

Fantasy Hunters

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Translation from Dutch by Birsen Uçar

Dreams are illustrations...

from the book your soul is writing about.

(*Marsha Norman*)

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My name is Kate Lillian, I'm thirty-one years old, and I'm an emobeing from Emo World, the second dimension. Emo World is a place where ratiobeings from Ratio World dreamed of and dreamed in. Dreamt *because*, for most this activity now belongs in the past.

I scribble down these notes with a plain old fashioned pen. It does something to me, the contact of my hand touching the sheet of paper, via such a pen. I don't like a machine blocking my thoughts from the things I will create. Even if these are simply notes or scrawls with which I might want to do something serious later on. What precisely, I still have to figure out. Writing a novel perhaps. I often do things without knowing where it will all lead to.

Good, there are still beings from Ratio World, the first dimension therefore, who don't know we exist. They still think that their dreams are plays in their own fantasy world. Actually, we are dealing with a dimension filled with creatures, just as alive as themselves, and within their eyes there are many strange creatures. The so-called monsters from Emo World wouldn't harm a mosquito, even if it would suck them dry. We too have rules and laws, though these are based on more liberal principles than the ones in Ratio World. Emo World is a real world, just as the Earth, which is now called Ratio World.

However, at the time, there were many ignorant. These were actually ratiobeings who still thought they owned their own dreams. You recognize them, apart from their vague contours; they had expressions in their eyes showing fear, stress and insecurity. They mostly conducted themselves in a manner not quite sure of the next move. They had the listlessness resembling someone who smoked too much weed.

Visually, these dreamers clearly differed from the emobeings and ratiobeings who visited Emo World through the Portal. Their body was a little translucent. It seemed as though they hadn't entirely passed through, as if the ink of the printer had run out. They ran most of the time, although this cost them a pitiable amount of effort. In general, they were frantically

trying to eluding one monster or another. If they only knew these creatures never intended harm towards anyone.

Just like that young woman who ran past me once. Two seconds later, there followed an old scrawny werewolf who heeled next to me. He panted, his tongue hanging from his jaws, his eyes rolling back from exhaustion. As a ratiobeing, you think: poor woman being chased by a dangerous werewolf. That's not the case, one should rather say poor werewolf.

I asked him: "Are you alright?"

He squeaked something incomprehensible.

"Do you want some water? There's a witch shop nearby."

He shook his head. "I'll survive," he panted.

"Why did you chase that dreamer?"

"That dreamer? Was I chasing a dreamer again?" He cursed so loud a few startled by-passers looked up stunned. "That's why that screaming woman wouldn't stop, I should have known. I am such a useless old wolf."

"You scared her to death."

He chortled with a wee bit of pride. "I still look quite dangerous, don't I? What a shame I didn't see her face, these days you don't encounter many dreamers."

"Why were you chasing her?"

"She dropped her bags. O well, she won't be missing them when she wakes up. OK, I'll be off, thanks for your sympathy." Off he went.

It was forbidden to play tricks on dreamers. Even if the dreamer considered himself to be in danger, we were not allowed to intervene. At times difficult to resist, you did it anyway.

I had strolled to the park. I was laying on the grass on my back with my eyes closed, while thinking about those things. I often visited the park, since it was situated near to my apartment. It was a lovely day, with a sky that seemed to have come right out of an animated movie. Clear blue adorned with polka dot cotton ball clouds, and a brilliant yellow sun. The sound of crickets resonated though the air so delicately it almost entirely faded away within the serenity of the park.

I felt a presence. When I looked up, a man stood in front of me: it was a dreamer. He looked around, confused and surprised, seeing all those strange creatures. The park wasn't even crowded. There were only a handful of emobeings and one leprechaun walking around.

I wish I knew what was going on in his frightened head. My telepathic gifts don't work on dreamers who did not arrive via the Portal. To me he looked blank, an ignorant to our world, in other words a real dreamer. They still didn't know that their dreams transported

them to a real and existing world. They were few and decreasing in number, which is truly sad. We often found it very funny and indeed interesting to see how a rational being from the other dimension would let their emotions and behavior run free. Those few who still thought that they were dreaming usually came from the more primitive parts of Ratio World. In those places, primary lusts and feelings were still accepted to some extent.

I figure this guy to be around forty by the way he wore his attire. Wearing shapeless rags around his body, he wasn't de-wrinkled like most of the ratiobeings, which often looked as though they were smoothed out by a flat-iron, had an untrimmed beard. The man's appearance did not hide his life's hardships. That's what made him interesting.

The dreamer now stood on a bench and tried to jump in the air. He was wildly flapping his arms, trying to raise himself unsteadily on the tips of his toes.

With my friendliest face, I went up to him in case he should really take off. Not every day you had the chance to talk with a blank. He only noticed me when I was right in front of him. With his sleepy eyes he briefly looked at me. Blanks can't concentrate very long when they're dreaming, it's as if their brains are partially shut off. That's why I had to operate fast before he would really fly away.

"Hello," I said.

"Eh... hello." He looked at me with nervous anticipation.

"I'm Kate, what's your name?"

With that kind of childlike behavior you had to approach a blank. They had trouble making a normal conversation because they usually let their dream take hold of them. So it was my job to maintain the interaction between us.

"Eh... Bob," he replied.

"Do you know that you're dreaming, Bob?"

He blinked. Of course, it was like asking someone if he knew he was actually dead. I've never really understood why ratiobeings couldn't see the difference between reality and their dream world. Apparently, the part of their brain which sets a distinction between realism and surrealism doesn't function while they're sleeping.

He was flapping his arms even more wildly, but eventually, he gave up and sat down, his eyes fixed on me. He looked pretty frightened.

I asked: "What were you trying to do?"

Another problem was their memory. While they're dreaming, it hardly ever functions. By the way, that's why it took Ratio World such a long time to find out that the dream world

is actually an existing dimension. Besides, your memory generally lets you down entirely when you wake up.

Defeated, Bob looked around, scratching his beard. “What I was trying to do? That eh... that I can’t remember. Can you?”

I suddenly felt sorry for him. That’s a problem we emobeings have to deal with; we’re too sensitive. Besides, my empathic abilities are unusually highly developed. I knew I had to leave the man alone, before he would panic even more.

“You tried to fly. You will be able to if you try your best.”

Once more, he knew what to do, and he seemed relieved. Ratiobeings always *have* to do things, even in their dreams. Strangely enough, they find it a complete waste of time when they’re doing nothing.

Again, the dreamer stood up on the bench. Apparently, he thought that he would take off more easily if he went on doing breaststrokes. In fact, in Emo World this technique has the greatest effect for these dreamers. Maybe because in reality, swimming means you are going forward. In real life, flapping one’s arms has never gotten anyone up in the air.

Dreaming ratiobeings can fly in our world, because it’s their subconscious that leads them. The subconscious is a part of your mind which carries out your wishes and thoughts. Ratiobeings would be able to do the same in their own world, but there, it is made impossible by their rational thoughts.

I watched him go. The dreamer took off southward, doing breaststrokes, climbing higher and higher up the sky. Afterwards, I lay down again, and fell fast asleep.

When I woke up, the sun had disappeared. Clearly, the werewolves had had enough of it. Now, dark clouds were suspended from threads high in the air. Hopefully, these werewolves weren’t thinking of drenching us with rain. They sure had a pretty simple sense of humor.

It was time for me to be off since I wasn’t dressed for bad weather with this light cotton dress I was wearing.

I realized rather late that I was walking too closely to a witch shop. Something you must never do if you don’t need anything. Their magical tempting odors are even too strong to resist for someone who has witch genes, like me. You get the compelling idea that you want to eat something (one day I had bought ten jars of pickles which had expired a long time ago), or that you need extremely useless things.

Let's just enter the shop then, as if tracking a scent, like dogs do. However, dogs are actually the only creatures that are not affected by these tempting odors coming from witch shops.

"Kate, dear, how are you?"

Witches know everyone by name, even though they have no telepathic abilities. They just have such a good memory, it's a trick they use to catch you off guard. In Ratio World, managers do the same thing with their clients, but instead, they use their secretary or their laptops to pull it off.

Even though you can see through their tricks, you always have to be polite towards witches. They don't have a sense of humor, and they can never forgive rudeness. I must admit, I also possess some of these characteristics, but I do know where to draw the line.

At the time, when ratiobeings entered through the Portal and put their first steps onto our world, there happened to be some problems concerning these matters. One day, a witch had taken offence because of something a ratiobeing had done or said. Consequently, she had transformed her permanently into a toad. From then on, transforming ratiobeings has been prohibited. Rude people could still be prosecuted and penalized no longer could they be punished as severely and irreversible as that.

I looked around the shop. What did I need again?

The witch looked at me: "I think you're up for some pizza. Transform me into a jelly-fish if I'm wrong."

"Good guess," I replied resignedly. Of course, she knew that pizza was my weak spot.

The witch grinned, showing her white teeth. Their true appearances are really quite beautiful, but they still employ a façade of illusions. Intuitively, witches sense the preferences of their costumers, and then they assume the looks their costumers find greatly attractive. Evidently, a witch looks different depending on the person who's looking at her. That day, she had reddish-brown hair, blue eyes and an athletic figure. Luckily, I didn't need to use these tricks. According to the people surrounding me, I looked more than decent.

The witch shuffled to the back of the store. In a witch shop, they keep everything at the back. There is no shop-window, neither is there anything on display. You just know it is a shop, because witches make you think that when you come too close. I imagine they merely conjure the things you want to buy. Anyway, you can find anything you want in a witch shop.

While I was waiting for my pizza, a man entered the store. "Hello!" I said admiringly while I examined him closely. That's the way it goes in Emo World, we don't waste any time like people do so well in Ratio World.

He smiled. "Looks like the werewolves have chosen dark clouds today."

A pure emobeing, I supposed, no strange genes though clothes could conceal many things. His skin was so soft and brown: you couldn't even see minor imperfections. His searching eyes showed a mixture of grey and brown, and his features were masculine but not arrogant. He was quite tall, but not as tall as an elf. He radiated that much power and litheness, he could very well be descending from vampires. He didn't have vampire fangs, though.

"You are quite a catch," he stated.

I knew he meant it. Like I said, in Emo World such things are just put straightforwardly.

"My ancestor was an elf," I explained. "You're not too bad yourself."

The witch appeared, holding a large box in a plastic bag, after which the man switched to telepathic conversation. *That witch better not hear what we are saying.* He looked at me, questioningly.

He was right. You never knew what these charlatans did with their information. *I sure feel like having you, nice and good,* I answered equally.

You read my mind. He briefly caressed my cheek, so tenderly a shudder went through my body.

"Oh, you are going down that road," the witch said, referring to our telepathic conversation which she could not hear. She sounded a little upset. "Here's your pizza."

I took the bag. Without a sound, I gave the man my address and the time when we could meet. After that, I paid the witch, greeted her with as much courtesy as possible, and walked out the store. I knew he was watching me, so I swung my hips even more.

I met several other people and some creatures, none of them were interesting enough to sleep with. That day was not exactly a success.

Yet, I was curious to get to know the man from the witch shop especially because I craved for some physical contact. Generally, that was the case when I had spent some time in Ratio World. Being there, without any contact, honest emotions or smiling glances was simply too exhausting. Ratio World could be as tiring to emobeings as Emo World could be to ratiobeings.

As I opened the door of my apartment, I sought contact with Ewok, my little dog. Safely inside, I was no longer afraid of eavesdroppers. With the limited magical powers I had inherited from my Great-Great Grandmother who was a witch, I had sealed my apartment off with a shield. No one outside that shield could read my mind when I was at home.

Ewok jumped on me with great enthusiasm. Only elves can communicate with animals, but because of the quarter elf blood that was running through my veins, I too had this ability.

Watch out for my pizza!

I missed you. I missed you. I missed you.

When I picked her up, she licked my face, giving it a thorough washing. Ewok is part Jack Russell and part Maltese, and she doesn't get any bigger than a full-grown cat. Her character is both lively and gentle, and because she descends from a werewolf, she is stronger and more powerful than any other dog of that size. Ewok sure is sweet, but she can turn into a monster that can take on three pit bulls at a time. I've seen her do it. However, because her mother was a Maltese, she looks like a neglected mongrel.

I wanted to come home sooner, but I fell asleep at the park.

I'm hungry.

Werewolf or no werewolf, she is still a dog, and food is one of her top priorities.

I walked to the kitchen, placed a slice of pizza on a plate, and gave Ewok a piece. Of course, that's not really healthy for dogs, but she liked it.

When I finished, Ewok laid beside me on the couch, resting her head on my lap. She looked at me.

Who is coming tonight?

A very attractive man

Of course, but what is he?

That's none of your business.

This is my house as well.

Since when are you paying rent?

People usually shrug, but a dog replies with a sigh.

I went to the bathroom to freshen up. I always put a lot of effort into that before I go to bed with someone. My hair was the same color as the sun; yellow; orange and red. The more I brush my hair, the more it goes on shining. It probably has to do something with the genes I inherited from the elves. I have an extremely white skin, without looking unhealthy. My mom claimed that Snow White was probably one of our ancestors. Actually, Snow White was also an elf. The fairy tale tells us her stepmother wanted to kill her because she was so jealous of Snow White's beauty. But in fact, the truth was too confronting for Ratio World. In reality, Snow White was much better in bed. That is why male elves preferred her. The brothers Grimm had gotten the idea from their dreams, or rather, from Emo World. They had

experienced it and seen it, but they had interpreted it incorrectly. Oh well, you couldn't blame them. Ratio World has always had trouble with the more natural side of people.

In our world, sex is just as ordinary as eating or drinking. Making love is just a wonderful invention of Mother Nature, isn't it? It's the ultimate way of uniting people and conveying emotions. Everybody does it in their own personal way, and nobody will consider it to be strange. For some time now, we are trying to eradicate every aberration, each restraint, and eliminate every anxiety in these ratiobeings, but it often seems a hopeless task. They don't want anything to do with ghosts, vampires, trolls and other non-human creatures. They obviously don't know what they are missing.

When the doorbell rang, I had just put on another dress. Naturally, I could even have opened the door wearing nothing, but the dress, which was almost completely transparent, added a certain flavor of eroticism, and that made me feel really good.

For a human, it will do, I guess, Ewok told me.

Make sure you stay out of the room. I watched Ewok as she walked to the kitchen.

The man didn't waste any time giving compliments. He entered my apartment and grabbed me immediately. He wrapped his strong hands around my thin waist and lifted me up. As long as they didn't hurt me, I gladly took on the role of the fragile girl.

Carefully, he laid me down on the couch and undressed me, his mysterious eyes fixed upon me.

Now I would surely get to know him. It was a dangerous game most people wouldn't dare to play. In Emo World, there were creatures you'd better not invite to your bed, unless you didn't mind being ripped to pieces. However, I wasn't as fragile as I seemed to be, and I loved the unknown, which was extremely exciting.

"You are very special," he said.

With a tender touch, he kissed me, making me very impatient, I wanted more, now! The next thing I knew, he tore up my dress with one single pull. I felt the tip of his tongue circling around my left nipple. The tip of his tongue, *both* the tips of his tongue! Amazingly I had picked up a snakebeing. I had never heard a woman complain about them.

I closed my eyes, and I let myself drift away in a blissful sea of double pleasure.

All human beings are also dream beings.

Dreaming ties all mankind together.

(Jack Kerouac)

I woke up with a few scales lying in my hand. Immediately, I remembered what had happened. I had caught the most amazing and sensual creature in my bed. Destiny had given me a blazing hot kiss. But not only destiny had. Shuddering, I stretched out, and enjoyed the smell of sex coming from the sheets.

Snakebeings are extremely talented lovers, and not just because of their tongue. They could twist their body in such a way your orgasm was lifted up to the highest level, one, you thought, you would never return from.

We made love four times, but then he left. Unfortunately, he had another date with a female troll. And you can't keep them waiting. A man who dares to do that, had better count their body parts afterwards. Sizzling creatures these trolls were. Most men were ready to take many risks just to be with one.

My watch sent a bright pink beam to the ceiling. The Fantasy Hunters seemed to need me straight away.

It was still night time, but I didn't need much sleep, thanks to my grandfather, who was a vampire.

I hurried to the bathroom to rinse off the odor of the snakebeing. After that, I made myself a milkshake mixing pig's blood and fruit to boost my energy level.

With regret, I threw away my torn dress, and put on some pants and a sexy top. It had just been made clear that you never knew who you were going to meet during the day.

It was not without reason that I lived in an apartment close to the airport, you could just get there by foot. Emobeings can fly if they want to, but I like to walk. When I float I feel pretty helpless. And it didn't exactly go fast.

The streets were practically deserted; only some vampires and several witches running their night shops passed me by, briefly greeting me. The airport, however, was crowded with people from both dimensions. It was a large building, constructed with more glass than metal. Ratiobeings couldn't understand that the building didn't need steel girders or pillars to support the whole structure. But in Emo World, plenty of things seemed illogical and incomprehensible to ratiobeings. That is why they loved to come here, even though their constitution didn't allow them to stay very long.

There were never any non-human creatures in the airport, unless they worked there. These creatures weren't allowed to travel to Ratio World. They were banished from the place when ratiobeings understood that their dream world was an actual existing dimension. They couldn't cope with the sight of demons, trolls and vampires walking around freely. Difficult

beings, you know these ratiobeings. Terribly intolerant, but hey, they're the ones missing out on all the fun.

People were queuing to enter the Portal, but you didn't have to wait very long. The system was also very simple. You had to pay at the Portal, after which you were required to walk through a detector of some sort. In fact, it was a test to see whether you were human or not. The machine made a loud noise whenever it detected even the slightest trace of non-human elements. I had a special pass because I had essentially four types of genes, but being a Fantasy Hunter, I could make use of quite some privileges.

The Portal man didn't feel happy. His aura had the same grayness of corpses, and it was dull green like dying leaves. He looked at me gloomily. In a burst of enthusiasm I gave the man a kiss. Immediately, I felt him brighten up, pink colors appeared in his aura.

"Lady, you taste of sex," he said. He sounded a bit jealous. As she was walking towards the detector, the woman in front of me glanced disapprovingly over her shoulder. No doubt, it was just another hypocritical ratiobeing. I ignored her.

"Had a tough night?" I asked the Portal man.

Loud enough so the woman in front of me could hear, he said: "Too many ratiobeings, not enough affection." He winked at me.

The woman pretended she hadn't heard it, but I sensed that she was irritated. Good.

The Portal was made out of a colossal, revolving metal sphere, which was suspended in the air, without any visible support. Actually, it was being held up by energies I could not even begin to pronounce. The man who had invented the Portal was obviously a ratiobeing. It's clear that their mathematical and technical capacities are much more evolved than ours. That's also why ratiobeings don't have enough time to think about their feelings. The man must have been baffled when he realized that the other dimension which he was looking for was really the dream world. What's more, his invention had brought about an enormous breakthrough. Both our worlds had been merged into one. It took a lot of time before ratiobeings were able to get over the shock and the confusion. In fact, that still hasn't entirely ended.

As the light turned green, I stepped into the sphere of the Portal. Traveling to another dimension isn't exactly fun. It's like being turned inside-out, which could be the case, really. It would be an amazing fairground attraction for people who like to vomit. Eventually, you do get used to anything. Strangely enough, when you arrive at the other dimension, you land exactly on your feet, as though you have been carefully put down by a giant hand.

Many things indicate that you've arrived in Ratio World. Playtime is over, everything is deadly serious now. Something like that. Fortunately, the sun was shining.

The bureau where the Fantasy Hunters meet is situated, very conveniently, next to the airport. Sometimes it was really important to get to work rapidly, because lives could depend on it. Moreover, a creature that slipped through the Portal illegally could be caught immediately.

Once again my watch glowed. Ratiobeings are extremely impatient. Everything has to happen quickly, efficiently, and all this in accordance with *their* standards.

The bureau of the Fantasy Hunters is one of the last old buildings in a world where technology and renovation is now the most important thing. Every other building in town has been constructed in a rigid and tasteless manner. However, the bureau was built in the twenties, revealing splendor and charm which characterizes the Art Nouveau era. It is the only building in Ratio World that makes me feel at home, keeping everything the same as it was. I consider it to be some kind of antidote for the aloofness of Ratio World, making it possible for me to be there a little longer. It's not that easy for me, being the only representative of Emo World in the group, although these ratiobeings do their best to accept me in their midst. Or to pretend that they accept me.

Gehlen, the leader of the group, waited for me by the door. He was extremely tall, even by human standards. If I didn't know any better, I would be convinced that he descended from giants. He was 8 foot 2 and had the build of a gorilla. I'm 6 feet 2, and even I felt insignificant standing next to him. However, he was surprisingly tender, a kind of gorilla as it were. I couldn't remember a time when Gehlen had been scared, and we had been through a lot! Unlike most of these 'heroes', who were only brave because they didn't have to carry around an awful lot of brains, Gehlen was pretty smart.

I often wondered how he would be in bed. It must be fascinating to be overwhelmed by such power and mass. However, even in bed he would be rather tender. Unfortunately, he was a ratiobeing, so you couldn't just try these things out. Miserable boring peoples these ratiobeings.

"Kate, finally!" he said to me.

"I left in a hurry, Gehlen."

"We know how you guys hurry." He grinned warmly. Unlike most ratiobeings, he started to learn to accept people just as they are.

"What is going on?" I asked, while we entered the building.

"You will hear it in a second."

We walked silently up the marble staircase with its magnificent wrought iron banisters. Vaguely, I noticed that I had to take twice as many steps to walk the same distance as him.

The office of the Fantasy Hunters was on the third floor. At the time, our members had been brought together by the governing authorities of Ratio World. As the two worlds got to know each other, the ratiobeings suddenly understood why they had been seeing so many ghosts and monsters throughout the centuries. They realized that their legends about elves, leprechauns, trolls, vampires and other creatures had found its origin in the other world. Even the so-called UFO's lost their mystery. (As a matter of fact, these aren't aliens. They are called moon landers and they come from Emo World). Every now and then, non-human creatures from Emo World ventured to visit Ratio World. It was usually a short visit, because they were only confronted with a lack of understanding, fear and disgust. When ratiobeings had understood where these creatures came from, these visits were no longer possible. From now on, not a single non-human creature could enter Ratio World. That's such a shame actually, but that's the way our xenophobic opposites were. Incomprehension led to repudiation.

The Fantasy Hunters had to make sure this prohibition was being carried out. We sent the trespassers back home. At worst, we took them out, but fortunately that was hardly ever necessary.

My co-workers were seated at a round table, which resembled the table of King Arthur and his knights. (He actually existed. Our history books are more accurate than those of Ratio World). As usual, Aspen was sitting there with her face stuck to the computer screen. She just lived day and night with that thing.

Aspen was twenty-five years old. Her parents had lived at the end of the Aquarius era, during the second hippie wave. At that time, ratiobeings had discovered their latent paranormal abilities. After having experienced an intellectual boost, their brain had developed in another direction. For a short time, ratiobeings had also accepted the fact that there were different ways of using the brain, other than putting numbers and words in specific orders. Some people hadn't tried to hold back this new evolution, and they had acquired interesting gifts, such as telepathy or telekinesis. Some people, or actually most people, had just wanted to keep things as they were.

Aspen's parents, however, had embraced these changes with great enthusiasm. They had even proved themselves to be representatives of the second hippie wave. That also explains her name. Still, Aspen hated her own name; she'd rather be a genuine ratiobeing.

Aspen didn't have paranormal abilities, but she was a wizard on the computer, and was highly talented in several other areas. She was petite and slender. It seemed as though all the energy had been put in her brain, and that her body had been left out. Though there was nothing wrong with her figure, on the contrary. As for knowledge, I could only outdo her in the field of Emo World beings.

When I arrived, she merely looked up, very briefly. I knew she harbored negative feelings, and I could imagine why.

Cody greeted me with much more warmth. He even raised from his chair. "Hello", he said, almost whispering like he always did.

I liked Cody. He was barely eighteen years old, and he was so shy, sometimes it seemed as though he completely disappeared, but his paranormal talents were legendary.

Then there was Aqua, an expert in fighting techniques, weapons and a clairvoyant specialized in behavior. That meant he could anticipate other people's reactions. He already knew what you were going to do even before you knew it yourself. He too had Aquarius parents. I found it a real pity that he was a ratiobeing. He was exceptionally good-looking with his long blond hair and his icy blue eyes. Sometimes I just wanted to tear his clothes off and take him on top of that round table, while everyone could see us. At home, that would have been possible, but here obviously not. Besides, he consciously maintained a certain distance between us. Apparently, he held a grudge against all things associated with my world. I didn't know why. He couldn't entirely hide the fact that he found me attractive. Gehlen was the only one who knew exactly who I was and what I was, the others could merely assume things. At the time, he hadn't wanted the other members to be shocked by the new member of the group; the 'monster' from Emo World, so he had found it best to let them get to know me little by little. Nevertheless, I had already proven myself during previous assignments.

I sat down between Gehlen and Cody. I sensed that Cody was trying to read my mind, but I locked my thoughts. He too was quite taken by my good looks and charms. I positioned myself to make sure he had a clear view of my breasts.

"Alright, we're all present." Gehlen always started a briefing with this catchphrase.

Aspen briefly looked at me with an inscrutable look in her eyes. Then she focused her attention back on Gehlen.

"Moon landers", the latter one said. It sounded as a sigh. "They are back in action."

Aqua flinched. Moon landers were disastrous for the relations between the two dimensions. As long as there were ratiobeings who still didn't know them, these jerks kept on

scaring them with their so-called ‘abductions’. Moon landers were good at creating illusions. They loved that people believed they were extra-terrestrials, even if they were not. Some people also called them ‘the grey ones’, because of their thin grey skin. They also had a skinny little body and a large head with unusual big black oval eyes.

“Where are they?” Aqua asked.

Aspen gestured to her monitor. “According to the internet, they’re spotted in a small town in Pennsylvania.”

Gehlen was irritated. “How can it possibly be that these people don’t know anything about Emo World?” He had a problem with people not following the news. People acted as though the world had stood still half a century ago. These people are absolutely shocked when they come across phenomena which they’re not familiar with. He sometimes compared them with cavemen who fell to their knees when they saw lightning for the first time.

“What are we going to do?” Cody asked in his usual timid way. He didn’t look anyone in the eye. I often wondered what had made him this shy.

“We’ll kick their asses, I hate these bastards!” Aqua said wholeheartedly. Of course he meant the moon landers. He hated all non-human creatures. Nobody knew why.

“We’ll hunt them down,” Gehlen said. “Like we always do and hopefully we’ll catch them.”

I knew from experience that it wasn’t going to be easy. Moon landers were sneaky. I remained silent because nobody asked for my opinion. They were also extreme jokers. That’s why they loved playing tricks on people. Most of the time, they waited until our airships were close by, after which they took off with extreme velocity. At the time, when the two dimensions weren’t connected yet, this had caused extreme frustrations. During many generations it had been embedded in their culture. Moon landers just couldn’t help themselves, they kept on fooling and frightening ratiobeings. Secretly, I found it rather funny, but the other members of the group didn’t.

I had an idea. I put my hand on Cody’s shoulder. Clearly, he was startled by this unexpected gesture. “You can both teleport yourself and Gehlen, can’t you?”

“Eh... yes?”

I looked at Gehlen. “And your telekinetic abilities are powerful, aren’t they?”

Gehlen replied carefully: “That has been said, yes...” He thought about it for a while. “It’s not that I don’t trust Cody, but I’m not looking forward in letting myself get *demolecuarlized* by him.”

Even the bravest men had their weak spots, I thought.

“I’ve done it before,” Cody said. “With my cat.” He had an innocent look on his face.

“Is it any different than with an elephant?” Aspen asked.

I was surprised and looked in her direction. So the girl did have a sense of humor.

Gehlen merely grunted something unintelligible. I didn’t wait for him to think about the danger of being teleported. “This way you could catch the moon landers before they have the chance to disappear,” I told him.

“Those flying saucers of theirs, those are just illusions, aren’t they? How are we supposed to stop those?” Aqua suggested.

“Their bodies should do the trick,” I replied.

Gehlen said: “Not a simple task, they’re barely traceable in those fake machines. You can’t even see them.”

“That’s where Cody comes in,” I said.

The boy nodded vaguely. “It’s worth a shot.”

“They won’t know what hit them.”

“These guys are really smart,” Aspen remarked. She looked at me with that strange look of hers.

“That’s where you are wrong,” I answered. “They make you think they are smart, that’s their great power. Creating illusions is their only true talent. The great challenge is to look through that.”

Aspen smiled vaguely. I realized that she had also been aware of this. Probably thanks to her damn computer. She’d only wanted to test me. They were sneaky, these ratiobeings.

Aqua asked: “Suppose we do catch them, what are we going to do with them?”

“That’s up to the government,” Gehlen replied. “If I can hold them long enough to hand them over, that is. Okay, we’ll carry out Kate’s idea.” He rose resolutely.

While we left the office, I noticed he didn’t exactly feel confident about the whole operation. This was understandable, since teleportation wasn’t always a safe activity. One time, a fellow passenger came out even worse than those things from Picasso’s Blue Period. It all depended on the ability of the person to whom you trusted your life. Yet I was convinced that Cody was going to do just fine.

Then Cody and Gehlen disappeared. You only heard a *pop!* Like a cork being pulled out of a bottle. That was the sound of air filling up the space where Gehlen and Cody had been standing.

Aqua, Aspen and I hurried to the roof of the building where a small aircraft was waiting for us. These aircraft had gradually replaced cars when there hadn’t been any space

left to drive. In fact, the name ‘airport’ was misleading. There were Portals to travel through dimensions, but airplanes were no longer in use. Only a couple of larger aircraft were used by people who couldn’t afford private transportation.

Our group owned a small aircraft, which was shaped like an amorphous box filled with chairs. It operated on zero-point energy. These things went incredibly fast and made sharp turns without you even noticing it. It had something to do with atomic movements, but I didn’t know more about it. I’m not really interested in technical humbug. People who want to know more about it can look it up on the internet.

Aqua sat down on the pilot’s chair. As a result, the onboard computer switched on. “Warm up the engine,” he commanded.

“Hello Aqua,” the computer replied with a sensual female voice which could not be distinguished from a real voice. Not even with my highly developed hearing skills. Sometimes I believed that the computers in Ratio World were more sensitive than the people who had made them.

The flying vessel started to vibrate.

“Pennsylvania, Julie,” Aqua instructed. “Maximum speed, please.” He was remarkably kind. I felt almost jealous of the cybernetic Julie.

The craft rose up in the air like a speedy elevator.

“Cape Valley, please,” Aqua said. “With coordination points fifty - thirty.”

I sighed. Why were ratiobeings friendlier to their machines than to people of their own kind? Sometimes these people are hard to understand.

The view through the windows became blurry when the flying vessel gathered speed six hundred miles per minute to be exact.

“Dreams are the royal road to the unconsciousness.”

I looked surprised at Aspen. She was staring out of the window. “That’s beautiful, who said that?”

“Sigmund Freud.”

I read about him. He had some worthless theories, but he was gifted with words.

I noticed the shadows in Aspen’s aura. “What’s the matter?”

“I was thinking... switching off our dreams like that, I think it’s wrong.”

“Do you?”

“When I was a child, I believed in Santa Claus. I was heartbroken when I found out that he didn’t exist.”

That was not entirely true. Santa Claus did exist. He lived somewhere in the south of Emo World. There he ran an orange plantation. Once a year, usually in December, he went to Ratio World to fool the children, but he wasn't allowed to do that anymore.

Aspen looked at me. "A life without dreams and illusions feels so empty..."

I had never seen her so emotional. It was as if I was looking at a different Aspen. Her left eyelid trembled a little.

"Physically traveling to Emo World is not the same as dreaming of it," she said. "You miss out on something. No, you miss out on a lot. We've really lost something truly important. Taking drugs to make sure you'll sleep without dreaming." She shook her head. "This can't be right. We are all becoming so... so boring and groggy. But what is the alternative? Being transparent, wandering around in your world, while everyone makes fun of us?"

Since we never dreamed, I could not imagine how that would feel like. I only knew that things usually went wrong when you tried to go against nature.

"I envy you, sometimes," Aspen said.

I was taken aback by her sudden confession. Usually, ratiobeings were never this sincere.

"We have arrived," Julie announced with her sensuous voice.

When we landed, I saw that Cody and Gehlen were already waiting for us. Gehlen was holding his arms up in the air. A flying saucer floated above him, or at least, the illusion of a flying saucer. They had clearly caught one of those things.

Around the area, ratiobeings were grouped in a large circle. Some of them held on to one another, something they only did when they were scared to death.

We jumped quickly out of the vessel.

Visibly, it cost Gehlen much effort to keep the flying saucers under control with his telekinetic powers. Sweat was dripping off his face and his hands were shaking. "Get them!" he snarled when he saw us.

I immediately sought contact with the Council.

"It's Kate."

"Yes?"

"We've caught a group of moon landers running amuck in a small town."

"What are their coordinates?"

I passed on the information. As I was doing that, I saw the moon landers looking out the imaginary windows of their imaginary craft. They looked frightened. Nevertheless, they

knew in advance that they ran a great risk of being caught, but still they continued playing their silly games. It was probably some sort of addiction like gambling. You know you will always end up losing, but you keep on playing anyway.

The flying saucer seemed to dissolve into thin air. The Council with their powerful teleportation skills from Emo World had obviously intervened. Originally, they came from somewhere else, nobody knew from where exactly. No one knew what they looked. People even speculated that they had created Emo World, and that they were reconstructing another dimension. Possibly, they had even made several kinds of apes evolve into human beings by playing around with their DNA. Oh well, wild speculations often circulated whenever the Council would come up. They themselves maintained these myths by hiding behind mists as thick as those in the forests of Avalon.

Gehlen sat down on the ground, his head resting in his hands. Clearly, it had cost him an enormous amount of energy.

A burly man with a long black beard was coming towards us. He seemed someone who was in charge of things, and he looked surly. He asked us to follow him. Ratiobeings were usually afraid of us, but he didn't seem to be troubled by that.

When I looked at Aqua, he shrugged indifferently. We followed the man to a shed.

"I know what you are doing," he said when we were out of view.

"Really?" Aqua said disinterestedly.

He nodded. "Fantasy Hunters." He looked at me. "Clearly you are a descendant of the elves." He grinned when he saw the look on my face. "I know everything about Emo World. I do, but they don't." He pointed at the open door of the shed. "We have to keep things that way. They are happy because they are ignorant."

Aqua frowned. "If your friends out there knew that these moon landers came from Emo World to enjoy themselves, they wouldn't have been this scared!" He seemed to have wanted to add something, but he suddenly kept silent. Then he said in a completely different tone: "They still have dreams and... emotions."

The man agreed. "They are still *alive*," he said emphatically. "This can't be said of the vast majority of insensitive ratiobeings."

I suspected he was an emobeing, one with a mission. Carefully, I tried to read him, but without any result.

"I try to keep everything as it was in this place," he said. "The mountains seal us off from the civilized world. We take care of ourselves and of each other, and we are quite happy with that." He examined Aqua. "Are you happy?"

“I don’t have to answer that,” said Aqua.

The man nodded. “That is right, because I already know the answer. I would rather be unhappy once in a while, than to have no feelings at all. You’d better leave us alone.”

I nudged Aqua. “I think we should leave.”

He nodded, and looked at the man with pouted lips. Then he went outside. I followed him.

When we were all back into the aircraft, I saw the crowd standing around the man with the beard. Some of them glanced worriedly in our direction.

“Let’s go home, Julie,” Aqua said to the computer. He sounded a little grim.

“That was quick,” Gehlen noticed while the aircraft took off. “How did you get these people to understand what had happened this rapidly?”

“Don’t ask,” I said. I stared out of the window, to the blurry landscape of Ratio World.

Cody had taken a seat next to me. Suddenly, he said quietly: “We’re depriving them of their cultural heritage...” I was surprised. When I looked at him, he added: “Not just from ratiobeings, but even from other creatures, like those moon landers. It’s a no win situation. What the hell are we doing, Kate?”

“They are scaring these people to death.”

“Should you stop lions from hunting just because deer are afraid of them? Would you disturb a centuries old balance for that purpose?”

“Deer aren’t people, Cody.”

“I can sense your uncertainty.”

First Aspen, and now Cody, I thought. Cody seemed to have forgotten his normal shyness now he had tapped into his passions. What was going on today with these people? They were easier to handle when they were their own emotionless selves though their behavior gave me hope. Maybe they weren’t such robots after all.

I asked: “Have you been eavesdropping?”

Cody nodded, but clearly he wasn’t finished yet. “People don’t have to laugh to survive,” he said. “The ones who do, sure live longer, that has been proven. They are more cheerful of course and healthier.”

“So you mean we should let everyone have their own way?”

“I mean that we should be careful not to make too many changes in the natural course of things. This concerns both the dimensions.”

“In all honesty, I find this discussion too difficult,” I said.

Cody nodded. "Something that is broken stays broken, and in this case irreparable. That's the problem."

Dreams permit each and every one of us
to be quietly and safely insane
every night of our lives.

(Charles William Dement)

3

When I returned to Emo World, the day had just turned into night. I had been gone a whole day, though it didn't feel as such. Time in Emo World was famous for its fickleness, not just time, anyway.

I walked into town, carefully avoiding the witch shops. I didn't want to return home again with a bunch of junk.

I tried to reach Ewok. I wanted her to keep me company, apparently, she wasn't at home. Besides, I couldn't pass through the shield I had put on my apartment. You can't have everything your way.

My body started to tingle because I hadn't had physical contact for a long time.

"Kate!"

I startled and saw Kalon, my most appreciated ex-boyfriend, walking towards me. He crossed the street without looking. Being a vampire, he still had several lives to spare. Unlike what the legends of Ratio World tell us, vampires aren't immortal. They have numerous lives that cannot end before they all have been completed. Not even with the infamous wooden stake through the heart. Those few vampires, who had been killed with a stake in Ratio World, happened to have only one life left. They could have even been killed with a bullet and not necessarily a silver one.

Unfortunately, though being quarter vampire, I hadn't inherited this ability. At least, I didn't think so, because my mother had had only one life. I'd rather not take the risk of trying it out.

Kalon smiled, showing his particularly well-formed fangs. I loved them. The sinking sun illuminated his shoulder length, raven black hair. Vampires could live during the day, they didn't like it as much. Their skin and eyes were extremely sensitive to sunlight. That is why you only saw them wearing sun glasses and clothes that covered up almost everything.

Kalon hugged me with an overpowering force that made me catch my breath. “I missed you terribly,” he whispered in my ear.

I could clearly feel it down there. “Let’s go to bed,” I said, hoarsely.

“Just back from Ratio World?”

“Good guess.”

Arm in arm, we walked to his apartment near the park, next to a butcher’s shop. Dark curtains made sure that no sunlight would enter his place. It made him feel more comfortable than in my own apartment.

I looked up. “Your timing is perfect.”

“Like always,” he smiled.

He was right, our antennas were completely synchronized.

Kalon’s apartment was decorated with great care and taste. Too bad it was always so dark in there.

He looked at me with those beautiful big black eyes of his and a shudder went through my entire body. Sex with a vampire was possibly even better than with a snakebeing. And Kalon was a fabulous vampire. Besides, it had been a while since we last jumped each other’s bones.

He fell down on his knees, tore my pants and pulled them down. With his teeth, he ripped my panties to pieces. I quivered, and felt how he carefully put his fangs into the soft flesh of my thighs. I had to catch my breath while I closed my eyes and buried my fingers in his silky hair. It seemed like two pin-pricks, just that. Then, he sucked the wound very softly. Flaming with desire, my legs turned into rubber. The next thing I knew, I was lying beneath him on the couch. We were both completely naked. He didn’t have to use his hands; his large, hard membrane seemed to find its way. I bit his lower lip while he entered me, very slowly. I tasted blood, his blood or mine, that didn’t matter. Suddenly, he did something only vampires could do: his penis started to vibrate as if it was leading a life of its own. I was going crazy. A few seconds later I screamed, I buried my fingernails into his back, and squirmed and struggled beneath him. I wanted to hold on to these intense sensations of pleasure flashing through my nervous system. When my last orgasmic convulsions faded, it was Kalon’s turn to come. Once again, I was catapulted into the heights of pleasure.

We lay there for a long time, perfectly still, until the normal rhythm of life returned to our bodies.

“Why aren’t we together anymore?”

Kalon was resting his head between my breasts. When he asked me that startling question, I felt his voice resonate through his head.

I didn't know the answer. My love for Kalon had lasted longer than for the other lovers I had been with. My feelings had become more significant than the usual sexual love I felt, and maybe this had scared me off.

Since I didn't answer immediately, he said: "I think you don't *want* to know."

Sometimes it seemed as though he could look right through me, which was probably another reason for me to pull back.

"I still want to be your life partner Kate, forever."

He was torturing me, probably without realizing it. "You have more than one life, Kalon. You will stay young and attractive much longer."

Kalon sat up straight. "You are thinking about your grandmother."

I looked away. "I will become a wrinkled old woman, while you..." I didn't finish my sentence, it was just too sad.

"That wouldn't bother me. I'm not only in love with your looks."

I held his face in my hands and kissed him gently on the lips. "You are sweet." I declared.

"I mean it Kate."

I didn't have any doubts about that.

When he saw the look on my face, he shook his head impatiently and rose from the couch. He walked toward the window and turned around, his pale nakedness in clear contrast with the black curtains. The circle surrounding his black irises almost seemed to glow in the dark. It was magnificent, devastatingly magnificent!

"Tell me how I can change your mind."

I looked away, feeling guilty.

We remained silent for a while. Then he said: "It's clear that I can't..."

"Try to understand, Kalon. Please."

"I'm sorry, I can't."

"You can't be happy with a human being. You won't stay happy."

"You are only partially human."

"Unfortunately, that is the most dominant part."

"I love you, Kate, whatever you are. You are my soul mate. Never again will I find someone like you."

I rose from the couch and put on my clothes. “I still have to feed Ewok.” I felt sedated while I walked towards the door.

“I will never want another woman,” Kalon said. “For however long you’ll keep me waiting.”

Until my skin loses its smoothness, I thought grimly. I walked out without looking back.

If a little dreaming is dangerous,
the cure for it is not to dream less
but to dream more, to dream all the time.
(*Marcel Proust*)

4

I woke up with a wet tongue in my ear.

Let me sleep, Ewok.

If you don't take me to the wood I'll bark until the entire building wakes up. She grabbed the blankets with her teeth and pulled them off the bed.

I hate vile little bitches! I struggled to get out of bed and walked to the bathroom.

While I was in the shower, I decided to take Ewok for a walk to my great grandfather. My great grandfather liked my visits, and the Elf Wood was really enjoyable. Besides, I could use his elf's advice.

My great grandfather was half a millennium old, and he was incredibly wise. For some time now, he had a new partner who was also an elf. However, my great grandmother had been half human and half witch. She had reached the normal age of one hundred and two years.

Apart from my great grandfather, my only living family member was my grandfather, a vampire. Meanwhile, he was living his seventh life, but no one knew where he was exactly.

Unfortunately, when I visited my great grandfather, I had to take his new wife into account. She was a presumptuous bitch who looked down upon everything and everyone who was not an elf.

In fact, all elves are entirely focused on their own kind. They rarely mix with other creatures. My great grandfather had been an exception, but he had paid the price. By marrying my great grandmother, he had been told to leave the Elf Wood. He could return again when she died.

I put on a green dress, resembling a blossoming forest in spring, with a few specks of red in it. Your appearance was very important when you visited an elf, because they were really sensitive about these things. I sprinkled some elves powder on my hair so that the sun would illuminate it even more, after which I applied my make-up with great care. You had to make sure your make-up wasn't noticeable. It all had to seem completely natural when you were around elves, as though you were a part of the forest. I used make-up in shades you would find in these forests, which I had bought from a witch. The stuff had amazing qualities; the powders seemed to form part of your skin.

As for most places in Emo World, it wasn't a long walk to the Wood. Places were either close by, or they were unreachable. That last option was extremely annoying. You could be searching for days to find a place which was actually close by for someone else. As I said before, the concept of time and space in Emo World doesn't adhere to the rules found in Ratio World. In truth, we only started to realize this fact when we were getting to know the other dimension.

Ewok scurried close to my feet, apparently lost in dog thoughts. The Elf Wood had that effect on everyone; it made you think sometimes about the craziest things. The elves magic that impregnated the Wood affected your physical appearance. Your skin became smooth and velvety, and your hair became so light and airy, as though it were floating above your head. It made you feel truly wonderful. The Wood boosted your ego, but when you eventually saw the elves, it seemed as though they absorbed all this new-found beauty. Finally, you ended up feeling cold and empty.

It has been said that the elves were the descendants of Venus, a high elf.

Venus was a creature who only survived by feeding on the beauty of other beings. She took away your beauty and instead gave you special powers in return.

Hold on, I said to Ewok. We've almost reached the elves.

She looked up, barely reacting.

Suddenly, we were in the center of the little village. If truth be told, it wasn't really a village. You knew that it was situated at that particular place, yet there was not a single house in sight. My mother had told me once that her grandfather must have truly loved my great grandmother, because he wanted to live in a house enclosed by a roof and four walls for her. I had found that really romantic. Elves never sleep and they live off powers provided by the Wood, so they don't need houses to live in. They do draw together at particular places, which are always adorned with extremely beautiful flowers. You won't find these flowers in a flower shop, because the moment you pick one, it withers and shrivels.

“And you are my most beautiful flower.”

When I heard that voice coming from behind me, I turned around.

Sighing I whispered “Melfo.”

I always felt like a little girl when I was with my Great Grandfather. Yet, I called him by his name, because he didn’t like to be called grandfather. It didn’t fit his elves vanity.

“You are creasing my new robes,” he warned me when I hugged him tightly, my head leaning against his chest.

Of course, he meant it. Elves never joke, especially not about their appearance.

“What brings you here?”

“I was walking with Ewok and I wanted to see you.”

Hello Ewok.

Hello, my dog answered while she was staring absent mindedly to all those flowers.

Melfo pointed out a log of wood to sit on. I had the feeling that the log hadn’t been lying there a few seconds ago.

“You look magnificent, Melfo”, I said. When you were around elves, you never knew whether you complimented them out of your own free will, or if they magically forced you to say it. Elves really loved compliments. However, Melfo did look amazing with his silky hair, colored like pearls, his green eyes and his manly features. He was wearing robes with colors that were hard to define, like all elves colors. Deep purple was maybe the closest you could get.

“You didn’t just happen to pass by. Something is bothering you,” he stated.

When I didn’t reply, he said: “Elves always hide their problems. Your great grandmother used to blame me for doing that.”

“I’m considering seeking advice from the Oracle.” I didn’t look at him.

You could only consult the Oracle in special circumstances. She was a High Elf who was more than five thousand years old and extremely ugly. That was the price she had to pay in exchange for her gift to see the future. Some people say even animals avoided going near her.

Melfo said softly: “Then you must really have a serious problem.”

I nodded, staring straight in front of me. “I have a boyfriend, a vampire who seems to love me very much. His name is Kalon. He claims that the Oracle has assigned me to be his soul mate.”

“Do you love him back?”

“I wish I knew for sure...”

He wrapped his hands around mine. “There is something else that darkens your thoughts,” he stated. He looked at Ewok, who was sniffing a flower, until a spray of pollen hit her nose and sent her into a sneezing fit. “My daughter used to cherish a love for a vampire.”

Together they conceived my mother, I thought. Eventually, he abandoned her.

Melfo said: “I suspect that my daughter has secretly planted a magical warning in your mind. It stops you from making the same mistake as her.”

“Didn’t my grandfather know that he would see her growing old while he himself would stay forever young?”

“She had elves blood flowing through her veins. He hoped that she was going to live forever.”

And now history was going to repeat itself.

“Kalon could be different,” Melfo seemed to have read my thoughts. “Generally, vampires have no fear of getting old, just like they are not afraid of death. Your grandfather may have been an exception.”

I nodded gloomily. Maybe, maybe not...

“May I?” Melfo raised his hands to my face. He wanted to make a way into my subconscious.

I let him do it. I didn’t have anything to hide from him. Or at least, I thought so.

His fingertips slightly touched my temples. After a short moment, he lowered his hands. “I was right,” he stated. “She has blocked you off.”

Should I be angry or grateful? I didn’t know.

“Can you undo it?”

Melfo look at me, sorrowfully. “Are you sure that you want it to be undone?”

“There is a catch to it,” I realized.

He nodded. “It will probably harm one of your abilities, and I can’t predict which one.”

“How big of a risk is it?”

“Extremely, you’d better think about it for a while.” Melfo rose. The conversation seemed to have come to an end.

“Thank you, Melfo,” I muttered.

I looked at him while he walked away, and watched the colors of his clothes dissolve into the brown and green shades of the forest.

I remained seated. I was struck down by feelings of doubt and insecurity.

Ewok laid her head on my lap, but she was silent. Dogs, too, have strong empathic abilities. Distracted, I stroke her neck.

Without a doubt, Grandma had done this because she loved me. It still seemed unfair. Besides, implanted restraints are awfully difficult to undo. She probably hadn't thought about the consequences her intervention would have on my personality. Oh well, ordinary parents hardly ever think about how they influence the growth of their children's personality... or how they mess it all up.

Would I be able to conquer it, without Melfo's help? At least I knew that it wasn't my own fault. I didn't prevent myself from giving in to Kalon's love.

I was struck by another disturbing thought. What if I could conquer the restraint, would my desire for Kalon remain as big as it is now? Were we truly soul mates? The attraction of the unattainable...

Suddenly, I rose, I was sick of my own thoughts. However, I had completely forgotten about Ewok, who jumped rapidly onto the ground.

Hey!

I didn't pay attention to her. I was too preoccupied with my own doubts.

Although the events
we appear to perceive in dreams are illusory,
our feelings in response to dream content are real.
(*Stephen LaBerge*)

5

My job as a Fantasy Hunter took place in the dark hours of the evening and the night, because creatures who illegally visited Ratio World thought they wouldn't get caught as easily during that time. The scanner that traced these creatures worked continuously. Aspen checked the data on her computer night and day. I had a suspicion she even slept with her head on the monitor.

We were in real trouble this time. I could feel it as I sat down at our round table. It was still night and they had called me yet again.

Gehlen hadn't arrived so far. He first had to report to the IFG, the International Fantasy Hunters Group. It was a higher organization that had to be called in serious cases. It looked like I was going to be stuck in Ratio World for a while, which I was not looking forward to. Not now, while I was still figuring things out with Kalon.

“Your thoughts are elsewhere,” Cody remarked immediately.

I tried to be as nonchalant as I could. “It’s nothing.”

Gehlen appeared, but he was looking very worried. He sat down without saying hello. He even forgot his usual catchphrase. “It doesn’t look good,” he said. “A forgotten kind.”

“Huh?” Cody clearly didn’t understand what he meant.

“The big bosses were in conclave with the Council. They are worried.”

Aspen asked a little impatiently: “What are we dealing with?”

I knew what a tense meaning the term ‘a forgotten kind’ had. In Emo World there were still creatures that had never been registered, creatures who generally didn’t obey the rules. Often because they didn’t know what these rules were. Of course, not every corner of the world could be examined to find out what kind of species it was inhabited by. Ratio World had been warned that once and a while forgotten kinds could turn up. And now, that time had come.

“Energy vampires,” said Gehlen.

I drew my breath and everyone looked at me. “I have heard of them, a long time ago.”

“A long time ago,” he questioned.

“Nobody knew for sure whether they truly existed or if it was just a legend.” I caught Gehlen’s interrogative glance. “Well sure, we know a few legends as well. Yet, they appeared to be a lot more real than we had hoped for.” I noticed the tension in Aqua’s aura. “The Council banned them to a secluded area away from all civilization.”

“That’s kind of severe for you tolerant emobeings,” Cody found. “What crime did they commit?”

I couldn’t answer that question. “For centuries they seemed to have adhered to the exclusion. We don’t know for certain. Who knows, maybe they have found a way to enter Ratio World without appearing on your radars.”

Aqua asked: “Are there a lot of them?”

“I have no idea. There could be hundreds, maybe even thousands of them. You never know with these kinds of stories. Did the Council have more information?”

Gehlen shook his head. “They thought that these energy vampires had been extinct.”

I thought about this for a while. “Maybe they almost were. Escaping to Ratio World could have been their last resort.”

“If that’s the case, they may have grown weak,” Aspen noticed.

Gehlen nodded. “That is what the Council hopes. We don’t know anything for certain.”

Aspen was working on her computer. "I can't find any information," she said. She looked up. "What kind of threat do they pose?"

Gehlen looked at me. "Kate?"

"I only know bits and pieces I remember from stories." I told them the little information I knew. That energy vampires were the most dangerous bastards that existed among life forms, they would do anything to survive. You couldn't blame them for that because survival is important for most life forms.

"There she goes again," Aqua sighed. "Constantly justifying, the filth that comes from her world."

I didn't let him get to me. "We are just more tolerant than you guys," I stated calmly. I was wondering why he sounded so irritated.

"Please no philosophical discussions," Gehlen requested.

He looked at me. "More good news?" he asked.

"Their names have to be taken literally, they suck the energy out of everything that contains molecules, even out of chairs."

"Out of people, of course," Aqua said wryly.

I nodded. "Out of other living beings."

"God, how I hate vampires," he said.

I reacted more intensely than I intended. "They are not vampires!"

"Oh, no? Then why are they called like that?"

"Genuine vampires don't harm anyone."

"I have heard different stories, here in the real world." He brusquely emphasized the word 'real'.

"I have also heard different stories about your real world including the Attila's, Napoleon's, Hitler's, Stalin's, Amin's, and the Saddam's." I looked at Aqua defiantly. "And don't forget the addition of thousands of other bastards!"

"People, please!" Gehlen warned us. He seemed to have become angry himself.

While Aqua sulked in silence, I gave in a little. "We call them vampires, they... Well, because of the sucking. That is the only thing they have in common with real vampires. They are not related in any other way. What's in a name?"

"Kate and her vampires," Aspen said, shaking her head.

"I've also met some decent vampires once," Gehlen said. It looked like he wanted to support me.

“Energy vampires are anything but decent,” I said. “Sucking the energy out of a human being is a true delicacy for them.” I almost enjoyed the disgusted look on Aqua’s face.

“So they feel like they are in Lazy Town here,” Cody said with his soft voice.

Aspen asked: “What do they look like?”

“Quite like you and me, but uglier and without any solid substance. They seem to have been made of ectoplasm of some sort.”

“So they look like ghosts.” That was Aqua again. I was starting to wonder what was eating him. However, he was not far from the truth. The energy vampires were sometimes invisible. And when you did see them, for example, when they had just eaten, you still couldn’t touch them. You just went right through them. Some of the old ghost stories from Ratio World were certainly based on energy vampire sightings.

Aspen asked: “How in heaven’s name can we capture them?”

“They’re most vulnerable when they have just eaten,” I answered. “Like most creatures.”

“People in Ratio World don’t know they exist,” said Gehlen. “So they can do what they like without being disturbed.”

“Not if I have something to do with it,” Aqua said grimly.

The hate in his aura was almost too painful to witness. Once again, I wondered what was wrong with him.

“All Fantasy Hunters have been warned,” Gehlen clarified. “Everyone is expected to help out.”

Aspen was a little worried. “I have read quite a few ghost stories. Right before a ghost appears, the temperature in the room drops significantly. Is it the same with energy vampires?”

I nodded. “That’s because they suck out all the power. Everything in their surrounding cools down, and sometimes the furniture falls apart and the plants die.”

“It doesn’t look like we will ever be close friends,” Cody said. He shivered emphatically. He didn’t seem to be faking it.

“It is not going to be easy,” said Gehlen. “But we have to do it, right now.”

“They are sending us to Dorsen,” Aspen said while working on her computer.

We were sitting in the aircraft. Gehlen was steering the ship, ready to take off. Everyone looked more anxious than usual. I wasn’t exactly calm myself. I would have much rather been in bed with Kalon.

I suddenly remembered I had once asked Kalon if he was related to the energy vampires. He had denied it quite furiously. Kalon had called them bastards, and said that he hated their guts. True vampires were often compared to them, which was obviously a wrong thing to do. Nonetheless, I had sensed a slight hint of fear. Kalon had given me the explanation a few moments later. True vampires were mainly made up of energy as well, which made them extra vulnerable. Energy vampires could even kill them by sucking them dry until each of their lives had been used up.

“Dorsen?” asked Gehlen. “Did they cause the most damage there?”

Aspen shook her head. “It’s the closest place to where we are now.”

Gehlen nodded. “You’ve heard it, Julie.”

Without delay, the computer initiated the take-off, and the aircraft rose up in the air.

Dorsen was a small town filled with computer freaks, similar to a miniature Silicon Valley. People, who weren’t specialized in cybernetics couldn’t even enter the place. The people there weren’t interested in anything else; they didn’t even have other hobbies. Most of them wore contact lenses with built-in computer screens so that they would never miss a thing. Their social lives, call it as you may, took place mainly on the internet. No wonder they had the lowest birth rate of the entire world. It certainly appeared; a sort of computer sect.

Or a sublimation of Ratio World, I suddenly thought. Instead of a heart, these people seemed to have a computer placed in their chests.

Of course, Aspen had a different opinion about Dorsen. “I wish I could live there,” she said as she caressed her keyboard. Well, that didn’t surprise me at all.

Things weren’t looking good in Dorsen. Usually, the inhabitants sat in front of their computer screens like zombies. Now, however, they were running around in circles, awkwardly waving their hands in the air. Others were rolling about on the ground, while some of them jumped to and fro like rabbits. Several looked frightened when we landed, but others were just staring into space, their eyes completely glazed over.

“Are we able to protect ourselves?” Aspen asked. She was worried while she observed them behaving so oddly. These were the people whom she had wanted to live with a few seconds ago.

“Activate the shield,” said Gehlen to Julie.

The aircraft had a Para psychological defense system which shielded the craft from every living organism, even from ghosts. This was actually the result of an unusual, but well-working cooperation between witches and engineers.

We were all looking tensely out of the windows. What were we looking for, ghosts?

Gehlen rose from his seat and opened the weapon cabinet. He handed each of us an energy gun. It was heavy artillery, capable of killing everything that did or did not move. This time, we would not hand over these guys to the Council. It didn't make me happy, but it was something we had to do. Otherwise, it was like jumping naked into a snake pit. However, I would jump naked into a pit full of snakebeings.

"I hope I will get quite a few of them," Aqua said icily.

When Gehlen saw the look on my face, he said: "It's us or them, Kate."

I nodded gloomily. Killing is a hard thing to do for someone who thinks every living being has its own rights, no matter how monstrous that being may be. Of course, I'm not that naïve. There are limits. When your own life is in danger, you cannot keep on respecting the life of your opponent.

Julie switched off the shield for a moment so we could leave the aircraft. Cautiously, with our guns at the ready, we snuck out, one by one. A few people who were walking close by recoiled anxiously. It seemed that our appearance had given them a fright though Cody was clearly terrified himself.

I'll be fine; he said telepathically when my worried thoughts had reached him. *I hate guns; I have learned to make use of other powers...*

Now, while we were outside, we could hear people shouting and screaming. It was extraordinarily painful, like a madhouse in a deep crisis. The place seemed entirely taken in by energy vampires.

Next, I saw them in action. Energy vampires were scattered in all directions, bowing over their victims while they pressed them to the ground with their strong hands. Eyes rolling in their sockets, they quickly hovered with mouths agape over their shaking victims. With great speed, they sucked each drop of life force out of their defenseless bodies.

One of the guzzling energy vampires seemed to have scented danger. He turned around rapidly looking in our direction. The next thing I knew, he flew like an attacking cheetah to where Gehlen was standing, his mouth forming a grotesque and greedy grimace. At the same time, he was turning invisible.

Gehlen fired his gun. It lit up like lightning, illuminating the creature as though he were hit by a ray of sunshine. In no time, the energy vampire had been dematerialized. He dissolved into thin air, once and for all.

"Damn, they are fast!" Gehlen snapped. "Watch out, people!"

Aqua started firing his gun like a madman. He loved guns, but I had never seen him act this fiercely. Here and there, energy vampires lit up, dying while they were devouring

their prey. “Stay close to the aircraft!” Gehlen warned us. “Keep your backs covered, let them come to us.”

The creatures seemed to smell our energy. They were running towards us with an alarming speed. We had very little time to aim our shots correctly as soon as the energy vampires stopped eating, they started to dissolve. Sometimes we had to aim at an ice cold gust of wind.

I saw Aqua disappear in the chaos of energy vampires and human beings, still shooting furiously. That half a second of distraction had nearly cost me my life. One of the semi-transparent creatures was coming towards me with his mouth agape. I could already feel the eagerness with which he reached out to my energy when a well-aimed shot of Gehlen reduced him to loose atoms. Immediately, the next creature flew towards me. This time, it was me who took him out.

There are so damn many of them, I thought, feeling desperate and afraid. There are only five of us; we are never going to get out alive.

We will get them! That was Cody. He was no fighter, but he was certainly courageous.

Aspen screamed. She lay on the ground, trashing about like mad. I fired my gun in the air above her. The energy vampire suddenly became visible before he burst into a million little pieces and disappeared. There was already another one coming towards me. I took him out before he had the chance to approach me.

I heard Gehlen bellow madly, while his gun constantly lit up. The energy vampires seemed to have made him tap into unknown depths of violence.

I caught a glimpse of Aspen. She was standing up again, fighting off the attackers, but she was still staggering.

“Go inside!” I yelled. I was afraid she would collapse. She didn’t seem to hear me through the turmoil of the ongoing battle.

Gehlen had understood me. “Back into the ship!” he growled at her with a voice that could have made trees tremble. “Julie! The shield!” he screamed at the computer.

Aspen obeyed dazedly, and stumbled into the aircraft where she could be looked after. There she would receive the necessary medical care from Julie.

Next, I saw Aqua. He was standing with his back against a wall, shooting fiercely around him. I couldn’t see his attackers, but I was certain that he wouldn’t be able to carry on for much longer.

I wasn't even thinking of asking Gehlen's opinion. I shot at ghostly figures coming from the left and the right, as I ran towards Aqua. I jumped over dead and half-dead people who were moaning and screaming.

Aqua was now kneeling on the ground, but he was still shooting. I shot at creatures to his left and right, missing Aqua by only a couple of inches. I took the risk of nearly hitting him, but I just had to do it, because now, Aqua was able to crawl back on his feet. Determined, I dragged him back to where the others were standing.

Just then, Aspen reappeared as well, moving her body with a newfound self-certainty.

The tide seemed to be turning. The amount of energy vampires was decreasing, and their attacks were slowing down. The group could disperse itself in order to kill the creatures more systematically.

Suddenly, the battle was over. As the combat stopped so abruptly, we were standing there for a moment, looking groggily around us and expecting to find the last attackers to surprise us from behind. That didn't happen.

Gehlen exhaled shakily as he let himself drop to the ground. "God damn..." he muttered.

Aspen started to sob, which nobody minded.

Cody said: "To think that this isn't the only place where these monsters are partying." He looked at the gun lying in his hands, as though he didn't know what to do with it.

"Aqua..." Gehlen looked at him. "Don't you dare try that one on me again...? You jeopardized everyone's safety by running off like that." Then, he looked at me. "And you... Oh well, never mind." He got up. "Julie, did you execute a scan?"

"There are no longer any energy vampires in the surroundings." The computer answered through speakers.

"I felt powerless." Aqua said to no one in particular. "I couldn't probe their behavior, and that made me furious."

"Let's call the emergency services," I said, gesturing towards the civilians who were still not back to their senses. However, the screaming and yelling had already diminished as the energy vampires had disappeared.

Nobody looked outside when the aircraft took off a few moments later. We had seen enough suffering for a while.

Aspen looked at her computer screen with a big frown on her face. "There are still quite a few Fantasy Hunters working on it, but most of the other groups were successful though I still have the feeling that something isn't right." She turned the screen towards me. I

saw a map of the area which fell under our jurisdiction. The oscillating streams of energy that were visible on the map decreased as the energy vampires were eliminated. However, one particular section showed a vague and indecipherable signal, as though something had caused interference with its reception.

“This seems to be something different altogether,” I said. “The energy level of these creatures is usually much stronger.” I nudged Gehlen. “Shouldn’t we investigate the area?”

He glanced quickly at the screen and shook his head. “I don’t think it’s important, I want to go home. We are now too weak. We’ll check it out tomorrow.”

We shouldn’t have been this careless.

As I tried to calm my racing mind, I thought about Kalon. Suddenly, I yearned deeply for the warmth of his body, even more so than usual.

The aircraft reduced its speed. The sun was shining, from hell to heaven in less than three minutes. It seemed like the slogan on a tourist brochure.

But an indefinable feeling kept haunting the dark corners of my mind.

I don't use drugs, my dreams are frightening enough.

(M.C. Escher)

6

Kalon caressed my hair. I lay on the couch with my head on his lap. Ewok had nestled close to my legs.

“You should get some sleep,” Kalon said softly. “I can hear the thoughts running through your head at maximum speed.”

I took a deep breath through my nose. “It was awful, I thought I wasn’t going to come out of it alive this time.”

“Why do you continue risking your life with that group? There is so much you could do with those talents of yours.”

Kalon had confronted me with a good question, a very good question. What had drawn me to being a Fantasy Hunter?

“I don’t have that many talents,” I countered.

“Oh, that’s right, only those of four different kinds of species.”

“Having small abilities and not a single true gift gets one nowhere.”

“With your strong empathic abilities you could be a great nurse.”

“I suppose I’d miss the excitement,” I admitted. “I think I may well be an adventurer.”

“You do live pretty dangerously, Kate.”

Not always, I thought. Most of the time, our missions were a lot less risky. But more importantly, I was extremely restless.

“I’m a survivor, Kalon.” I tried to make my voice sound reassuringly.

“Why did you ask me to come here?”

When I looked at him, I saw a spark of hope lighting up his sad eyes. I found it heartbreaking that I couldn’t live up to that hope. “I needed you.”

He kissed me softly, I could hardly feel his lips on mine, but the fond touch of his skin made me yearn for more. I had once read that the moment you are about to be kissed, you come in contact with your deepest hopes and desires. I had realized that it was entirely true. In the arms of Kalon I could cast off my worries while I gave in to the overwhelming passion. I noticed vaguely how Ewok sighed as she jumped off the couch and entered the kitchen.

“Bite me,” I begged Kalon while he kissed my neck.

As he granted my wish with all the love he could muster, I felt the tangible world slip away from under my feet.

There came no new sightings of energy vampires. Were they finally defeated after all? Several Fantasy Hunters were wounded or killed as well, but given the circumstances, the losses were reasonable.

However, quite a number of people were worse off. The deceased had gotten off easily. The victims of the energy vampires who had survived had to spend the rest of their lives wandering around in the murky depths of their souls. People were still in search for the right medication, but there wasn’t much hope.

Aspen and I couldn’t shake off the feeling that it wasn’t over yet, that we had overlooked something truly important. I thought about it for a moment while I was tidying my apartment.

As I walked to the sun roof to throw some trash in the garbage can, Ewok followed me with a half-eaten teddy bear between her jaws. She looked at me, innocent and expectantly.

I’m cleaning, Ewok.

Want to play?

There’s no time.

I walked to the kitchen to wash the glasses we used last night. Ewok uttered her usual sigh and ran away.

I put the glasses in the cupboard and returned to the living room. Ewok lay sulking on the couch. With one eye opened, she followed every movement I made.

When I looked outside, I saw that the werewolves were in an extremely bad mood. Dark clouds gathered in the sky, just as I wanted to take Ewok for a walk. In that case, it had to be a short walk. I went and put on my raincoat.

We walked outside and tried not to look at the gloomy sky. I wanted to go to the park, but I couldn't find it. Usually, it was only a five-minute walk, now it could have been five hours. Oh well, the park might return in no time.

Suddenly, the Leprechaun Forest was right in front of us. It was a good alternative, at least, if you stayed near the border of the forest. It changed constantly and only the Leprechauns could find their way in it. You could get lost, never to return.

We enjoyed the spicy odors of the forest, could also smell the imminent downpour. I was wearing my special raincoat and held up the umbrella which I had bought in a witch shop. These protected you against the pouring rain, which washed down on us a few moments later. I held the umbrella above Ewok as steady as I could, while she growled and cursed her family members.

We shall have to take shelter, she announced, and we scurried to a nearby cave.

We had just entered the cave when suddenly I sensed we weren't alone.

Deeper in the cave, in the semi dark, I saw the vague contours of a human figure. Someone with ordinary eyes would probably not have noticed him.

Ewok growled as she tried to look ferocious, which she did quite well for the fluffy little dog she was. However, the person remained motionless at the other side of the cave.

"Who are you?" I asked hesitantly.

The person didn't react, but I had the feeling that I already knew him, so I didn't feel worried anymore. Ewok, however, kept on growling menacingly.

"Hello, Kate."

His low voice sounded familiar, it reminded me of someone of my childhood. Suddenly, I began to feel cold, and not because of the chilly air in the cave.

"Grandpa," I sought.

"Good guess."

I felt a little hesitant at first, but then I ran quickly towards the man. Without giving it another thought, I hugged him. "I thought you were dead!"

He smiled so charmingly I almost forgot what he had done to my grandmother. He hadn't changed a bit. He still looked the way I had remembered him. That was a typical

characteristic of vampires. They stayed young until all their lives were used up. His raven black curls adorned his head like newly forged steel. When you looked into his eyes, you imagined yourself in the magnificent crevices of a long forgotten love cavern. My grandmother had fallen for him like I had fallen for Kalon.

He pointed at Ewok. She had stopped growling, yet she was still looking at him with suspicion. “What a vicious little creature.”

“She’s my dog, Ewok. She has the blood of a werewolf running through her veins.”

“Oh, that is why it’s raining this heavily.”

Ewok snarled, showing her teeth.

“Impressive,” said Grandpa, he didn’t seem to be serious. Ewok decided to give up.

I looked at the vampire. “Where have you been all these years? Why haven’t you been in touch?”

He placed my hands in his. “What did your grandmother tell you about me?”

“She didn’t tell me why you abandoned her.” I tried not to sound so reproachful. “She only told me that you had left to travel around the world.”

Suddenly, he rose to his feet. “Let’s continue this conversation somewhere nicer. Even though I’m supposed to feel at home here,” he uttered that last remark with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

While we were walking to a witch tavern, grandfather didn’t want to stand under the umbrella. He said he liked the feeling of raindrops falling on his face.

We were silent for a while. His presence beside me didn’t feel strange, even though I hadn’t seen my grandfather for ages. However, I was wondering how it was possible to encounter your long lost grandfather in a cave where you normally never came. I was planning to go somewhere else in the first place. No, it was no coincidence. Coincidence was something of Ratio World. If you believed in coincidence, you didn’t have to think about deeper causes and consequences or about how people are all connected to each other in one way or another, like the famous and wise Jung had come to realize one day. He had called it the collective unconscious. He must have suspected the existence of Emo World more than a century before its discovery.

The innkeeper of the *Magic Talk* conjured a round table in a quiet and dark corner of the tavern. When we sat down, a lit candle and two cups of steaming coffee were already placed on the table.

“Your grandmother could do this too,” said grandfather as he positioned himself on his chair. I heard sadness in his voice. He stared at me with a searching look on his face. “Who told you what really happened?”

“Melfo...”

His gaze suddenly darkened with disgust. He managed to conceal it as quickly as it had appeared, but it didn't escape my attention. “You and your father-in-law didn't get along,” I stated.

He nodded reluctantly as he sipped his coffee and looked away. “He didn't approve of the choice his daughter had made. Though, according to him, he didn't have any problem with vampires, as long as they stayed away from his daughter.”

“I didn't get that impression when I talked to him.”

Grandpa shrugged. “Maybe he has become wiser by now. Although he was right in the end...” He paused. “I abandoned your grandmother.”

“She had gotten too old? Was that the only reason?”

I looked at his face which was as smooth as a young man's. I realized it seemed a little strange that I didn't have any trouble calling him grandpa.

“I loved her very much,” he said. He stared into his cup. “She was the most beautiful woman I had ever met, with her intelligence, liveliness, mindful of ideas, just a magnificent creature. I wasn't good enough for her.”

“You were perfectly happy for years. You had my mother.”

“Yes, and I deserted her as well. Did she ever talk about me?” When I hesitated, he nodded resignedly.

I remembered that my mother had never talked spontaneously about her father. Only when I had specifically asked about him, had she answered my questions. Mostly in a manner that was anything but affectionate.

“I never saw either of them ever again. I never had the chance to say goodbye before they died.”

“You have extreme difficulties with the concept of growing old and dying,” I stated.

He nodded. “You have no idea.”

“That's no surprise when you can live more than a thousand years without ever losing your youth.”

I was getting a little annoyed, and he looked at me with a frown on his face. “There is a limit to life,” he remarked. “I'm glad I'm not an elf.”

“How many lives do you have left?”

"I don't even know. My father is now living his seventh life..."

"You have had enough," I observed, though it was difficult for me to understand. How could someone so handsome and strong be tired of life?

"What holds me back is my fear of dying. That is a typical characteristic of our kind, isn't it?"

"Shall I help you with that?"

He looked at me in surprise, until he realized I was just making a macabre joke. "What do you do for a living?"

As I told him, he was surprised for a second time. "That means you often have to travel to Ratio World?"

"Yup"

"Why would anyone want to do such a thing?"

"I find it very exciting. Maybe I'm some kind of adrenaline addict."

He shook his head. "My granddaughter a Fantasy Hunter..."

I realized he referred to the risks of the job. You could pay for it with your life, and my grandfather couldn't understand why someone would do something like that willingly. He wasn't afraid of death, but he was afraid of dying.

"Humans are strange beings" he remarked. "Even if only one quarter human." He emptied his cup. "I miss your grandmother," he said suddenly.

I had already realized it, but I waited, remaining silent.

"I should have been there for her those last months, but she looked so old, and so sick and weak. I couldn't bear it anymore, it was incredibly painful. I wasn't..." He shook his head. "And worst of all, she knew exactly what was going on in my head." Grandpa looked at me with eyes full of sorrow, as if he was trying to ask me for forgiveness. "It was she who asked me to leave."

I wasn't surprised. Grandma had been very accepting about the matter. When she had told us the news that grandpa had left, she had acted very serenely, as though it was just meant to be.

"She was always so understanding. If I would have stayed with her until the end, she would have probably felt even more miserable. No, I'm not trying to justify myself!"

His tone of voice startled me. "I'm not accusing you of anything," I said reprovingly.

"No, of course not, you've always been as forbearing as your grandmother."

"She has planted some sort of warning in my mind."

"What?"

“Melfo detected it. Apparently she wanted to prevent me from falling for a vampire so history wouldn’t repeat itself.”

Grandfather’s look now became so piercing it almost hurt. “Your grandmother was very foresighted.”

I nodded guiltily. “His name is Kalon.”

As he continuously turned his empty cup between his slender fingers, grandpa said: “I think I have done more damage than I realized.” He looked at me. “Could Melfo reverse the spell?”

He didn’t tell me not to fall in love with a vampire, which surprised me. “He could, but it could also cost me one of my abilities.”

“It might not even be necessary, not every vampire is the same.”

“Humans aren’t the same either. Maybe I’ll grow tired of Kalon long before the first wrinkle appears on my face,” I said defiantly. Or he’ll grow tired of me, I thought. In Ratio World they have an eye-opening saying for this: love is eternal while it lasts.

Without being asked, the innkeeper brought us two cups of coffee and some water for Ewok. She walked away in silence.

“Apparently, the spell makes sure your intellect remains operational while you are in love,” grandpa stated. “So it’s not for nothing.” I wasn’t sure whether he meant it or not.

“I’ll find a way to live with it. Kalon is more than worth the trouble.”

Grandfather nodded. “You will be fine.” He put his hand on mine. “I’m sure of it.”

“Grandpa...” I hesitated. “I want you back in my life.”

He looked surprised. “I wasn’t expecting that, Kate. I was hoping, but not expecting.”

I had many joyful memories of my grandfather, enough to make me forgive that one mistake, how awful it may have been. Clearly, he had punished himself long enough because he had let himself be ruled by his own nature.

I had forgiven him, not without any personal gain. Grandfather was the source of my problem with Kalon. A confrontation might help me tackle this problem. Besides, grandpa and Melfo were the only family I had left.

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” I said. It was an empty saying, but I could see that my words pleased him.

He smiled. “I love the rain,” he said.

The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up.

(Paul Valéry)

When I reached my apartment, a stranger was pounding on my door. The warning growls of Ewok made him turn around. It was a dreamer with his usual sleepy yet restless gaze.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

The man looked at me confusedly. “The door is locked.”

“This is my house.”

“Oh.”

“Why did you want to go inside?”

“To jump out your window,” he announced.

“Really?”

Somewhat impatiently, he said: “I know I’m dreaming. I’ve practiced myself in lucid dreams.”

“Okay. And that’s why you want to jump out of my window?”

“Yes, to fly. I need to start at a higher altitude.”

“Right, I see. And why exactly out of *my* window?”

“I was walking and I ended up here. You know that the location of places change in your dreams. Are you a dreamer as well or just a figure of my own dream?”

“I’m a dreamer too,” I lied, eager to find out what was going to happen.

“You know you are dreaming too? That’s strange I didn’t know you could meet other dreamers.”

“So you don’t know you are in Emo World?”

“Emo World? Is that what you call the dream world?”

An ignorant of course, otherwise he would never have come up with the idea of jumping out of the window to fly. A lucid dreamer, however, was truly exceptional. Lucid dreamers realized they were dreaming, so they were in control of their own dreams. In the past, these people had been given clues about the existence of Emo World, but apparently they just forgot as they woke up.

“Yes, I call it Emo World. Don’t you like it?”

“Where did you get that name from? I don’t understand.”

The dreamer had something funny about his appearance. He was not even 5 feet tall. He had a round head with puffy cheeks and bulging eyes. His long hair and messy clothes suggested he came from a technologically less developed area of Ratio World.

“If I told you, you wouldn’t want to jump out of the window anymore,” I said.

He started to look worried. "This is a dream, isn't it?" He quickly looked around.

"Of course, don't you worry."

"Thank goodness. Can I use your window now?"

I opened the door and walked inside, followed by the dreamer.

"Funny little dog," he said.

I looked at Ewok, but she didn't reveal her feelings to me.

"Like owner, like dog," I said. Ewok growled.

The dreamer looked around without embarrassment. "Does it look like your apartment in the real world?"

"Pretty much." I didn't know what else to answer.

"It seemed to be out of a movie."

I wondered if he meant it as a compliment. Before I could ask him, there was a knock on the door.

"Aha, a visitor," said the dreamer who acted as if the apartment was his.

It was Kalon. When I kissed him, he looked past me to where the dreamer was standing. The look on his face revealed that he thought I had brought home another sex partner.

"Who is he?" he asked in a tone which was anything but friendly.

"A lucid dreamer," I whispered in his ear.

"My name is Tom," the dreamer said. "And who might you be?"

"Kalon"

"Strange name, Romanian?" he replied.

"Lots of vampires are called Kalon." He grinned when he saw that the man had a fright.

"Are you a vampire, a real one? I didn't ask for one, get out!"

"Too late."

The dreamer was agitated as he searched through the pockets of his coat. His eyes were fixed on Kalon the whole time.

I asked: "What did you lose?"

"A cross won't help you," Kalon said sympathetically.

The dreamer looked at me in need of help.

"Kalon is right," I said. "It doesn't affect vampires." I wanted to explain it all, but I had to stick to the rules. "He loves garlic," I added a little cruelly.

The dreamer ended his useless search. "Are you going to bite me?" he asked Kalon.

“I’m not into men,” Kalon answered gravely.

The dreamer looked at me. “Aren’t you scared?”

“Why?”

“He could bite your throat off!”

“He’s never been that passionate. He bruised my labia once, didn’t he?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” the dreamer remarked.

“I’m a well-behaved vampire,” Kalon said. “There are nice witches too.”

“What about cute poisonous snakes?”

Kalon nodded. “Yes, them too.”

“You two are a strange pair. Can I watch?”

“Watch what?”

“Well, when you guys do it.”

“When we what-?”

I put my hand on Kalon’s arm before things got out of hand. “Weren’t you about to fly out of the window?”

The man looked a little confused, but then he remembered his previous plan. “Right, the window...” He walked towards the window. However, halfway he started to fade. “Hey, I don’t want to wake up yet!” he objected. His voice was fading too. He disappeared, back to Ratio World.

“His REM sleep must have stopped,” I stated.

Kalon nodded. “I didn’t come here to entertain a dreamer.” He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me near.

We walked to the bedroom. “Watch out for my throat,” I warned him.

After Kalon had left, I curled up on the couch with a comfortable blanket and a book. It had been a while since I had gotten to that. I loved Kalon and I was a very sociable person but I did feel the need to be on my own once and a while.

Kalon, however, had left to work reluctantly. He worked at the warehouse of a storage firm where he could move around lots of equipment with his vampire strength. He loved that kind of manual labor, because he could use up some excess energy that way. He could do that with me as well, which was much more fun. Unfortunately, being a vampire, he could not call in sick. Everyone knows that vampires never get sick.

I was reading *A History of Ratio World: From 2000 to the Present Day*. It wasn't as boring as the title suggested. Stories about ratiobeings were usually very interesting, or very funny, at least. Besides, some knowledge of their behavior helped me at work.

With Ewok's head on my lap, I was caught up in the difficult development of space travel between 2000 and 2010, when there was a loud knock on the door. I briefly considered pretending I wasn't home, but Ewok started to bark. She could have been home alone, of course, but a second series of vigorous knocks on the door made me change my mind. Reluctantly, I peeped through the eyehole in the door. I couldn't see anyone. Then, I heard a child's voice:

"My name is Neder. You probably don't know me, but-

When I opened the door, a demon child stood in front of me, too small to be seen through the eyehole. He shuffled his feet uncomfortably, hardly looking at me with his dark red eyes. His bright red horns and black lips indicated that he was a fire demon. His extremely large and callused hands didn't seem to belong to this skinny little man. The callous protected them against the fire which they made with their hands. Despite their name, fire demons were very gentle. They were intelligent, they worked hard and they didn't harm anyone. He looked like he was ten years old, but he could just as well be eighty.

"What can I do for you, Neder?"

"Eh, well ... you are a Fantasy Hunter, aren't you Ma'am?"

I was curious. "Yes?"

"Well, eh..." He was nervously crumpling up a piece of paper he was holding in his hands. "I, eh, would like to interview you, Ma'am if that's possible?"

"Interview me?"

"I'm a journalist at the school paper, Ma'am."

He was too endearing to tell him to leave, so I let him in.

Ewok had stopped barking, she had even fallen asleep. She didn't care much for fire demons.

I showed Neder to his seat. As he sat down, he smoothed out his piece of paper attentively. He didn't seem to have brought a tape recorder. His school paper probably didn't have the means for it.

I poured myself a cup of coffee before I sat down, but it had already gotten cold. When I made a grimace, Neder carefully reached out his hand and touched the cup. Immediately, the coffee was steaming again. "Thanks," I said. "I could use someone like you in the kitchen. How did you get hold of my address?"

“Celebrities aren’t that hard to find.”

“Celebrities?”

“You’re the only Fantasy Hunter in Emo World.”

Strangely enough, I had never thought about that. “So you want an interview with the famous Fantasy Hunter?”

“Eh... like that, yes.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s an expression from Ratio World. It means you can start asking your questions.”

Neder nodded. “The...eh... did you... Did you fight energy vampires?” The last words were uttered full of awe.

“Aha.” I made myself more comfortable. “You find that very scary, don’t you?”

Neder nodded eagerly. “Really brave too,” he added.

“Let me tell you a secret; we nearly wetted our pants.”

This awkward confession surprised him a little. “Can I write that down?”

“Of course, journalists always have to tell the truth.”

“Journalists oh M..!” He grinned timidly. Next, he asked: “Weren’t those energy vampires banished to an island?”

“They escaped, but now they are all dead.”

“All of them?”

I slowly shook my head. I was still not entirely sure of that.

“What do they look like?”

“Most of the time, they’re invisible. When they do show themselves, they look like human beings.”

“That ugly?” he stated.

When I looked at him suspiciously, Neder started to grin broadly. “Just kidding,” he clarified.

I told him the story of our unpleasant adventure with the energy vampires. His pen scribbled fervently on the crumpled paper. When I finished my story, he said:

“I hope they are all dead.” He stared at his notes. “May I ask how eh... how did you become a Fantasy Hunter?”

“Do you have similar ambitions?”

He had an eager look on his face. “Could that... could I become one?”

“That’s unlikely, Neder. You can’t enter Ratio World unless you’re a human being, at least, for now.” As long as they keep on being narrow-minded, I thought.

“That’s not fair, is it?”

“Ratio World is unfair, and it will stay that way for the next hundred years, if by then they haven’t all lost their minds.” Shutting off the mental outlet of your dreams can’t be a good thing, I thought gloomily.

“You eh... with all due respect, but eh... you’re not entirely human yourself, are you?”

I nearly laughed at his tense expression. “It was quite silly how I was caught up in the whole thing. You really want to know how?”

Neder nodded eagerly. So I told him the story of how the Council had noticed me because of my thesis on shadow eaters, a species that is nearly extinct. These creatures are as big as your hand, and as dark as the night. Normally, they don’t do much damage eating shadow, because shadow immediately grows back. However, they are parasites. They stick to you until it drives you completely crazy. It’s like an army of mosquitoes incessantly circling around your head. They produce an incredibly irritating noise, and they are almost impossible to get rid of. That was where I came in. I had observed them for two years and I knew them better than anyone.

Neder asked with obvious awe: “So you met them?”

I nodded. “I had made a deal with their leader: she could eat my shadow for a whole month.”

“What?”

“Long ago, the Council decided that shadow eaters could only feed on the shadow of objects and animals who are not bothered by them. They have to stay away from emobeings, so the leader was extremely privileged. That way, I got to know everything about them. Much more than the information they had at that time.”

I graduated cum laude and from then on, they saw me as an expert in the field of emocreatures, especially those who are threatened with extinction.

“I was called in by the Council when a couple of shadow eaters had escaped to Ratio World and started to bother people.”

I looked at Neder’s vigorously scribbling pen. That first assignment had passed without any violence. Shadow eaters are mostly negotiators and I had persuaded their leader to summon her fellow shadow eaters back to Emo World. On condition that she could eat my

shadow for a week. I could live with that. Some people in Ratio World are even more annoying.

“You have been through quite a lot, haven’t you?” Neder stated admiringly. “May I ask you eh... do they accept you in Ratio World?”

“In general I don’t have that much contact with them. And the other members of the Fantasy Hunters have accepted me. Our teamwork is already less awkward than in the beginning.

“Is it eh... nice in Ratio World?”

I looked at him pensively. “You really want to go there, don’t you?”

“Eh... I don’t know.”

“Don’t try it,” I said sternly. “We would have to come and arrest you.”

“Hey... I won’t harm anyone.”

“Don’t try it,” I repeated. “Maybe later, when times have changed, you still have a long life ahead of you, maybe you’ll witness the day when you can visit it on a normal and legal holiday.”

He nodded but he didn’t look convinced. “I eh... I thank you very much,” he said. “For eh... for the interview, I mean.” He got up abruptly.

I looked at him when he crossed the street with his short little legs. I could have told him about the short affair I once had with a fire demon, I thought with a smirk on my face. The hottest relationship I had ever had, literally. But that story wouldn’t have been so suitable for a school paper. Even in Emo World.

I closed the door and went back to reading my book.

Don’t slay your dream dragons; make friends with them.

(Stephen LaBerge)

8

Kalon nudged me. “There’s someone at the door,” he muttered.

Drowsily, I thought of journalists who were just knee-high. “I’m very popular these days,” I said. But Kalon had gone back to sleep.

It was Aspen. When I opened the door, her eyes traveled awkwardly over my naked body. “I couldn’t sleep,” she explained when I let her in.

I saw that she was actually awake. That had never happened before. She never came to Emo World unless she was dreaming. She looked messy and tired. There had to be something wrong, because we were never really that close.

Without being asked, she plumped down on the couch.

“Coffee...?”

“That would be nice.”

I put on my bathrobe and walked into the kitchen. When I returned with two cups of coffee, Aspen had switched on her laptop and positioned it on her lap. “Look,” she said when I sat down next to her. She pointed at the screen.

It was the same oscilloscope curve we had noticed in the aircraft. The peak of the curve had become more noticeable.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on it for days. The strength of this thing fluctuates.”

“So?”

“I don’t know.” Aspen put the laptop next to her on the couch and took the cup of coffee I was holding out to her. “Energy vampires, I keep on having the feeling that some of them are still alive and up to no good.” She took a sip of the hot coffee. “Nice.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t think that Gehlen is going to take action just because of an energy peak.”

“There is something else that’s bothering you,” I remarked.

At that moment, Kalon appeared in all his naked glory. “Hi,” he said. He yawned so you could see his sharp fangs.

I felt Aspen jump up. “Eh... hi,” she stammered. I saw her struggling with the desire to look at his gorgeous body.

“This is Kalon,” I said. “Kalon, this is my teammate Aspen.”

“Oh yeah, that walking box of microchips.” He smiled warmly before he walked into the kitchen.

Aspen looked at me with surprise. “Is your boyfriend ... a vampire?”

“He sure is.”

I nearly laughed when I saw her glance quickly at my neck. “Me too, actually a quarter,” I said. “A vampire, I mean.”

Without being aware of it, she moved away from me on the couch.

“I won’t bite.”

“Does he?” She looked nervously at the kitchen.

“Only sensitive bites,” I shared.

She realized I was teasing her. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s not easy to...” She fell silent, sorrowfully.

I put my hand on her arm. It felt cold. “You’ll get used to this world.” I thought: in a thousand years, when all your prejudices have faded.

“You were about to tell me something.” I drank from my own cup of coffee, a classic ritual to break the ice.

Aspen nodded and pressed her lips together before she said: “You know that I was attacked during our last raid...”

Of course I remembered. For a split second I saw her lying on the ground again, with her invisible attacker on top of her.

“Since then I’ve been feeling a little strange, as if the energy vampire has contaminated me or something...”

Kalon appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. I noticed vaguely that he had also put on a robe. “You’re connected to them,” he stated. It almost sounded accusingly.

Aspen nodded, her face turned away.

“If I understand it correctly, they aren’t all dead after all?”

“I don’t know, Kate. It’s like some kind of static in the background. Once in a while I can hear a word or two. Very strange... it doesn’t bother me as much when I’m here.”

“They are bastards,” Kalon stated. When Aspen stared at him with a frightened and confused look on her face, he said: “I’m not related to them, don’t you worry. What an idea!” He looked angry.

“We’ve never known that they contact each other telepathically. We’ve never been aware of what kind of connection they use,” I said pensively.

“There were suspicions,” Kalon said.

Aspen looked at her laptop. “They shield themselves in one way or another, that’s why the energy peak is not clear. They’re evading the scanners of the IFG.”

“Or someone is protecting them,” Kalon suggested.

Aspen looked at him. “You don’t have to please me by saying that. I’m not crazy!”

Before Kalon could answer, I said: “Aspen, we have to tell Gehlen. He needs to know what you’re dealing with. It’s in your own interest and that of everyone else.”

“For a while I hoped I was hearing the voices of dead energy vampires in my head.” Aspen didn’t seem to realize that, for a ratiobeing, she had said something extraordinary. She put her empty cup on the coffee table. It made a loud tapping noise, as if she no longer had control over the movements of her body. “Maybe I’m partly dead as well...”

“As long as you’re not turning invisible, everything is fine,” Kalon said. I wasn’t sure whether he meant it or not.

“You need to help me with Gehlen,” Aspen said to me. “He won’t take the matter seriously if I’m the only one telling him.”

I nodded. “First thing in the morning, you can spend the rest of the night here.”

Aspen looked hesitantly at Kalon who was leaning casually against the frame of the kitchen door. He answered her gaze quite blankly. “I think I’d rather sleep in my own bed,” she said.

When she was gone, Kalon said: “I’m worried, Kate.”

“Why? Because Aspen didn’t fall for your charms?”

He didn’t respond to that. “If something would happen to you...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my body against his. “We still have enough time to take a shower together.”

I felt his body react immediately down there. But still he said: “Even that won’t take my worries away.”

In silence, I pulled him in the bathroom. I knew a couple of tricks which would make him forget much more than just his concerns about me.

The next morning, just as I was about to leave, Ewok returned home. I hadn’t even noticed she had sneaked out of the apartment. She wasn’t alone, she was accompanied by a shaggy werewolf quite a large one, too, with claws like those of a lion. They could talk, even though it sounded as they carried a hot potato in their mouth.

My new boyfriend, Ewok announced. She seemed proud of her capture.

As long as you two stay out of my bed. He’s really dirty.

The werewolf sniffed the air. “I smell a ratiobeing,” he remarked.

“You will have to eat something else, she’s already gone.” I was kidding, of course. Werewolves aren’t evil at all.

“She?” he asked. “Was it a bitch?”

“I don’t know her *that* well.” I winked at him. “Be careful with Ewok.”

“I won’t harm her.”

“I mean the other way around,” I said.

Aspen was waiting for me in the airport of Ratio World. “I’ve already called for Gehlen before I left home,” she said. She pointed at her laptop. “He was still half asleep, but the message seemed to have come across. At least, he didn’t think I was insane when I told him about the static in my head.”

“Did you tell him I was coming?”

“Of course I did.”

That’s why he was prepared to listen, I thought. Two members of the group becoming insane at the same time would be highly unlikely. Besides, Gehlen respected my knowledge of emobeings.

I looked at Aspen with a searching glance. “Could you handle another confrontation with energy vampires?”

She hesitated. “I won’t know that until I see one before me. But I want to get rid of them, no matter how.”

We walked to the exit.

The others had already arrived. Aqua’s loud voice carried as far as the hall: “I’m telling you that we have to kill every last one of these damn creatures, and now we have to do it right!”

“We can’t just throw ourselves into this mess again without being prepared,” Gehlen replied accusingly. “Clearly, these guys are not like the others.”

“They’re obviously more cunning, all the more reason why –” Aqua fell silent when Aspen and I arrived.

Gehlen greeted us with a short nod. “We should have paid more attention to that remaining energy peak,” he said to Aspen. “*Mea culpa.*”

It surprised me a little. Gehlen never apologized that easily. The energy vampires seemed to have made him really worried, probably because they had outsmarted him.

I sat down next to Cody. He was staring at his hands in silence, but when I plumped down on the chair, he smiled at me.

“First we have to figure out how they could evade our scanners,” Gehlen said. “Otherwise they can pull the same stunt on us again. The longer they keep on lingering here, the more people are going to be killed.”

“We can’t afford to lose more time!” Aqua snapped.

“Maybe you should finally tell us why the energy vampires trouble you so much,” I said.

He looked at me intensely. “They murdered my grandmother.”

Gehlen frowned, asking: “your grandmother?”

“At the time, I didn’t know who had done it, I didn’t even know these monsters. When we had to fight them, it all became clear to me. I still see her lying on the floor, shaking in that ice cold living room. It seemed as if something had brushed past me, something even colder than the room itself...” He paused as he stared at the frightening images of his past. “She groaned that she was attacked by a ghost who sucked the strength out of her.” Aqua shook his head. “For a couple of years, she lived like a plant, the doctors were perplexed, and they didn’t know what to do. Sometimes, she begged them to remove the voices out of her head...” He looked at Aspen. “Does this sound familiar to you?”

Gehlen spared her the answer. “Maybe you’d better stay here this time,” he said to Aqua. “We already saw how you acted like a complete madman last time. You’re a danger to yourself and to the others.”

“I’m coming too,” Aqua said in a low voice. “I can control myself.”

Gehlen didn’t seem convinced, but he nodded. “If you start acting foolishly again, you’re out, for good.”

“Nekor,” said Aspen as she was staring at her computer screen. “That’s where the energy peak comes from, a small community, with a closed, conservative, and old-fashioned lifestyle.”

“A perfect hide-out for these monsters,” Aqua growled.

“There’s not much information about the place, except some rumors that the people there are believed to practice black magic.”

Aspen looked up from her screen. “Black magic in Ratio World?”

The others barely reacted, but these words scared me. I knew what you could do with the black arts, though in the first dimension it had always been a rare phenomenon.

An alarm bell should have sounded in my head, but it didn’t happen at the time. Only later would I realize the connection between black magic and energy vampires.

Cody asked: “Should we be afraid of the people whom we are about to rescue? Why didn’t they raise the alarm?”

Aqua said: “Maybe they were taken by surprise, or maybe they are all dead.”

Or insane, I thought. I said: “I wonder if it’s wise to perform a direct attack. I mean, if they are all mentally connected to each other, they already know that we’ve killed some of them. They probably know what guns we use and the way we work. They may have even found a way to detect our aircraft from a large distance. Besides, we should try to gather as much information about them as possible to prevent another debacle in the future.”

Gehlen looked at me, searchingly. “What are you suggesting? What is the alternative?”

“Infiltrate?” I awaited Gehlen’s reaction.

“That would be risky, if they caught you...”

“I’m willing to try it.”

“You’re an emobeing. Won’t they spot that from miles away?”

I shook my head. “It’s not noticeable, and I can shield my aura if necessary.”

“Not noticeable? What about your eyes?”

“I have contact lenses for that.” I saw that Gehlen was still somewhat hesitant. “I’m the only one who has an extensive knowledge of what you call alien beings, you can’t deny that.”

Cody said timidly: “I can stay in contact with her, and if necessary, I can get her back in an instant with teleportation.”

“Don’t go empty handed,” Aqua said grimly. “Take a T-20 Mini with you, those are easily to hide.”

I nodded compliantly. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with a tiny T-20 against a whole gang of energy vampires, but guns were of paramount importance to Aqua, and I was prepared to acknowledge his input.

Aspen said: “You could pretend you’re someone who is tired of living a hectic life. Someone in search of a world of years past, before everyone started to go mad.”

I had already thought of something similar, so it wasn’t hard to pretend I liked her idea. “I’ll go with an air taxi, in full view, like I’ve got nothing to hide.”

Gehlen asked: “What if there is nothing left of the Nekor community?”

“Then I will come back immediately or Cody can pick me up.”

I still had another problem I couldn’t stay in Ratio World for a long time without a complete breakdown. I didn’t want them to know that.

“Okay, you have my blessing,” Gehlen said. It didn’t sound very enthusiastic.

Dreams don't cheat, lie, make distortions or put aback....

They look to express something unknown and incomprehensible for the ego.

(*Carl Jung*)

9

I rushed home to pick up some things and to say goodbye to Kalon, which wasn't very easy. He thought I was insane for going through with it. That's what you get when you're being honest to your boyfriend instead of making up a story so he wouldn't be upset. We had a discussion that almost assumed the air of a fight. Our first fight and a pointless one for that matter, because he knew that he could never have stopped me from doing it anyway. He didn't seem to understand, why they couldn't send someone else. Not *wanting* to understand was a better word for it. He acted with his heart and not with his mind. That's the way it goes in Emo World. I left him behind with a heavy heart.

Ewok didn't make a big deal of it. *Go kick their asses!* The only thing she said to me. She seemed to have her mind on other things. It had probably everything to do with the rough werewolf that was still hanging around.

"Hide your way too pretty hair and try to walk a little less as if you're floating on air, and especially no make-up!" Aspen warned me when she said goodbye.

Act less like an elf, was what she meant. She was right, I couldn't attract attention to myself. I followed her advice and put the dull-colored contact lenses in my eyes so my look became colorless and uninteresting. I had already put on baggy clothes. I couldn't do much about my height, but as I looked at myself in the mirror, it seemed to me that I could pass for a boring ratiobeing. However, it wasn't exactly an improvement.

"At least now you're not so irritatingly beautiful," Aspen remarked looking at me.

"*Irritatingly* beautiful?" I thought.

She nodded. "You don't know how frustrating someone like you can be to an ordinary woman."

"You consider yourself an ordinary woman?"

"No, I can handle a computer a lot better."

"Let me tell you something. If you were an emowoman, without all the goddamn restraints of this world, I would have jumped you a long time ago!" I meant it. She surely was attractive, even more so because she didn't realize it herself.

I saw that my words had startled her, as though I had threatened her with a knife.

“I’m sorry,” I said quickly. “I got carried away. I forget where I am sometimes.”

“Don’t do that when you’re in Nekor,” she said. To my surprise, she gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. She had to stand on the tip of her toes to do it. Then, she rapidly turned around and walked away.

Now it was my turn to be confused. In amazement, I watched her disappear into a room and shut the door behind her with a loud bang.

“Your taxi has arrived,” said Cody’s soft voice behind me.

I grabbed my bag full of things and walked to the elevators.

The air taxi slowed down so I could see the landscape down below me. We were flying over an undeveloped piece of land where nature was in control again. During the last couple of decennia, the world population had finally decreased and this started to show in several areas. Quite a few places already provided a lot more breathing space. The view of the forests below me was soothing. I really needed that. Not that I was so nerve-wracked, but I was quite tense, despite the fact that I was sufficiently armed and disguised (I had attached a T-20 against my left inner thigh, and I had put one in my beauty case, disguised as a ladyshaver). Knowing that Cody was almost constantly keeping an eye on me and that he could bring me back in a second didn’t really help either.

I saw the valley where Nekor was situated. The driverless air taxi slowed down and started to descend rapidly.

At first sight I didn’t see anything unusual. It was just a peaceful little village with a few people walking in the streets. There weren’t many of them, but at least they weren’t staggering or fainting. When they became aware of the descending air taxi, they stood still and looked up in surprise. It landed on a patch of grass just outside the village.

“We have arrived, Ma’am,” the masculine voice of the computer said rather unnecessarily. “The payment has been arranged by the IFG.”

As I was standing on the patch of grass and the taxi took off again, I was struck by the freshness of the air. Breathing had never been that pleasant, except maybe in the Elf Wood. I closed my eyes to fully enjoy this unexpected sensation, until I sensed a presence.

A forty-year-old man, tall and thin, he looked normal and his eyes were bright, but still there seemed to be something wrong with him.

“Hello,” I said. “My name is Kate Lillian.”

He nodded. “Greetings, I am the mayor.” His voice sounded surprisingly deep. “My name is Robert. What brings you here?”

“Well... I would like to live here, with your permission, of course.”

He looked surprised. “You want to live in Nekor? Why?”

“I have the feeling I belong here, I am a nature-lover. I’m sick of all that modern business.”

He glanced at the bag I was holding in my left hand. “Where is your moving van?”

“I don’t require much, and I have some money, I thought I could buy the things I need here.”

The mayor didn’t seem convinced. “We hardly ever see immigrants here.”

“Nekor is not exactly well-known. I found out about it by coincidence on the internet. Well, not really by coincidence, I was looking for a place like this, actually.”

The mayor shook his head. “You can’t live here.”

“Why can’t I? I’ve been dreaming for years about this kind of place.”

“We have our reasons to keep off strangers.”

I observed the man more closely. Maybe the energy vampires found out a way to feed on these people without driving them crazy or killing them, I thought. This guy could even be in close contact with them.

“Please, don’t send me back,” I begged him as submissively as possible. “I’d rather die.” That seemed to have set him thinking, so I went on. “I want to have my dreams back, like before. Please?”

“Follow me,” he suddenly commanded. “You can stay until I discuss the matter further with a few people.”

When he said that people here weren’t used to having visitors, he wasn’t lying. I could tell it from the way by-passers were staring at me.

Nekor had the atmosphere of a medieval village, winding roads, cobblestones, and desolate sidewalks with oil lanterns. The shops reminded me of a story by Dickens. The people’s clothes weren’t medieval, but they weren’t exactly modern either. Some people were riding on bicycles, something I had only seen in old photographs or in Emo World. There was not a single air car in sight.

“We don’t have televisions, no computers, and not even telephones,” said the mayor who was watching me while I looked around. It sounded a little defiantly.

“I can live with that,” I answered. At least for a couple of days, I thought.

We reached some sort of suburb with detached houses. “This is my house,” the Mayor said. He pointed at a stately Victorian building. “You’ll be staying with us until we’ve reached a verdict. There aren’t any hotels or inns here.”

A verdict that sounded rather ominous.

“I’m very grateful to you, sir Mayor.”

“Sure,” he said skeptically. He didn’t seem to be susceptible to sweet-talk.

No sign of energy vampires, but something was wrong with the people I had seen so far. Just like with the mayor. I could feel it, but I still didn’t know what exactly.

There were plenty of flowers, knickknacks, and lace cloths in the Mayor’s house. In the adjacent room, I heard someone going about with pots and pans.

“We have a visitor,” the Mayor announced as he was standing in the empty hall.

The sound of rattling pots stopped. A plump woman appeared in a flower print dress and a surprisingly modern haircut. Her face was heavily made-up. She grinned. It was the first smile I had seen in Nekor.

“Whoever you may be, welcome,” she said.

Her reaction was a pleasant surprise. “Kate,” I said. I tried to make my grin even bigger than hers.

“My name is Babette, but everyone calls me Bobbie.”

“Kate wants to live in Nekor,” the Mayor explained. “She is prepared to do almost anything for it,” he added in a strange tone.

“Is that so?” Bobbie remarked neutrally.

“Put your bag down and join me for a cup of coffee. You’re staying for dinner, aren’t you?”

I followed her. Behind me, the Mayor announced that he was going to go to the “others” to talk about me. I tried not to think about who the others might be. Hopefully he only meant the local council.

The kitchen was big and comfortably messy. A large working table stood in the centre of the room with several chairs placed around it.

“Sit down,” Bobbie ordered. “The trip has made you tired, hasn’t it?”

“I came by taxi,” I said while I obeyed her.

“What? Oh! Of course you’re not from these parts, all that modern hoo-ha.”

“I’m sick of it too, all that comfort.” I uttered the ironic remark without realizing it, but Bobbie didn’t seem to notice it.

She was grinding coffee beans with a crunching little hand-mill. Next, she poured the powder in a linen pouch, and put the kettle on the stove. “This may take a while,” she said, apologizing. “But the quality’s to match.” She sat down next to me and looked at me,

searchingly. "Strange, to see a young woman like you wanting to live here. Our daughter Jesse is not much younger than you."

"Do young people usually leave this place?"

She seemed to hesitate before she answered: "Some are curious about eh... about the outside world."

"Do they actually leave?"

"No," Bobbie said curtly. The water was boiling and she got up.

I seemed to have asked a painful question, rebellious daughter perhaps?

"The coffee smells wonderful," I said. It was true. In fact, I preferred enjoying the smell of coffee than drinking the stuff, and this aroma was exceptionally nice.

Bobbie filled two large cups and sat down again. "Quite a few genuine, authentic flavors disappear because of all that modernism," she stated.

"I hope that the people whom your husband is going to talk to are not going to send me back home." Maybe Bobbie wanted to tell me something about them.

"The local council," she said. It didn't sound sympathetically. "They're like ministers on a small scale."

Or a group of black magicians, I thought, but I kept silent. For a moment, I did let my eyes wander around the kitchen. There was nothing to be seen that looked like attributes for the practice of black magic, not even a spice rack with unusual herbs. Hiding it would be useless because they hardly ever saw strangers here.

Suddenly, I felt light in the head. Was it tension? Since I never fell ill, it could be nothing else. Or maybe the coffee was too strong.

"It will be all right," Bobbie assured. "We could use some fresh blood around here."

Only now I noticed that she hadn't drank from her own cup of coffee.

"Why did you..." I saw and felt my head fall on the table, as if I was watching it from a distance. My brain kept on working, but my body didn't.

Bobbie was looking down on me with her hands on her hips. "Now tell me the real purpose of your visit," she commanded. It didn't even sound unfriendly.

A truth serum, I realized. She had me fooled nicely, lulled to sleep by Bobbie's maternal appearance. She was out of luck this time; thanks to my vampire genes this stuff didn't affect me. My body was knocked out, but my mind just continued working. That way, it was easy to play along.

“I want to live a different life,” I said. “Modern society makes me sick. It’s all so artificial...” I was really talking with a slur. Actually, it was fun. “And I want to be able to dream again ...”

“Why in Nekor?”

“I found it on the internet.”

“What do you know about us, except for the information you can find on the internet?”

“Almost nothing,” I said.

“You do know that we practice black magic, don’t you?”

I could force out a “No” without hesitating. Little did Bobbie know that she had just given an answer to what I was trying to find out.

“What do you know about energy vampires?”

I felt my heartbeat quicken, in spite of the serum that was coursing through my system. “I’ve read about them, that they live in Emo World or something.”

“It seems like you weren’t lying to my husband,” Bobbie said. She sounded a little surprised.

She got up and I heard that she poured the rest of the coffee in the sink and flushed it away. “You’ll be back to normal again in no time,” she assured me airily. “You won’t even remember what happened.”

Very humane, I thought sarcastically, but I kept quiet.

A truth serum and a memory eraser in one potion, that wasn’t an easy task. Combinations were never simple. Apparently, these people knew what they were doing. Every other member of the group would have blown their cover, and would have probably been sucked dry right away or worse.

I was starting to wonder what the mayor and his helpers were up to. Were they performing some kind of ritual to find out information about me?

The most alarming thing was that these people actually seemed to be living together with the energy vampires. It was both alarming and incredible. There had to be some kind of agreement between them. Who would seal a pact with his own killer? Or had they lured these creatures here with black magic? Why would they do such a thing? There were enough questions to make you get an excruciating headache, with or without a magic potion.

The potion was starting to wear off anyway. I was beginning to feel my limbs again.

Apparently, Bobbie was cooking because I smelled pea soup and Brussels sprouts.

I moaned ostentatiously before I lift up my head.

“You took a little nap there, didn’t you?” Bobbie asked. “It sounds as if the trip was more tiring than you thought.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Isn’t coffee supposed to wake you up?”

“Ours isn’t. We take out everything that’s bad for you.”

However, in the modern world, we already knew that caffeine isn’t as bad for you as people used to think, but I let her believe what she wanted to believe.

I yawned, the heaviness in my limbs wasn’t entirely gone yet. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling.

That moment, the Mayor arrived.

“The arrangements have been made,” he announced. “You can stay, young lady.” He looked at me expectantly, as though he was waiting for an outburst of gratitude.

“Great news,” I said as enthusiastically as I could. “Thank you so much!”

“Oh well, it’s nice to have a new face in our community.” He and Bobbie exchanged glances but I couldn’t see the expression on their faces.

It surprised me that the Mayor didn’t want to know the results of Bobbie’s cunning trick before he announced the good news. Did they have some kind of telepathic contact which managed to escape my notice? It seemed highly unlikely, because then I would have at least felt something.

“We will provide a house for you to live in,” the mayor said. “I think we still have some things you can use.”

His kindness started to worry me, certainly after the frosty welcome he had given me earlier. “I would have liked to go for a walk before dinner, to take a look at the village,” I suggested carefully.

The Mayor looked doubtful. “That could be difficult.”

“It’s not dangerous I hope?” I grinned to make sure they both realized I was just kidding.

“Eh...the people of this village have to be prepared first. They may have difficulties with a new face showing up like that. Every villager knows everyone here, and we hardly ever see strangers. We have to make an official introduction first. Maybe we can still do it tonight, so you’ll be free to go as you please tomorrow.”

It didn’t sound like I had a choice, so I nodded resignedly. Anyway, I could use some rest since the pressure of Ratio World was already taking its toll.

Bobbie led me to a room on the second floor. It all looked very nice, in an old-fashioned and almost antique way. I even had my own bathroom. It seemed like a bed &

breakfast coming right out of Victorian England. There were five other doors that opened out onto the landing.

“That’s our bedroom,” Bobbie gestured. “That’s the second bathroom.” She didn’t mention the fifth door. When I looked at it, I felt her gaze resting on me. However, I knew better than to ask about things which were none of my business.

My room was some kind of rummage sale with flowers, lace cloths and kitschy little statues. I would have to sleep with the cover over my head so I wouldn’t have to look at it all.

“Dinner is at five,” said Bobbie before she left me alone.

I kicked out my shoes and lay on the bed fully dressed. Of course, the bed creaked and squeaked like mad. Fortunately I was alone.

With Kalon in my mind, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, it took me a while to realize where I was. That was until I saw that rummage sale surrounding me.

It was nearly five o’clock and my built-in clock had done a good job.

I had never seen a bathroom that pink before, it almost seemed a giant cloud of cotton candy. Even the bathroom utensils were pink.

Downstairs, the mayor and his wife were already waiting for me. It was still a minute to five.

“We heard you were awake,” Bobbie explained. “So we decided to go to table.” She pointed at a chair and smiled invitingly. Next, she filled our plates with food which smelled particularly fresh and tasty.

“Later on, you’ll be able to meet most of the villagers in the assembly hall,” the mayor announced.

I wondered how he had managed to notify the villagers that quickly without a telephone. With Indian tom-tom drums perhaps, or smoke signals? I wasn’t brave enough to ask.

Halfway through dinner, he suddenly asked: “Are you good with animals, Kate?”

I nodded. I didn’t have to lie about it. “I can sense them rather well.” I kept silent about the fact that I could actually talk with them.

“That’s very convenient; we are looking for someone who can work in the children’s farm.” The mayor looked at me. “We don’t use cleaning machines.”

“I won’t miss them.” Of course, that was a lie and not a small one either. But maybe the animals could provide me with some information, I thought.

“Good news to announce later on,” Bobbie stated. “Employment is a big step towards integration.”

I looked at her piercingly, but she seemed to be serious.

Afterwards, when the Mayor guided me to the assembly hall in the center of the village, I was starting to get nervous. I had the feeling I was being led like a lamb to the slaughter. There were more people walking in the street, and they were all walking in the same direction as we were. Most of them stared at me as if I was something extraordinary. In fact, I was special in Ratio World, but they couldn't see that. I thought. I hoped.

The assembly hall was crowded, and every head turned towards me when we entered it. I was beginning to feel uneasy, since I wasn't exactly an artist who was used to that much attention. Why would one single newcomer be so important?

Bobbie found a chair on the first row which was probably reserved for her. The mayor pulled me onto the stage.

They didn't have any sound equipment, so people had to talk at the top of their voice, which is another thing I'm not good at. Of course, the Mayor didn't have any problems with it. He introduced me with the story I had told him myself, that I was in search of the tranquility of a pure and natural life. He conveyed my lies so convincingly I almost believed them myself. That's what politicians are for, of course.

“The leaders have already decided that Kate can stay amongst us,” he said as he gestured vaguely at the left-hand side of the first row in the hall.

So that was where the “leaders” were sitting. They were all older men, staring blankly at me, and I could physically sense their arrogant aura. I suddenly had the disturbing idea that they weren't going to be fooled that easily.

“We have a question.” Somewhere in the center of the hall a plain and middle-aged woman was standing up.

We? I thought suspiciously.

“What if the newcomer doesn't like it here? What if she wants to leave again?”

Was this some kind of prisoner camp? I pushed that question aside. “That won't be a problem,” I answered as clear as possible. “Thanks to your mayor I'm feeling at home already, and I'm not afraid of hard work.”

The woman didn't show any sign of reaction, but she sat down again. The mayor didn't ask whether there were more questions. “Anyway, Kate already has a job,” he announced. He looked at someone in the audience. “Jeanine?”

“You start at six o'clock tomorrow morning,” she replied.

I expected the crowd to laugh, but apparently, it wasn't a joke.

"I'll show you to the children's farm, right away," the Mayor said sympathetically. I showed him a grateful smile. I didn't even know I was such a good actress.

"Right," the Mayor decided. "Now we all know what our new fellow-villager looks like. Don't shoot her when you see her walking somewhere."

Once again, people didn't laugh. I was starting to wonder whether they had ever heard of humor in Nekor.

When we left the assembly hall, I said: "I expected them to ask much more questions. They don't see someone from eh... outside every day, do they?"

"Most of them don't like to talk in front of an audience. They will approach you in private."

To a certain degree, the mayor's answer sounded plausible, however, somehow it didn't.

"A small community," I remarked.

"Maybe, but the children weren't there. We know every individual in this town, and we are able to survive together, so you can say there are just enough of us. Like one big family."

"Amazing," I said, but I hoped he couldn't read my aura. There are limits to what I can cover up.

The children's farm was just outside the village. The distance from the mayor's house could easily be done on foot. And at least I was sure that it would still be in exactly the same place the next morning.

When we were back at home, I was glad to have a good excuse to go straight to bed. Starting to work at six o'clock in the morning is not an easy thing to do if you're not used to it. The mayor and his wife seemed to understand it. In fact, I *was* really tired. Every hour in Ratio World weighed like lead on my body. Not a single person to hold or to hug. For a moment, my craving for Kalon became so agonizing I quickly had to think of something else.

I yearned for a talk with the group, but we made the agreement not to make telepathic contact. Out of sheer necessity, I had even replaced my high-tech watch for an antique little wristwatch with authentic pointers.

At any rate, it seemed that I was doing a good job, I thought as I slipped naked under the covers.

However, I hadn't seen any sign of energy vampires yet, unless every villager had somehow become one.

Fortunately, my weariness made me fall asleep rapidly. It was, of course, a dreamless sleep.

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

(Edgar Allan Poe)

10

The next morning breakfast could almost be called decadent. I suspected that Bobbie got up at four a.m. to prepare all these things unless she just magically conjured it on the table. For the time being, I wasn't ruling out anything though I had difficulties to distrust that outgoing, motherly woman. If she was just playing a role, she sure was doing a good job. As good as me, I thought surly.

The mayor was also acting perfectly courteous and sociable. If they did have a pact with the energy vampires, they sure knew how to hide it.

"I'll walk part of the way with you," he said when it was time for me to go to my new job.

He had to go in the same direction, he said. I wondered what a mayor was planning to do at six o'clock in the morning. Maybe the time schedules in Nekor were different from those in the normal world.

Bobbie even packed my lunch. It had been a while since I had felt this pampered.

The mayor did walk only part of the way with me. After a short salutation, he disappeared in an obscure little side-road. I wanted to follow him, but it seemed too risky. Maybe I was being watched.

The children farm was old, but surprisingly clean, with cheerfully painted walls and a tiled roof. It was surrounded by a well tended, white wooden fence. It seemed the gingerbread house of Hansel and Gretel, those two adolescent brats who would have been convicted for theft and murder if they hadn't died on time. They were caught by a witch while they were ransacking her house. However, they were out of luck, because after they had decided to throw her into the fire, the witch was still able to curse them before she passed away along with all its consequences, of course. After they had eaten too much candy, they became tremendously fat and exploded.

Flowers, so many flowers around the house! It almost seemed an Elf Wood, with tulips, carnations, lilies, roses, chrysanthemums, hyacinths, sunflowers, asters, dandelions, buttercups, dahlias, freesias, azaleas, and fuchsias.

Before I could reach the door, Jeanine walked out. I was greeted by the scent of freshly baked pastry. She grinned. "My ministering angel," she said. Once again, it sounded alarmingly sincere.

Jeanine was a skinny, lean woman with long grey hair held together in a pony tail that was resting on her back. Her face was sharply outlined, but she had big brown eyes which softened her features.

"Pies for the little ones," she declared when she saw me sniff the air with utter pleasure, in spite of the lavish breakfast I had barely half an hour ago. "In exchange for the food the parents always bring along for the animals."

I received a guided tour of the place which made me want to be a child again. With every step I took, the house seemed to become more and more fairylike.

Jeanine introduced me to Burt, a small chubby cook who was working in a big and chaotic kitchen. The man was hardly recognizable with all the flour stuck to his face, but he seemed to recognize me.

"I saw you yesterday in the assembly hall," he stated. "You'll be able to handle the animals, won't you? You seemed to have the head for it."

Was this an encouragement, or a downright insult? I couldn't find out, and I didn't have enough time to read his aura.

Carefully, I asked: "What kind of animals do you have here? No crocodiles, I hope?"

"Goats, pigs, cows, chickens, and roosters," Jeanine replied in his place. "Some sheep and rabbits, several horses, a few cats, dogs and peacocks that can just run around freely."

I felt that the cook's eyes were following me when we walked out the door. It was no surprise; I was the new girl in town.

The guided tour outside and in the stables didn't last very long, it wasn't that big anyway. However, I felt I would have a lot of work to do, and that there wouldn't be much time left to investigate the affair in Nekor. I hoped I could get information from some of the animals. First I was going to talk to the dogs, since they were the ones running freely around the area.

"We don't open until noon," Jeanine said. "It gives us time to clear the place up. The feeding happens in the afternoon, kids love that sort of thing."

I took a deep breath. It surprised me that I wasn't feeling so bad, although it was already my second day in Ratio World. Was my mind adjusting to it? The stimulating environment helped too, I think. So far, the things I witnessed in Nekor were nothing like the

atrocities I had expected to see. It remained alarming, though, probably because I was used to crisis situations on our missions.

As we sat down for the cup of coffee ritual, I asked: "How come you had difficulties finding someone for this job? It seems enjoyable work to me."

"Everybody here has got something to do already. Your predecessor has a broken foot."

"Oh, so if that's completely healed, I would have to leave again?"

"Of course not, I could surely use a second worker around here." Jeanine stared at me with a neutral look on her face. "What do you think of Nekor?"

"It is exactly what I was looking for." I gazed at Jeanine with the cup in my hands. "Of course, I've just arrived. Who knows, maybe I'll stumble upon terrible secrets."

"Only if you find dreams a terrible secret."

"You mean you're actually still dreaming?"

Suddenly, Jeanine looked a little embarrassed, as though she had said something she shouldn't have. She stood up, brusquely. "I'm afraid it's still too early to discuss that with you." She walked to the sink to rinse out her cup.

"Come on!"

She stopped rummaging around and sighed. "We don't take pills to stop our dreams; we let nature run its course."

"But... you do know about-"

Impatiently, Jeanine cut my question short. "Of course, we're not stupid, we know about that other dimension. It still remains our dream world, like it has been for thousands of generations before us. Why would we want to change that?"

"You do know that you are faced with real creatures in your dreams? That everything you see really exists?"

"Generally, when you're dreaming you don't realize it, especially if you don't *want* to realize it. We have made a special herbal tea to switch off that awareness completely."

That was interesting, that tea would be very popular in Ratio World, I thought. There was a good chance that it had something to do with black magic.

"To be able to dream again, like times past," I said. "It's one of my deepest desires..."

"We need our dreams," Jeanine said. "It's not natural to eradicate them."

Was that why these people weren't as cold as the rest of Ratio World?

"Ask Bobbie if you can drink some of that herbal tea," Jeanine said. "You'll be able to experience your first dream tonight."

“Sounds too good to be true,” I thought.

I switched on my antenna to scan her aura. It was less cheerful than she appeared to be, as it was infused with specks of sadness.

“It is definitely amazing,” Jeanine said. “Unfortunately, after a while, the tea loses its effect.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t let that stop you from doing it. Certainly, you will be able to enjoy it for several months.”

Since I couldn’t dream, I wondered how the tea would affect me. That’s the way I am, these things always make me curious. Fortunately, I don’t have a tendency for addiction. When I think about all the stuff I’ve experimented with!

For a moment, I had the strongest impression that Jeanine wanted to tell me something else, but she seemed to change her mind. She probably didn’t trust me enough. “We need to get to work,” she announced.

I had to start cleaning out the horse stables. While I was shoveling the hay, a horse looked at me with his big bright eyes.

I’m Kate.

The horse seemed to startle. It puffed and stamped nervously with its front hooves.

Easy there, I can talk to you.

The animal twisted its ears, as though it was wondering where those strange thoughts were coming from. I noticed that it was less intelligent than a dog. Contact was clearly possible.

I’m not an ordinary human being.

Now, the answer came swiftly: *Can you disappear too?* The thought was accompanied by fear.

Who is able to disappear? Could it be that simple?

Monsters, we don’t know what they are. Animals are brought to them and sometimes they don’t come back. Sometimes they do, but then they act really strange.

Is that all you know?

Ask Igor.

Who is Igor?

The black sheep. The only animal that has been there and still acts normally once and a while.

Is that all you know?

Know of what?

Of those disappearing creatures?

My stable and the field, that's as far as I get, woman! The horse started to chew on the fresh hay, like I wasn't interesting anymore.

I carried on working for a while before I approached the black sheep. When Igor saw me, he rose to his hind legs. *Look what I can do!*

He didn't seem to find it strange that I could understand him. Maybe because he wasn't really normal anymore, I thought peevishly.

What did they do to you?

I'm a sweater.

Excuse me?

A woolen jumper... Igor turned around on his hind legs.

A dancing sheep, you had to come to Ratio World to witness that. I tried again.

What did they do to you?

I told you, they made a sweater of me.

But you're still walking on four legs.

At times I walk only on two.

Who made you believe that you are a sweater?

Those disappearing sausage monsters. Oops! Dangerous word!

What word?

Sausage. Igor lowered himself into a normal position again.

How do you get into contact with those sausage monsters?

Contact?

Are you brought to them?

They said they wanted to keep enough stupid animals for the big moment.

The big moment?

I don't know I'm just a sweater.

I went to clean out the chicken coop.

At noon, things were beginning to liven up. Mothers appeared with their children, and I had to help prevent the animals from being teased too much. It was going well, and because of my height, I had some kind of natural authority over children. At least, I thought it was due to my height.

At the end of our working day, Jeanine seemed happy about what I had accomplished. She even made me promise not to run out on her the next day.

That evening, I retired to my bedroom early again, something the mayor and Bobbie could well understand. I was really tired, even though I was handling the pressure of Ratio World quite well.

Just as I was about to fall asleep, I thought I heard footsteps walking furtively in the hallway in front of my bedroom.

I slipped out of bed without a sound, and listened at the door. The stairs briefly creaked, but then everything remained silent. I wasn't brave enough to put my head out the door, so I went back to bed. There weren't any suspicious sounds anymore.

Being alone on a mission blows, was my last thought before I fell asleep.

I had to keep thinking about that "big moment" Igor was talking about. I asked Jeanine whether people in Nekor were planning some kind of event, but she acted as if she didn't know what I was talking about. When I pressed the point, she even started to look suspiciously at me, so I kept silent.

Were the energy vampires planning a massive attack? Were they planning on transforming Nekor into their operating base to start some kind of conquest campaign? And where the hell were they, anyway?

On several occasions, I uttered how happy I was that I had decided to move to Nekor. I needed to convince them that I was here to stay, and that they could trust me. It already seemed to work on Bobbie. She even started to discuss magic with me and asked me what I thought about it.

I pretended it was something completely new to me. "I've heard about the existence of white and black magic."

Bobbie nodded. "Is that all you know about it?"

"Pretty much" I stated. "Where I come from, people are just too down-to-earth for it. That was one of the reasons why I wanted to get out of there. All these things actually fascinate me."

"Of course," she said as if it was perfectly obvious.

I continued even further. "It seems exciting to me," I said.

"I was hoping you'd think about it that way."

"Really...?" I thought.

We just had breakfast. The mayor had already disappeared to his obscure activities, and I still had several minutes before I needed to take care of my animals.

“Can I trust you?” Bobbie wanted to know. As I read her aura I could see it was a rhetorical question. She clearly wanted to get something off her chest.

“You already know the answer, don’t you?” I replied.

She nodded in agreement. “This village has an enormous secret.”

It wasn’t hard to look expectantly.

“Every adult inhabitant of Nekor practices black magic.”

“No!”

She nodded again. I noticed she was observing my reactions with a certain tension. Bobbie wasn’t as naïve as she tried to appear. Something I had realized a long time ago.

“Black magic is far more dangerous than white magic. It offers a lot more possibilities. White magic has too many restrictions.”

I said: “You make it sound as if eh... as if it’s just perfectly common.”

“It is perfectly common, after a while.”

“Yikes!” I said. I looked at Bobbie as innocently as possible. “Can I expect more secrets like these?”

For a moment, I thought she was going to tell me more, that moment passed as quickly as it came. “I think I already said too much,” she said in a different tone. “Too much or too soon, Robert won’t be pleased with it.”

“I’m clearly not accepted yet.” I looked unhappy.

“You just got here, Kate.”

“The impatient youth,” I said.

The impatient and curious elf, I meant. I couldn’t complain, I just got here, and I was already starting to make progress. Of course, for me, it wasn’t fast enough. Every day Kalon and I were apart was a day too much.

That night, I snuck out of my room to prowl around in the village. I thought I could do that by now, going for a walk on my own. Nobody had told me not to anyway. By sneaking out without the mayor noticing it I wasn’t giving him the opportunity to still do it. My elf’s pace was so light, the stairs didn’t creak.

I tried to walk as relaxed as I could in the dimly lit streets. The village was unrealistically quiet. No machines, I thought. No motors, no mechanic affairs that disturbed

the natural quiet. In the rest of Ratio World, you couldn't hide from the noise, every time and everywhere, an engine was continuously running.

Maybe it was too risky what I was doing. But if I was just going to do my job compliantly and didn't take action myself, I would probably be stuck in Nekor for weeks or even months without finding out much. I wasn't that patient.

The center of the village was as deserted as the rest of the place. There weren't any bars or cafés that stayed open late.

For a moment, from the corner of my left eye, I thought I saw a shadow flashing past me. However, when I turned around, there was nothing to be seen. It was probably my imagination; surely the atmosphere was to match.

As I walked close to the houses, I sought my way to the market and the town hall. I didn't turn a corner without looking whether it was safe first.

When I reached the market, I saw someone coming from the opposite direction. The person was walking to the town hall. I hid in a doorway and waited until the stranger disappeared into the building. Just as I was about to leave my hiding place, a second person appeared. He also disappeared into the town hall and another person as well. Then someone left the building.

It seemed strange to be holding a meeting at this hour. In fact, I was pretty sure the mayor was sleeping.

It wasn't a meeting, something else was happening here. People kept coming and going. They all arrived on their own, and they all left the same way. It went on for a while. When the last villager left and nobody else reappeared, I was none the wiser. My vampire eyes had seen some of their expressions, but it wasn't a great help either. They had all looked neutral, or smiled vaguely.

Without having achieved anything, I walked back home.

The house was completely dark, I noticed thankfully. I didn't feel like handling a cross-examination about where I had been and what I had seen. I sneaked back to my room unnoticed.

At least, I thought so.

Those who have lost the ability to dream, are lost altogether.

(Saying of the Australian Aborigines)

11

I had a headache and my skin was tingling uncomfortably. My stay in Ratio World was starting to have consequences after all. I hoped Bobbie or Jeanine weren't going to notice, I didn't feel like being stuffed full of magic potions. The effects of such concoctions were too unpredictable on me.

I managed to get through the day pretty well. When Jeanine became concerned and asked me if something was wrong, I muttered something about that time of the month. From then on, she didn't insist any further.

At the end of the day, a surprise was awaiting me.

"Tonight you'll be initiated," Bobbie announced from her kitchen which smelled like freshly cut spinach.

"Initiated? Why does that sound so alarming? Does it entail bloody sacrifices or something?"

"Of course not, silly." The thought made Bobbie laugh.

"That's fast, don't you think?" I said, relieved and nervous at the same time.

Bobbie nodded. "There isn't much time left."

"How do you know this?"

"Don't ask, you'll see it quickly enough."

"Should I wear special clothes?"

"Oh no and you don't have to go fasting either."

I stopped asking questions.

At dinner, I noticed that the mayor was even more introverted than usual. He looked truly depressed.

"We have some problems with Jesse," Bobbie explained when she saw me looking at him. "Our daughter, she wants to leave Nekor."

"Why is that a problem?"

The mayor looked at me. "We don't want the secrets of our village to become known in the outside world." His words were a clear warning. "If you still have doubts yourself, you should tell us now."

“Oh no, I don’t!” I said hurriedly. “I found my destination.”

“Jesse is a bit rebellious,” Bobbie said, trying to make things seem better.

“All teenagers are,” I remarked. “It will pass.”

I suddenly realized that it wasn’t going to be easy to get out of Nekor. There weren’t any means of transport, and the village was surrounded by a large piece of nature land. Immediately I wondered whether the young people in this village had any idea of how the outside world looked like. They had no other source of information besides their school or their parents.

It wasn’t easy to keep my mind on the conversation. It bothered me that I didn’t know what was going to happen to me that night.

I hoped that Cody was on standby. I had the feeling I was going to need him soon.

Awaiting coming events, I retired to my room. I took a hot shower, after which I gradually adjusted the water to ice cold. It’s an effective way to calm down the nerves. The thought of being confronted with energy vampires made my hands tremble as I was fixing my hair.

I startled when I heard an unusually discreet knock on my door.

Jesse, I realized immediately when I saw the girl standing in the doorway. She quickly glanced left and right, and promptly entered the room, so that she nearly pushed me aside. I closed the door behind her.

She was wearing tight jeans and a top, so I imagined she had to be completely out of place in the streets of Nekor. Or maybe she just wore this kind of clothing at home. Her messy hair lay loose on her shoulders. Without being asked, she sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Hi, my name is Kate,” I said matter-of-factly.

She nodded as if it was completely obvious to her. “People are gossiping about you.”

“What can I do for you? Do your parents know you’re here?”

She shook her head unwillingly. “If you do something they don’t approve of, they cast a spell on you so you’ll think twice before doing it again.”

I didn’t trust her, I suddenly realized. Her aura was anything but spotless. Besides, she couldn’t look into my eyes. It couldn’t just be coincidence that she needed to talk to me now.

“Cast a spell on you?” I asked.

She nodded. “That’s their way of educating children.” She briefly looked at me, but not for more than two seconds. “We have a radio, we know that we are living in some kind of sealed off reservation here.”

“We...?” I asked.

“My friends and I.” As she spoke her own words seemed to have scared her. “Please don’t tell anyone!”

“Isn’t this wrong, what you’re doing?”

“What?”

“Too go against the wishes of your parents?”

“Oh come on! You’re from the outside world, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t like it there, that’s why I’m here.” I hated how I was acting, but since I didn’t trust her, I absolutely wanted to keep on playing my role.

An angry frown appeared between her eyebrows. “I thought you would be on my side!”

“I’m on the side of those who are right.”

“You’re going to rat on me,” she stated.

“Your parents only want what’s best for you, Jesse. And you always have to be wary of friends with a bad influence.”

“The hell, with you,” Jesse called out and jumped up.

It was awkward. I almost admitted I was on her side. However, my intuition was more powerful. “Tonight I’m going to be initiated,” I said. “I can hardly wait.”

I watched her as she marched towards the door and walked out. She shut the door with a loud bang, it seemed no longer necessary to sneak around.

Now Jesse was gone, I began to question my behavior towards her. Did I misjudge her? That would be painful, for her as well as for me...

There was another knock on the door, more resolute this time. Without waiting for an answer, Bobbie entered my room. She grinned. “Congratulations,” she said.

I put on my most innocent face. “What did I win?”

“Your residences permit. You just passed your final test.”

“Your daughter was...?” I pretended to be angry, which I was a little. However, I was mainly relieved that I hadn’t fallen into their trap.

“We don’t want any interfering spies from the outside world, that’s why we have to be careful. You don’t blame us for it, do you?”

“I thought you trusted me!” What Jesse could do, I could do too.

“Of course not completely, now we do.”

“Yikes, you guys must really be hiding an enormous secret.”

“Keep your patience,” Bobbie said. She looked friendly, almost motherly.

The mayor and Bobbie led me to the town hall. They both walked beside me, like two guards. I felt anything but relieved. I found the expression on their faces a little sinister. However, it also could have been my imagination.

When we reached the town hall, I saw people entering and leaving the building without saying a word, just like last time. I thought about Cody. I could only hope he was on standby.

They guided me to a steel door with several locks. What was this? Too keep the energy vampires from escaping? My heart was beating alarmingly fast. I didn't want to see what was behind the door. The whole time, vicious little sucking mouths appeared before my mind's eye.

With visible effort, the mayor opened the door. Behind it I could only see an empty space with another heavy door, guarded by two people.

I didn't understand. Energy vampires could pass through walls, couldn't they? How could they keep these creatures under control?

Without a word, the mayor made a gesture towards the second door. One of the guards rose from his chair, and picked up a key ring that was lying on a table. The armored door flew quietly open.

They had torn down the walls of several small rooms to create a large space. You could see it from the demolition leftovers which were still lying on the floor. In the center of that space, there stood some sort of large bell jar. Behind the glass, about ten energy vampires were floating around, like mosquitoes above a pool of water. When they saw us, their thin lips contorted into a hungry grin. Their black eyes were glistening.

Bobbie's voice scared me. "Aren't they magnificent?"

Magnificent hmmm, those nasty murderers? I don't think so! On time I remembered I couldn't let them notice I already knew energy vampires.

Hoarsely, I asked: "What are they?"

"In Emo World they are called energy vampires, but Wish Fulfillers, that's what they call themselves. They can make your wildest dreams come true."

I couldn't believe it. Did these monsters invent it themselves? It seemed highly unlikely.

"Nekor has one big desire," the mayor stated. "That's what drew them here."

I looked at him, perplexed. "One big desire?"

"We all want to return to times past, when life was still natural and normal."

That wasn't a surprise. What could these monsters do about it? Instead, I asked something that was worrying me a little more. "Can't they leave the bell jar?"

"Oh, they can, but they are not supposed to be here, they told us that. They come from Emo World, so they are illegal visitors. We protect them with our magic. Inside the bell jar, they can't be detected by... by the outside world."

I asked: "How are they... I mean; what do they eat?"

"Biological energy," she answered.

The mayor gestured to one of the guards, who immediately walked towards the bell jar and spread his arms. An opening appeared in the glass. As he walked through it, the opening closed behind him.

The guard stood motionless while one of the energy vampires sat on his arm. I froze up when I saw how the monster's mouth took on its sucking form, but I managed to keep quiet. However, it didn't take very long. After a few seconds, the energy vampire let go and flew towards his companions who were still dancing around edgily in the bell jar.

The guard left the jar. There was a kind of ecstatic expression on his face. Without looking at us, he sat down again. He stared blankly into space without blinking, his lips curled into a half-smile.

"They remove our knowledge," the mayor explained. "One piece at a time, all our evil knowledge and in two weeks, when the moon is full in the month of May, we shall be released of every bad memory. Every single technological and scientific piece of knowledge we are stuck with now shall be taken out. We won't even know the outside world exists. From then on, we shall be able to live and dream like we've always wanted. We won't even have to eat anymore."

"The big moment..." I muttered.

"Exactly," said Bobbie. "It reminds us of going to heaven a life."

Heaven, I thought. So they still believed in that as well. Or did the monsters make them believe it? How could people be this naïve?

I pointed at the bell jar. "What do they get in return for all those blessings?" I barely managed to suppress the sarcasm in my voice.

"Too hide them. They are entirely selfless."

I never had to bite my tongue this hard. What were the energy vampires up to? Their scheming behavior was highly uncharacteristic. I couldn't imagine that they just wanted to escape the Council's notice. Anyway, they had learned to suck out only a part of the victim's energy, so they could continue using them like cattle. Like cows who are repeatedly milked.

Suspiciously, I looked at the floating monsters in their glass cage. I had the feeling that they were laughing at me.

“You feel wonderful afterwards,” Bobbie said adding. “A bit lightheaded and giddy, really nice.” She gestured invitingly at the bell jar. “It’s your turn Kate.” It sounded as though she was doing me a big favor. “We want you to be there next month.”

Panic came and faded away again. The monsters didn’t seem to truly hurt these people, so maybe it wouldn’t affect me either. Then there was something else; maybe I could penetrate their strange little brains to find out what they were really up to.

I also had a T-20 attached to my inner thigh, but it wouldn’t stop ten Energy Vampires from attacking me. I no longer hesitated, for the mayor and his wife waited for my reaction.

I began to move, as if my legs were controlled by someone else. This had to be one of the worst moments of my life, I thought.

If there still was going to be a life.

Oh Kalon, I thought grievously. Why on earth am I not just laying in bed with you instead of being here, acting like a heroine in such an absurd manner.

I stood still in front of the bell jar, carefully avoiding the monsters’ hungry glances.

Bobbie followed me to open the passage. “You don’t have to be scared,” she assured me. “They won’t hurt you.” She showed me her motherly smile. “You’ll be one of us in no time.” She waved her hands in the air.

The passage opened. I took a deep breath as though I was going to dive into ice cold water and took a step forward.

The energy vampires swirled around my head. I had vaguely expected that they would attack me immediately, but they weren’t touching me yet. Then, a voice pierced right through the telepathic shield in my head. It sounded high and a little shrill.

An emobeing!

My neck stung as if someone was inserting hundreds of microscopic pins in it.

Elf, vampire, witch, and human?

“Get out of my head!” I hissed aloud.

Why are you here? You must die!

Why hadn’t I foreseen that they would be able to read my mind? What if Cody couldn’t get here? Maybe the bell jar made it impossible to teleport! I drove the thought of Cody with force out of my head, but it was already too late.

Who is Cody?

I tried to lead them in another direction. *What are your plans with Nekor?*

You should already know that, emowoman.

I couldn't tell which monster was talking to me, maybe they were all talking at the same time.

You keep them alive and sane, why?

Why do you want to know? You won't be able to tell them.

Human curiosity, tell me before you kill me.

Because of the Council, we were almost extinct.

That is too bad.

What?

That they didn't succeed.

Monsters with twisted and angry faces swirled around me. I positioned myself so I could easily grab my T-20. For the spectators outside the bell jar, it would probably have been a strange sight. I had other things to worry about than the audience.

Is it death, or transformation?

Death or what?

We can make you just like us. Your fellow villagers are well on their way, even though they don't realize it yet.

I didn't know you could do that.

There are many things you don't know, emowoman.

The time will come when the moon is full, I presume?

That's right.

Who is going to continue hiding you from the Council's scanners?

Once there are hundreds of us, we can... We're losing time.

I saw the mouth of an energy vampire take on its sucking form.

Quick as a flash, I reached between my legs to grab the T-20. At the same time, I sent the strongest signal I could produce to Cody.

I heard a piercing scream: *Watch her!*

I got hold of the gun and fired at random. I caught a glimpse of the mayor and his wife who recoiled in bewilderment.

Cody appeared right next to me. The next thing I knew, I found myself in the meeting hall of the group.

The other Fantasy Hunters stared in utter shock at the T-20 in my hand. Then I couldn't see their faces anymore, because I had fallen to my knees to kiss the ground.

In all of us, even in good men, there is a lawless wild beast nature, which peers out in sleep.

(Plato)

12

“I almost haven’t slept all this time,” said Cody who looked terrible. “I was scared to death I would miss your call.”

I had already recovered from the initial shock, and we were sitting around the conference table.

“You have no idea how grateful I am to you.” I had never meant something that sincerely. Too bad that ratiobeings always hide and repress their sexual desires, otherwise I would have known how to thank him.

“Debriefing, please,” Gehlen said matter-of-factly.

I told them my story. When I finished, they looked at me with visible awe.

“You’ve got some guts,” Aqua remarked. It was clear that he meant it.

Gehlen said pensively: “If I understand it correctly, we have two weeks before every single inhabitant of Nekor will be transformed into an energy vampire.”

“Two weeks...” Cody muttered. His eyes were practically closing.

Aspen asked: “Should we feel sorry for them? They helped those monsters with their black magic!”

“They don’t know what they’re doing,” I said in their defense. I thought of Bobbie who had been like a mother to me. “They are just being used.” There was my empathy again, I realized. I couldn’t possibly see people as numbers whom you could exploit like pawns in a game of chess.

“We have to stop the process immediately,” Aqua said grimly. He looked at Cody who was dozing off. “Maybe he could place a bomb in that bell jar.”

Gehlen seemed to take that outburst seriously. “Too risky,” he found. “It’s not even certain he can get in without Kate as a focus point.” He stared over our heads. “Ten energy vampires, how hard can it be to kill them if a few of us group together and –” He shook his head as though he was refuting his own thoughts. “Cody can’t teleport us all at once.”

Suddenly I got an idea. At first sight, it would be rather difficult, but our options were more than limited. “What if we kidnap the mayor? We should be able to make him see the truth. Maybe we could show him some footage of energy vampires on a killing spree.”

“Kidnapping? That’s illegal,” Gehlen said.

“Necessity knows no law, Gehlen. Cody can take him out of there in the blink of an eye. It’s just a matter of choosing the right moment. If we can’t convince him, too bad, but blood won’t be spilled in the process.”

If the energy vampires were controlling him, it wasn’t going to be easy to make him change his mind, I realized. However, everything seemed to be better than the use of brutal force. I wasn’t like Aqua.

“We can pick him up when he goes to work,” I thought out loud. “Then we’ll have about twenty-five minutes before someone starts to notice he’s gone.”

Aspen asked skeptically: “Less than half an hour to change someone’s thoughts?”

“Shooting will be faster, I have to admit,” I replied more viciously than I meant. She looked at me reproachfully, but she kept silent. I glanced at Cody who was now fast asleep. “He can lie in wait for the mayor, I know the right spot.”

“Hmmm...” Gehlen was thinking it over carefully. “First, Cody will have to investigate the area, and you’ll have to accompany him.”

“Let’s get it over and done with.” I tried not to think of my safe home, or of Kalon. But the kidnapping had to take place the next morning, I realized. I still had time to go home, sleep, and catch my breath.

I woke up the unfortunate Cody. It took him a while to understand what was expected of him, but he agreed to do it. The current teleportation to Nekor didn’t take as long, it lasted less than a second. I hoped it would be my last time.

Without being noticed, we arrived in a small forest just outside the village. As we hurried to the center of the village, I sensed that something had changed. The atmosphere was different, and it had nothing to do with the late hour. Maybe it felt like this because now I was more an intruder than a visitor.

I saw that several lights were on in the town hall. That was unusual, this late at night. What were they up to? My theatrical departure possibly caused a great upheaval. It must have alarmed the energy vampires as well as the villagers. We needed to get a move on.

We reached the park, and I showed Cody the right spot where he could bring back the mayor after we had done the job. There wasn’t much to see in the scarce light of the oil lanterns, but he got the idea. Next, we sought a similar place in the area around the mayor’s house where the man could be picked up. We found it near a large weeping willow I had remembered from last time. Cody could hide in the bushes as he waited for his victim.

Cody was just about to teleport us back to the base, when I heard voices. Immediately I realized it was the mayor and his wife Bobbie. I was certain that they were returning from

the town hall, and I was dying to know what they were talking about. We drew back in the dark shade of the tree.

In the silence of the night, their voices were already comprehensible from a considerable distance. “That’s not going to be easy, such a large shield,” I heard the mayor say. “Over the whole village?”

“That’s what the Wish Fulfillers want, Robert,” Bobbie’s voice sounded a little reprimanding.

They walked past us, marching on as though they still had work to do. “That darned Kate!” the mayor complained. “It’s as if the Wish Fulfillers are scared of that impostor.”

“They’re not the only ones. What was that all about?”

“We’ll never know.”

“I hope we’ll never see that bitch again,” Bobbie said whole-heartedly. Apparently, her love for me had been short-lived.

“She’ll be surprised if she dares to show her face again...”

Their voices became unintelligible.

I reached for Cody’s hand. The next moment, we were back in the meeting hall.

“Are you alright?” Gehlen asked visibly relieved.

I nodded. “We have some new information. They seem to be planning to create a magical dome over Nekor. Like the bell jar where the energy vampires are staying in now, but on a larger scale.”

“Do they have this kind of power?”

“I suppose they do. But it needs an elaborate ritual, so they will be at it for a while. Anyway, we can’t take action until tomorrow morning.” I mentioned that again because I hoped Gehlen would send us home to get some sleep. In my case, to breathe in some much-needed Emo air.

Gehlen nodded understandingly. “Get out of here,” he said.

From the moment I stepped out of the Portal, I started to feel much better, in spite of my incredible fatigue. Though I was just beginning to realize what I had been through. I escaped an attack of energy vampires, something not many people had done before me. The thought of it made me walk proudly with my head up in the air.

Kalon was waiting for me at home. I thought he was going to eat me when I appeared at the doorstep. His aura exploded like fireworks. My grandmother’s spell retreated in a small corner of my being. I loved him so much it hurt. His embrace hurt, because he did it with so

much strength. It seemed as though we hadn't seen each other for ages instead of just a couple of days.

Ewok jumped excitedly up and down my leg, but she cleared off as she started to feel embarrassed.

'I'm never letting you go again,' Kalon said when the storm had passed and we were sitting on the couch.

Reluctantly, I said: "Bad news, Kalon, the mission isn't done yet, in about six hours, I need to get back to work."

I felt Kalon freeze up. "Once more to –"

I shook my head. "No not to Nekor." I told him what we were planning to do.

Kalon didn't have to think about it for long. "That will never work, you can't just convert someone like that mayor. It's some sort of religion to them. And you know how religious people can be, no matter what they believe in."

"The only other option is violence, and you know that that's something *I* don't believe in."

"Said the woman who wore a T-20 against her silky thighs." His gaze became a little dazed. "I wish I could transform myself into a T-20."

"You have a much better weapon," I said. "It brings life instead of death and ruin." The change of subject caused a familiar tingling in my belly. Too long had I been deprived of physical contact.

"Let's make love first," I demanded. "Then we'll talk."

"Aren't you supposed to rest?"

It's just a matter of priorities, I thought as I threw my clothes in every direction. I couldn't even make time for my usual shower. I needed that hot piece of flesh of his in my body, the rest wasn't important.

That night we slept for 3 hours, at the most.

Cody needed less than a minute to pick up his prey. The look on the mayor's face when he appeared in our meeting hall was absolutely worth it. First, he looked as though he had seen his deceased grandfather. His face turned ashen and his eyes were bulging. Then, he recognized me.

"You!" he snarled. It seemed as if he was about to attack me, but when he saw that Aqua was pointing a gun at him, he froze up.

"Nobody is going to hurt you," I assured him. "All we want to do is talk to you."

His eyes moved quickly back and forth. “Where am I, what is this place?”

“The office of the Fantasy Hunters, we receive assignments from the Council and the IFG.”

“The IFG! Are we going down that road?”

“Robert...” I realized I had never called the mayor by his first name. Me, who didn’t like ceremonies, maybe I had unconsciously wanted to keep a distance. “Robert, we know what you think of the outside world. Or should I say, of reality. However, laws and agreements need to be followed. Hiding dangerous emobeings is not exactly a small offence.”

“We have our reasons.”

“The wrong reasons.”

“That’s our problem, don’t you think?”

“No it’s not!” Gehlen said severely. “If these monsters escape—”

“Monsters?”

“You’re hiding energy vampires, the most evil emobeings in existence. Their only purpose in life is to suck people dry, literally. If they get the chance to reproduce, the consequences could not be estimated. We thought we wiped them all out, but several survivors are hiding in your village, thanks to your black magic.”

“That’s just plain nonsense!”

“We can show you some images, Robert,” I said.

The mayor laughed sneeringly. “I know what you can do with images. Just because I live in Nekor doesn’t mean I’m stupid!”

Aspen asked: “Why do you think we’re putting in so much effort if these monsters are as innocent as you seem to believe?”

“I don’t know, because it’s your job? Blindfolds on and shoot!”

Then Aqua spoke.

“We only shoot when we have no other option.” He was still pointing his gun at the mayor. “Which is a shame sometimes.”

“Those creatures are Wish Fulfillers.”

Gehlen said: “You may not be stupid, but you are extremely naïve. You are brainwashed by those monsters, you and your whole village.”

The mayor looked haughtily at us. “I demand that you bring me back home, now!”

He had the right to demand that, I realized. Our kidnapping plan wasn’t exactly kosher, but the IFG left us some elbow room. Of course, we needed to follow the rules, but only as much as possible.

“They warned me that something like this could happen,” the Mayor said.

“They?” we asked.

“The Wish Fulfillers and they were right.”

“They’re not removing your knowledge of the past, they’re sucking out your energy,” I said. “You will all end up like empty shells. Or like new energy vampires, which would be even worse, for the rest of the world, at least.”

The mayor nodded. “That’s exactly what they predicted. People like you trying to make us believe something like that.”

“This is hopeless,” Aqua said impatiently. “Let’s call for backup to flatten that village, they’re asking for it.”

The mayor looked at him intensely. “So this is the civilized world?”

“We are trying to keep it civilized,” Aqua answered. “Preferably with a light hand, but we can do it differently too.”

“People with deep desires are easily persuaded by the words of charlatans,” Gehlen said.

The mayor nodded. “The question is, who is the charlatan?”

“What could we possibly gain by trying to make you and your fellow-villagers change your minds?”

The mayor nodded. “You’ve got a good point there. Tell me.”

“We don’t have a problem with you guys, but we do have a problem with the monsters you are trying to protect.”

“We’re losing time, Gehlen,” Aspen warned him. She turned her computer so the mayor could see the screen. She turned on the volume.

Screaming and screeching people attacked by energy vampires. I experienced an instinctive escape reaction, but I bit my lip and stayed seated.

I expected the mayor to become white-faced, but he barely reacted to the images. “As I said before –”

“God damn it, I’ve had it with you!” Aqua snapped. It seemed as though he was about to pull the trigger.

The mayor did look a little pale now. However, his tone remained haughty: “Did you think that killing me would solve the problem?”

“Fanatics piss me off!” Aqua growled.

“Same here,” the mayor remarked.

Aspen switched off the sound of her computer. “You should be able to reboot human brains,” she muttered.

“You would all rather amputate anything that’s human,” the Mayor declared. “Those who don’t want to participate, and those who want to return to times past are criminals.”

“That’s not the point, mayor.” Gehlen looked at his watch. “We don’t have much time left. I’m afraid I will have to give you an ultimatum. You’ll hand over the energy vampires by removing their cover, or...” He hesitated slightly. “Or Nekor will be wiped off the map.”

Aqua nodded contentedly. “Because of your village’s location, we don’t have to be afraid of damage to the surrounding area.”

The mayor rested his gaze on me. “So you were nothing but a nasty spy?”

“You can leave out the nasty,” Aspen said.

He ignored her. “How could you resist the truth serum?”

“I’m not human.”

“No, you’re a spy.”

“Your Wish Fulfillers immediately knew I was from Emo World. That’s why they wanted to kill me, so I couldn’t give away their filthy intentions.” For the first time, I saw a glimpse of doubt in the aura of the mayor. “Robert...” I switched on my witch talents and my elf abilities to put the utmost power of persuasion in my words. “You’re a wise man, use that wisdom, and think about it! Go through the points once again, without prejudices. Why would those creatures from Emo World speak the truth, and why would this group here, this group of people just like you, try to deceive you? Why? Who is going to benefit from the whole situation?”

“We are,” the Mayor replied. “Me and my fellow villagers, our deepest wish will be fulfilled.”

The insecurity in his aura was growing.

“Do you really believe in such a moving altruism? Those creatures come from the second dimension, instead of ordinary people like you.” I grimaced. “You’ve experienced yourself how easy it was for me to fool you.”

“You’re a trained fraud.”

“I’ve got to hand it to you,” I said. I glanced at Aqua’s gun. “You’ve got guts! If you used that courage against those monsters, maybe we could handle this situation without too much damage.”

“Take him back,” Gehlen said to Cody. “Aspen, notify the IFG.”

“Wait a minute,” the Mayor said. A sting of fear flashed through his aura. “Notify the IFG? What is that supposed to mean?”

Aqua asked: “Do we have to explain it again? Goodbye, Nekor. Too bad, Kate told me it’s a beautiful little village.”

The mayor took a deep breath. He was crestfallen. “This is blackmail...”

“This is called sacrificing the small to save the great.” Aspen refuted. “Truly and highly awful, but necessary, like the amputation of a shattered leg.”

The mayor muttered something unintelligible.

“Excuse me?” Gehlen said.

The man looked up. “What do you want me to do?”

I tried to probe his aura as accurately as I could. He was full of doubt, but I didn’t see any dangerous intentions. Of course, that could change as soon as he was out of our reach.

For a few seconds, Gehlen observed the mayor before he replied. “The bell jar has got to go.”

The man pursed his lips, then he said: “What, just like that?”

“I don’t care how you’re going to do it. If necessary, we can create a diversion by landing our air ship in the center of Nekor. As soon as we storm the town hall, the bell jar has to be eliminated.”

“Then what...?”

“People are not going to get killed, we can sedate those who stand in our way.”

“Except those monsters,” said Aqua. He met the Mayor’s distrustful gaze without blinking. “If they’re all in one space, we should be able to handle them a lot easier.”

I looked at my watch. “They will start to notice you’re gone,” I said to the mayor. “We have to leave now.” I looked at him, searchingly. “I hope you’ll appreciate my company, because I want to stay close to you.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

I smiled friendly. “No,” I said.

Back to Nekor, I thought when our aircraft took off. That wasn’t what I promised to Kalon. Maybe it was for the best, nobody was going to benefit from his bursting with concern.

Everyone was quiet onboard during the few minutes it took us to get there. Nobody was looking forward to another confrontation with the dangerous energy vampires. The mayor was particularly scared of the aircraft. He appeared to be claustrophobic.

I looked at Aspen who had shut her computer. She was staring at the floor near her feet with a strange expression on her face.

I asked: "Can you hear them?"

She nodded. "It's like hearing radio waves, several channels at a time. Voices talking at the same time, not a single one are comprehensible..."

She looked at me. "I truly hope, by everything that is dear to me, that it will stop when they're all dead."

By everything that is dear to her, I thought. I was wondering who or what was so dear to her. Did ratiobeings know how to love? She did, I concluded. I hadn't forgotten how she conducted herself towards me sometimes. I briefly reflected on how it would be to have sex with a ratiowoman. Just for a second though, because Gehlen, who was sitting in the pilot's chair, asked:

"We're here, that open space right there?"

I looked down, to the roofs of Nekor. The computer set course for the marketplace, near the town hall. There weren't many people on the streets, as usual.

"Just land the aircraft," I said. I looked at the mayor who was clinging to his seat as though he were afraid to fall off. "Ready, Robert?"

He started. "It will take me a while to remove the bell jar. I need to cast a spell –"

I raised my hand. "Just make sure they don't catch you, those Wish Fulfillers of yours." I could hardly suppress the sarcasm in my voice.

It would be like opening a jar full of poisonous scorpions, I then thought, flying scorpions of nearly two feet. The hand that was holding my gun was starting to get sweaty.

Outside, I saw a few people freezing up while the aircraft quickly descended and landed smoothly on the marketplace. More people came running along, some even out the town hall. That was a good thing, the fewer people staying behind there, the better.

The door slid open and Julie switched off the shield.

I patted the mayor on the back. "Do what you have to do, Robert," I said. "Your wife, your daughter, even the whole village will be grateful afterwards." Fear flashed up in his aura. "They won't catch you," I promised. I hoped I could keep that promise.

The next moment, we were all running with the mayor amongst us. Partly to protect him, partly to prevent him from changing his mind. Cody was the only one who stayed outside to guard the exit of the building. He had to make sure energy vampires weren't going to get out.

The guards in the town hall had probably never been threatened in their lives, but when they saw our guns, they automatically held up their hands in the air.

“Outside, now!” the mayor yelled. “It’s going to get dangerous!”

The two men obeyed without a comment.

He snatched the bunch of keys that was lying on the table, and opened the door of the ruinous space where they had placed the bell jar.

I could practically feel the other members of the group simultaneously catching their breath. For a few seconds, they were staring motionlessly at the floating energy vampires. They were all looking at us, their monstrous mouths contorted with rage.

“Mayor!” That was Gehlen. “Do your work!” he hissed.

The Mayor’s aura was still full of doubt and growing fear. A palette of somber colors which fluttered like autumn leaves in the wind. He started to move. We followed him closely, our weapons at the ready, as he walked stiffly towards the bell jar.

I watched him carefully, paying close attention to the ritual he was performing. I knew enough of the black arts to see whether or not he was trying to fool us. It diverted my attention from the monsters. They were now flashing back and forth as though they were trying to break through the translucent wall of their glass prison.

The Mayor’s arms formed a circle in the air. Then, he spread them with a jerk. The next moment, the energy vampires flew in every direction. Apparently, they realized their lives depended on the speed with which they could disappear, even though they were in the majority.

Weapons crashed and flashed, and the first two monsters were reduced to atoms. Then a third one, a fourth one. The fifth one seemed to be changing his mind and threw himself at the mayor with a furious screech. It disintegrated but I didn’t know who hit it. Maybe I did. I pointed at another monster that was floating against the ceiling, I fired and missed. Someone else got hold of the monster and it dissolved soundlessly into thin air.

We were standing with our backs against each other, so we wouldn’t hit members of the group. We fired incessantly at the four remaining energy vampires. They were flashing back and forth with incredible speed. One of them disappeared in the open door.

Cody!

He didn’t answer, I felt he was reacting.

Aqua, who was firing his weapon like a madman, took out one of the remaining monsters. For a second, it appeared to be on fire. Its deafening scream resonated through the air before it finally disintegrated.

A few moments later, the last energy vampire was dead. The whole fight had barely lasted twenty seconds.

I ran outside to see Cody.

He was fine. There was a single mark on the wall near the door. "I'm not as sleepy as I appear to be," he said with a timid smile.

A handful of people had gathered on the market place, but they showed no intention of entering the town hall. They were just staring, motionlessly. Especially the aircraft received their attention. They probably had no idea what just had happened.

I went back inside.

The Mayor was looking around with a look on his face as though he had just been hit on the head.

"Nobody knows about your treason," I said to him. I emphasized the word 'treason' with an ironic tone to it. "You can do whatever you like with it. With your talents as a politician you'll certainly be able to make up some story to ease the mind of your fellow-villagers. You'll probably even benefit from it all."

His gaze cleared up as he focused it on me. "Maybe it's hard for people like you to understand, but I only want what's best for them," he said neutrally.

"If that's really the case, you should be grateful to us."

"I haven't figured that out yet."

"Trust me, Robert, you did the right thing. As soon as the poison is out of your system, you'll see."

He nodded. "Let's hope I wasn't wrong."

"There is still a tiny problem," Gehlen said. He had followed the conversation.

The mayor sighed wearily. "Black magic..."

"We can't allow it, mayor, under no circumstances."

I saw the look on the mayor's face. "And the use of it is traceable," I stated before he thought of continuing his black arts in secret.

He nodded resignedly. "I'm already feeling at home in this new world," he said.

I put my hand on his shoulder. He didn't respond to the touch. "Nothing prevents you from continuing many of the good sides of your way of life, as long as you don't turn your village into a prison."

He nodded again. "I've got some thinking to do."

"Maybe I'll come back and take a look one day." I meant it. This place had something special about it. Or maybe it had everything to do with the nice, organic food here.

“I hope it’s not meant as a threat,” the Mayor replied. He showed me a weak smile.

In bed my real love has always been the sleep
that rescued me by allowing me to dream.

(Luigi Pirandello)

13

In bed in Kalon’s arms, he was sleeping and breathing peacefully next to me, I let my thoughts take their course. I wasn’t tired; too much adrenaline and endorphins were running through my body. I felt happy, almost euphoric. Obviously, I had been through quite a lot without a scratch.

Aspen had already told me that those nasty voices in her head were completely gone. The scanners no longer recorded suspicious energy peaks. Clearly, the energy vampires were completely wiped out this time. The person, who could handle those creatures, could possibly handle anything.

Strangely enough, it did leave me with the feeling that I lost something. Extinct life forms, dangerous as they may be, leave behind a void. Not everyone could feel it. Maybe one day, I’d write an article about it, or a book. That way, some little piece of them would survive, after all.

The Council and the IFG had showed us their gratitude by giving a large bonus and an extra vacation. We could definitely use some time off, in my case, preferably with Kalon.

I had asked Kalon to move in with me after our vacation. He only stated one serious condition: the apartment had to be darkened.

Ewok didn’t have problems with it either. As long as she could enjoy the company of werewolves, everything was fine by her.

Life seemed easy and wonderful, at least for a while.

The next day, Aspen stood on my doorstep. It wasn’t the first time, but it still surprised me. Aspen didn’t really like our dimension, just as every other ratiobeing. The only difference was that she had established some kind of relationship with an emobeing, with me.

I tried to remind myself that I was on vacation. I shouldn’t immediately put my entire system on *red alert*. Who knows, maybe Aspen wanted to treat herself with a surprise holiday through the Portal.

“Hey, nice to see you,” I said, and I meant it. I let her in my apartment.

“Coffee? At his time of day, I usually drink some blood.”

Aspen frowned. “Blood!” as she tried her best to hide her disgust.

I switched on my coffee machine. “I just like it, that’s all. I think it has something to do with my vampire genes. It’s just pigs blood, if that can assure you. It’s hard to find human blood these days.” I put on a sardonic grin while I gave her a steaming cup of coffee. “It’s not more horrible than eating meat, something you probably do too.”

She nodded slowly. The good thing about Aspen was that she was open to things outside her own environment. Like the fact that my lover was a vampire.

To my surprise, Ewok jumped on her lap. Aspen barely seemed to notice it. She stroked her head and neck absent-mindedly. The scoundrel clearly enjoyed it.

Ewok caught my gaze. *She is nice.*

I ignored her.

“It’s such a shame that I have no telepathic abilities,” Aspen said as if she had noticed something of Ewok’s reaction, after all.

“I can talk with animals because of my elf blood. But you can still develop the telepathic ability to communicate with human beings. Everyone has that potential. The only problem is activating it.”

“Yeah, right!” She did not seem to believe it.

“It’s a bit like reading. Every child has the potential, but they still need to learn it.”

“You’re way too gifted,” Aspen stated. However, her aura didn’t show any sign of jealousy.

“Oh well, it’s my mix of genes...”

“What good could the company of an ordinary computer freak like me do to someone like you?”

I smiled. “You’ve got so much more hidden inside you than you seem to realize.” I meant it. Aspen started to interest me more and more.

I pointed at her empty cup. “Want a refill?”

“I would rather have some wine, if that’s possible?”

I walked to the kitchen. As I opened a bottle of red wine, I wondered what had brought her to Emo World. I could have read her mind, but that would have been indiscreet and unfair.

When I appeared with the bottle and two glasses, Aspen asked: “How are things with Kalon?”

“Better than ever. We have some serious plans. Unfortunately he has to work late today.”

“Is it different to have sex with a vampire?” Her words seemed to have startled her. Her face turned red and she averted her eyes. “Sorry.”

I chuckled. “There is no such thing as an embarrassing question in Emo World, Aspen. Not even about sex, *especially* not about sex.”

“I still need to get used to it...”

“Sex with a vampire is different from sex with a human being or with a snakebeing, or with an undine for that matter. Every being has its own specific characteristics, and that is what makes it exciting. With a vampire, it usually is wild, passionate, and a little bloody though they can often be tender and sensual. Whatever you like.”

Aspen was surprised. “Do they bite your neck, like in those old stories?”

“A little bit, to release a single drop of blood. Afterwards, he licks the wound until it makes you climax.” I gazed dreamily into space.

Aspen shifted back and forth on her chair, but as usual, her curiosity triumphed. “What’s an undine?”

“A water nymph,” I educated her.

“Oh yeah, I’ve read about them...” She thought about it. “But aren’t they feminine?”

“They manifest themselves in a female form. According to mythology, they are elementals, messengers of the gods. But gods don’t exist.”

Though Kalon had doubts about that, I thought. He idolized someone called Hecate, some sort of super elf who is told to manifest in both dimensions. That adoration surprised me a little, Kalon was usually so down-to-earth. Gods, in any shape or form, were invented by Ratio World. Though you could ask yourself where those people found that idea in the first place...

I poured out the wine and handed a glass to Aspen. She took a large gulp before she asked tentatively: “So you’ve had sex with a woman?”

“Not really, undines are bisexual. If they take on a human form, it’s usually that of a woman. Oh well, man or woman, sex is sex.” I drank my wine. “Undines are extremely sensitive and tender. They slide and flow over you like hot oil.”

“I eh... I’ve never done it before. Made love, I mean.”

That didn’t surprise me, though that confession obviously cost her lots of courage. In Ratio World a life without sex was normal. Reproduction generally happened in laboratories.

I refilled her glass. “But you would want to?”

“Ratiobeings find the whole thing kind of eh... dirty.”

I put my hand on Aspen’s. It felt as soft as velvet. “What do you think of it?”

She didn't pull back her hand, though I had felt a light shudder when I touched her, typical response of ratiobeings when they're suddenly touched.

"I think... I think it's something completely natural." She seemed uncomfortable.

"You can sleep with Kalon, if you want and if he wants to."

Aspen stared at me, frightened. "What?"

"He can be very gentle."

"But Kate... he's your boyfriend!"

"He is my soul mate, my lover, and soon he'll be my life companion, but I don't own him." I smiled when I saw the incredulous look on her face. "If Kalon wants to be faithful to me, it will be his choice. We live in Emo World, Aspen." I made sure I emphasized that last sentence.

She nodded slowly. "He would have to find me attractive first."

"Don't underestimate yourself, Aspen. You're incredibly hot, you know that?" Even though he would really have to lean down to reach things.

Her face turned red again. Then she suddenly asked: "What do you think of Aqua?"

I shrugged. "He's nice, but a bit too cold." But he compensated that by acting bloodthirstily during our missions, I thought.

"You probably find every ratiobeing too cold, don't you?" Aspen remarked.

Did Aspen have a thing for Aqua? I thought ratiobeings weren't capable of these emotions? What a difficult dimension to live in, damned difficult though ratiobeings probably thought that the lack of deep emotions simplified life.

Kate Lillian?

That was a call from the Council.

I'm listening. I almost told them to leave me alone, I'm on vacation, but you couldn't say something like that to the Council. They came close to what ratiobeings used to call a Supreme Being. At any rate, there wasn't much in both dimensions that they didn't know of.

Aspen looked at me questioningly, but I ignored her.

We have a problem, the Council said.

This time, I did look at Aspen. Did she already hear what was going on?

Which creature is it this time that managed to escape to Ratio World? I suddenly realized that it had to be more serious than that. They obviously found it necessary to disturb me here and now.

Trouble in Emo World this time! Kate, you'll have to put off your vacation for a while.

“Oh, great,” I said aloud. Aspen frowned, as though she didn’t know what was going on, after all.

To my disbelief, I was told that it involved a drug problem. I couldn’t believe it because you didn’t need to use drugs in Emo World. This dimension is so fantastic, so fairy-like and bizarre. Drugs would only make life more normal, instead of more insane. Or at least, the definition of ‘normal’ used in Ratio World. What would you miss in a world where dreams come true, where you can do whatever you like, and where the word taboo barely has a meaning?

We have a strong suspicion that some emobeings are using pills to make it possible to dream.

Well, I’ll be damned. There wasn’t much that could surprise me, but this was absurd. Emobeings never dreamed. That was the biggest difference between both kinds. Since our life was already some sort of dream, we didn’t need that kind of release. Ratiobeings did need it, but they didn’t seem to realize it yet. Not even as their society became increasingly numb by taking anti-dream pills. It was a worrying development with fatal consequences in the long run.

Now there seemed to be emobeings who *wanted* to dream. And on top of that, they were taking drugs for it.

I asked, still in disbelief: *Does that stuff really work?*

The pills work, but your minds aren’t made for dreaming. It will have catastrophic effects.

I nodded. The Council wanted me and Aspen to investigate the matter. That’s why she was here. Without her knowing it, they had led her to me. That’s one illusion less.

Why Aspen?

The input of a ratiobeing can be useful. She understands the concept of dreaming.

Why me?

Your blood is more powerful than that of ordinary emobeings.

Resignedly, I asked: *Where can we find those drug users?*

For the time being, you can find them in the so-called Dream Clubs, but the phenomenon seems to be spreading. These clubs are operated by rupa angels.

I thought they were only concerned about taking care of sick people and animals?

That’s part of the problem. We don’t know what made them change their minds. Keep us informed.

The Council broke off contact.

I sighed and took a large gulp of wine. It tasted bitter, like a terrible night of rain.

Aspen asked hesitantly: "What's wrong?"

I told her the situation.

"Rupa angels," she said. She didn't seem shocked. Apparently, angels evoked less terrifying feelings than vampires. "I've never heard of them before."

"They are creatures of a high ethereal, astral and mental level. They generally distance themselves from the tangible world."

I couldn't image what role they were playing in this situation.

"Taking drugs to dream, that's absurd!" Aspen said.

I was more worried about the disturbing thought that rupa angels were changing into drug dealers. Had there been a vortex activated?

For a moment, it seemed as though Aspen could read my mind. She asked: "Have there recently been any vortex sightings?"

"The Council would have told me that."

A vortex was some sort of invisible whirlpool in which good and evil, black and white, beautiful and ugly, or in other words, all kinds of opposites were twisted and mixed up. However, this natural phenomenon was extremely rare. Besides, the Council had ways to track vortexes.

"Your first assignment in Emo World," I stated.

Aspen was looking skeptical. "Yeah, that's just what I've been waiting for."

"And I thought you were visiting me out of kindness."

"I was." She looked confused. "At least I thought I was."

I didn't go more deeply into it. "Anyway, it's a nice opportunity for you to get to know Emo World."

"Like a dream come true," Aspen replied.

I thought she was being sarcastic, but she seemed to mean it. Apparently, she missed her dreams of old. Every ratiobeing missed them, but not many of them realized it.

Pensively, she asked: "Where would emobeings go to when they dream? When we did it, we ended up here, even though we weren't aware of it. But how would that be in your case?"

"It's new for me too, Aspen."

Suddenly it seemed interesting to find it out for myself. It would be a whole new experience. Unnatural for us, of course, but as usual, my curiosity was too strong for my own good.

I rose up decisively. “We could start by looking for a Dream Club, like the Council told me,” I said. “Let’s make ourselves presentable.”

Apparently my vacation was over.

I put on a pale blue blouse which emphasized my firm breasts, and simple stretchy pants worn tightly around my thighs. Simple and sexy, I thought.

Aspen didn’t need much, she was already really attractive. The crazy part was that she didn’t realize it at all. She probably had more binary codes running through her veins than female hormones.

“I’m nervous,” Aspen confessed when we left home.

“I won’t let you out of my sight,” I promised. Not exactly a horrible job, but I kept it to myself.

The night was falling. Aspen looked anxiously at what she thought were strange creatures leaving their houses under the disappearing sun.

“We’ll drop in at Kalon’s first,” I announced. “He likes to know what I’m doing.”

Aspen raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“He thinks my job is kind of frightening.”

The witches were locking up their doors, except for several night shops. They were hard workers, those witches. As they closed the shops, the tempting smells that persuaded you to buy things faded. It was a good thing, because a ratiobeing like Aspen would not have resisted them.

“Hey! Kate.” The young Neder waved from across the street.

Aspen pulled my sleeve. “Horns, black lips, and pointy tail, is that a demon?” She nearly whispered.

“A fire demon yes,” I replied.

When Neder approached us, Aspen hid behind my back.

“They’re kind-hearted,” I assured her.

“Good to see you,” Neder said.

“It sure is.”

“My interview was a great success. I even got a promotion. They made me editor.”

He had grown a lot in that short period of time, I noticed. Last time I saw him, he had still been a shy stuttering little demon. Fire demons mature a lot during particular phases of their long life, especially during their puberty. I barely recognized him. He even smelled like maturity.

“Well, well, congratulations!”

“I wanted to thank you,” Neder looked at Aspen who was still partially hiding behind me. “Hello, who are you? I’m Neder.”

He seemed to want to hug her, but Aspen backed away awkwardly. Then, she cautiously held out her hand to him.

“She is a ratiobeing,” I explained when Neder looked at me, puzzled.

“A dreamer?” he asked.

“No, awake.”

“Oh.” As I read his aura I could see he felt a little insulted, but he seemed to understand it. Demons simply had a bad reputation in Ratio World, though they were extremely nice in reality.

I asked: “You don’t happen to know a Dream Club, do you? It seems to be popular these days.”

Neder thought about it. “Not really... maybe that new place, which used to be a cave of power animals near the Leprechaun Forest.”

I nodded. “You could be right.”

Meeting Neder wasn’t a coincidence. Coincidence as I said before didn’t exist in Emo World. When we left my apartment I already knew something or someone would cross our path to help us out.

We went on. I hoped that the company where Kalon worked hadn’t changed its location. As I said before: Emo World wasn’t always simple to live in. It sure was fun and never boring, but not simple.

“What are power animals?” Aspen wanted to know.

“They appear to be normal animals, but they’re not. They help people. For example, when you need more muscles, you evoke the power animal of a bear. Or if you need order in your life, you evoke a vulture, those are natural born cleaners. The only ratiobeings who believed in them and evoked them regularly were shamans.”

Darkness had fallen completely. It wasn’t a problem for me; thanks to my vampire blood I had excellent night vision. I loved the smell of the *Mirabilis Jalapa*, or nightshade, whose flowers open at night.

Aspen looked at me from aside. “You know what I find extraordinary? In Emo World, so many different creatures live together in peace and harmony. That seems impossible in Ratio World. For thousands of years, we have been knocking each other’s brains out.”

“The real art is cherishing the differences instead of judging them, though trolls and underwater demons are also at each other’s throats sometimes. That’s because of some stupid

misunderstanding. Nobody takes that feud serious anymore; it has become part of the folklore.”

I saw Kalon. He and his boss were standing at the exit of the company. His employer was a pleasant, easy-going emoman with a large belly, and a round, friendly face. Kalon and his boss got along very well. Probably they had the same sense of humor.

Kalon was someone who carried things around. It was hard work with a lot of dragging and lugging. Brainless work, he called it. He needed to get rid of his excess energy. And he had nice co-workers.

When he saw me, he walked over and we hugged.

I knew Aspen was probably looking a bit awkward, especially because of my previous proposition. I briefly breathed in Kalon’s spicy odor, a combination of aftershave and wet wooden crates.

I told him about our mission. Kalon sighed, but he knew that it was useless to protest against it. He had already given up the attempts to make me find another job. I simply needed my daily dose of excitement. “Be careful,” was the only thing he still said.

“You two look nice,” Kalon said. He let his eyes wander over Aspen’s shapely body.

“Thanks,” she muttered. I could almost feel her glow.

“I’m hoping to see you tonight,” Kalon said as we were walking away.

“Make sure you have enough energy,” I replied.

I heard his boss laugh as though he had just heard the best joke ever.

To my surprise, we immediately found the Leprechaun Forest. Fortunately, we didn’t have to enter it. The cave we were looking for was situated on the south edge of the forest. At least, it was supposed to be there. We were still in luck; the cave was in the same place.

The Leprechaun Forest was surrounded by caves. During the years, these caves had grown along with the forests, as though they needed each other.

Aspen was clearly worried. “Rupa angels look human, don’t they?”

“Most of the time yes. Certainly among emobeings.”

We heard music, a mix of old fashioned Ratio World trance with gnome beat. An inflaming rhythm that could get you intoxicated.

Several emobeings were chatting at the entrance of the cave. They weren’t paying attention to us, and there wasn’t a doorkeeper. We could just enter the place. That seemed strange if they were doing things that weren’t kosher.

The entrance hall of the cave was lit with candles and it smelled musty. It was a mixture of sweat, candle wax, and a hint of opium incense, an oriental aroma. The high-backed red velvet sofas looked new. The rest of the interior was rather plain.

In a corner a few leprechauns were seated on the lap of emobeings. They sipped their green drinks, and stroked the leprechauns, who enjoyed their caresses with closed eyes.

Aspen asked in a whisper: "Are those leprechauns' prostitutes?"

The leprechauns were like teddy bears or pets. There was no prostitution in Emo World, people didn't need it. I told Aspen. She looked surprised but she kept silent.

In another corner of the room, a vampire and an emowoman were pounding away. They were doing it very intensely, but nobody took notice of them. Aspen was embarrassed and looked away. However, another couple was doing the same thing. A woman was sitting on a bar stool with her eyes shut and a drink in her hand while a snakebeing's long and forked tongue disappeared between her thighs. He kneeled before her, his knees on a cushion. I clearly remembered what such a tongue could do to you. That woman should be envied.

However, I noticed it was all too much for Aspen, so I took her to an adjoining room.

More candlelight and an even stronger smell of opium incense. It turned me a bit lightheaded. Emobeings were dancing to the entrancing music.

At the edge of the room, simple high tables were placed in a Spartan manner. You didn't have to come here to admire the interior.

I looked around, searching for rupa angels. I startled as a voice sounded in my ear: "Want a dreamer?"

When I turned around, I found myself face to face with an emoman.

"What?"

"Do you want a dreamer? What else are you looking for?"

"Oh, you mean those pills that –"

"Don't play the innocent with me, lady!"

"I didn't know what they were called."

The man looked impatiently at me. "Well? What about her?" He pointed at Aspen.

"Bring it on."

"Come, it'll be the trip of a lifetime."

The man guided us to an empty table.

"People told me that rupa angels sold these dreamers," I told the man.

He grinned. "What do you think I am?"

I noticed that Aspen observed him intently. He looked like an ordinary emobeing whose face you could forget in a minute, which was probably his intention.

“I thought rupa angels were healers?”

“You think too much,” he replied. “And who says dreamers don’t have healing properties?”

He seemed to be talking too easily for someone who was breaking the rules. “Isn’t it bad for emobeings? We aren’t supposed to dream, are we?”

“How bad can it be to just walk into another dimension?”

“What does it look like?”

“I don’t use those pills myself, ma’am. Would be pointless without human anatomy, wouldn’t it? Relax, ladies. A healing angel won’t do you harm.”

No fixed body, so no aura. I couldn’t see if he was lying or not.

Suddenly, Aspen asked: “I’m a ratiobeing. What can I expect if I use a dreamer?”

The man looked at her, surprised. “Ratiobeings don’t need drugs to dream, do they? I thought it was the other way around.”

“You should stay sober and keep an eye on me,” I said in her ear so the man couldn’t hear it.

“That group over there.” The rupa angel pointed at a group of teenagers sitting across the room. “They are just back from their journey, and I don’t think they will tell you much.”

I wondered what he meant by it, but I could just as well ask the teenagers myself. They were clearly having fun. They were laughing and gesturing wildly.

I looked at the rupa angel. “How much is it?”

“The first pill is for free.” He put two in my hand. “Here are your tickets to dreamland. You’ll be back for more,” he predicted.

I pulled Aspen towards the teenagers, two girls and two boys. When they noticed us, they grinned broadly but vacantly.

I introduced myself and Aspen.

“Hello, hot stuff,” the skinnier of the two boys said. He was starting to have a thin beard and his eyes were bulging.

I ignored his lustful stare. “Can you tell us something about these so-called ‘dreamers?’”

One of the girls giggled. Her blond hair was put up so high her head seemed twice as long. “O yeah, the dreamers...” she said.

Her friend stared vacantly at the ceiling.

The other boy looked relatively normal. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Well, what that stuff does to you, what did you think?"

"Oh man, that's so hard to explain," the first boy said.

"It's like explaining an orgasm to someone who hasn't had sex before," his friend found.

"Which dimension do you end up in? Is it safe?"

"Safe?" The beard guy stared pensively into space.

"You get a headache afterwards," the other one said.

"How long have you been doing it?"

"I'll have to check my journal," Blondie said. She giggled.

I hoped that their irritating, sluggish behavior was just teenager attitude and not an effect of the drug.

Aspen asked impatiently: "How long does a trip last?"

"Oh, a couple of hours."

It surprised me. "What do you experience during it?"

The beard guy shook his head pityingly. "She's hot, but she's completely clueless."

I started to suspect that they were put to silence. That's why the rupa angel had claimed that they wouldn't tell us much. I was just going to have to take the risk with the possibility that the stuff didn't work on me. Like the truth serum in Nekor.

"We'll just have to try it," I said.

"Have fun," the bearded guy called when we walked away. "We'll see you again."

I hoped we wouldn't.

When we were back outside, Aspen asked: "Are you sure you want to take the risk?"

"We need to know what it does, Aspen."

"It could be dangerous!"

"I'm pretty sure it won't kill me."

Fortunately, we could leave the Leprechaun Forest behind us. It looked menacingly in the dark.

"You'll have to hold my hand," I said to Aspen. "If something goes wrong, you can call Kalon, or you can alarm the group."

"Something's not right," Aspen said.

She had a point. It didn't seem right that rupa angels were pretending to be dealers, and it was highly unusual that emobeings resorted to drugs.

The streets of the city were practically empty, which was a good thing. I liked empty streets. They calmed my nerves.

“I’ll do it tomorrow,” I promised Aspen. “If I made a wrong decision, fate will let me know in one way or another before it’s too late.”

Aspen didn’t seem convinced. Ratiobeings were simply deaf and blind when it came to those things. But she kept silent.

She decided to go home and return the next day. Apparently she had enough of Emo World. I knew how it felt, but the other way around.

I brought her to the airport. As I walked home deep in thought, a clapping noise startled me. A little further down the road stood a man in long robes, adorned with multicolored feathers. He staggered as though he were drunk and clapped his hands, a loud and annoying noise in the silence of the night. However, he immediately stopped when he noticed I was looking at him.

Something wasn’t right; the man looked blurry, like a shot of a badly adjusted camera. He was a dreamer, something I hadn’t seen for a while. An authentic and rare ratiobeing who still dreamed like before.

“Hey!” the man greeted. He had long grey hair so thin it didn’t seem real. Actually, his entire body was thin, something his long clothes couldn’t hide.

“Hello,” I replied curiously.

“Glad to have found you,” he said sighing.

“You were looking for me? Who are you?”

“A shaman, I know I’m walking around in Emo World.”

It got complicated. He was dreaming, otherwise he wouldn’t look so blurry, but his spirit seemed unusually lucid for a dreamer.

“I ate a *Paneolus Copelandia*,” he explained when he saw the expression on my face.

“What?” I asked.

“A Hawaiian mushroom. It allows you to travel to this dimension.”

“Never heard of it before.”

“You also have the *Stropharia Cannabis* or the *Psilocybe Mexicana*, but those aren’t as strong. In fact, they grow here as well.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes, in the wild, especially in the Leprechaun Forest. You know those little guys are immune to it.”

“You seem to know Emo World pretty well.”

“I often come here.”

Aspen and I had only recently talked about the shamans. And now I was talking to a member of that dying species. Did he have a message for me? Knowing that’s how fate worked.

“Anyway, I have a message,” he said.

“Aha!”

“Be careful.” It sounded really serious.

“Is that your message?”

“That should be enough.” His ancient head seemed a road network of wrinkles as he frowned.

“That doesn’t help me much.”

“My power animal thought it would be sufficient. He’s a sloth. A real one, you know, one of those fuzzy animals that hardly get anywhere.”

“I know them, yes.”

“He sent me to you.”

“Why were you clapping your hands?”

“That was to draw your attention. The sloth said I would find you that way. By the way, Clapping Hands is my name. Slow but smart. The sloth, I mean. That’s why he’s my power animal. I think the magic mushroom is wearing off.”

The shaman seemed to become even more blurred than he already was.

“Take care,” he said before he disappeared completely.

I stared incredulously at the place where he had dissolved.

Be careful. Had he gone through all this trouble for this? Nevertheless, as I walked back home, those two words continued to haunt me. They seemed to sound more ominous with every step I took.

I took the dreamers out of my pocket, insignificant, tiny little pills. It seemed ridiculous to be afraid of them.

Ewok wasn’t home. She was probably partying again with some werewolves. I pitied the fools.

Maybe this was my last dreamless sleep, I thought later, as I lay in bed.

Traveling alone:

you will avoid unpleasant events.

(Zolar's Encyclopedia of Dreams)

14

I woke up beside a warm body, wrapped my arm around it and kissed his back. Kalon had got into bed without waking me up to make love. What a shame.

He turned around. "Hello, gorgeous."

I kissed him extensively. "Why didn't you fuck me awake?"

"I wanted to spare your strength. How is the assignment going?"

I told him the whole story. As I expected, he found the words of the shaman particularly worrying.

"What he meant was that you shouldn't be doing it," he claimed.

"Don't go reasoning with me, Kalon," I warned him.

He nodded resignedly. He knew I would do it my own way.

I slipped out of bed. "I'm expecting Aspen."

Swinging my hips, I walked to the shower, knowing he was going to follow me, if only for a quickie.

We had just finished, when Aspen appeared, along with Ewok who looked a bit disheveled.

"Coffee?" I asked.

No thanks, you know I don't like coffee. Ewok walked to her nest where she wouldn't be coming out of for the next couple of hours.

I wasn't talking to you, you heated bitch.

Thanks for the compliment. Ewok curled up in a fuzzy ball.

"I'd love to," Aspen said. "I need some caffeine."

I walked to the kitchen proposing: "Something to eat as well?"

She didn't want to. "I didn't get a wink of sleep," she confessed.

When I gave her the coffee, she looked at me, investigating me.

I shook my head. "We made a deal, remember?"

I told her about the shaman.

"Too bad I missed him," she said. She looked at me with the steaming cup in her hand. "But you're still going to try it?"

Kalon appeared. "Don't bother," he said to Aspen. "She's as stubborn as a fern eater."
"What?"

"A fern eater is a small hairy animal. They would rather die than eat something else than ferns, even though they can actually. It is a typical case of proverbial stubbornness."

Kalon leaned over to kiss me in the neck. I felt that Aspen braced herself. "Got to work," he said. He walked to the door. "Please be careful, both of you." He vanished.

I saw Aspen glance at my neck, worried, as if she expected a bloody bite mark. "He holds back when we have company," I explained gravely.

She ignored the remark. "I've been thinking last night; I'm not letting you take that pill alone."

"What?"

She put down her empty cup with a decisive bang. "This time I refuse to follow your orders, Kate. If you're going to do it alone, I can't do anything when you're in the other dimension, except stare at your sleeping face. If necessary, I might be able to help you in the other dimension. I'm an experienced dreamer, that's probably why the Council sent me to you, remember?"

And I had experiences with stubbornness, so I kept silent and waited.

"Come on with those damn pills," she said.

I nodded slowly and acquiescently. Sometimes I forgot that other people also had a will of their own. Like ratiobeings. Aspen was more than just an introverted computer freak.

I fetched the pills.

After I had given her one, we were both just staring blankly at it. Suddenly, we both put it in our mouth and flushed them down with a gulp of coffee.

There was no turning back.

At first, nothing happened. We were just staring at each other, sheepishly. Then I started to feel sleepy. My toes began to tingle, then my feet, my ankles, my knees, until the tingling had reached every part of my body and stopped in my head. It felt as though a colony of ants was marching across my skin.

I saw Aspen look at her hands as if she was experiencing something similar. But I couldn't ask her anything, my tongue wasn't working. That was strange, because my lips were still moving. However, I wasn't scared. Apparently the drug contained a calming ingredient.

I felt my body become heavier, and the prickling become warmer, as though someone had spread a warm blanket over me. Then, something exploded in my head. Or so it seemed, at least. My eyes closed and I vanished from the world.

A swirling and spinning of colors: dark, warm tones succeeded cold bright tones. Purple and green jumped on sunny orange and yellow shades as though they wanted to push them away. It didn't make me dizzy; the psychedelic seas caressed and tickled me. It was as if the colors were alive, accepting me and infusing me with pleasant feelings. I couldn't do anything but stare at them, fascinated, as though the show was taking place around me and not merely in my head. If heaven existed it would be similar to this. The sensations became even stronger when odors were introduced; cinnamon red cubs, warm bread tulips, sweet sex and almonds. A Sunday morning breakfast, salty seagulls, velvety chocolate, quilted candy, magnolias, petunias, apple trees and roses. I wallowed in it, I wanted to drown in it, be part of it.

I couldn't think anymore, couldn't act. I just *was*, right now. Past and future didn't exist, time had vanished.

I experienced an irritating interruption, a tap on my shoulder which made the heavenly sensations retreat. When I turned around, frowningly, Aspen was there. My aggression immediately faded.

She said something, but her words seemed to come from extremely far away. They fluttered like snowflakes. Aspen and I stared at it in surprise, until I leaned over to her to speak softly in her ear: "How are you doing?"

"This goes beyond words..." Her voice near my ear seemed nothing more than a sweet whisper.

"Could this be it?" she asked, after we had detached ourselves a bit from the serenely rocking waves, colors, and odors, for the second time.

"What a dimension..."

This was the Walhalla of the seventh heaven where everything good had come into being. Where flowers had learned how to smell, where nature had borrowed her magnificent display of color, where flavors had begun to exist.

I noticed my feet. They weren't touching ground. We floated in perfect balance on ribbons of aromas and pastel shades. My hands seemed further away than usual. It was as though my arms were long enough to reach the furthest corners of this dimension. However, it didn't feel right. My instinct seemed to be resisting it. And then there was the voice of the shaman that forced itself in my mind: *be careful*.

I stopped Aspen who appeared to be planning to explore to outer borders of this dimension.

"Don't do it," I warned her.

Aspen didn't ask why. She was familiar with my extraordinary intuition. We kept floating, tasting, enjoying and including being.

When we woke up, the trip only seemed to have lasted a few minutes, but more than three hours had passed.

The awakening happened all of a sudden. The tingling slipped off of us in a hurried pace. Our legs twitched and with a jolt, we ended up back in Emo World.

Sharp stabs were felt in my head when I sat upright. The light in the room hurt my eyes.

Aspen also awoke with the same symptoms. The teenagers in the Dream Club had known what they were talking about.

"Hangover," she growled. "I want another head."

I rose to my feet, staggering, and went to the bathroom to get some painkillers.

She could have easily gotten another head, I thought. The novel about Frankenstein was based on a nightmare Mary Shelley once had, in which she had met a doctor in Emo World, who had been able to create a living human being from a cadaver's body parts. He hadn't been shy about head transplants either. That guy was actually an aatxe, and they can do such things. When they fall in love with an emobeing, they create a human body for themselves.

The painkillers worked extremely fast, I had bought them in a witch shop and I made a mental note to shop there more often.

"What an adventure," Aspen said when her head was back to normal.

I nodded. "All those colors and odors and feelings..."

"Feelings?" she inquired.

I looked at Aspen. "Didn't you feel anything?"

She slowly shook her head. She seemed disappointed.

"I'm an emobeing, and I have telepathic abilities, that should explain the contrast. You can only feel things with your existing senses."

"Should I be jealous now?"

"Of course, I like being envied."

"Why didn't you want me to reach out to the horizon? That would have certainly been an extraordinary experience. Who knows what we would have found there?"

I thought about it for a while. "I don't know. Something didn't let me..."

Aspen nodded. "The shaman with his warning."

“That and the intuition of my witch blood perhaps.”

Aspen said pensively: “Maybe in the distance rests the secret that we are trying to unveil.”

“What we need to do now is to inform the Council.”

I suited the action to the word.

How was it?

Heavenly, I answered truthfully.

It remained silent for a while, as if the Council needed to process that. Then: *What else did you find out?*

Nothing except a, tempting phenomenon. I explained it to him.

You didn't take the risk, so you missed out on the most important part.

Something strong in me didn't let me.

You will have to take the trip again, Kate. Now we know where these pills come from, you don't have to go to a Dream Club anymore, we will deliver them to your apartment. However, we also want to know why the rupa angels have become dealers.

Aspen didn't experience the feelings that I felt during the trip.

Aspen is a ratiobeing.

I'm just reporting it.

The pills will be delivered tomorrow. The contact was broken off.

Aspen nodded resignedly when I informed her. “Would you mind if I went home in the meantime?”

I shook my head absent-mindedly, my thoughts were somewhere else.

“I don't mind going back to that heaven,” Aspen said. She looked at me with a searching glance.

“Yes, apparently the addiction is never very far away.”

When she was gone, I continued thinking about it for a while. I realized I was enjoying the afterglow. I wanted to go back too. I had experienced emotions I didn't even know existed. Love multiplied by ten, something like that and without the usual efforts. Where did it all come from? Suddenly, I found it irritating that I had to wait another day to visit the dimension again. I almost decided to run to the Dream Club to buy new pills. I managed to restrain myself for now.

Maybe the colors were living creatures, I thought dreamily. Creatures that made us experience what we wanted to experience.

Suddenly, I realized I was longing for the dream dimension just as intensely as I longed for Kalon or perhaps... even more intensely. The people, who hadn't experienced it, were losers, a typical symptom of an addiction already.

I was going to figure it out, I thought. I hoped. After all, I wasn't a normal human being. However, I did worry about Aspen even though the experience seemed to have been less overwhelming for her than for me. Ratiobeings were simply a lot more sensitive to corruption of the mind, with drugs or with anything else.

A soft caress crossed my breasts; fingertips touched my nipples, delicately playing. A tongue slid along my neck, then cheeks, forcing its way between my lips. I closed my eyes.

Kalon had returned home. I felt his warm breath, smelled the sweet scent of blood mixed with the autumn leaves of his sweat, and I felt happy. My mind became empty, the contents replaced by pleasure and ecstasy. Sex on this level was a catalyst through which extraordinarily powerful magic could be evoked. A tantra to the ultimate being.

My orgasm was swelling up slowly, it was a catharsis as I soundlessly recited a charm:

Let me see through the third dimension

Let me reveal what it seems to hide

Give me the strength to take on the fight

Give me the strength to beat the addiction

Let me learn

And safely return

I screamed as all the energy released itself from inside me, as an explosion of emotions. The scream came from the deepest depths of my being and contained the primitive force and origin of everything.

Still trembling, I thought that grandmother would have been proud of this iambic pentameter, the most powerful rhyming scheme that existed. A recitation during the climax of the orgasm would guarantee that the charm was going to work, and would have the complete cooperation of all living things.

The transition between waking and sleeping came abruptly, as it always did in Emo World.

A loud bang was heard. I sat upright in bed with a jolt, looking around me, frightened.

Ewok didn't seem to have heard it. Kalon muttered something unintelligible and turned on his other side. For a brief moment, I thought I had imagined the sound, but then, a second bang made me jump up. Kalon still barely reacted. Then, I heard a soft rumbling noise.

Annoyed, I got out of bed. Completely naked, I walked to the living room. I could hear the strange rumbling noise even better. It was coming from outside. I walked to the window. It sounded as if the whole street had turned into some kind of moving sidewalk. But I could only see the usual garbage collectors, who were like the Langoliers from Ratio World. You know those creatures the author Stephen King wrote about. He obviously based several of his ideas on his visits to Emo World.

Our garbage collectors aren't called Langoliers, but omni bolls. Primitive creatures that live to eat. They eat all the garbage we produce and transform it into manure for our forests and field, a perfect and natural recycling system.

They are making that noise, Ewok said. I hadn't even noticed she was there, watching the omni bolls as the rising sun was shedding its first beams of light.

She was right, but it wasn't normal that the creatures were making those truck noises with an occasional loud bang. Generally, you didn't hear them.

I put on pants and a shirt, and walked outside.

Omni bolls have telepathic abilities, so I addressed myself to one of them. They don't have hierarchical structures or systems, so it doesn't matter who you're talking to.

Excuse me.

The hairy omni boll I was talking to, rolled around. He looked at me with those typically big black eyes of his, his mouth full of potato peelings, shreds of paper and a diaper. Disgusting you think? In Ratio World, they eat the entrails of animals disguised as sausages, which doesn't look tasty either.

The omni boll chewed his cheeks puffed up like balloons, and swallowed before he licked the corners of his mouth. He looked at me expectantly.

Why are you making that awful noise?

Human... He briefly paused. You need to give them time to form their sentences. The other omni bolls had already moved on a couple of houses. *We heard garbage collectors in Ratio World growling machines.*

That's right. And?

He wanted to roll around and follow the others. *Wait a minute! You mean you are imitating the garbage trucks of Ratio World? Why?*

Seems more real.

But you're waking up people.

Seems more real too.

He turned around resolutely and followed his co-workers, as if he were annoyed by my questions and distracted from a good meal.

Contact with Ratio World wasn't always a blessing, I thought as I walked back inside, malcontented. Next thing they'll be imitating motorcycles and motorbikes and ghetto blasters and car alarms and cell phones and what have you. I tried to put it out of my mind.

Kalon was still deeply asleep, but my sleep had vanished. The thought of returning to the third dimension was starting to fill my head. I felt anxious about the adventure and I wanted it so badly at the same time.

I went to make some coffee.

Talking to a friend in a room:

amusement and comfort.

(Zolar's Encyclopedia of Dreams)

15

Kalon had gone to work. Because of his concern, I was almost forced to kick him out of the house, literally.

With Ewok on my lap, I sat on the couch, thinking about certain things. I realized I missed the group of Fantasy Hunters. Perhaps working alone, or just with Aspen, wasn't really working for me. The variety of characters had a complementing effect, which enabled you to handle a lot more, and allowed you to find quick solutions.

The universe walked strange paths to make people live their lives. While I was still thinking of the group, I heard a knock on the door. It was Gehlen.

I couldn't help myself I threw my arms around his neck. After all, I'm an emobeing. Fortunately, I didn't detect repulsion in his aura.

"Clapping Hands told me you needed me," he explained.

I was genuinely surprised. "The shaman visited you, too?"

Gehlen nodded. "Strange fellow," he said and followed me inside.

"Coffee or something else?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No time, we're dealing with a closet monster attack.

"Oh, those guys again?"

“They’re stubborn.”

We sat on the couch. I maintained the respectable distance between us, the way ratiobeings liked it.

I told Gehlen about our trip to the third dimension and the warning of the shaman.

“But the Council demands you to continue the task?” When I nodded, he said: “I don’t get it. Those people of the Council are dimension travelers, aren’t they? Why don’t they go look for themselves what’s going on there?”

“They want to find out how emobeings and ratiobeings react to certain things.” I looked at Gehlen. “Why did Clapping Hands visit you?”

“He came to tell me you needed me.”

I nodded. “He was right,” I admitted. “I just wanted to talk to you before... before I continue this mission.”

“Kate, when it comes to it, every single one of you can count on me.” It sounded a little reproachful.

I looked at him, thankfully. Just the fact of him being there meant a lot to me. Suddenly I had less doubts about what we were about to do.

“You can handle every mission, Kate, which can’t be said of every member of the group. You’re just not a common specimen. Are you?” He smiled kindly. “The Council realizes this too, of course.”

“I’m worried about Aspen. It’s a strong drug, and you know how vulnerable ratiobeings are when it comes to those things.”

“Yes, I know,” Gehlen said emphatically. He grimaced.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.”

“I’m glad you came over,” I said gravely. “Even emobeings need a strong leader sometimes.”

“You’re laying it on as thick as the slime closet monsters produce.”

“Where were they this time?”

“In the room of my own niece,” he replied

Closet monsters were one of those many creepy little creatures who could only be seen by children. They loved scaring these kids. Not like bed monsters, who hide under one’s bed. Sometimes some of them came to visit me too and then I could see them because they wanted to. They stayed for several days under my bed when they were out of work. They just played cards there, mostly Blackjack. I didn’t care, as long as they didn’t make a racket.

“We created a laser to make them visible for adults, as soon as Dorsen is working again,” Gehlen explained. “The fun will soon be over for them.”

Ratiobeings and their technical toys! But hey, they were useful sometimes.

There was another knock on the door. This time, it was Aspen. It didn't seem to surprise her that Gehlen was here too. “Our support, our rock in anxious hours,” she said. It sounded kind, though she looked pretty nervous. “Didn't sleep much last night, have you got some coffee?” She walked to the kitchen, feeling right at home.

A pink glow from Gehlen's watch appeared in the room and he sighed. “They need me again.” He rose to his feet. “Be careful you two.”

“That's what they all say these days.”

“But I mean it. I don't want to lose anyone, and you... and you the least of all.” He uttered that last sentence with a glance at Aspen who appeared in the room with a cup of coffee in her hand.

I escorted Gehlen to the front door where he surprised me by hugging me tightly. And that for a ratiobeing! I looked at him, amazed, as he marched towards the airport.

He had barely left when the Council called.

Your mission has been postponed for a day.

What?

We received a warning from Clapping Hands.

That guy has to mind his own business!

If you go today, you might not survive the trip.

How does he know – The contact was already broken off, I realized.

I cursed out loud. Now we were stuck with our nerves for another day. Those Council idiots! Their power was evident, but no one knew who or what they really were. However, it was clear that they had incredible paranormal powers. They were believed to have changed the DNA of apes to push the evolution in the right direction, which had also developed some of the paranormal abilities that were lying dormant within us. However, those were just suspicions and rumors.

I was pacing up and down while I told Aspen the news. Too much adrenaline was coursing through my body, I couldn't even sit down.

“I don't know whether to be pissed off or relieved,” Aspen said. “I was so ready for it...”

“What's the deal with this shaman, anyway?” I stood still. “He has contact with the Council, now.” I shook my head. “Incredible.”

At any rate, we had to deal with our nerves for another day. We had better gone through with it and tried to find out what was behind the horizon immediately, I thought defiantly. Maybe this whole affair would have belonged to the past.

And maybe we would have, too.

Our watches lit up. “The group,” said Aspen in surprise. “What now?”

A few minutes later, we were already on our way to the airport. You couldn’t keep the group waiting, never.

These days the airport was always crowded, with humans and other creatures of all shapes and sizes.

“They don’t scare me anymore,” Aspen stated. “I usually couldn’t reach the Portal quickly enough because I feared such a creature would jump me.”

You would be surprised how nice some of them could jump you, I thought. But I kept it to myself. Her sense of shame had already gotten enough blows. I didn’t want to force these matters.

As usual, the jump through the Portal was rather pleasant for me, and quite unpleasant for Aspen, but at least, she had managed to keep down her food.

It was a gloomy and drizzly day in Ratio World, in the area of the Fantasy Hunters’ office, at least.

Gehlen and the others were already sitting around the conference table. I felt a little left out because they hadn’t waited for us. There was a curious tension in the air, I felt it even before we had taken our seats. I even sensed a little hint of joy.

“Thank you for coming on a day like today,” Gehlen said both to me and Aspen. “I heard about the postponement.”

I brushed his remark aside. “Any distraction is appreciated. What’s going on?”

“*Elvis is alive!*” said Aqua.

“Of course, and Napoleon won the war.”

“You don’t mock the phenomenon that is Elvis Presley,” Aspen said reproachfully. “I happen to love his music, most of it, anyway.”

“Several people have seen Elvis alive,” said Gehlen.

“That’s not new, is it,” I observed. “After his death, there were more Elvis sightings than UFO sightings.”

“We have some footage of it, seen in different places,” Cody said. “This time it’s real, unless that guy really looks like him. We compared his physical features with Elvis Presley’s when he was still alive. It’s a perfect match.”

“There aren’t many people anymore who live more than a century,” I remarked. “He’d look pretty dehydrated, even if he had a considerable amount of fat and water in his body these days.” Now I understood where their cheery attitude was coming from.

“We have to check these things out,” said Gehlen. “An assignment is an assignment.”

Aspen argued: “Can someone have brought him back to life with magic?”

Gehlen nodded. “That’s possible...”

I said: “An experienced witch or wizard with considerable power can bring someone back to life without many side effects. If it’s done by an amateur, the consequences can be pretty gruesome.”

“He already looked gruesome before he died,” Aqua offered.

“You know what you are? A Philistine!” That was Aspen, of course.

“Oh yeah, what he did was true art.”

Cody said timidly: “He looks pretty healthy in our images.”

I thought about all those horrible cameras in Ratio World. You could barely move without some interfering guy seeing it. And that in a world where you already seemed to be feeling ashamed when you just had to blow your nose. Now they had quite a big catch and not just literally. All of a sudden I was struck by an idea.

Gehlen saw the expression on my face. “Kate?”

“I just thought of something, it’s not clear to me yet. Maybe I should open my course books from college again, when I studied alien beings... No, now I remember! It could be a ghost demon.”

“Oh, no,” Aqua said. “There are ghosts and then there are demons. Please tell me that it is a combination of the two? Will there ever be an end to the list of freaks of your dimension?”

“What you happen to call freaks, so disdainfully, are creatures like you and me,” I replied, annoyed. “Why should human beings be better than them? Because you have so little possibilities and talents?”

“You,” Aqua said menacingly. “You...”

“Stop it you two!” Gehlen snapped, rougher than usual. “I won’t tolerate such discussions anymore!” He fixed his gaze on me. “Ghost demons...?”

I looked intensely at Aqua while I talked. “They won’t harm anyone, they are peaceful creatures. They are made of some sort of ectoplasm, so they have no fixed form. That’s why they take the same shape and looks of dead people to manifest themselves in the world. Their problem is their unhealthy preference for the bodies of deceased celebrities. Maybe now is the time to find out why at least, that is, if we are dealing with a ghost demon. The fact that he has picked out Elvis will probably have no specific meaning.”

“Unless he wants to start a rock band,” Aqua said. He grinned.

I ignored it. Maybe he didn’t even know how big Elvis’ name once was in this world. “He wasn’t as big in Emo World as he was here,” I remarked.

“Because there they don’t charge you by the pound,” Aqua said, grinning.

“In any case, he has broken the law by coming to Ratio World,” Gehlen assessed soberly. “We need to arrest him and bring him back.”

Pensively, I said: “I wonder why he came here. As far as I know, ghost demons aren’t very rebellious.”

Aspen asked attentively: “Is that why people use to dream about dead people a lot? Were they seeing ghost demons?” When I nodded confirmingly, she said: “Strange, I never found any information about it in my files. But I don’t know all my computer files by heart.” That last remark sounded apologetically.

“You wouldn’t need a computer if you did,” I said kindly. “Though the dead people you saw in your dreams could also have been their look-alikes in Emo World.”

Gehlen looked at me. “This seems a thing for you, especially today. Take Cody with you, so he can zap you out of there if anything goes wrong. The rest of us stay close with the aircraft.”

Gehlen gave Julie the coordinates from the last sighting, calculated by the scanners and street cameras, and away we went.

Beside me, Cody said, barely audible: “I’ll think of you when you’re in the third dimension.”

“You were reading my mind,” I stated. Sometimes, I forgot to put up my protective shield, especially when I was distracted.

He stared at the floor. “I just picked it up by accident, that’s all. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t know yet how powerful you are, do you?”

Cody looked at me. “I think I’m able to teleport to other dimensions.”

Those words startled me. Teleportation to other dimensions was something only the Council was able to do as far as we knew.

“My powers are getting stronger every month.” Cody spoke in a whisper, as if he didn’t want the others to hear it. Suddenly, he appeared worried, almost scared. “What would the Council say if they knew?”

“I have no idea,” I said, impressed. “If it’s a natural development, they can’t do much about it, I presume. Maybe it’s the next step in the evolution. Maybe someday teleportation will be something everyone is able to do.” And then Julie, the aircraft computer, would be out of work, I thought.

He nodded, barely convinced, and leaned back on his chair while Julie initiated the landing on the roof of a relatively high building.

Gehlen glanced backwards. “The object is last located in a coffee shop, *The Marago*, a few blocks away. Good luck, Kate. We’re keeping an eye on you.”

Cody and I left the aircraft.

We sought our way down, and we ended up in a quiet part of town. The less crowded the place was, the better. One of our convictions was that the job should be done without anyone noticing it, but wasn’t always that easy.

Without any effort, we found *The Marago* where Elvis was just having a cup of coffee. Half a dozen of other clients were staring at him incredulously, whispering fervently.

Elvis looked up and frowned as we walked towards his table. “Another fan for an autograph,” he said resignedly.

Cody stared mesmerized at the Elvis figure when we sat down at his table. The resemblance with the real celebrity was astonishing.

“We have come here for another reason,” I said.

A waitress appeared in a maroon ensemble and dark brown hair, so she looked a bit like a coffee bean. “Have you made your choice?” she wanted to know, indifferently.

To make her go away, I ordered coffee for me and Cody. Next, I gazed at Elvis, pensively. I noticed our glances made him nervous, as though he knew we weren’t simply annoying fans. When he picked up his cup, I saw that his fingers adorned with many golden rings, was shaking. That could have been characteristic of the real Elvis, as well, I thought. After everything he had put down his throat.

“You’re under the suspicion of being a ghost demon,” I said. “We have the means to check this. If you deny it, you’ll have to undergo some tests.”

Elvis almost broke the cup as he put it back down. "Fantasy Hunters," he remarked. He stared at me with a strange look on his face. "You're clearly an emobeing, what are you doing here yourself?"

He had already blown his cover. Ratiobeings couldn't see that easily I was from the other dimension.

I waited a while as the waitress put the cups on our table. She went away without a word. "The Fantasy Hunters have taken me on," I explained. "They needed my knowledge of cheaters like you."

Elvis stared at a spot on the table. "I had heard from other ghost demons how nice the old days had been. Before Ratio World got to know the other dimension, we could just sneak out unpunished. The admiration you received as a celebrity, the attention..." He sighed. "It was completely innocent, nobody suspected anything. Except maybe the press, but that was funny, all those stories... We always stayed for a short period only."

"Elvis died a long time ago, so why him?"

"He still has an enormous amount of fans, I'm one of them. And I absolutely loved his outfits. Those high collars, those broad belts, all those rhinestones, those cloaks, those scarves, the moves, those sideburns..."

"I'm sorry," I said and I almost meant it. "You'll have to come with us."

He had the decency of paying the bill before he rose to his feet and followed us outside, stared after by everyone in the coffee shop, that's what ghost demons were. Despite their name, they were kind and docile creatures.

"Hello folks," Elvis greeted the group as he stepped aboard the aircraft. His voice sounded as though it was coming out of a hollow basement. "I have left the building..."

"You don't have to bother the Council about this trifle," I said to Gehlen. "I'll escort him back to Emo World on condition that he takes on a less showy disguise."

"Whatever you say, baby," Elvis said obediently. "You will always be on my mind."

In a blink of an eye, an unknown man appeared in his place. I had never known the transformation happened so quickly and unnoticed. Interesting, I pondered.

Back in Emo World, the ex-Elvis went his own way, after he had apologized about twenty times for the inconvenience.

Then the problem of getting through the rest of this anxious day remained. Aspen had the solution; she asked me to show her some places in my world. She didn't feel like staying at home by herself, moping.

Oh well, why not? I thought. We walked in the street, picking out a car.

Cars belong to everyone in Emo World. One day they were put into the scene by a witch who didn't want those expensive, stinking, and dangerous status symbols to race through the streets like they did in the other dimension. Our cars are partly organic and they have a will of their own, a bit like the computer in the aircraft of the group. They exist in all shapes and colors, but they are all small. If you don't need them anymore, you leave them behind so another person can use it. You don't have to take driving lessons, these things steer themselves. You just tell them where you want to go. Filling up the tank isn't necessary either, their energy is magical. They even maintain themselves.

I barely took the car because I liked walking, and I never needed to go far. Of course, Aspen was used to other things when it came to transportation. So we took a bright yellow Mini that was left behind a couple of houses away.

"My friend here is a ratiobeing and she wants to see a part of Emo World," I said as we got in. "So drive, please."

There was no answer, but the Mini started to move without a sound. It moved itself skillfully between pedestrians, other cars and a few bicycles. It left the city, and chose a country road to the Leprechaun Forest. I didn't like it. However, the Mini seemed to know what it was doing, because it stayed close to the border of the forest. I started to get the feeling that it wasn't just driving around randomly. It had some kind of plan.

We reached several farms, painted in bright colors, with barns surrounding it. Cows and pigs were walking freely around the place.

Aspen was staring out the window confoundedly. "What are we doing here?"

I asked the car, again there was no reaction. I started to feel as though we were being abducted. Also because the doors were locked, even though it generally was to guarantee the passenger's safety.

That moment, the Mini stopped in front of a little farm with purple bricks and green shutters. The locks opened with a click.

Aspen looked at me questioningly. I shrugged and got out. I could smell fresh foliage.

We pushed open a little fence with creaking hinges, and walked to the front door of the purple farm.

"Clapping Hands," Aspen said all of a sudden.

"What?"

"I have no idea why, I suddenly have a suspicion that he's behind all of this."

At first sight, it seemed a little absurd, that guy seemed to be popping up everywhere these days. And Aspen's instincts couldn't be underestimated.

"We'll see," I said and knocked on the door.

Although I could hear noises coming from inside the house, it took a while before someone came to the door. A plump woman wearing a brightly colored flower print dress opened the door. Her face was swollen and red. She had bloodshot eyes, as though she had been crying. She looked at us, barely realizing someone stood in front of her.

"Are you the undertakers?" her voice sounded hoarse. "You don't look like them."

"Not at all, our car brought us here without asking."

In Ratio Word, she would have slammed the door, but the second dimension followed a different kind of logic. To Aspen's surprise, the woman invited us in. She brought us to a bedroom at the back of the house.

It was dark in there. Every window and most of the curtains were closed. It smelled of death and despair. Within the gloomy bedroom stood a four-poster bed, in which laid a motionless body.

"My son," the woman clarified. "He died an hour ago. I informed the undertakers, I thought you were them."

Aspen hesitated in the doorway, apparently scared of death. I walked towards the bed and gazed at the lifeless body. He was a handsome teenager.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Dream pills, I think," the woman answered with a determined voice.

I could literally hear Aspen holding her breath.

The woman looked at me. "Apparently you know the stuff?"

"We heard about it, yes."

"Stay away from them!" the woman snapped fiercely. She gestured wildly at the body. "My husband doesn't even know it yet, I..." She started to cry.

I put my hand on her shoulder. She turned around and grabbed me like a drowning person holds on to a piece of driftwood. Her body was shaking as I patted her on the back comfortingly.

"Let me tell you the truth," I said. "The Council has given us the assignment to investigate these pills. And apparently, we were sent here for a reason."

The woman let go of me. She no longer sobbed. "One of his friends died the day before yesterday. If nobody does something about it, more people will die," she remarked flatly. She sunk down on a chair next to the bed and put her hand on the hand of her dead son.

“May I ask you something else?” When she didn’t react: “How long had your son been taking those pills?”

“I don’t know...” Her shoulders started to shake again.

“Let’s go!” Aspen whispered urgently.

Without saying a word, we walked outside, towards the Mini. I asked the car to drive us home, and he started to move.

Aspen remained silent until we stopped in front of my apartment. Then she said: “What a clear warning...” She stared into space.

She was right, and it seemed almost certain that Clapping Hands was behind it.

“I was already idealizing the drug,” said Aspen. “With such an incredible effect...” She shook her head.

“Next thing you know, you’re dead. Why by the way?” I said. Though we didn’t know whether the teenagers had died because of the side effects of the pills, or their stay in the third dimension, I thought. It all came down to the same thing. More people had probably died, we didn’t even know about it.

Someone knocked impatiently on the side window of my side of the car. It was a vampire. “Are you planning to live in this thing?”

We got out of the car and the vampire took off. I barely took notice of it.

When we entered my apartment, I sought contact with the Council and announced the news of the deaths.

We believe now that they are not the first ones.

And what about the risk we will be taking?

You won’t die after two trips. It seemed disapprovingly, though you could never really tell with telepathy.

I have a question, without any intention of being presumptuous.

Go ahead.

You are dimension travelers so why won’t you go look for yourselves what is going on there?

We have our reasons. This time, the reproaching tone was clearly audible.

Why does Clapping Hands have such an influence on this whole experience?

A powerful shaman who is in closer contact with nature than any living creature? Even elves don’t come within miles of him, and not just because they mainly manipulate nature instead of listening to it.

Well, that hit its mark, I thought a little affected. I decided to keep silent.

“They are keeping things from us,” Aspen claimed when I told her what happened.

I nodded.

“I thought they were omniscient.”

“There is no such thing as omniscience, Aspen, even though those guys from the Council appear to be coming close to it sometimes.”

I proposed Aspen stay over for the night, she didn’t feel like it. She had enough of Emo World for one day, she said.

When I kissed her goodbye, I felt that she briefly hesitated. Finally, she walked away, almost abruptly.

The peace and quiet didn’t last long. Aspen had just left, when I heard another knock on the door, short but imperative.

More careful than before, I asked who it was, before I opened the door.

“Ave,” a soft female voice said. “You don’t know me, I knew your great grandmother.”

A tall red-haired woman with a lovely outlined oval face. She had a slightly hooked nose which accentuated her big green eyes. She was wearing long white pants, a partially translucent blouse with flowers on it, and a red scarf. She had brought a white bag with her. I had the feeling she was much older, she seemed no more than thirty-five years old. She smelled like lilac and roses.

I stepped aside and pointed at the living room.

“What a cutie,” she said when she saw Ewok. She stroked her head.

“She’ll consider it as an insult,” I said. “She’s partly a werewolf.”

Ewok didn’t seem to be offended at all: she let the woman caress her with visible pleasure.

“I’m a witch,” Ave said after she sat down.

I suspected that already, because of her courtesy. I sat opposite her. “You look considerably young for someone who knew my great grandmother,” I said.

Ave smiled. “I was still a child at the time. Elise taught me practically every witch trick there exists. She was like a mother to me. I was only ten when I graduated in the doctrine and rituals of the higher magic.”

Either Ave was a genius, or Elise had been an excellent teacher or both.

“That’s truly remarkable,” I said sincerely.

“It wasn’t an extraordinary performance. Some just receive more gifts from nature than others.”

“Did my great grandmother send you?”

“In some way, yes ...” She looked at me. “Elise has been in touch with Clapping Hands.”

Him again!

“And Clapping Hands has contacted me.”

“Why didn’t she come to you straight away?”

“I’m not such a good medium as Clapping Hands.”

I nodded understandingly. “And why didn’t Clapping Hands immediately come to me with his message?”

Ave blinked. “There is no message for you.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll need some of your urine.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your great grandmother is watching you and she asked me to perform a protective ritual for you. The most powerful protection is of course the witch bottle.”

I had heard about it, but I had forgotten most of it.

With a voluptuous movement of her hand, she threw back her long hair. I saw that she was wearing the most beautiful rings on her long and slender fingers. Silver rings with black opal, amber, and rhinestones. “A closed glass jar, half full of needles, fragments of glass, screws, bolts and similar rusty metal objects. Next, it must be filled with the urine of the person who needs the particular protection. The jar is then sealed and buried at a depth of at least one foot.” She looked at me again. “The protection is even more powerful if the urine contains menstruation blood.”

I wasn’t shocked, after all I was partly a witch myself. “Unfortunately, we’ll have to wait a while for that,” I just said.

“Without blood then,” stated Ave.

Ave pulled the glass jar filled with fragments of glass and metal out of her bag. She gave me the jar.

I was staring at it for a few seconds, before I asked: “Could you tell me about Elise first, please?”

“Of course,” she said.

Suddenly, I jumped up. “Forgive me my rudeness, can I offer you a drink?”

“Do you have Ambrosia?”

Unfortunately I didn't.

“Fruit juice is fine too, if it's isn't too much of a nuisance.”

I hurried to the kitchen. Of course, there were the stories told by my mother, but hearing a stranger talk about a loved family member was different. Especially when it was someone like Ave who actually had a special bond with Elise and apparently still has.

I brought two glasses of fruit juice, a pair of candles and incense to the living room. Witches loved those things.

“Elise was a remarkable woman and a brilliant witch,” Ave said as the opium scent filled the room. “She was also extraordinarily beautiful, even when she was very old, and without using magic to obtain it.” Once again, Ave looked at me with that mysterious green gaze of hers. “You look like Elise, did you know that?”

“I've been told that before, thank you for the compliment.”

“An exceptional teacher, with endless patience, and an indestructible mood it was like witnessing the sun breaking through clouds wherever she appeared.”

“You really admired her,” I stated.

Ave nodded. “I owe several amazing years to her.”

“I wish I had known her when she was alive.”

“She's still watching over you, Kate. I can call you Kate, can't I?”

“It would be an honor,” I said sincerely. Talking that intimately to a witch wasn't that self-evident.

“Oh well, only the thought of you being a direct descendant of Elise...” Ave briefly stared into an imaginary distance. “She was the first one to marry another species.”

I knew that of course. My great grandmother was married to a human emobeing. “How was their marriage?”

“Your great grandfather was already dead when I met Elise. She always talked fondly and full of love of him. She clearly missed him.” Ave fell silent and stared again.

I rose to my feet to go and fill the jar.

When I appeared back in the living room, she got up as well. “I have an appointment with a vampire who wants me to perform a love spell.”

“The spell with the puppets?” I said.

Ave smiled. “That fourth part witch of yours surfaces once and a while, I must say.”

I didn't say that it was one of the few enchantments I had always remembered. You took two puppets made out of rags, one male and one female. Then, you gave them a few

distinguishing characteristics of the persons involved. In these puppets, you put verbena, valerian, rose petals, and other love herbs. While you were doing it, you had to concentrate on that particular person. The ritual had to be brought to an end in a magic circle with the necessary spells, of course.

“I’m glad I have it in me,” I said.

Ave put the jar in her bag. “I will do everything that lies within my power to keep you from harm,” she promised as she walked to the door.

Not until Ave had left, did I realize that it was really thoughtless of me to entrust a strange witch with something that came out of my body, how unimportant it may appear. They could do a lot with just a few hairs, nails, or some bodily fluids. However, I had trusted her completely. Then there was the golden rule every witch had to adhere to: do what you will, as long it doesn’t harm anyone, and the good you send out will come back to you magnified three folds, and the bad you send out will also come back to you magnified three folds.

Ave’s enchantments would probably protect me like some kind of bulletproof vest. Unfortunately, the enchantment couldn’t be extended to Aspen...

Angel

Of one angel:

Triumph in love.

(Zolar's Encyclopedia of Dreams)

16

The most powerful magic comes from within. What is created in the subconscious generates an explosion of energy via the conscious state which functions as a catalyst. Therefore, when someone is aware of the fact that he is dreaming, he can also influence that dream. In fact, it is a way of performing magic, or a form of magical thinking.

Although the dreamer knows he is dreaming, he remains in a deep state of the subconscious so that the things he wishes for also happen. He can steer the dream, or in other words, he can change Emo World in whatever way he pleases. This has caused hilarious situations, especially in the past. It was and still is the cause of the continuously alternating locations of Emo World.

I wondered whether this was the case when you found yourself in the third dimension. Was my mind also going to be in a subconscious state so I could perform magical acts? If the

pills didn't really make you dream but just brought you to another dimension, this wouldn't be the case. Another dimension where no materialized creatures existed? My mind was spinning with questions and doubts.

Was the Council postponing a second trip until Clapping Hands found it safe enough? What exactly was the real danger? Even energy vampires didn't make me as anxious as this.

Sex with the deva angel Kalon had brought home for me last night didn't make me calmer either. Devas, also known as adhibautas, are angels with enormous powers to manipulate nature. They are not the religious figures known in Ratio World, but emobeings, distant relatives of the elves. They can be about five hundred years old. Rather handsome, slender creatures with long blond wavy hair, and wings with an enormous wingspan. They can switch the odors of flowers, the colors of tree leaves, make shrubs grow more rapidly... They have also a sense of humor, something elves don't have.

The male deva was called Michael. He smelled like delicious fuchsias, zinnias, and daisies. The sex... oh well, I will keep my mouth shut about it. Spoken and written language can never adequately describe feelings which don't belong to the normal living environment. It wasn't better than with Kalon, sex combined with love cannot be surpassed. Nevertheless, it was... different. Especially because devas know every nerve and every fiber in the human body, and they know how to touch them to elevate you to the peaks of pleasure, which even comes close to the unbearable. My own pleasure had swept Kalon away too. That's the way it goes with real lovers, in Emo World anyway.

As already mentioned, even that miracle of sensuality couldn't permanently remove my restlessness.

At ten a.m. Gehlen and Aspen arrived. Gehlen brought the pills. I didn't ask where they came from. "It's time," he announced gravely. He pointed at Aspen. "Your friend practically forced me to come along. I'll keep an eye on you while your minds go on expedition."

I was glad about it, even though I strongly doubted whether he could really do something if anything went wrong with us. Just his moral support meant a lot to me.

"The Council has contacted me with the news that Clapping Hands found the time was right."

Aspen hadn't said a word yet. She just sat there with a look on her face as though she was starting to get seasick. Maybe I should also have sent Michael over to her, I thought. He, too, had to stay out of Ratio World, but those who would see him there would just think they had seen an angel.

“You’re thinking about the woman with her dead son,” I remarked.

Aspen nodded. “Yes, that too...”

“He was heavily addicted,” I said. “A situation that has nothing to do with ours,” I replied, hoping I succeeded in sounding relatively convincing.

She nodded again. “It will get better once we’re in action.”

Gehlen took out an electronic device. “If everything goes to plan, this thing should allow me to communicate with you when you’re *there*.”

Aspen seemed to jump awake now we were talking about electronics. “Because of the microchips, nanos are transferred to the ventricle used for telepathic connections in the brain. The signals are magnified several hundred times. Of course, we weren’t able to try it out, but I think this could really work.”

As a true emobeing, I detested these kinds of gadgets, I suppressed my disgust. For the greater good, we shall say.

Aspen pressed the device against my head above my left ear. I felt a tiny sting when the microchips disappeared under my skin, and that was it. Nothing happened further. Gehlen did the same with Aspen.

He gave us the infamous pills. “Don’t lose your heads,” he said.

For a second time, we were floating amid an orgy of colors, odors and indefinable sensations. Nerves, restlessness, fear, all those negative feelings completely disappeared. In heaven there was no room for unpleasant experiences.

I leaned on nothing without losing my balance. A string of dark pink mist in bright magenta tones swirled through my fingers, after which it smelled like freshly baked croissants and robinias. The aroma radiated a comfortable sensation through my entire body as though I had just received good news.

With some difficulty, I realized we ought to move on, we weren’t here on a holiday.

Tentatively, I stretched my arms. They became longer, just like last time. From the corner of my eye, I saw Aspen doing the same thing.

Stay close.

What did you expect?

Apparently the electronic telepathy worked.

Then I was suddenly pulled away with a jerk, as if by invisible hands. I gasped for air when my head tilted back. What followed was very similar to a ride through the Portal between the two dimensions. Until I saw that I was being dragged along by partially

translucent creatures that looked terrifying and magnificent at the same time. They were smaller than human beings and they looked sweet and colorful, like translucent nymphs. Until you saw their hairless faces: black eyes, an absent nose, and a big mouth filled with sharp teeth, grinning viciously.

They weren't dragging my body but my aura. I sniffed an unpleasant mixture of sulfur and musty attics. Clearly, heaven had its darker sides too. The strange part was that I didn't experience any malicious willfulness from their side. Maybe I didn't need to worry, at least for now.

They could just be some sort of transport beings who had to accompany us somewhere. Stretching your arms was possibly a signal for them to come and get you.

A male voice pierced through my mind: *Is everything all right there?* It was Gehlen.

So far so good, I replied.

We obviously had contact with Emo World as well and in some way that was a relief. Maybe I should reconsider my aversion against electronic devices.

I hoped Aspen, who was floating beside me in the same direction, could hear this too.

I explained to Gehlen what I saw.

It remained quiet for a while. Then: *Those are Sulfides, the Council knows them.*

So the Council already knew about these creatures. I started to get the increasing feeling that the Council knew more about this dimension than they wanted to admit. Maybe they wanted us to make the observations with an open mind? I hoped it would be that innocent.

A little further a bright white light appeared. *I think we're almost there,* I passed on to Aspen. I saw that the fear in her aura was growing.

The light became bigger until we flashed right through it. All at once, we were hovering above a picturesque landscape. The Sulfides turned to me and grinned. Then they snapped their mouths filled with sharp teeth and sucked every colorful layer out of my aura. The next moment they let go of me so I landed on the floor with a painful crash, luckily not wounded.

I lay there, stunned, until Aspen fell to the ground with a thud. She also seemed fine.

The landscape was breathtaking. Bright green grass, rippling streams, weeping willows, rose bushes, and hills with a small waterfall. Compared to this piece of paradise and pureness the Elf Wood seemed normal and boring.

Without thinking, I asked Aspen how she was feeling. Not until she answered that she was feeling fine did I realize that we could just talk to each other, without the help of the devices.

“What were those Sulfides doing?”

“They were sucking up part of our aura. I hope it won’t cause any trouble.” Probably not, I thought. Your aura is renewed and remade continuously, just as your blood. You can’t live without it either, or you’ll die.

We were staring at the amazing landscape, couldn’t get enough of it. The aroma of thousands of flowers and plants! In a way, it was like coming home, never to leave again. But unfortunately we had to.

I rose to my feet reluctantly, and reached for Aspen to pull her up.

Is everything all right?

No real problems, I replied Gehlen. We’re moving on.

Just keep your eyes open.

Quite a redundant piece of advice, closing your eyes was one of the last things on your mind here.

Aspen was staring in the distance. No sign of habitation, villages or houses.

What were the fun-seeking teenagers doing here after taking a dream pill? What was so tempting here that made them deadly addicted to it?

Without any haste, we walked towards a bunch of trees, some New Dawn rose bushes and more. I felt like kicking off my shoes and dancing on the grass. But I restrained myself. We weren’t here to play Snow White, even though we were walking through the décor of an old cartoon.

It took us a while to realize something wasn’t right with the idyllic landscape: there was no sound. You could see the water ripple in the stream, but you couldn’t hear it. You saw the tree leaves fluttering, touched by a soundless wind. You could hear or see not a single animal.

Aspen nodded when I told her. “I already noticed it, but since I got to know Emo World a little better, this sort of thing hardly surprises me anymore.” She crouched down next to the stream and put her hand in the water. “Feels like ordinary water.” She licked her finger. “And the taste is the same as well.”

She shook her head. “I miss my computer.”

The utterance seemed pretty out of place in the surroundings, but Aspen’s laptop was basically an extension piece of her brain.

She got up and looked around for a while. “The silence is quite calming. Maybe the sounds here are on a frequency we can’t hear?”

We followed the stream until it suddenly stopped. No well, no pool, nothing. It just stopped in the middle of the field, as though you banged into the décor of a movie set.

Instinctively, I took Aspen by the hand and walked a few steps forward. A second later we were standing in a completely different landscape, as if we had jumped from Europe to the Middle East.

Aspen seemed hardly surprised again. “Emo World times ten,” she said.

The grass was parched because of the burning sun. Here and there a dried out bush and a few cacti barely survived the merciless climate. Only a few echinocacti stood proudly erect, seemingly comfortable in the desert.

The hot air felt oppressive, I wanted to get out of here. Turning back or walking backwards didn’t help, so we walked, panting with the heat, to an elevated area a little further up to have a point of reference. As I took my first steps, I sensed something wasn’t right again. Aspen noticed it too, as she stared at her feet in amazement.

“I can’t feel the ground,” she said. She leaned over and let a handful of dry earth slip through her fingers. “I can’t feel it. It’s as if my hands are sleeping!” She looked up to me, questioningly.

I experienced the same thing. First silence now no feeling. As if every landscape eliminated one of our senses. Our ears did work here. I could hear the weak, hot wind blow in them.

Then Aspen disappeared. Apparently she had walked through a new passage.

I hurried after her. A few steps further I was standing on a white beach with palm and banana trees and exotic flowers. A pale blue sea reached for the shore, soft and foaming. The temperature of the air was perfect.

“This, I like,” said Aspen. “Is there a five star hotel somewhere?”

I thought about my mother. She, as a nature-lover would have found this absolutely amazing, from one extreme to the other. That moment, I felt something vaguely touching my hair and, maybe I was imagining it, the subtle smell of vanilla.

Aspen had taken off her shoes and was skipping around like a child in the warm sand. It made me think of my mother again, of her cheerful energy.

“It’s good to feel the world again,” said Aspen. She stopped skipping. All of a sudden she looked distrustful. “What seems to be missing this time?” She sniffed the air. “I can smell the sea...”

I walked to one of the banana trees. Its fruit was perfectly ripe. I pulled one off and peeled it. The aroma was creamy rich and intense sweet. The taste... nothing. Being able to smell without a sense of taste was unnatural, but this dimension was unnatural too for us.

And were there any people or animals living in this dimension?

Are you still receiving me? Gehlen...

Without a problem, I answered. Which was also pretty strange, such perfect communication by means of an experimental device.

I didn't mean to disturb you. I just wanted to be sure that we were still in contact with each other. No problems there?

Just a lot of big questions.

Okay, just shout if something goes wrong.

With my hands on my hips I looked at the forest located behind the banana trees. A different way out didn't seem to be available, unless we went in the sea.

Aspen said: "If it was up to me, I would just stay here, lying on my back until my pill wore off."

She was right, but we had no choice. A few minutes later we entered the forest, staying close to each other.

It was a beautiful forest with the widest range of colors, the highest trees I had ever seen, and smells that radiated the origin of all living things. Flowers grew there which normally wouldn't survive because of the oxygen shortage and the dense overgrowth. Those kinds of laws were not effective here. I recognized the bright pink *Prunus Triloba* and couldn't walk past it before breathing in its delicious and delicate smell. Nearby, there stood a bunch of *Cobaea* with their violet chalice flowers, an insect paradise. Untouched splendor meant that there weren't any paths. We walked through the dense overgrowth with great difficulty.

Once again, there seemed to be no animals. I didn't hear a single bird, and I couldn't even pick up anything that seemed like animal auras or thoughts.

After at least half an hour of struggling to get through the almost impenetrable jungle, we still didn't find a new passageway.

"Maybe we should have walked into the sea," I suggested when we stood still to catch our breath. Following untrodden paths was tiring.

Aspen wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. "That's an appealing idea."

"Shall we, before we get stuck here completely?"

We retraced our steps back to the seashore.

Maybe the sea just stopped somewhere, I thought when we were back on the beach, staring at the horizon. Like the stream we followed in the first landscape.

I took a few steps in the rippling surf. "We're doing it?"

"I don't like getting wet," Aspen said. "I don't like swimming either."

"Okay, I'll try it on my own." I waded further in the sea.

"Hey! No!" Aspen followed me.

It took a while before the water became deep enough for us to swim in it.

She may have hated swimming, but Aspen had a nice smooth stroke, which was a good thing because there didn't seem to be an end to it. However, just as we were about to give up and turn back around, I was pulled under water with a jerk. I didn't even get the time to take a deep breath. People say that drowning is a gentle death, but that thought barely helped to keep away the panic. I fought and I kicked to that invisible thing dragging me along. I didn't feel any hands or tentacles. It seemed more as if the water itself was pulling me down, like a powerful current. What a completely insane idea it was to walk into the sea, was the last thought flashing through my head.

I found myself lying on dry land.

Beside me I heard Aspen coughing up the salty seawater. "Mountains..." she uttered between two coughs.

Indeed, and what kind of mountains. It was as if we were dropped off in an improved version of the Alps. Majestic giants of earth and rocks with groups of wandering pine-trees like pinpricks against the sides. We were lying in the middle of some sort of deep green meadow with little white flowers everywhere. No cows, goats, or chamois, let alone a human shepherd. Not even a house as far as the eye could see and that was pretty far from this height.

In the meanwhile Aspen had recovered from our moist adventure. She was shaking a shrub with white flowers. "I can hear and I can feel..." Investigating, she put a white petal of the *Stephanotis* in her mouth and immediately spat it out with a grimace. "I can taste too."

"No sense of smell," I remarked. I had already noticed it from the moment the seawater had left my nostrils.

Aspen nodded gloomily. "So in the next landscape we'll probably be blind?"

Not a nice prospect. Was this the only thing you could find here? Landscapes where one of your senses didn't work?

Maybe the normal pill users were clever enough not to come here, I thought, and stayed in that heavenly addictive place. I was wondering why there had been the temptation to touch the horizon.

One of the mountains caught my eye, because it looked like an enormous gate. It had an opening which you could easily walk through. The purpose was obvious. Was it the way to the blind world?

Not really appealing, there seemed to be no other option. Except ask the Council to get us out of here and admitting our defeat. Were we ambitious and foolish enough to take the risk?

We were.

As soon as we climbed through the opening in the mountain, it was as though we were looking at a movie where suddenly the screen turned black. Aspen and I could still see each other, but that was it. I had never felt scared of the dark before, but now I could sense how the claustrophobia tightened its cold hands around my neck. We could just as well be in a coffin, or in a never ending space, you just couldn't tell. My intuition sent out continuous shrieking alarm signals.

Aspen looked around, panicky glances with unseeing eyes. "What Now?" I could almost smell her fear.

Something brushed past me. It was a subtle sensation, not more than the sigh of a movement. It could have been my imagination. However, Aspen had noticed it too.

"What was that?" She asked with a quavering voice.

Again, something seemed to brush past me, and then I heard a sniffing noise.

Something or someone was investigating us, they were examining their catch. Just like the Sulfides in the psychedelic passageway at the beginning of this dimension, they were giving off a special smell. Like burned coal, or scorched leaves in a fire place.

Gehlen, can you still hear us?

Loud and clear...!

His voice in my head was encouraging. I told him our situation in a few words.

It could be salamanders, according to the Council they are supposed to live there.

Reptiles...?

Some sort of elementals, like the sulfides. But they are fire elementals instead of air elementals.

Aspen, who had followed the conversation, asked me: "What are elementals?"

“Workers of the gods and the watchtowers, they represent every aspect of nature; air, water, fire, and earth. But those were just legends, even in Emo World.”

According to the Council, they should lead you to your destination, Kate.

Let’s hope it isn’t hell, I thought grimly. We already experienced some sort of heaven. So its counterpart could exist as well...

Salamanders and sulfides, I thought, the assistants of the god legendary figures who suddenly seemed to exist. Didn’t I once have a short affair with an undine, a water spirit, which was also believed to exist only in myths long ago? Perhaps we were pulled under water by one or more undines. Let’s take a step further. What if there existed real gods, unlike those creatures in Emo World who did have special powers, but who didn’t have anything to do with the creation of man and his surroundings. Did they feed us lies, just like they did with ratiobeings in times past?

I had never felt this uncertain. It seemed as if my own reality was falling to pieces.

For the second time during this trip I became aware of someone pulling my aura, which made me move. Hastily I checked if Aspen was following me, and she was.

Once again, we were dragged to a growing orb of light. What a relief to be able to see again!

Just before we reached the light, we were released. By the salamanders or whatever they were called, we couldn’t see them. Though I was sure I had sacrificed another piece of my aura to them.

Hand in hand, we walked towards the light. While we did that, more orbs of light appeared. They were all around us, as though we were walking through a soundless starry sky. It was grand, impressive and incomprehensible.

“Kate?”

“I’m listening,” I said reluctantly. The fear had completely vanished, and I wanted to enjoy this incredible situation for as long as I could.

“My grandmother died when I was ten. I didn’t know about Emo World then, just like most people.”

“So you still dreamed in your sleep.”

“Exactly, I remember that when my grandmother was already dead, I dreamed about her once. She smiled to me and said that everything was going to be fine for the rest of my life and that I was going to be happy.”

“And..?”

“I thought... I thought it was my grandmother’s spirit coming to comfort me. Those people in your dreams, they live in Emo World. So who was that woman?”

“Not your grandmother.”

“Why was she imitating her? How did she know who I was?”

“Some emobeings have telepathic abilities, Aspen. The look-alike of your grandmother picked up your thoughts. She sensed you needed comfort and she gave it to you. It happens all the time, these so-called meetings with the deceased.”

It took a while before Aspen said quietly: “Maybe the inventor of the Portal should have never been born. We miss our dream world, Kate...”

“Welcome,” said an unfamiliar and polite masculine voice.

Despite the shock, I could vaguely smell a whiff of wet earth and moss. A few steps further stood a barely visible, tall figure, wearing dark clothes. He was wearing some sort of cape which hid most part of his face. Just as Aspen, I could do nothing but wait, speechless.

“I’m a gnome,” the dark figure said slowly. His voice sounded sleepy. “However, I notice you already suspected that.”

Were the gods hiding in the darkness, watching in amusement?

“You probably already know who and what we are.” It surprised me that my voice sounded fairly normal.

“An Emo- and ratiobeing hand in hand, a strange combination.” The gnome’s listless voice sounded a little sarcastic.

I couldn’t think of something meaningful to say, so I asked: “Where are we?”

“This is called the third dimension, but in truth, it is the first.”

Aspen found back her voice too. “You mean that this dimension is the first one that ever existed?”

“An unusually correct conclusion,” the gnome said. The sarcasm was clearly present now.

“That is what I meant, yes.”

I asked: “You do know why we are here I suppose?” Though elementals didn’t know everything, I remembered now.

“Of course,” he said

Aspen asked: “Is this our final destination?”

“You mean if I am your destination, what an amusing thought.”

I was starting to feel like Alice from the book by Lewis Carroll, when she tried in vain to have a normal conversation with the sleepy and smoky caterpillar. At least, that's what Alice told Carroll when he was sleeping.

I tried again: "Why are rupa angels selling dream pills to emobeings so that they end up here? And what happens to them once they're here?"

Silence fell. Was the gnome consulting with his superiors, with... the *gods*? It was impossible for me to read his aura or thoughts.

"We make them forget bad memories," he said. "They don't dream, therefore they can't put these memories in a safe place of their existence and mind. We make them happier." The sarcasm in his voice had decreased, although it wasn't completely gone yet.

"I've never had any difficulty with processing my bad memories," I stated.

"You haven't."

"I'm not that different or abnormal."

"What is abnormal?"

"Good question," Aspen agreed. "Especially in Emo World."

I wouldn't let it distract me. "I don't believe in altruism. What's in it for you?"

I felt that Aspen was looking at me, startled, but the gnome didn't seem to be offended. Maybe he felt too high above me to be affected by it, I thought peevisly.

"We take a few bites out of their ethereal body. It is harmless for them, but particularly good for our own wellbeing."

"So the whole process should be a win-win situation?"

"That is one way to put it, yes."

"Then why did the users become addicted to the dream pills, so badly that it even cost them their lives?"

"Bliss has an addictive effect on people. Imagine an existence with pleasant memories only."

"Why don't the addicts talk about those different landscapes, or about the elementals? An oath to secrecy?"

"Why should I answer such questions?"

"Why did you let us come near you then?"

"You have a sharp tongue, lady."

"You have no idea. Anyway, the Council will not be satisfied with the little information you have given us."

I still had the feeling that the gnome was laughing at us. Where was that self-confidence coming from?

Aspen asked: "What lives here apart from the few creatures we have seen already? It all seems so deserted."

"You have no idea," the gnome replied, successfully mimicking my intonation.

I didn't trust this and I didn't even trust the Council anymore. What was really going on here? What role were we playing in all this?

"Maybe you'd want to tell me why rupa angels stoop to the level of drug dealers?"

"They too have bad memories, more than anyone, and they want to get rid of them. Will it suffice as an answer?"

"Are they in cahoots with the Council?"

"What a nice expression, you certainly got that from Ratio World, didn't you."

I would have sworn I heard the gnome snigger, but I could still not see his face. The feeling that both he and the Council were toying with us, became stronger and stronger. At any rate, I had enough of it.

Irritated I said: "The conversations with my dog are worth even more to me than this."

"I hope, for the sake of your dog, that that goes for her as well."

I frowned apprehensively. "How do you know it's a *she*?"

"Because a *he* would probably never stick it out with you for very long."

Bastard! I thought. I didn't have enough courage to say it out loud. Or not enough disregard for death.

Gehlen!

I'm listening, Kate.

The Council needs to get us out of here, right now. We probably won't find out anything more.

Are you in danger?

Not immediately... I think.

Gehlen didn't ask any further. *I'll pass it on.*

I was angry with myself for letting the gnome's love of sarcasm get to me. Normally I could handle a lot more of it. It probably had something to do with me feeling completely powerless. Did the creature feel some kind of support from a powerful ally? I didn't know anymore, I had lost it.

A second later, I was sitting on my own couch, back home again, with a heavy head.

Secrets

Hearing a secret:

you must control your passions.

(Zolar's Encyclopedia of Dreams)

17

Aspen and I swallowed a few gallons of water and the necessary painkillers, and life was returning to our bodies again.

A couple of hours in a mysterious dimension filled with heavenly pleasures where you could get rid of your bad memories would make anyone addicted, I thought. However, the hangover when you returned would be enough for me to count me out. Was it really that important to erase your bad memories? Mistakes from the past defined your personality. You wouldn't make the same mistakes again, and it increased your sense of morality. It formed a part of life, just as breathing and eating did. Ratiobeings weren't exactly happier once their dreams had been eliminated. They may have been feeling safer, guarded from embarrassing situations but not happier, on the contrary.

Nature always struck back hard and without warning when people tried to interfere with its actions. Sometimes only after a long time, but nonetheless.

Gehlen waited patiently until we were more or less mentally fit again. When that was the case, I said to him: "I'm going to contact the Council. They are screwing us over, and I want to know why."

He was looking at me worriedly. "Anger is a bad adviser, Kate."

"Spare me the clichés!"

"Clichés contain a part of truth. I advise you to sleep on it before doing or saying things that you'll certainly regret afterwards."

"I know myself. I'll be pissed off until I know what they are trying to do to us. After all, I'm an emobeing, and we're not as self-controlled as you are." I stopped, frightened of myself. I realized I was trying to hit Gehlen below the belt. He was right, I wasn't acting reasonably. "Sorry..." I muttered sheepishly.

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "Go ahead, contact them."

He walked to the window and stared at the street with his back to me.

I called the Council, well aware of the fact that Gehlen and Aspen could hear the conversation because of the chip in her head. I didn't care.

Got home safely from the third dimension?

From the FIRST dimension, you mean?

It remained quiet for a few seconds. *How do you know that? Who told you?*

Apparently elementals aren't perfect either.

You weren't in any danger, Kate.

Then why did we get warnings to be careful so many times?

Another silence made me sense that they were fooling around with me again. What was going on? Impatiently I asked: *Aren't elementals servants or messengers of the gods? Isn't that what the myths tell us?*

Gods don't exist, Kate, you as an emobeing should know that.

I'm not sure of anything anymore.

But I realized frustrated that the Council wasn't going to tell me things they didn't want to. It became clearer by the minute. I had to find out for myself what kind of game they were playing.

I asked: *Which other creatures live in the first dimension?*

Did you find out why rupa angels sell dream pills to emobeings?

I was used to the Council not answering the questions they found inappropriate for me to ask them, but I couldn't handle it well today. Before I had the opportunity to explode Gehlen turned around and looked at me with a warning on his face.

I nodded resignedly and took a deep breath, slowly breathing out again.

They see it as a form of healing. A trip eliminates bad memories in the head of emobeings. It makes them feel happier. I can't imagine that, in the long run, this could be good for one's mental health.

If bad memories were redundant, we would have brought an end to their existence a long time ago.

Their answer perplexed me. Had they let their tongue run away with them? In any case, a silence fell yet again, an uncomfortable one this time.

What's in it for the rupa angels?

I suppressed my impatience again and told them that, because of their normal work, they carried a heavy load of misery themselves, and that they wanted to get rid of it. For free.

We know enough, for now.

The contact was broken off.

"Calm down, Kate," Gehlen reprimanded me. "I have never experienced a moment when the Council didn't seem to know what they were doing."

Possibly, but they were not omniscient, I thought. Not infallible either. They treated us as children. Especially that last part bothered me. Then there was my insatiable curiosity of course.

If necessary, I was going to buy some of those pills myself to investigate the matter on my own. Then I thought about the undine again, the one I had an affair with once. Undines were elementals too, and you could find them in Emo World.

I saw that Aspen was observing me. "I was thinking..."

"I suspected that, yes." She put on a sweet smile.

Gehlen looked anxiously at me. "Kate-"

I put up my hand. "Thank you so much for your help and support, but I've had enough of it for a while."

He nodded resignedly. "I've been here for too long, anyway." He walked to the door.

"Don't you have to tell me to be careful?"

Of course, he hadn't deserved the sarcasm, and I regretted it immediately. "Sorry," I said in a completely different tone. "Nerves," I walked over to him and pressed a kiss on his lips. "I am really grateful to you," I assured him.

"I know." He walked out.

I turned around and looked at Aspen, searchingly. "What about you?"

"I'm not leaving you alone, forget it."

"What? Doesn't Emo World make you sick anymore?"

"On the contrary, I'm starting to feel at home here and to enjoy it."

Aspen seemed so serious, I almost believed her.

We still have a room available, or does she get to sleep with you?

Mind your own business, you mutt!

Ewok sighed and walked to the kitchen.

"You can't make the poor thing miserable," Aspen reproached me.

"The poor thing..." I suddenly realized that she had been able to hear me just now. Not Ewok, fortunately, but me. "We forgot to ask Gehlen how to get the chip out of our heads."

"Hmmm, I'm finding the thing quite handy."

"Sure you do..."

I tried to think rationally. The presence of Aspen could make things more complicated. But on the other hand, I was glad she was here, I realized a little surprised. In a short period of

time, she had started to mean much more to me than the bits and bytes guzzling computer geek of a while ago.

“My undine lived near a lake,” I said. I walked through the room and positioned myself on the couch, staring into space. I always thought of Mare as a *he*, despite the seemingly feminine name. “They are water beings, after all. He had a little house there, kind of adorable actually. With a thatched roof and lots of flowers and plants...”

“Let’s go find a car,” Aspen said matter-of-factly.

“Kate!” Mare was standing in the doorway with her arms stretched out, grinning broadly.

She had taken on her female form and she looked very pretty in the filmy pale blue dress she was wearing. We weren’t here to have fun, I thought with regret, even though you could do more amusing things with an undine than getting angry with the Council. The embrace was passionate enough to make Aspen hop awkwardly from one foot to the next.

“Aspen, my co-worker and friend from Ratio World,” I introduced her.

“Well, look at that, from Ratio World,” Mare said, exaggerating sympathy.

“There are worse things,” Aspen said peevishly.

Mare’s house was decorated in a maritime and sober manner. I knew that she spent more time in the lake than at the house. It was cozy, with all those sea flora and fauna on the walls and all those dark brown, green, and blue colors. There were several bouquets of flowers, giving off a sweet smell.

“It looks like you haven’t come here for a threesome,” Mare remarked after she gave us something to drink. She chuckled when she saw the look on Aspen’s face. “Ratio World!” she said and shook her head pityingly.

Businesslike, I said: “We just returned from the first dimension.”

For a brief moment, I saw Mare’s face darken. Yearning and fear both clouded her aura. Or was it anger? Undines are hard to read.

“What were you doing there?”

I told her the story, and I explained my problem with the Council.

She listened carefully, her expression blank. She had already given away that she knew that dimension. What’s more, she knew that it was the first dimension and not the third.

I couldn’t tell much from the look in her eyes which were almost white. I asked, quite frankly: “Mare, are you an elemental yourself?”

“You have met elementals, so you know they don’t just exist in legends,” Mare stated calmly.

“What are they trying to keep from us? What’s behind all this, Mare?”

She became nervous, I could tell. I had never seen her nervous before. She fidgeted with her dress like a teenager who feels caught doing something inappropriate. Completely off track, she said: “I would really like to go for a swim in the lake. I have an urgent need for it, just water surrounding me, I mean.”

“Don’t you dare try to get out of this,” I threatened. “You’re the only one I know who can answer a couple of important questions.” I leaned forwards so my nose nearly touched hers. “Did you escape from the first dimension, Mare? Did something bad happen to you there? You know you can trust me, and that goes for Aspen as well.”

Mare started to rock backwards and forwards in her seat. She stared right past me, into the distance through the window of the living room. All of a sudden, she said: “Go away, Kate...”

“Mare, please, help me!”

“Elementals have sworn an oath of secrecy, signed with breath and blood.” Her eyes rolled backwards.

“She won’t tell us anything,” Aspen stated. “We should leave her alone.”

She was right and I straightened my shoulders. I felt sorry for Mare, and it was hard not knowing what happened to her. What had made her leave her own dimension? I felt guilty for having brought up a traumatic memory.

I rose to my feet unwillingly. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Mare,” I assured her.

I caressed her cheek before I turned away and walked to the door.

“As soon as we’re gone, she’ll be fine,” I assured Aspen who had watched apprehensively.

Without a sound, we closed the door behind us.

We were driving back home with the car we found. After she sat beside me for a while in complete silence, Aspen asked in a strange tone: “Are you really looking for the gods?”

“If they exist, I will find them,” I answered grimly. I looked at Aspen from aside. “It’s not too late to go back to your safe Ratio World.”

“I wish I brought my computer with me,” was the only thing she said.

“Go get it and leave me in peace for a couple of hours.”

“With Kalon?” she asked.

“Yes, with Kalon! Does that bother you?”

I immediately regretted the outburst. I realized I was tired. I did need some rest, with or without Kalon.

I put my hand on Aspen's thigh. It felt cold. "Sorry," I said.

Aspen nodded. "I can also fall apart any minute now."

She didn't seem to mind that I left my hand where it was.

Talking

Talking with your lover:

Watch out for jealous friends.

(Zolar's Encyclopedia of Dreams)

18

Garlic, I thought as I put my key in the front door lock. Kalon was already home, he was making dinner, one of his nicest skills. The heavenly aromas out of the kitchen reminded me I hadn't eaten for a while.

He hugged me with a cheerful smile, until he saw the look on my face. "What's wrong?"

"Give me some time before I start telling the story." I dropped down on the couch, and felt the hunger grow.

'I made a glass of blood for you.'

Sweet Kalon, always knowing exactly what I needed.

"Where is Ewok?"

"Chasing werewolves as usual, I think," he replied.

Sweet warm blood of a cow, I smelled. I drank from it and I felt the liquid energy working its way through my body almost immediately. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the head rest of the couch. A few seconds later, I felt Kalon taking the empty glass from my hands.

"I'll tell you the story when we're at the table," I said without opening my eyes.

"Only if it doesn't spoil my appetite, because that would be a shame." He walked away.

Life was good again. Nearly perfect, me resting on the cushions, and my sweet lover working his magic in the kitchen. The clinking of pots and pans was like music to my ears. Relaxing music...

We ate lamb chops, marinated in garlic and thyme with puffed potatoes and crispy steamed green beans. Sensuous red Bordeaux did the rest.

"You're a walking compliment to the chef," Kalon said, watching me stuff myself in amusement.

"Also to you completely, I hope?"

"The rest will come soon."

He briefly looked at me, investigating. "So you recuperate that fast?"

"That depends on what they feed me." And who feeds me, I thought.

I told him about the first dimension and the elementals. That last part seemed to scare Kalon.

"It certainly goes really far," he remarked.

"I'm afraid it doesn't stop there. They are trying to keep us in the dark, for some obscure reason." I didn't explain who 'they' were because I didn't even really know it myself. "We found out why the rupa angels were beginning to deal drugs, but apparently, the rest is none of our business."

At first, Kalon didn't react. I wasn't impatient, and not only because he often thought more logically about things than me. Finally, he asked:

"Why don't you seek advice from the Oracle?"

It was a relief that, this time, he didn't start telling me about the danger, or about being careful and stuff like that.

"It didn't occur to me." I thought about it for a while. "The Oracle is particularly good at seeing the future, not the past. And I think that the things I'm looking for are rooted in the past, after all."

"Hmmm..."

We emptied the bottle of Bordeaux.

At a certain moment, Kalon said: "Hecate."

I looked at him in surprise. "I know you admire that so-called super elf, but why are you mentioning her?"

"I'm not really sure."

Maybe it was a good idea, I had to admit it. Hecate would have knowledge of the hidden higher magic, and she would be extremely powerful. Maybe it was worth a try.

“How come you know so much about her?” I asked.

“She’s pretty well known in my social environment.”

My social environment... It had an unpleasant sound to it, as though I was being left out. Which wasn’t the case, of course, we both had our lives together, and our own lives apart. He didn’t have free access to all my databanks either, to say it with an expression of Aspen’s.

“Hecate,” I said pensively. I tasted the name on my lips. “I may have read about her, before I met you.”

“She is extremely old, but nobody knows how old exactly. She is sparing in giving away information about herself.”

“Didn’t people used to worship her as a goddess in Ratio World?”

“One of the many goddesses then, I wouldn’t know.”

I got up and walked to the bookcase. It included all the books with which I used to obtain my diploma. I immediately found the book about Ratio World: *A Short History of the Perished Gods*.

Hecate did appear in it, in great detail even. She was the daughter of two titans, Perses and Asteria. She is believed to be one of the first creatures that lived in Emo World, because, according to the legends, titans lived even before the gods. She was seen as a goddess with three heads, one of a virgin, one of a mother, and one of a wise old woman, the three seasons of female existence. Seeing as she had the power of three women, or three goddesses, according to Ratio World, she controlled power over several cycles consisting of three parts. Birth, life and death, thoughts, body and spirit, new, full and dark moon. She was the dark link between the underworld and the Earth. Besides that, she was also worshiped as the goddess of darkness, the three-forked road, magic, vampires, witches, the moon, mysteries and, in fact, all living creatures.

“If ratiobeings depicted her that way, she must have really had an awful lot of power,” I said. Or maybe she was good at faking it, I thought. I looked at Kalon. “Maybe this means even more than we think. You know that the worshiping of gods in Ratio World never came out of the blue. It was always based on true facts. The powers that were assigned to them, really existed for the main part, but those creatures weren’t gods, that’s all.”

I continued reading. Hecate usually had snakes draped around her neck and three wild dogs lying at her feet. She seemed to be fond of dogs. I was starting to like her a little more. She also loved horses, lions, and black cats.

She could send nightmares to people, at the same time she was a creative source of inspiration. Hecate was considered to be severe and honest. She never complied with

unjustified pleas. She was seen as the ultimate goddess who could not only steer the unconscious and the menstrual cycle, but she could also control the earth, the sea and the air.

“She had her say in everything,” I said incredulously. “An elf.? Have you ever heard of an elf, even a higher elf, with that much power?”

“I’m not an expert,” Kalon said.

Her name meant *she who imposes her will from afar*. That proved her magical powers weren’t just really strong, they also extended very far.

The book also provided information about the ideal place to summon her. It should take place on a three-forked crossroad where cypresses and hazelnuts grew, and if possible, opium, almond trees, and aloe plants. Nevertheless, you could also summon her at night. In that case you had to go to a burial ground, or a location where a crime had been committed. She is believed to wander around these places, accompanied by her wild dogs.

“We don’t have any crime scenes around here, so let’s go to a burial ground,” said Kalon. I wasn’t sure whether he meant it or not. “It’s almost night time,” he clarified.

I asked: “Does it matter which cemetery?”

Maybe Raincloud can help.

The voice in my head startled me, until I saw Ewok. She had sneaked into the room without a sound. *Raincloud..?*

A werewolf I know pretty well. He hangs around cemeteries a lot.

Where can we find your little friend?

Your nose is too weak, of course. I’m afraid you’ll need me to do it. That’s something for tomorrow, I’m beat. Ewok jumped up the couch and laid her head on her front paws.

Not tomorrow, I said. My tiredness had vanished, as if Kalon really prepared magic food. *We need to go looking for him right now!*

Yikes, here she goes again! Ewok sighed and jumped back on the floor. *What’s in it for me?*

That you’re still allowed to live with us if you try hard enough!

We entered the increasingly darkening street, Kalon, me, and Ewok who was walking in front of us with evident reluctance.

Of course, I had my doubts about what we were trying to do. Could you summon mighty creatures like Hecate, just like that? What if we could, what could we expect? I couldn’t wait, I was too curious and excited. Perhaps I ate too much garlic.

Ewok found Raincloud surprisingly fast. At the fourth burial ground we visited, she already smelled him.

He's here. I'm going to get him! She disappeared, running between the dark gravestones.

Kalon and I waited for a while, sitting on a broad tombstone. The marble felt cold against my ass.

I lay my head on Kalon's shoulder. "It's peaceful here..."

The gravestones standing between the high birch trees emanated eternal peace in the moonless night. It was an old, wise tranquility that covered up secrets and offered the deceased a safe haven.

"Nothing as peaceful as the dead," Kalon said, quite disrespectfully.

I could see why Hecate loved cemeteries. You could hear your own thoughts as the ever present death reminded you of how precious life was.

I heard approaching patter.

I found him, said Ewok.

We followed Ewok across the graveyard, through a scarcely lit path at the edge of the Leprechaun Forest. She led us to a grave where two werewolves were chatting to each other close to some olive trees. Apparently, one of them was Raincloud. It was a fairly old animal with grey manes, looking annoyed at us.

Is that them? He asked Ewok

Impatiently, I asked: *Can you bring us into contact with Hecate?* I asked him telepathically, for Ewok's sake.

Why would you want to disturb her?

It's really important.

But it's none of my business?

I subtly replied: *Maybe you'd rather not want to know.*

Ewok interfered: *If Kate says it's important, it is,* she said emphatically.

She did seem to have an influence on these horny werewolves. *Okay,* Raincloud gave in. *You're so nice and tight.* He grinned, showing an impressive set of fangs. *I've known Hecate for many years, because I often accompany her and her wild dogs on their walks across nocturnal burial grounds. However, I also know that she'd get furious if you bother her for stupidities.*

Again, Raincloud, it is really important.

Follow me. Raincloud turned around and marched away. Ewok scurried after him. The horny bitch didn't even look back. The other werewolf stayed behind in silence.

"He's taking us to Hecate," I clarified for Kalon's sake.

He didn't reply, but I sensed that he was impressed and worried at the same time.

We retraced our steps, but now we took the final path that ran through a part of the Leprechaun Forest. It made me feel anxious, but we walked only briefly through the gloomy trees. We reached a little village, unknown to me. I was certain it hadn't been there before. But as already mentioned, this wasn't so unusual in Emo World. The windows of the houses were all dark. The houses were small, with thatched roofs and vegetable gardens on the front side. The creatures that lived here couldn't be taller than leprechauns. Normally, as an outsider it was incredibly difficult to find a leprechaun village. They preferred to keep themselves hidden.

Behind the village there was another small graveyard.

When we approached it, I felt a presence. The emanation of it was so strong I was almost devoured by it. It pressed against my chest and took away my breath for a few seconds. Before I could panic, the pressure stopped. Next, my entire body started to tremble.

"We are being examined," Kalon whispered. He was experiencing the same thing.

It did seem that way, but with what force! I was still curious, but not without a hint of fear.

Raincloud and even Ewok didn't seem to be bothered by anything. On the contrary, they were wagging their tails as if they were expecting something pleasant to happen.

Hesitantly, we walked through the wrought iron gate that sealed off the burial ground.

Wait here, Raincloud said.

I nodded, not saying a word, not wondering whether he could see me doing it in the dark. He took off with great speed, as if he had vanished on the spot.

I gazed anxiously around me, but I could only see black tombstones and trees.

Raincloud came back again almost immediately. He was panting, his tongue hanging out of his mouth. Maybe he wasn't as fit as he appeared, after all.

Come with me, he demanded curtly.

Raincloud guided us across a small graveyard and then led us outside of it again. I started to have the feeling that we were walking to the Elf Wood. Was Hecate a higher elf, after all?

My feeling hadn't betrayed me. The border of the Elf Wood seemed to glow, as though it was making its own moonlight. The trees lit up as if thousands of fireflies were swarming around.

We walked up a small path with tiny red pebble stones. I couldn't resist brushing my fingertips over the small flowers of a *Lavandula augustifolia*. They were tingling, as if they enjoyed it.

Raincloud stood still. With his head, he gestured in the direction of a few trees, overgrown with ivy, which grew in a circle, creating a natural green arbor. In the middle of this arbor stood a figure in a long, slender, and human shape.

Only you are expected, Kate, Raincloud warned.

For some reason or another, that didn't surprise me. "You stay here," I said to Kalon and Ewok.

Nobody protested. Kalon just briefly laid an encouraging hand on my arm.

My heart was pounding, and I could hear my panting breath when I walked, all alone, towards the motionless figure in the arbor. There was not a breath of wind.

"Don't be afraid, Kate."

The musical, feminine voice startled me and brought me to a halt.

"There is no danger," she said. Her tone of voice sounded encouraging.

I walked on until I was a few steps apart from Hecate.

Magnificent and noble, those were the adjectives that came to me. She was wearing long black robes which covered her feet, adorned with leaves in every color green you could find in nature, each of them radiating their own delicate light. I didn't notice anything of her three bodies. Her features were young and mature at the same time and her raven black hair was covered with white streaks. She was wearing a necklace with pearls and a large moonstone at the center of it. A delicate smell of opium surrounded her. A breathtaking appearance that made you lost for words.

"I know who you are, Kate," she said in an inviting tone, which also sounded as if she had unveiled every mystery of life a long time ago.

"Eh..." I felt stupid because I couldn't bring out a word.

"Usually you are not that timid, are you?" Hecate remarked. She smiled, showing a set of brilliant white teeth that glittered in a beam of light which seemed to come from nowhere at all.

I coughed and tried to say something that made sense this time. "Pardon me. I have never been so impressed by someone's appearance before." Bombastic words, but I meant them.

Hecate smiled and it was as though I heard lilies-of-the-valley tinkle as bells in the wind. "You wanted to ask me a question?"

A question she already knew, I realized vaguely. But she wanted me to express it myself.

Uncertainly, I started: "During a mission of the Council, I visited the first dimension. I met elementals..." I hesitated, but Hecate just waited. "Now I'm stuck with the pressing question..." I fell silent again, couldn't utter the words.

"Why would you think that gods live in the first dimension?"

It didn't surprise me that she picked the thought right out of my head, even though my telepathic channel was closed. That chip wouldn't have had something to do with it as well. Hesitantly, I answered: "According to the myths, the elementals are the helpers of the gods."

Suddenly, something about Hecate's appearance changed. At first I thought it was a play of the strange light, it wasn't. Her features grew older, her lips became less voluptuous, and wrinkles appeared around her eyes and the corners of her mouth. The color of her hair faded, and the white streaks increased.

Then I understood. Hecate could take on each of her three appearances any time she liked. Only a minute ago, she was the mother, and now, she was the wise old woman. These features made her even more intimidating, she was still an incredible beauty who emanated an enormous sense of authority.

"I'm not allowed to answer your question," she said with a voice that was not as warm as before.

I kept silent and waited, without becoming angry like when the Council told me to go and take a hike. I did feel disappointment coming up.

"You are asking about secrets which are older than life itself, Kate, knowledge which mortals are not entitled to."

"So the gods do exist," I remarked. I was listening at my own voice in amazement, as it was saying something this incredible in an almost normal tone.

Hecate closed her eyes for a second. Without opening them again, she asked: "What are gods?"

The way she asked it reminded me of the gnome, but this time, I couldn't feel irritated. There was no use; it would be like becoming angry at a mountain or at the sea.

Carefully, I tried the definition Ratio World gave to it: “Those who created the world...?”

“That was nature’s doing, Kate.”

“That’s what I always thought.”

“You are beginning to doubt that?”

I nodded, like a silent confession.

“If the gods, whom you believe to live in the first dimension, have created the world, what... has created the gods?”

“I don’t know,” I had to admit. “Maybe they have always been there...”

“Then why could nature not always have been there?”

I kept silent, feeling miserable. My intelligence fell short for this kind of conversation. I’ve known it before, but now my nose was being rubbed in it. Maybe this was exactly what Hecate wanted to achieve; make me realize that I was just not up to her kind of knowledge. I *wanted* to know and to understand!

Hecate nodded, as if she followed my train of thought. “You’re an exceptional specimen of the emobeings, Kate.”

It sounded as a compliment, even though I wasn’t really sure of it.

“You are part elf,” she remarked with evident tenderness. “Maybe you are worthy of being initiated in one of the biggest mysteries of the cosmos. That is what I have told the Council, otherwise you would not have come this far.”

I gasped when I realized what was going to come.

“However, it concerns knowledge which cannot leave the borders of your own head. It will be held prison in your own mind for the rest of your days.”

At that ultimate moment it didn’t seem such a terrible punishment to me. That ultimate moment...

I was excited enough to ask audaciously: “Are you a goddess yourself?”

There came no answer. “Come closer,” she ordered. “I will show you something.”

I obeyed, my legs feeling wobbly like rubber. When I stood right in front of her, once again overwhelmed by her presence, Hecate laid her cool hands on my temples and looked at me. Her gaze startled me as it seemed a reflection of infinity.

“Close your eyes,” she said. “Don’t be afraid.”

When I obeyed her again, my head started spinning immediately. However, her strong hands ensured me that I wasn’t going to fall. My mind was filled with swirling colors. It was like being in the front part of the first dimension again. Then, Hecate’s voice penetrated my

head. I couldn't hear the words, and it weren't telepathic thoughts either. The ideas came into being in my mind itself.

We come from another universe.

I saw a bright blue planet with brown and green spots, floating in a black space. The planet was surrounded by circling rings, which were also blue.

The existence of our world came to an end because of our expanding sun. There was not a single similar world we could go to in our entire universe. We had knowledge of other dimensions. By joining the forces of our minds, we were able to take the plunge.

Somewhere in a small corner of my mind, not absorbed by the voice and the overwhelming image of the strange world, flickered the thought of the Council. They, too, could travel through dimensions without technological devices. Was Hecate part of the Council?

We found dimensions with their own universes, and we discovered planets suitable for us. We chose a world where intelligent life did not exist yet, and we adapted it to satisfy our needs.

I saw the planet; it was green and beautiful.

We created our own environment, with necessary variations to satisfy different preferences. You have seen some of the experimental projects in the first dimension.

I saw the planet become increasingly blue. It was starting to look more like the previous world, without the rings surrounding it.

It's incredible what the mind is capable of...

Those were my words, I realized. However, I didn't know whether I uttered them. There came no reaction.

At this moment, ratio- and emobeings don't use much of their mental capacity. We, at that time, used almost everything. In the meantime, this capacity has increased. We may even be able to take care of an expanding sun now.

It didn't sound arrogant, it sounded like a fact.

Elementals work for us. They maintain and take care of our creations.

So that's why you had elementals for fire, earth, air and water, nature's four elements.

It went well for thousands of years. Even too well, some became bored. Once again, they wanted to give form to a new planet, make it fit for habitation, and this time, let other creatures live there. Several of them left for another dimension to have their own way, together with a few elementals. On the condition they would never return to the dimension of origin.

The Council!

They created Emo World, letting their imagination run free.

I saw the creation of Emo World, its development, the astonishing landscapes and its variation of living creatures.

The creators were not yet satisfied. They wanted something entirely different as well, a counterpart of the world filled with emotional creatures they had created.

That was how Ratio World came into being, I realized. In another dimension, so both worlds would never come to know each other, a world which had to evolve on its own.

I was told that the creators intervened only once, they found that it was all going too slow. Due to that a certain species of apes evolved into a human species. It was an intervention which people were going to call the missing link. I would love to have seen images of the evolution on earth, but they didn't come.

It had gone well for more than thousands of years, despite the fact that there occurred some kind of 'leak' between the two worlds, which manifested in the dreams of ratiobeings.

I received one last image: a dreaming and confused ratiobeing, vaguely visible in Emo World, running around like a madman.

"... Till the technological development of their own. They provided an unforeseen breakthrough... Literally," Hecate concluded.

It took me a few seconds before I realized that the voice wasn't inside my head anymore, that Hecate had just talked to me. Next, she kept silent, and waited.

It took me a while before I could think clearly again. "As if I had known all along..." I muttered to myself, but Hecate seemed to have understood.

"The primal memory," she said with a vague smile. "Things you know, but you don't know you know them."

I took a deep breath. "So you are a goddess after all."

She shook her head, slowly. "We are creators, artists of worlds. Not gods. Everything that lives and thinks has the ability to create things. We have been created ourselves."

"By whom or by what...?"

"You know the answer to that question; by nature, the all-embracing nature which we only partially understand. She has always and will always be here, in whatever shape or form that may be."

"You are here, but where is the Council?"

"Its members are everywhere," Hecate replied with a hint of a smile.

“Why...?” I paused. I realized I was asking a lot. This was probably the chance of a lifetime. “Why must this be kept a secret? Why can’t everyone know how the matter stands?”

“So people would worship us again? So religions would come into being again, with all its horrible consequences?”

“Haven’t ratiobeings become more intelligent by now?”

“No.”

I nodded slowly. Maybe the mysteriousness of myths and stories was more exciting, I thought. Mysticism had its charm. However, I hoped my head wasn’t going to explode if I couldn’t exchange this knowledge with anyone.

“I can release you of that knowledge in the blink of an eye.”

“No!” I said hastily. The thought of it scared me. And then my thoughts returned to the dream pills. Why the Council hadn’t investigated the matter for them seemed pretty evident; they couldn’t enter the first dimension. Why did the creatures from the first dimension allow dreamers from Emo World to enter the place? They didn’t only allow it; they even seemed to encourage the growing hype.

Then, I was struck by the cold truth.

Hecate nodded gravely. “It is time to go, Kate.”

She disappeared as if she’d never been there. The void she left behind was almost palpable.

Memory

Memory loss

Dishonor for the family.

(Zolar's Encyclopedia of Dreams)

19

Kalon continually looked at me as we walked back home in the middle of the night, but strangely enough, he didn’t ask any questions. Until I realized that Hecate tampered with his memory, he just didn’t know anymore that I’d met her. For him and for Ewok it was just as if we were taking an ordinary evening walk. Raincloud had just vanished.

“You are awfully quiet tonight,” Kalon finally remarked.

“I’ve been through a thing or two the last couple of days, Kalon.”

That wasn’t a lie.

“I was hoping that my food would put you back on your feet.”

“It did.” I wrapped my arm around his shoulders. “Why didn’t I meet you ten years earlier?”

“You would have been sick of me by now.”

Or you would have been sick of me, I thought. It shouldn’t necessarily happen that way, as long as you gave each other enough freedom, even to see other people. It was one of the many problems of Ratio World, where couples usually considered their partner as their property.

“Tell me when it happens.”

“When what happens...?”

“When you’ll be sick of me, I don’t want us to slowly become strangers.”

“You crazy vampire!” I gave him a peck on the cheek.

“Are you going back to those weirdoes of the other dimension?”

For a moment, I felt caught. And I didn’t know what to answer. What could I do? Kill every pill selling rupa angel that existed? Informing those young people wouldn’t help, they knew all about that in Ratio World. The more you told teenagers not to do something, the more interesting it was for them.

Ratiobeings stopped dreaming because they were scared of making themselves completely ridiculous in Emo World. Emobeings started dreaming out of curiosity. It would have been funny were it not connected to such an incredible danger. In the long run, it would cause the downfall of both - still very young - worlds. The Council had to witness it all, without being able to do something. A situation which they put themselves into, mainly because they created us with so-called free will.

I kept worrying for days. Eventually, I came to the painful conclusion that I could do nothing else but reconciling myself to the situation. My sole comfort had to be the fact that I wasn’t going to witness the downfall myself, not in this lifetime. Why shouldn’t I just continue with my considerably well arranged existence? After all, I had enough to be happy, or at least, content about. The people, who wanted to throw themselves deliberately into misery, should take the consequences.

It didn’t work. I wasn’t like that at all.

During our next mission with the Fantasy Hunters, I found out that Aspen’s and even Gehlen’s memory had been erased. They didn’t remember our assignment in the first dimension. I envied them. It was my own stupid fault, I sometimes thought. I shouldn’t have been that curious and stubborn. At a certain moment, I thought about visiting Hecate again,

and asking her to relieve me of that burden as well. She probably wouldn't show herself anymore. That chance had gone by. Lack of power could be terrible.

Yet there had to be a way out. My parents raised me with the idea that every problem had its solution, until they were struck by fate themselves. They were killed during a silly hiking trip at night, when I was standing on my own feet for just a year or so. I never found out how that was possible, but they fell into a ravine together.

Emobeings may consider death as a part of life, to me it seemed unfair. Young healthy people weren't supposed to die.

Every problem has its solution.

My father's words echoed through my mind, like a mantra.

If you repeat something often enough, you'll start to believe in it yourself, a publicist's conviction. I was really beginning to believe that there was a way out.

My thoughts continued wandering to Hecate. There were hundreds of millions of emobeings walking around in this world. Why had she told the story to me, of all people? If you couldn't tell it to anyone, nobody would ever know you were the chosen one. So there could be hundreds of people just like me.

No, I corrected myself. It wasn't that simple. The more I thought about it, the more I was starting to believe that she was expecting something of me. Was she a part of the solution, and did I have to find the key?

Hecate had many gifts. What if she erased the memory of the rupa angels and that of every emobeing that came into contact with those dream pills?

Maybe it wasn't possible after all. She claimed she couldn't do anything about the situation. Otherwise she would have come up with an idea herself.

Or would she?

I was pacing up and down the apartment. Kalon had gone to work and Ewok was sleeping. Was I supposed to try to meet Hecate again? Where? She would certainly not be in the same place every time.

Something else crossed my mind. Why wouldn't I be able to reach her telepathically? If it worked with the Council, why shouldn't it work with her?

I closed my eyes and focused. At the same time, I opened up all my chakras to be receptive to outer influences. I breathed as deeply and as slowly as I could.

It took you a while.

I was so surprised by her swift reaction I almost lost contact with her. With great difficulty, I regained part of my tranquility.

Maybe there is a solution after all.

Really. She didn't sound surprised.

I explained my idea.

That is not impossible.

Once again, I was pretty amazed. *I can't imagine that you didn't think of it yourself.*

She didn't seem to be offended. *We have no right to intervene of our own accord, Kate. People must find solutions and answers for their own problems.*

It almost sounds like a game.

It is nature's law. We are not allowed to make negative interventions, unless a human being asks it explicitly and with a good reason.

With all due respect, but what was it that you did with my companions?

That was a positive intervention, to keep you from having to answer questions you wouldn't be able to answer.

I tried to make sense of all this. I succeeded only partially.

There is another problem, Kate.

I closed my eyes. It was all starting to become so exhausting.

I will also have to erase the memory of ratiobeings, up to a considerably long period in the past. Emo- and ratiobeings are connected to each other and every piece of memory has to be eliminated.

I nodded. I could understand this. And at once, I knew where this conversation was heading. I felt myself freeze up. There were no other solutions, none that I could think of.

You know what is at stake, Hecate stated.

I knew perfectly well. Ratio World would forget Emo World and everything would be just like before. Ratiobeings would start dreaming again, ending up in Emo World. We would no longer know that something like dream pills existed. The Portal would disappear until someone might invent it again. I wouldn't be a Fantasy Hunter anymore. The team would disappear out of my life as though they never existed.

Just like Aspen would.

Every scientific piece of work about it will vanish, Kate. Or become unrecognizable.

I plumped down on the couch. I hadn't expected these consequences, not in a million years.

Of course, the Portal would be invented once more, in a couple of centuries or so. And then, everything would start over again.

The team, I thought. That was my biggest uncertainty. I would miss them terribly. Gehlen, Aspen... especially Aspen.

No, I suddenly thought. I wouldn't miss anything or anyone. My memory would be wiped clean as well. I didn't know which thought was most painful.

You don't have a choice, Kate.

Of course, Hecate was right. She would always be right. I couldn't let two worlds slowly head for destruction for my own personal gain.

Kate?

I leaned back on the couch. In a few seconds, I would be a lot more ignorant than I was now.

I wouldn't realize it.

I took one last deep breath before I whispered telepathically: *Do it...*

Kalon got home early from work, which was very convenient. I had brought home dinner (a delicious takeout meal from a Chinese witch), and I had some other nice plans for the evening.

"Hello, my dearest blood sucking man," I greeted him at the door. We kissed each other extensively.

"So cheerful today," Kalon remarked as he let go of me.

"That's right. The werewolves have turned it into a beautiful day, the flowers bloomed and smelled delicious, there's a session of steaming hot sex on the menu, and I was offered a job today, a *dream* job."

"Well, Kate, you don't really have to work. I'm earning enough money for the both of us, and I've got a big promotion coming up."

I quickly glanced at Kalon's slender loins as he walked towards the bathroom. I followed him. "I'm not planning to sit on my ass the whole day."

"That would be a shame," he said.

"Oh?"

"If you're sitting on it, I can't see it." He grinned and took off his shirt. "Care to join me in the shower?"

I brushed his invitation aside. "Let's eat something first, before we start at it."

"A quickie before dinner is healthier."

“Quickies with the right partner are always healthy.” I watched how he pulled off his pants. He had a large erection. Kalon seemed to have some sort of chronic erection. My advice to lonely ladies, find you a vampire.

I abandoned him to fill our plates with food. It was still really hot. That’s the way it goes with takeout meals by Chinese witches; they always have the right temperature until you’ve finished with it. Just like Kalon and me.

“Wurrell is going to publish my novel,” I said as he sat down at the table and opened a bottle of wine.

Wurrell was a witch who ran a small publishing company. She had a witch shop which nobody could walk past without buying a stack of books. That way, all her books were successful, even science fiction novels, which I had written or tried to write. I already published some books with Wurrell’s company before, but this was going to be my first novel. According to her, I wasn’t exactly great at it, but it contained some fun ideas. That’s why she had given it to her editor, some strange guy who could transform a kid’s paper into a bestseller, if you owned a witch shop too.

Kalon filled the glasses. “A novel eh...? With lots of sex...?”

“Too much according to Wurrell, badly written too, she said. She thinks I don’t get laid enough.”

Kalon grinned. “This proves witches can be wrong too.”

He took a sip of wine and nodded approvingly. “Lots of dreamers again on my way home, laughed my ass off a couple of times, sometimes you can’t believe what you’re seeing. Those idiots are scared to death of anything that looks the least bit strange.”

I had seen a shaman that morning, on the corner of the street. When he saw me, he smiled and clapped his hands, as if he were applauding. When I wanted to ask him something, he clearly woke up, because he disappeared.

We were eating with the included sticks. You didn’t even have to be handy to use them. The Chinese witch fixed them, so these things automatically held anything you took off your plate.

“It was one of those dreamers that offered me a job,” I said.

“Really...?” Kalon chuckled. “What did he need? A dream mistress...?”

“He didn’t seem the type for it.” I thought about the figure that approached me in the park a couple of hours after the meeting with the shaman. In the given circumstances, he had acted quite normal and rational. Then he turned out not to be just anybody.

“He was some kind of scientist,” I said. “He was looking for an assistant.”

“He could see from the shape of your body that you would make a fine helper?”

“Cut it out, stupid male chauvinist!”

“Sorry, I meant it in a funny way.”

“Sure you did...” I knew it was true. Kalon was anything but a macho. Sometimes he even seemed to have more feminine characteristics than me.

He continued eating in silence, before he asked with interest: “Some kind of scientist?”

I nodded, “A physicist or something, quantum mechanics and related matter. He claimed he developed a new theory which would turn the world upside down.”

“The more your upside is down, the better.”

“Be serious for a minute, will you!”

“Sorry, go on.”

“The government gave him a grant to put his theory to practice. Now he was looking for staff members.”

“I’m starting to find it a shame that he was just a dreamer. I can already picture you in a tight and short white jacket, with your hair in a bun, and a pair of sexy glasses.” When I didn’t respond, Kalon looked up. “What was he trying to build?”

I shrugged. “He tried to explain it to me. I couldn’t understand much of it. He was talking about parallel worlds and other dimensions.”

“What?”

“He invented something that could make it possible to travel from one dimension to another.”

“Come on.”

I nodded absent-mindedly. Something was stirring in the dark wells of my mind, I couldn’t grasp it. “He called it a Portal...”