amarna and the Silver Rose..."

"I didn't tell you I was looking for her. How do you know?"

Kirilian merely smiled enigmatically.

The creatures of different kinds, shapes and colours kept mingling.

"Why are they all kept here?" Marko felt the hair on his legs stand on end. "What will the Timbavians do with them?"

"That is something perhaps not even the Supreme Repairer knows yet. It's hard to say anything until one sees the final being..."

"But, you are...", Minga burst in.

"I am the beginning of the beginning..."

"Don't you hate them?", asked Minga, but Kirilian shook his head. What could he tell her? What was he to think? How could he hate? If he didn't take flight, he would live forever! And one day he would perhaps return to the Yenisei, find the little girl Galya...

Marko almost screamed with pain. Didn't Kirilian realise that those he once knew had long since gone? That the only eternal things are the birch trees, arctic foxes, and the Yenisei...

The metal man shuddered.

"You are right, Marko!", he said as if in answer to the boy's thought. "I belong here now... But... you... this is no place for you. Go back to Sitlo Sika..."

"I can't until I find the Silver Rose", wailed the boy, and Kirilian looked at him sadly.

"She is on Amarna, and it will take the Timbavians, or the Bimbavians, it's all the same, about twenty minutes to find you."

It wasn't clear to the boy what the Timbavians needed them for. They would have to be fed, and dressed...

"It's not you they need..." Kirilian wavered. "It's your memories. On Timbava there is no hunger, no cold, no death. Eternity reigns on Timbava...", said Kirilian bitterly, and Marko thought he saw his own father's expression in Kirilian's look, and he shivered. "You remembered somebody?", Kirilian asked gently.

"My father... He used to make me eat, practice..."

"You mean he loved you?"

"I don't know...", the boy mumbled. "Now when I'm far away I think that he does love me, and that I love him". Marko squeezed his arms around Kirilian's neck and sobbed: "Come with us..."

The metal man sighed, placed his palm on one of the walls and Marko saw the walls separate and they began to fly. They flew faster and

faster through the purple glow of Timbava, past the blue glass towers. Finally the end of the moving stairs and of the abyss was in sight.

"But, you said only Bimbavians could fly", the boy whispered, leaning his head against Kirilian's houlder. Behind him he could hear the cries of the Timbavians, the heavy echo of their steps, and then thundering, menacing voice of the Supreme Repairer.

Kirilian jumped.

"Timbavians, too, can fly like the water lilies over the Yenisei, but only once..."

The voices of their pursuers died out in the depths. In front of them was a big, shining star which kept changing colour. Marko noticed that Kirilian's heart beat was getting fainter and fainter and that they were losing speed.

"Beware of the Door of Echoes, Marko...", said Kirilian faintly, lowering them onto the ground of the unknown star. And then he began dissolving like a bubble on water, whispering: "Say hello to Yenisei for me..."

Soon he disappeared entirely, but at the spot where he had been, Marko saw a transparent, silver cloud rise up and head for the east.

Was he going to look for the birch trees overlooking the Yenisei? Or for little Galya's smile among the birches? Marko didn't know...

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER
in which

**THE GLASS CANNOT ADD WATER TO
ITSELF...**

"Why, look! Everything here is green!", Minga cried, stepping onto the ground of the unknown star. "The clouds, the sand, even you Marko Divats!"

Marko chuckled.

"If you had a mirror you'd see you were green, too, like a pea, like Wally Walnut..."

Indeed, her skin and hair were green, even her test were green. And green birds soared over the green boulders.

Then suddenly everything changed. As if an invisible hand had poured an ocean of red paint on everything, the grass, and the sand, and Minga, and the clouds turned red...

"Hey, Chand!", Marko said, staring at the little ball shining in his hand. "If Wally Walnut were to see you now he'd think you were a cherry!"

"And what would he think if he saw you?", Chand snapped back. "Now stop gaping and get going. You've wasted enough time..." As if someone were chasing him, Chand raced toward the hill, the top of which glowed red in the distance. A gigantic red tree straddled the hilltop and birds with red wings fluttered in its boughs.

"Oh, dear! Why they aren't birds, they're some kind of screeching flying objects!", Marko cried. He tripped over the hard root of the grass and fell flat on his face. "Oh, Mother, what's the matter with the grass?" Within the twinkling of an eye the blades of grass grew thicker than his arm, blocking his view. Suddenly, he was in a real forest where the

buzzing red flies were so big they could pick him up in their beak like a straw.

"I'm done for if they see me!", said Marko, shaking from head to foot.

"If they see you!", somebody grumbled, sneezing.

The boy jumped back and looked all around. Who had sneezed? Except for Minga there was nobody there. But, somebody behind him had sneezed. Then he heard somebody next to his shoulder sneeze. It was like a little epidemic. Who were these sneezers? Marko stretched his neck to see, but the grass was so tall and thick that he could barely see the red handkerchief of the sky through it. "When did the grass grow so fast?", he wondered, and a bright voice said:

"Unless you shrank?"

Then he again heard sneezing, and Chand's admonishing voice:

"Stop talking to the grass, and hurry!"

"Why, that's the grass sneezing!", Marko giggled, but an offended voice piped up:

"And why shouldn't we sneeze, huh? When the grass flowers you sneeze. So tell us, why shouldn't we sneeze?"

"Go right ahead and sneeze! I don't care!" The boy ran off, and the unknown star changed colour once again. Everything was now milky white: the sand, and the grass, and the tree on top of the hill, and the clouds.

With the change of colour the grass began to shrink. Soon it was up to the boy's shoulder, then up to his waist. It finally shrank so much that it barely covered his feet. Unless he had grown?

He was already at the foot of the hill with its milky white grass. Flitting through the tree branches whose white foliage glittered in the sun, were birds with soft, pearly wings. "Maybe they know where we are", thought Marko, "and what star this is?"

"Hello!", the boy said.

"Hello!", replied a croaking voice.

"If there's anybody here, let him speak up!", the boy suggested.

"Let him speak up!", the same voice repeated.

"Let him say his name!", Marko said softly.

"Let him say his name!", the voice repeated softly.

"Stop repeating everything like an idiot!", the boy shouted, and a chorus of voices echoed his own voice.

"Like an idiot! Like and idiot! Like an idiot!"

Irritated, Marko looked up at the treetop. Why, the tree was spinning and spinning with it were countless transparent doors.

Were they perhaps the Door of Echoes? Nonsense! Kirilian had mentioned only one door, and there were more than a thousand here! The spinning treetop and the flashing opening and closing doors made Marko feel so tired that he was ready to lie down on even a mat of nails.

"It's time to go to sleep. Good night!", he mumbled, and a myriad of voices in the spinning treetop repeated:

"Why, they're just parrots!", it flashed through his mind as he dropped off. Then he heard somebody titter, and a screeching voice shout that every star was different, but they were all what we expected them to be... to be.. to be...

The racket suddenly increased, and Arunti's voice came through the noise:

"Open your eyes, Marko! Anybody who falls asleep at the Door of Echoes stays there forever. Do you hear me?"

Somebody pinched him. Somebody blew into his ear, trying to wake him up. But Marko did not open his eyes.

"Oh, I'm so hungry!", he thought, and a piece of bread dropped down from the tree.

The boy grabbed and swallowed it without opening his eyes.

"How did you know I was hungry? I didn't ask for anything...", he asked his invisible benefactor in his dream.

"I hear more than just your words. I also hear your thoughts, even wishes you still don't know about..."

"And who are you?", the boy asked drowsily. "All I see here are parrots..."

"Why, only parrots live at the Door of Echoes! The inhabitations of Amarna are seen only by those who get past the parrots, if they get past. What is it? Don't you like it here? The places we arrive at are usually reflections of our wishes. The real thing has to be deserved...", the screeching voice faded and the tree spun even faster. So did the opening and closing doors, and Marko felt as if he were spinning with them.

"What has to be deserved? Passage through the Door of Echoes? The Silver Rose? What was happening to him?", he wondered, unable to lift his eyelids.

"Who brought these freaks here?", a rough voice startled him.

"Who invited them?", another, even rougher voice joined in. "I've never seen anything so ugly..."

Marko wanted to protest, to jump up, but he didn't have the energy to move even a finger. The dizziness muddled his mind. He felt as if he were falling apart, sinking... If only he could lie down and go to sleep...

"Become one of us..." In the milky white glow, Marko saw the shining, flitting shadows of tiny creatures move through the opening doors.

Suddenly he felt himself surrounded by a host of these creatures, who were touching his arms, chest and face with their tiny, quick fingers. Their touch made him feel that he was slipping even faster into a sweet, light, carefree sleep.

The creatures' tiny, glowing shadows, whose faces he could not make out, danced a circle around him, laughing and teasing him.

"We accept only fiends!", a voice warned.

"Well, I am a friend!", the boy cried out.

"That's what they all say!", a sharp voice, as cold as a needle, emerged from the others.

"All?", Marko opened his arms in surprise.

"Those here before you!"

The shadows flitting around the boy left behind a long, gleaming trail. He could not see their faces. And yet he had the impression that somebody was keeping a suspicious, close eye on him. Who?

"Where are those before me?", he retorted.

The Flock of tiny, light creatures giggled.

"Above you. In the light. They float like shining specks of dust, happy. Nothing frightens them. Nothing hurts them, they need nobody, although all of them were wandering stars full of fear, like you...", one of the light creatures said laughing. The boy noticed that in the middle of their shining bodies each of them had a large white eye following his every move.

"Here I come!" Marko lifted up from the ground and soared. He was transparent and light, nothing frightened him, he didn't need or want anything. Wasn't Minga funny with her attempts to take him back! And Kirilian was even sillier not to stay on Timbava, eternal in ternity. And what about the Heavenly Tiller turning over the stones, ha ha... What did he care about the Silver Rose, Wally and the tree! The Great Collector was right: nobody's life was worth any more than a single grain of gold...

"And mine?", Minga's voice reached him.

"And mine?", Nour asked sadly.

"And mine?", Arunti's voice appeared out of nowhere.

Irritated, Marko spun around like a top.

"Yours! Yours! Yours!", he shouted, and fell silent. For a fraction of a second he thought he saw Kirilian watching him pensively from afar. A tear trickled down Kirilian's face. In it Marko saw the desperate faces of his parents and Wally Walnut's raised head. It made him shiver.

The shadows around him closed in, tightening around him like a ring. Soon they were so close they seemed to be pressing him, pasting something on him, typing him up.

"You're ours! You're ours!", he heard a joyful voice say. "So, you've decided then?"

"Decided what?", the boy asked in surprise.

"To change shape! To stay with us forever in eternal light and ease..."

"In an eternal void, Marko!", Arunti's horrified voice rang out. "Open your eyes and look! What do you see?"

"What do I see? I don't see anything!", the boy muttered, opening his eyes with a gasp. The void stretched as far as the eye could see. A icy void. A dead void. The only thing that moved in the void was the Door of Echoes, spinning evermore temptingly.

"No, I'm not staying with you!", Marko summoned all his strength and jumped out of the twirling, gleaming, dancing circle of shadows whose tiny fingers kept pulling him back into the void.

That leap seemed to take him an eternity, but a second later he was on the other side of the door.

In front of him was Amarna. Beside him were Chand and Minga.

It was a strangely quiet star, covered in soft, white grass and shining white trees. Paths branched out on all sides, houses facing each other dotted the valley like sleeping swans. The inhabitants of Amarna obviously liked to keep company.

But, what were they?

Marko look curiously at his little hosts who greeted him with a friendly nod of their heads. They were all small, light, smiling. Dwarfs or children? The Amarna's faces radiated the same pearly glow that flickered over the grass. Their clothes were white, their movements gentle and calm. One of the residents of Amarna stepped forward, holding out his palms, and said:

"Welcome to Amarna!"

The others watched, smiling. They had bulging eyes, consisting of countless tiny eyes so that they could closely follow everything around them.

"So, you managed to pass the sleepies?", his little host smiled.

Marko flinched.

"Who are the sleepies?"

"The heralds of death. You saw them. They each have a white eye and guard the Door of Echoes. The love inside you appears to have won out...", the Amarna looked at Marko inquisitively, and smiled again.

"That was Arunti!", Marko protested. "She warned me o the void..."

"Not just Arunti...", said his little host mysteriously. "Day is breaking in Sitlo Sika!", said the little person, pointing deep into the sky, and before Marko's eyes appeared the Glass Tower and his room at the top of the Tower. His mother was standing by the window, crying, and his father was pacing up and down, his arms crossed. Hovering on the other side of the glass was the top of the walnut tree, where green dwarfs hopped among the boughs. Up on top Marko saw Wally Walnut. He was biting his nails, looking worried. He had lost so much weight, from despair, worry or whatever, that he could barely stand. The little walnuts were tireless, they played, squealed, laughed, but the tree was dying.

Marko's parents were blind to the green dwarfs, deaf to their squealing. His father frowned in a fixed stare, while his mother secretly wiped away her tears.

"What's the matter with them?", the surprised boy asked. "I've never seen them like that. What happened to them?"

"Nothing happened to them...", the little Amarna hesitated. "Think..."

"Later... What's your name?"

"Motoi, but names don't matter. Neither do words..."

The small pearly creatures, all shining light and smiling, communicated with smiles and numbers. A certain number of bricks mixed with a certain number of working hours and diligent hands, meant a new building. A certain number of pounds of flour added with water and the love of those who mixed the flour and water, meant bread or cookies...

There were no possessions on Amarna. Motoi explained it very simply, surprised by the boy's questions.

"Can light be appropriated? A cloud? Warmth?" Motoi smiled. "A glass cannot add water to itself if its water spills or evaporates. If somebody is sick, he cannot get well until his brother or neighbour contributes a bit of his own health! Is it clear to you now, Marko?" Motoi looked at him with his bulging, smiling eyes. Then he touched the boy's palm with his own. That same moment, an unexpected totally unknown joy flowed through Marko's body.

"Who is the top person here?", asked the boy. "You?"

"We have no top people...", the perplexed Motoi shrugged. "We are all equal, can't you see?", the little Amarna ran to pick up a fellow tribesman who had accidentally tripped and fallen. "Amarna is not Sitlo Sika... Smile! If you smile long enough your parents will sense that you are alright and they won't die of sorrow..." Motoi placed his hand on his chest and bowed. "On behalf of all Amarnas I invite you to visit the Crystal Mound...", he pointed off into the distance, but Marko frowned. He was tired and what Motoi called the Crystal Mound looked more like a glass dome than a building.

"Oh, it's only a glass roof...", the boy sighed, disappointed, and Motoi smiled.

"Children and plants need light and warmth while they grow!", he said. "And Amarnas are very small to start with. They need a lot of attention and tenderness until they grow up although not a single Amarna is any bigger than you..."

"What are Amarnas?", Marko raised his eyebrows inquiringly. "Dwarfs or children?"

Motoi looked at him in surprise and said:

"Children! Children millions of years old... First as small as poppyseeds... and then like me, like you..."

"So I'm finally in the right place!", the boy thought. "But, where is the Silver Rose?" He decided not to ask any more questions but to find the Silver Rose himself. When he found it he would grab it and run...

Motoi looked sternly, at the boy, shaking his head.

"That won't be so easy!", he said. "Nobody has ever yet reached the Silver Rose..."

Marko shuddered.

"We do not like thieves here!", the little Amarna added. "Here are wings so that it doesn't take days for us to reach the Crystal Mound...", and with a brisk wave of his hand he caught the wings rustling above their

heads and attached them to Marko's shoulders. Then he gave the same kind of wings to Minga, and a tiny pair to Chand. "Fly with me."

Marko opened wide his eyes in surprise. Then he started flying and faster than a clap of the hands he was at the door of the Crystal Mound.

"Take off the wings and return them to Mother Space!", said Motoi, landing. "You don't need them anymore, but somebody else may..." He took the wings off Minga and Chand and hurled them into the air. The wings flew on their own.

That was just the beginning.

The Amarnas returned to Mother Space fruit baskets they no longer needed and the baskets went off to somebody else who wanted them at that moment. Surplus tenderness, health, courage was also directed to others. By touching palms, the Amarnas gave their neighbours the joy that they missed at that moment, but they also accepted their sorrow. At one moment Motoi touched Marko's hand, and the smile disappeared from Motoi's face.

"Oh, how much sadness and fear you have inside you!", he said. "It will take year for you to get rid of it all..."

"I can't wait that long...", the boy bowed his head.

"I know!", said Motoi softly.

"Then tell me where the Silver Rose is?"

Motoi stopped and looked at his face searchingly.

"In the centre of the Crystal Mound!", he said. "In the enchanted garden. But, you can't reach it. You still haven't learned how to wish others success at work, happiness in sleep, joy in the heart by just smiling... But, you have learned one thing..." Motoi smiled sadly. "You have learned that nobody exists for himself, that we are all one big family, and that will help you... Beware of the little White Wolf, even though the others may look more dangerous..." Motoi pointed up and Marko saw a ray of light beam down on a point beneath the roof of the Crystal Mound...

"There?", the boy looked at the little Amarna, who simply nodded his head. "We'll see each other again..." Marko waved good-bye and Motoi smiled.

"We won't be able not to see each other!", he said. "Remember Nour, remember Arunti... How many times you see them in yourself. Now, hurry..."

Marko ran. Behind him ran Minga, and behind her rolled Chand, muttering angrily: "There's time, what's the rush..."

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER
and in it

THE SILVER ROSE

"Oh, will this road never end?", the boy ran and the ray of light pointed the way. Unless it was the little Amarna pointing. He couldn't be sure. He was worried about the White Wolf. How did wolves get to be on Amarna? Marko began to remember. On Amarna he had seen only birds and butterflies. What else?

Maybe Motoi had been joking? Marko stopped and then thought he could see his father's sad and mother's tear-stained face, watching him from a distance. They were still standing by the window at the top of the Glass Tower, but they did not see the green dwarfs (in the top of the walnut tree, nor did they notice the disappearance of the tree. Still, they were not quarrelling or reproaching one another. Marko vaguely realised that they were waiting for him, that they loved him, and he smiled. If he smiled and thought about them long enough, they would know that he loved them too. Arunti would know, Nour would know...

Marko gasped when he saw that the ray of light had brought him to a wall and to tall, locked doors.

"What's behind the wall, Chand? You've been here once before. You must know...", he cried in exasperation. He had expected a rock overgrown with moss as in Wally's story, he had feared wolves, but he certainly had never dreamed he would find himself standing in front of a wall and locked doors. "What's behind them, Chand? Tell me..."

"An enchanted garden, Marko! In it is the Silver Rose, and in her is a forgotten, a lost word..."

"What word?"

"If I knew that we wouldn't have had to come here!", Chand retorted, saying no more.

"Hah, a fat lot of good you are to me!", Marko grouched, looking uneasily at the wall and the doors.

Then, he heard Minga laugh behind his back.

"Where there is a door, there will be a key..."

"What kind of key?", the boy turned around and was shocked to see that nobody was there. He turned back to the doors...

Why look? They weren't doors they were bars made of crossed rods! "Oh, if only I could get through them!", he thought and saw the doors opening and the Porcupine's last ring slip off his finger.

Marko was breathless with excitement. Before him was the Enchanted Garden, and in the garden were large pearly blue flowers which would break away and become butterflies. Then he saw the butterflies turn into fairies like Silver-Bell's flowery sisters, and then back into flowers again.

"Hey, Marko, hurry! Across the sky scurry!", one of the fairies called to him, and flew away. She had Arunti's golden eyes. The boy smiled softly. "The little liar!", he thought. "She thought I would run after her, because she knows that Arunti is inside me..."

"Not always, Marko!", a cheerful voice said and he saw Arunti. She was so tiny he could fit her into the palm of his hand and she flew holding on to the shoulder of a butterfly. "I'll be back, don't worry!" Arunti disappeared and Marko found himself in a forest of pearly blue flowers. A tall, powerful tree stood smack in front of him.

"Why are there no Amarnas here?", the boy muttered to himself, but Chand laughed ironically.

"What do the Amarnas need the garden and the Silver Rose for? Have you forgotten? The chest containing the Rose opens only at the touch of an unhappy child. The Amarnas aren't unhappy..." Chand broke off and Marko stepped forward wondering where Minga was. He hadn't see here since entering the Enchanted Garden. Where was she hiding? Twice he looked around but she was nowhere in sight!

"Oh, Minga, where are you?", he cried in despair. "I don't see you..."

"How can you see me", Minga's reproachful voice said, "when you don't know how to look inside yourself?"

Minga's voice vanished, and Arunti flew onto his hand.

Here eyes shone sweetly, and somewhere in the distance he heard the humming of the Golden Flower. The moss-covered rock was to his left. "Is that it?", he wondered.

"Of course, that's it!", Chand snapped from the grass. "Take a better look! What do you see?"

"A tall, powerful tree and a rock overgrown with moss. What did you think I would see, you fool? A flying crocodile? An elephant?", the boy waved his hand in anger. "Some helper Wally Walnut gave me!", he grumbled, and felt something strange happening to his mouth. It grew and grew until it began to touch the shrubs. "Oh, I've acquired an elephant trunk!", he gasped.

"This is your doing, you creep!", Marko turned on Chand. But Chand just laughed, saying:

"That kind of power I don't have! But, it would only be fair if every ingrate and grumbler grew a trunk!" Chand disappeared, and a pack of wolves seemed to emerge from the sand before Marko's very eyes.

"Good evening, dinner!", they snarled.

The boy jumped back. The wolves snarled with curling lips but they did not close in. "None hadn't even completed his thought when the White Wolf jumped out of the rock, howling:

"Did I hear right? Dinner has arrived and the brothers want to keep it for themselves?"

"Shall we share dinner?", several of the wolves in the pack proposed, staring with bloodshot eyes at the boy.

"I eat my dinner alone!", the White Wolf snarled, and the pack began to retreat. "There's less meat on this boy than on a mangy sheep..." The White Wolf opened its jaws and rushed at the boy.

Marko dodged it.

The White Wolf ran after him.

Not knowing what to do or how to defend himself, Marko hurled the Heavenly Tiller's apple into the gaping jaws of the White Wolf.

Suddenly, the White Wolf stopped, choked and began to shrink. Soon it was no bigger than a pussycat, and then it dissolved like a snowball tossed into a hot oven. All that was left was a little puddle, and the pack of wolves vanished as if they had never existed. Amazed, Marko bent down to pick up the Heavenly Tiller's Apple and inadvertently touched the moss-covered rock.

He heard a thunderous explosion.

As if hit by a hammer, the rock shattered into smithereens and the little Golden Chest appeared before the boy's astonished eyes. Oh, how it gleamed! How it shone as if radiating all the light of the heavens!

But how was he to approach it when in front of it was a Monster covered in scabs that oozed with puss? Marko went pale with disgust. He stepped back and screamed... Gentle, golden eyes looked straight at him out of the scabbed face.

Suddenly, the Monster sobbed:

"Nobody loves me... Nobody has ever kissed me...", tears streamed down his scabby cheeks. The Monster sobbed: "I'll die if nobody kisses me. I'll die."

Marko stepped back, ready to run, but the sadness in the Monster's voice made him stop. The revoltingly ugly Monster wept like an abandoned child:

"I'll die, I'll die, I'll die..."

The boy's heart was wrung with pity. He himself had often been abandoned like that at the top of the Glass Tower. Nobody loved him either. Days went by without anybody kissing him.

"No, you won't!" Wiping away a tear, Marko rushed over and kissed the Monster on both cheeks...

That very instant, the Monster vanished and Arunti appeared. But she was somehow different, more translucent, shrouded in a soft, pearly veil.

"Thank you for saving me a second time, Marko! For awakening the Magic Star inside you...", she whispered. "The snake that guards the Silver Rose cast a spell on me and turned me into a monster. Had you not taken pity and kissed me, you would have soon become such a monster yourself...", Arnuti smiled, pressing her little face against the boy's, and then vanished. The Golden Chest opened to reveal the twinkling Silver Rose, more brilliant than any star.

It swayed and glittered, and gave off a scent Marko had never smelled before.

The entire garden changed as the scent spread. There was noise and laughter. All the flowers turned into little pearly fairies, all the butterflies became dragonflies. The soft, sparkling light wafted over the grass and the trees, enchanting the entire area. The foliage suddenly became translucent, and the wall, as transparent as glass, began to crumble.

Within reach of Marko's hand, the Silver Rose, light and translucent as though made of moonrise, quivered and let off its scent. It lived.

"Now I should snap it off and run away with it to Wally Walnut!", the boy thought, but he didn't have the energy to move. The rose was so delicate, so aromatic, it radiated such a glow that he didn't have the heart to pick it.

Confused, the boy passed a hand over his face and was astonished. He no longer had a trunk. When had it disappeared? Marko stepped closer to the Rose, looking at it. No, he wouldn't, he couldn't pick it, he couldn't take it away from the garden where it reigned... It would be like cutting Arunti's Golden Flower, like killing Nour...

Marko sighed.

"Forgive me, Wally Walnut!", he whispered. "I can't do it... I can't save you or myself, I can't get to the one single forgotten, lost word... Forgive me, my friend..."

The boy wept and heard a distant rumble as though the heavens were opening, then the humming of the Golden Flower.

"You have arrived at the word, Marko Divats, even though you don't know it...", he heard Arunti's soft voice say from the petal of the Golden Flower. "You couldn't pick, you couldn't steal the Silver Rose! You realised that the world of flowers, people, beasts, ants and stars is one... You saved it...", the Golden Flower's humming and Arunti's voice vanished. Chand ran off the boy's hand, the Enchanted Garden closed and in his bed on the top floor of the Glass Tower Marko opened his eyes in wonder.

What was happening? Why were his mother's eyes full of tears? Why was his father's face so serious?

"We almost lost you...", said his mother.

His father leaned lovingly over the boy.

"You practically melted away from the fever."

"I'm back..."

Marko looked out the window. Floating outside was the top of the walnut tree, and there, sitting on one of the highest bough was Wally Walnut. The boy smiled, and the green dwarf winked.

"You see that you have strength you don't even know about!", he shouted.

Marko smiled again, caressing the Heavenly Tiller's apple under his blanket, and looked at his father and mother.

"Now I know that you love me the way I am", he whispered. "The trees will return..."