

The Imago Master by Signe Kvaskova

Translated by Žanete Vēvere - Pasqualini

Description

”The Imago Master” is a mystery-adventure novel for middle school children and young teens.

Total word count – 92 500 (Latvian version).

Kristian is a twelve-year- old boy who likes maths and photography – everything that is based on reason. However, his rational world is turned upside down when he, his little sister Tina and three of his best friends discover the existence of imagos. It turns out that certain people can use their brain power to create images and even real objects – imagos – and that one of the children is extremely talented at this. The strange thing is – they don’t know which one of them it is. It becomes vitally important to find this out, however, in order to protect whoever it is from the evil underground organization which is looking for such talented children. The children travel to Iceland, to the Imago Masters’ School, in the hope of getting help from its teachers. But, before finally discovering the truth, they go through strange and dangerous encounters with imagos, overwhelmingly disturbing tests set up by the teachers and even the betrayal of someone they had considered a friend.

Synopsis

Kristian is a twelve-year-old boy who likes maths and photography and hates anything irrational. His little sister **Tina**, on the other hand, thrives on fairy tales and fantasy. When strange things start to happen, Kristian tries hard to find a rational explanation. But there is no way he can possibly explain various weird objects appearing and disappearing in his photos and even in real life. Events take an even stranger turn when Tina’s old nanny, **Mrs Rain**, wants to have a serious talk with Kristian.

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Mrs Rain's story sounds totally unbelievable – she explains that certain people have special brain powers that can create images and even real objects – imagos – and that Tina is one of them. She also reveals that lately intense imago activity has been detected near their apartment. The only explanation is that one of the children – Kristian, Tina or one of Kristian's three friends who come over frequently – must be responsible for it. It is not clear which one of the children it is but it seems unlikely that it is Tina. They must find out who it is in order to protect them from the Berry Gang – an underground organization of evil imago masters, actively seeking out such talented children.

Tina, Kristian and his three friends – **Mart, Linda** and **Mik** – are invited to the Imago Masters' premises where Mrs Rain tries to test them for imago activity and discover which of them is the special kid. Nothing works however, and soon she announces that all of them have to travel to Iceland – to the Imago Masters' School in Reykjavik - to seek help there.

They fly to Iceland in a small private jet and are greeted by **Gardar Edmundson**, principal of the Imago Masters' School. However, there is a sudden change in plans as the teacher who was supposed to take care of the children has had to leave on an urgent business trip. Mrs Rain decides to make good use of their unexpected free time and takes the children on a trip through Iceland. **Andris** – a Latvian boy, one of the best students in the school – acts as their guide.

The children are excited to see the exotic sights of Iceland but during their trip strange and scary things begin to happen. It becomes clear that one of them is creating strong and dangerous imagos – but none of the children owns up to it. After a couple of days, Mrs Rain receives a message that the children's teacher is back and they hastily return to Reykjavik.

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A serious task awaits the children at school. One by one, they are invited into a special room where they are incited to produce an imago. When Kristian walks into the room, he enters complete darkness and senses that Tina is in danger – in fact, she is calling out to her brother for help. But Kristian, rational as always, convinces himself that Mrs Rain would never allow such a thing to happen and that it must merely be a hallucination. At that very moment, the darkness disappears and he finds himself standing alone in an empty room.

The situation gets even more intense when, next morning, they discover that Tina has disappeared. Andris has received a letter, supposedly from the Berry Gang – telling the children that, if they want to see Tina again, they must go to a certain spot in the mountains. Kristian is devastated and Andris drives them up into the mountains. Another nasty surprise awaits the children when they discover that Andris has plotted against them, deciding to use Tina to buy his way into the Berry Gang which, in his opinion, is a much more powerful organization. However, after kidnapping Tina the previous night he has realized that Tina is not the one – and now he wants to test the other children to find out which one of them is that super-talented imago master.

Seeing Tina in real danger, Kristian is suddenly aware of something happening deep inside him. He then masterfully creates powerful imagos and enters an imagoduel with Andris, overpowering him and freeing Tina. When Gardar Edmundson and Mrs Rain finally arrive, it is all already over. Later, Gardar explains the mystery of Kristian's hidden imago abilities – apparently the boy's hatred for everything irrational had been so strong that his extraordinary gift had remained hidden, even from himself.

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Despite Kristian being confused and exhausted, wanting to put an end to everything to do with imagos, Gardar Edmundson still manages to convince him to join the Imago Masters. As the children travel back home, Kristian knows that very soon he will return to this strange, newly-discovered world of imagos to help protect other children from people like Andris and the Berry Gang.

EXTRACT

Chapter 1

Key hunters, Mart and Spook

When Kristian was still small, he was quite confused about the keys.

Firstly, he couldn't understand how people got them. Once, when he was three years old, he found a key on the pavement. It was brand new and shiny and seemed to be waiting for somebody to pick it up. Since then Kristian thought that people found them.

The only thing he didn't understand was – how do they find *the right* key. After all, there were so many different doors...

“Where did you get that?” his mother asked, having found the shiny, yellow key in the boy's jeans pocket.

“On the street,” Kristian replied.

He tried to put the key into the lock, but couldn't. Because it was not the right key. Little Kristian decided that when he grew up, he would definitely master this amazing skill of finding the

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right key – the skill, obviously shared by all grown-ups. How else could they manage to unlock their doors...

One day Dad lost his key and spent three whole hours outside the door, waiting for Mum and Kristian to come home.

“What are you going to do now?” Kristian asked, worried. “Without the key?”

“Well, I guess I’ll have to look for another one,” Dad replied.

Kristian was intrigued. He would have gladly taken part in looking for the new key, but he sensed that this was very serious adult stuff and that he would not be invited. He was right.

But already the next day Dad had his new key.

Kristian was amazed. Not even a day had passed – and Dad had already found his new key! Kristian hoped that he would grow up to become as good a key hunter as his dad obviously was!

When his kindergarten teacher asked the children what they wanted to be when they grew up, Kristian always said he would become a “the key hunter”.

”What?” the teacher wondered. “Do you mean the locksmith?”

“I mean *the key hunter!*” Kristian repeated. “I’ll be the best damn key hunter in the world!”

The teacher frowned, but that was more to do with the word “damn” than “the key hunter”. And in a moment or two she had completely forgotten that one of the children would become “the best damn key hunter”, whatever that was supposed to mean...

Shortly before Kristian’s seventh birthday the most important event of his life so far took place – he discovered the secret of key hunting and here is how it happened.

“You are a big boy now,” his mother told Kristian. It sounded a bit like a threat to the boy, but she continued. “Soon you’ll start going to school and Dad and I think that you are ready for your own key.”

Kristian gasped. It couldn't be happening! Would he really go for his first key hunt?! The boy didn't feel ready for this at all, he didn't have a clue where to start. But he bravely kept quiet and decided to do his best.

As they were out in the street, Kristian dropped his head and started searching for the key, but his mother took him by the hand and headed across the street. Kristian realized that his mother wanted to make his first hunt easier for him and tried to memorize the way. Possibly, all the future keys would be found in the same place. And he was right about that at least ...

Having walked for a while, they reached a building with a sign over the door. There was a picture of a key on the sign and Kristian felt confused. Was it really as simple as that? Do people only need to find a house with a picture of a key over the door? But having stepped inside Kristian understood that it was not actually that simple. There were hundreds and hundreds of keys everywhere – big and small, yellow, grey and black – and some of them so big and strange that Kristian thought they were probably meant for the cage of some wild and dangerous animal.

Now he was finally going to see how his mother hunted for the key. He was quite convinced already that she would not make him search on his own.

Suddenly a man appeared behind the counter and asked if he could be of any help.

“Yes please, we need a key,” said his mother, taking her own key out of her handbag. “Just like this one.”

The man took the key and put it so close to his eyes that it was as if a lifelong key hunt had impacted his vision.

“All right, no problem,” he said. “It'll be ready in half an hour.”

“Thanks,” his mother said and, having taken Kristian by the hand, walked out of the shop.

Kristian was confused again. Indeed, he was so baffled that for a minute or so he couldn't even speak. The whole "key hunting" theory he had cherished for four long years was now on the brink of destruction...

"What's going to happen with that key?" he finally whispered.

"What do you mean?" his mother asked. "Well, the locksmith will take an uncut key – you know, without any grooves – and then cut exactly the same grooves onto it as our key has. Then it will fit our lock exactly – and you will have your own key!"

Kristian groaned, but his mother mistook it for a cry of joy.

Kristian, however, felt more humiliated and stupid than he had felt in his whole life. At that moment, he decided that he would never dream of becoming "the key hunter" ever again.

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Over the following year, Kristian set his own personal record for uncovering the secret of both mysterious and not so mysterious things. He discovered what hides beneath Santa Claus' white beard and how flies end up inside amber... Every day he made dozens of new discoveries, driving his parents and teachers completely mad in the process.

"Oh, come on, Kris, that's enough!" Dad had once exclaimed. He still had not forgotten how Kristian had pulled his white beard off the previous Christmas Eve – to the great amusement of everybody else. "How should I know why fish do not freeze to death during winter?"

"Maybe they grow fur?" Kristian guessed, thoughtfully.

"Absolutely not!" Dad cried out. "Look, why don't you ask your teacher?"

And that's what happened the whole time. They kept sending him from one adult to another, but still the answer could often not be found. In those instances, Kristian put it down in his "yet to be discovered" journal, which quickly grew thicker and thicker.

Nobody had ever called Kristian "unreasonable", and rightly so. He was more reasonable than any of the adults around him.

Maybe that was why Kristian's parents decided to put an end to this reasoning madness and Kristian got a baby sister – Tina.

As soon as Kristian saw his little sister, he realized that Tina would be going full speed ahead to become "a key hunter".

Tina turned every little thing into a mysterious, strange occurrence, living in her own fantasy world more than in real life. When Tina was three years old – the same age as Kristian when he had found the key on the street – she dug up all the molehills in the garden of their house in the country. Later, it turned out that the little girl had been looking for Thumbelina, who the horrid mole was keeping locked up in his dark underground caves.

That same summer she pricked a whole basket of apples with a knitting needle. When her parents asked her why she had done it, Tina explained, quite seriously, "I was making houses for the worms!". She had thought that it was a tough job for the worms to gnaw through the apples – and that they would be delighted to find their homes already waiting for them.

One Christmas Eve, Tina got so angry with Kristian and Dad that she didn't speak to them again for the whole week. The thing was that Kristian had decided to cure his little sister, once and for all, of her stupid belief in Santa Claus. When the boy had pulled Santa Claus' beard off and revealed to everybody the face of a surprised and befuddled Dad, the room fell into total silence.

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Then Tina began to scream and, despite Mum and Dad's desperate attempts to calm her down, she screamed for thirty minutes non-stop.

She was angry with both Kristian and Dad because they had fooled her and she demanded to know exactly what they had done with the real Santa Claus.

In the end they went out to one of the city's shopping centres where, to their great relief, they found another Santa Claus. That convinced Tina that nothing bad had happened to him and that he was not lying tied up somewhere...

In February, Tina's stupidity reached new limits.

Kristian had already noticed some time before that Tina was constantly fidgeting at the door when someone was locking or unlocking it. But he couldn't possibly have imagined that she would nurture the same obsession with keys as he had. When Tina finally asked him, "How do they know which one is the right key?," Kristian just stared at her blankly for a while and then went off without saying a word. He had lost all hope of ever getting any reason into his little sister's head.

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Our story began when Kristian was twelve and Tina just five years old. While Kristian was at school and Mum and Dad at work, Tina was looked after by her nanny.

Her name was Rain Folkman and she was sixty five years old, however, from Kristian and Tina's perspective, she looked at least a hundred. She was quite a stately and robust woman, with shoulders as wide as Kristian's sports teacher's. Her face was wide and square and her eyes as hard and grey as steel. She had one more thing in common with Kristian's sports teacher – a tiny grey moustache on her upper lip, which she would pluck at constantly.

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Rain Folkman smoked a pipe. Kristian's sports teacher didn't smoke anything. Rain Folkman's long, grey hair, as stiff as wires, was always twisted into a low knot at the back of her head. Kristian suspected that it was actually a wig – it seemed too unnatural for real hair. But Rain Folkman was unnatural in almost everything ...

“There is no one left like her in the world anymore,” Kristian declared when she was not around. “People like her have all died out, just like the dinosaurs.”

Once Kristian asked his mother where they had found her.

“Oh, she is some distant relative of your Dad's,” his mother had replied lightly.

“A relative?!”

“Yes, I think so...”

Kristian found it hard to believe that this large, stout woman could be a relative of his, however distant... But it was not only her looks that made Kristian have his doubts.

Rain Folkman was strange.

Before coming into the house, she used to stand outside the door and smoke her pipe. Once you accept the idea that an old woman like her can smoke a pipe, that would be quite alright. But after she had finished smoking, she didn't go straight in but remained standing on the street, staring blankly ahead. Kristian had seen her like that a couple of times and it looked so weird that he got goose bumps every time. At times like that he even got a feeling that Rain Folkman was some evil witch, sent to bewitch their family, but the boy was too experienced in “key hunting” to take anything like that seriously.

But little Tina loved her nanny.

“I know what little girls need,” Rain Folkman said gloomily and kept bringing home books about Aladdin, Peter Pan and Pippi Longstocking. Tina was delighted whereas Kristian was distraught.

From the moment Kristian realized that his little sister was a born “key hunter” he had felt a giant sense of responsibility for her. The boy thought that, after having had the story of Aladdin read to her, Tina would sit on the carpet and try to fly around the city, choosing their sixth floor window as the launching pad. And after the book about Karlson, she would do the same thing with a fan on her back...

Of course, nothing like that ever happened. Tina kept listening to the books her nanny read to her and both – the carpet and the fan – remained in their places.

But Kristian was not convinced. He kept watching Tina’s nanny and she, just as suspiciously, wondered about Kristian’s strange behaviour. Mum and Dad didn’t notice any of this – and maybe it was better that way.

When Kristian wasn’t spying on Rain Folkman, he was at school.

His school was just a couple of blocks down the street, in the very centre of the city. Every morning, a quarter of an hour before classes began, Kristian met his best friend and classmate, Mart, at the school gate. The two boys had been inseparable since their first day of school five years before when their teacher was first getting to know the children.

“Mart?” the teacher had said back then.

Mart had got up. His sandy coloured hair had been quite long and wavy at the time and it was no surprise that the teacher mistook him for a girl...

“So you are Martha. Is your surname Simson or Simpson?” the teacher had asked.

That's when Kristian had jumped to his feet and exclaimed: "He is Mart! Mart! As in March, the month before April and after February. Can't you see?"

And that is how their teacher got acquainted with both of them at the same time – Mart – as in the month before April and after February – and Kristian who announced: "And I am Kris. I am a boy too." There was no space for misunderstandings as far as Kristian was concerned.

The two boys became best friends from that moment on. Many people couldn't understand how two such different boys could be such good friends. Actually, Kristian and Mart didn't know either, but they couldn't care less.

Kristian had light brown, always neatly-cut hair and blue eyes. He always moved as if his every step had been planned beforehand – and most probably that was exactly so. His relentless curiosity in everything was balanced by a quiet self-confidence, but the general impression was that he simply looked confused. He was quite skinny but strong, as some of the boys at school had already found out.

Once, when the family had been on holiday at the beach, Kristian and his dad had built a beautiful sandcastle. It was the biggest sandcastle on the whole beach and definitely the most beautiful too – people who walked by would stop and admire it. The next morning, Kristian couldn't wait to get to the beach again – but as soon as he got there he saw that the only thing left of the castle was a trampled-down pile of sand. Kristian had bit his lip and hadn't said anything, but by then he was already old enough to come to his own conclusions.

"It's not enough for something to be beautiful," he gloomily told Mart afterwards. "It has to be strong too. Otherwise there will always be somebody who prefers a pile of sand to a beautiful castle. It's not enough to look cute," he repeated, glaring judgmentally at his friend. Mart glared back at him, a little reproachfully.

Mart was indeed what could be called “cute”. He was also taller than his friend. After the misunderstanding on the first day of school, Mart had cut his long, curly hair really short – but it still grew back quite quickly and shortly afterwards Mart could be seen walking around with long, curly locks again. Then, angry at his own hair for such treachery, the boy cut it short again – only to then forget about it for another six months. He had very strange eyes – depending on the light they could look either blue or grey, besides which his eyelashes were so long that Mart really did worry that they made him look like a girl.

“Maybe the teacher was right,” he sometimes said, pretending to be sad. “Maybe I really do look more like girl.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Kristian would then reply. “You don’t look like a girl at all. I don’t know any girls with such long eyelashes!”

This was just a passing comment, but somehow it didn’t make Mart feel any better.

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The day Spook came to join their family started just like any other day.

It was September and, when school finished, Kristian went running on the school athletics track while Mart sat under a nearby tree, reading a book.

Kristian loved running and did it almost every day. Only in winter did he switch to skiing, but he admitted that he still liked running more. He loved to feel the hard ground beneath his feet while running round the track. Kristian always ran at a steady pace and, as soon as he felt like slowing down, he usually quit entirely.

Now, short of breath and sweaty, he dropped down beside his friend and took a breath. Mart put the book he had been reading aside and glanced at his friend with amazement.

“Kris, why do you have to run like that?” he asked. “You run as if somebody was chasing you.”

“Not at all,” Kristian gasped between breaths. “I run just as I should be running.”

For a while he just sat there, panting, then continued.

“When you run, you don’t have to think about anything. You just get into your own rhythm and your feet, and nothing else.”

“I thought you liked to think,” Mart said.

He was right and Kristian knew that. In fact, sometimes Kristian sensed that he was thinking too much. In moments such as those he knew that it was time for a run.

The trees that divided the school running track from the street were casting long shadows – and judging from the traffic on the street it was rush hour. The boys headed home as well.

“You could come over tonight,” Kristian said. “Dad has something in mind.”

“Like what?”

“Not a clue. He just asked everybody to be home early tonight,” Kristian said.

As the boys went into the apartment, Kristian saw his dad, who – without a word – ran through the hall holding a blue plastic bowl. A strange sound came from the living room.

“What’s going on?!” Kristian exclaimed and, having left his astonished friend in the hall, ran after his father. Little Tina, a wide smile on her face, was happily jumping around the room but his mother was sitting on the couch. She wore an odd expression and Kristian couldn’t work out if she was happy or sad.

“What’s going on?” the boy asked once again, but nobody replied.

A subdued bark came from below the table and Kristian, eyes wide with disbelief, glanced underneath.

There was a dog sitting under the table. Well, almost a dog – since this was just a puppy. Quite a grown-up puppy, but a puppy nevertheless.

“Doggy, doggy, doggy!” Tina cried happily, jumping up and down.

The puppy gave another unconvincing bark and jumped out from where he had been hiding.

Mart entered the room.

The dog ran to greet him and bit into the boy’s trainer. Little Tina was screaming with delight. Mart freed his shoe from the puppy’s teeth and looked at Kristian.

“I didn’t know you were going to buy a dog,” he said.

“I didn’t either,” said Kristian.

“Nobody did,” his mother echoed, gloomily.

“Well, I didn’t actually *buy* it,” Dad said, as if trying to justify himself. “Just someone at work happened to have puppies to give away ... and... well... there was no choice...”

“There was no choice...” Mum repeated, mechanically

“Yes, exactly!” Dad agreed enthusiastically, happy that she’d understood. “The rest of the puppies had all found homes and this was the only one left. They waited for quite some time, that’s why he is so big already.”

The more Kristian looked at the puppy, the more clear it became why this puppy had been left behind. He had the look of a true “key hunter” about him, no doubt about it. At that very moment the dog started barking and jumping round the table leg until he bumped his head against it and then sat down, looking daft.

Kristian looked at Mart and moved his fingers as if unlocking a door. That was their secret “key hunter” gesture. If somebody was stupid enough to be awarded the title, Kristian “turned the key”. Mart laughed and nodded.

Everybody kept staring at the dog. Tina with delight, mother gloomily, father in confusion, but Kristian and Mart looked amused.

The dog, even though he was quite well-grown, still had a rounded, puppy-like body. He had a rotund little face, plump bottom and long, if rather podgy legs. His fur was white but there was a big, elongated black spot on his left side. A similar black spot covered his left eye – so the dog looked a little bit like a one-eyed pirate. His left ear was black and hung down, whilst the other was permanently pricked up. His fluffy tail also stayed up in the air for as long as the dog remembered about it. However, if his attention was caught by something else, his tail would slowly lower until the dog remembered it and shot it high up in the air again.

“If we don’t keep him, he’ll have to go to the vet’s,” dad said, still gazing at the dog with a bemused look on his face – as if the dog had suddenly materialized out of thin air.

“What does he have to do at the vet’s?” Tina wanted to know.

Mum and Dad exchanged looks and Mum finally gave in.

“Nothing,” she said. “He is not going there at all.”

The dog ran up to her and bent his front paws in the weirdest way imaginable. It looked as if he had bowed. Kristian and Mart exchanged looks and cringed. This trick was not really fitting for somebody who had just been crowned as a “key hunter”... But Tina began to applaud.

“Hey, look!” she cried. “That’s one spooky dog!”

And so the white puppy with the black ear, even though very much alive, became Spook.

It soon became clear that Spook considered himself to be Tina’s dog. He only ever played with her, only came when she called and peed only in her slippers. Maybe, being a puppy, he had instinctively chosen the youngest family member, but Kristian thought differently.

“That’s no surprise at all,” he said to Mart later when they were both in Kristian’s room. “Now they can double their efforts with their key hunting!”

They also talked about Tina’s nanny. It was not long after that Rain Folman had joined their family, Kristian had secretly named her “Mrs Rain” – then some time later – “Rainwoman”. Of course, neither his Mum nor Dad knew anything about it.

“She really is just like the rain,” Kristian complained to his friend. “Sometimes she appears out of the blue, but sometimes she can drizzle for hours and hours... Brrr...” the boy shivered. “Sometimes I really do need an umbrella when she is in the room...”

Mart was laughing.

“But it looks as if Tina likes her, doesn’t it?”

“However strange that is, I guess she does,” Kristian admitted unwillingly. “Rainwoman puts all that fairy tale nonsense in Tina’s head – as if her head was not full of nonsense already... Believe me, with a nanny like that, something is going to happen round here one day!”

Mart didn’t take his friend’s predictions seriously but later it turned out that Kristian had been right. Something was indeed going to happen, even though not exactly the way Kristian had imagined. But for now everything seemed fine. Kristian and Mart kept going to school and Kristian kept running round and round the track after classes, while Mart sat nearby, reading. When it got too cold to wait for his friend outside, Mart went to a café across the street. The lady behind the counter really liked the cute boy with his curly hair and dark eyelashes. Who she didn’t like, instead, was the other boy who inevitably dashed into the café at some point, breathing hard and stinking of sweat.

Kristian and Mart had noticed that the same thing usually happened with most of the people they knew. Those who liked Mart, didn’t like Kristian – and the other way around.

“That one’s yours, Kris,” Mart sometimes whispered and Kristian gave a “thumbs up” sign, thus showing his approval. But sometimes they were more a fan of Mart’s, and Kristian indicated his good opinion of them by “turning the key”.

Their literature teacher was one of those who liked Mart. Of course, he didn’t show it openly that he didn’t like Kristian, but it was obvious that Mart was his all-time favourite. And nobody was surprised at that. Mart could sit for hours without making a sound if he had found an interesting book to read – and he had read all the books on the reading list before they were even given them.

Sometimes, while Kristian was circling the track at his steady pace, Mart was sitting at school, discussing a recently read book with their literature teacher.

“You are crazy with all those books,” Kristian told his friend. “How come you don’t get tired of them?”

“How could I get tired of them?” Mart didn’t understand. “Each one is completely different!”

“One day,” Kristian predicted gloomily, “you’ll become a darned writer.”

But Mart just shook his head.

“No, I don’t want to write,” he said. “I just want to read.”

Kristian, on the other hand, only read when he had to. He had to read those poems they were supposed to learn by heart, but when the teacher asked what the poem had been about, he got confused and angry. Kristian thought that the poem was not *about* anything.

He was quite fond of mathematics, though. He loved numbers and everything related to figures. On his way to school he had to pass a bank and he would amuse himself by memorizing the exchange rate of the US dollar. He loved to tease Mart with it too.

“Well, Mart,” he often asked, “how much would you give for a dollar today?”

“You know,” Mart snapped back, “go and run five hundred times around the track!”

Kristian just laughed.

Chapter 2

In the side street between Kristian’s and Mart’s homes stood a small, white church. A big, grey stone leaned, bird-like, against its even, light-coloured side. No one knew where it had come from, but there it stood.

Behind the stone was Kristian and Mart’s secret mailbox. The boys had realized they needed one to agree on things they couldn’t agree about on the phone. Later, the slips of paper hidden in a glass jar so the rain or snow wouldn’t ruin them, waiting behind the grey stone to be picked up, became a usual thing. The boys thought that it was much more exciting than to talk on the phone or send messages.

On that Friday afternoon Mart found a message behind the stone that began with words, “Urgent! Be at my place no later than half past six!”

It sounded as if something extraordinary had happened. Mart, eyebrows raised, continued to read: “Today we are celebrating my mum’s birthday, and you know my dad...K.”

This only meant one thing – if Mart planned on getting there later than half past six he would be wise to have a hearty dinner beforehand. Because even though Kristian’s father was quite nice he had a very unusual attitude towards food. He didn’t eat his food, he *gobbled* it. And yet he didn’t get fat - quite the opposite in fact. He was so skinny that he stood bending forwards as if he

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might break in the middle any minute. Possibly, if he didn't eat the way he did, that might really happen one day.

“If Daddy doesn't eat, he will disappear”, Tina used to say.

Dad's eating manners were a question of survival. Nobody wanted Dad to disappear therefore everybody let him eat as he pleased.

Kristian's parents' birthday and name-day celebrations were entirely family events. Kristian's mother's sister, Anna, and her two daughters, Kristian's father's brother Robert and for some while now Tina's nanny as well were the people who always took part in those events. Both Kristian's cousins were only a bit older than Tina, so Kristian was allowed to invite Mart so that he wouldn't get bored during the celebrations.

That Friday Mart had only had soup for lunch so he made sure he got to Kristian's place for ten past six. Just to be on the safe side.

When Mart, clutching a bunch of red dahlias in his hand, walked into Kristian's sitting room, his eyes radiated happiness because he realised that he had got there at just the right moment – the moment the guests weren't there yet but the table was already laid. Kristian's dad was circling shyly around the table, suspiciously eying the food as if it was about to escape.

“Hey, Mart!” he exclaimed when he saw his friend. “Mum, come and say hello to the first guest!”

Kristian's mum hurried out of the kitchen and, having accepted the crumpled bunch of flowers from Mart, kissed him on the cheek. Mart, highly embarrassed, muttered his birthday wishes.

“Thank you, dear! Thank you!” answered Kristian's mum. “Would you like a bite to eat? It looks as if the rest of the guests are going to be a bit late.”

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She took a plate and loaded it with a mountain of pasta salad. Kristian's dad stopped circling the table and, with a hungry look, stared as Mart started eating. Then, as if unable to bear such a sight, he turned on his heel and left the room.

His place in the room was taken by Spook. Just like the first time, the dog greeted Mart by slouching down close to the boy's feet and biting his trainer.

"Spook!" there was an exclamation from the next room and Tina appeared in the doorway. "Hi, Mart!" she said.

"Hi, hi!" replied Mart.

Spook looked at Tina but didn't let go of trainer.

"Spook peed in my slippers again," Tina said, glaring at the dog and frowning.

"Puppies do that sometimes," replied Mart, "it is inevitable if you have a Spook at home."

"He never pees in dad's slippers. Nor mum's, nor Kris's either," Tina complained. "Only mine!"

"He likes your slippers best," said Mart.

"I also like my slippers best," said Tina. "But I don't *pee* in them."

"Neither do I," Mark agreed. "Only spooks do".

The doorbell rang. Bzzz....

And then another bzzz, and another, and another. Four bzzzs altogether - one for mum, one for dad, one for Kristian and one for Tina. Aunt Anna failed to remember there were five of them now. But her daughters didn't.

"Spook!" they screamed in unison as soon as the door was opened.

Aunt Anna and her two daughters hadn't even got through the door before Kristian was already wishing they would leave.

Spook, having peeked out through the opening of the kitchen door, silently and unobtrusively slid back in again. Both girls dashed into the room and Kristian quietly closed the kitchen door, not wanting to give away Spook's hiding place.

When everybody was already seated round the table, Uncle Robert and Rainwoman arrived. Both at the same time. Kristian wondered if they had both stood outside smoking before coming in. Rainwoman most definitely had ... Uncle Robert was red in the face and out of breath, as if he had run all the way here. He hugged Mum, wishing her a very happy birthday. His wish came true in the blink of an eye, as Mum really did look happy as soon as she'd escaped from his uncomfortably tight hug.

"Thirty five years!" Uncle Robert exclaimed merrily, and Mum almost visibly winced. "Just the right time to celebrate! Seems such an age ago when I was thirty-five, too!" He sighed loudly.

"How old is he now, then?" Mart whispered to Kristian.

"Thirty eight," Kristian whispered back, smirking.

"So, haven't had time to gobble everything up yet?!" Uncle Robert exclaimed cheerily, glancing at the table.

Mother cringed. She had never got used to her brother-in-law's habit of saying whatever went through his head. But for once he didn't talk for long and, sitting down at the corner of the table, joined the other guests eating.

Spook came into the room, pushing his bowl with his nose. That was just one of his many peculiarities – he was totally incapable of eating alone. Nobody had ever seen Spook do so. When he wanted to eat he would follow, whining, whoever was at home, begging for some company. Then, whether they wanted to or not, they had to have a sandwich or whatever else, just so the dog could finally have something to eat.

This time too, he looked towards the table to make sure that everybody really *was* eating and only then he tucked into his food.

But something put him off.

He froze for a second then looked at the other diners. Quick as a flash he worked out what had disturbed him. Dad was the one to blame, as he was devouring in the loudest, most aggressive way possible all the pasta salad.

It was then that Spook did something Kristian would never have expected from a *key hunter*.

Spook grabbed his bowl in his teeth and knocked it on the floor three times. Astounded, everyone turned to look at the dog, Dad was the only one to carry on eating. But Spook continued to look straight at Dad. Then Mum elbowed Dad and nodded towards the dog. The very moment Dad turned his attention to Spook, the dog began to munch. He munched loudly, his mouth full of dog biscuits, spraying his food out in all directions. The dog didn't take his eyes off Dad for a second, so nobody was in any doubt who he was imitating.

Spook left quite an impression on everyone, and Dad was so astonished that later on, whilst still at the table, he even started avoiding looking at the dog.

“That dog is really spooky,” said Uncle Robert and shivered.

After a brief moment of embarrassment everybody started giggling but Spook's performance was already over and he had gone back to looking like an ordinary, daft puppy.

The party could continue.

Tina was the first to leave the table and run off to her room, and shortly after that Kristian and Mart made their getaway, too. Both Kristian's cousins had assailed Spook and therefore they didn't even make a fuss when the boys quietly snuck off.

“Ho hum,” Kristian gave a sigh of relief after closing the door to his room. “You can consider yourself lucky that you have no cousins.”

“And Tina as well,” he complained. “She scatters her toys around the whole place. Only this morning I discovered doll’s shoes she’d left on my desk. *Doll’s shoes*, can you picture it?! Imagine if Mik came to see me and saw doll’s shoes on my desk?!” Kristian shuddered in horror.

Mik was Kristian’s classmate and they only had one thing in common - running. But Mik used to come round to Kristian’s place for an entirely different reason – unlike Kristian, Mik didn’t understand the first thing about maths...

Somebody started pulling energetically at the door handle and Tina breezed into the room, dragging a big sheet of drawing paper along the floor behind her. Kristian glanced grumpily at his sister. It wasn’t the done thing in their home to burst into someone else’s room without warning. But that didn’t bother Tina. Nor Spook. They both came and went as they pleased.

“What do you want?” Kristian asked, sharply.

Tina ran to the table but, not finding what she was looking for there, looked reproachfully at her brother.

“Elfie,” she said with an angry frown.

“What?” Kristian had no idea what she meant.

“Elfie,” Tina said crossly. “She forgot her boots on your table. Where did you put them?”

Kristian, bewildered, stared at his sister before it dawned on him that she had to be talking about her doll’s shoes. He tore open the bottom drawer and, after a seconds’ search, pulled out the doll’s boots and gave them to Tina. Tina stuffed them straight in her cardigan pocket.

“Why did you hide them?” she asked, peevishly. “Elfie’s feet are freezing.”

“Tell her not to leave her shoes on my desk then,” said Kristian. “Why do you come to play in my room?”

“I don’t come,” snapped Tina. “It was Elfie. ”

“Yes, of course...”

“What’s that drawing of?” Mart suddenly asked, taking the drawing paper from Tina. There was a black smudge on it.

Tina snatched the sheet straight back out of his hands and hid it behind her back. But Mart wasn’t giving up.

“Come on, let me have a look,” he begged. “Just for a second.”

Tina waved the sheet of paper under his nose then hid it behind her back again.

“I didn’t see anything,” complained Mart. “You snatched it away too soon.”

Kristian chuckled but Tina was apparently unsure whether to show her drawing to Mart or not. Finally, glancing anxiously towards the door and gesturing to Mark to bend closer, she whispered:

“Aunt Rain mustn’t find out! It’s a secret, do you understand?”

Mark nodded seriously but Kristian just kept sniggering.

“This is Udul!” Scowling furiously, Tina pushed her drawing into Mart’s face. Kristian was about to burst out laughing, but Mart asked seriously :

“Tinny, what is Udul?”

Because he couldn’t make out Udul or anything else for that matter – all he could see was a black, smudgy sblodge. Tina moved the sheet a bit further away from Mart’s eyes, and the smeary black splotch finally took on some kind of form. It looked like a small, podgy, shaggy animal of some sort.

“Udul,” said Tina, deadly serious.

Kristian couldn't keep back his laughter a second longer. Tina looked at him reproachfully.

“There is nothing funny about it,” she pointed out. “Udul is terrible.”

“I don't doubt it,” agreed Kristian. “Tell us about him!”

Tina glanced once more at the door and, as it was closed, she started her story.

“Udul is a shadow-world animal,” she whispered, breathlessly.

“What?” exclaimed Kristian and Mart in unison, both thinking that this promised to be some story.

“The animal of extension,” repeated Tina. “A fright that comes from underground. Evil as the devil, a terribly horrible extension fright.”

Kristian made approving noises. Apparently this was going to be one of the more interesting of Tina's stories.

“Udul sits underground and crawls up onto the earth using moles passages,” said Tina, her face distorted into an expression of sheer terror. “On his way up, he gobbles down all the moles but when he crawls out he is even hungrier than ever.”

“Just like Dad,” added Kristian, and Tina gave him such a withering look that it was immediately clear how out of place his remark had been.

“Because he is so hungry, he is angry with the whole world,” Tina continued. “When he crawls up onto the earth, he sits down for a while. He is angry and tugs at his whiskers. All the animals know that Udul has come up onto the earth and they run away.”

“Do they make it in time?”

“Make what in time?” Tina was at a loss.

“To run away.”

“Not all of them,” Tina said. “Having sat for a while on earth in daylight, Udul growls and goes hunting. He wolfs down everyone he meets on his way, but he still hasn’t had enough. Most of the time, he eats up stray cats and dogs.”

“Oh, is that so...Why?” wondered Mart.

“Why so? Because wild animals are cleverer. They can smell the fear and run away. But cats and dogs think that Udul is just another cat or dog. Don’t you see?”

“Yes.”

“Does he gobble up humans, too?” asked Kristian.

Tina didn’t answer.

“I asked if he gobbles up humans too,” repeated Kristian. Tina’s eyes widened and, in a voice filled with horror, she whispered:

“Only small children!”

“ Ah, is that so...” said Kristian, in a matter-of-fact kind of way. “Then Mart and I, we have nothing to be scared of. But you should watch out!” he told Tina.

“I am not scared at all,” announced Tina.

“Why not?” wondered Kristian. This story about Udul sounded exactly like a horror story for little children.

“Because Udul only crawls up in the forest,” said Tina.

“There are no mole tunnels in the city,” explained Mart.

“Exactly,” agreed Tina giving Mart an approving look.

Kristian frowned, seeing that the other two were both on the same wavelength.

When Tina, along with Udul and Elfie’s boots, had gone away, Kristian said thoughtfully:

“I don’t understand why Rainwoman tells Tina such frightening stories. Then she spends ages dwelling on them and comes up with goodness knows what – you heard yourself.”

“I don’t think Rainwoman told her that,” said Mart.

“Who else would have done?”

“Tina said it was a secret. If Rainwoman had told her the story about Udul then she wouldn’t have been afraid to show us her drawing, would she?”

“I can’t think of anyone else who might have told her such a tale,” replied Kristian. “Maybe she just made it up herself.”

“I think she probably did,” agreed Mart and, with that, the topic of Udul was over.

For the time being.

With increasing frequency, Kristian found undeniable evidence that Tina had been playing in his room without his permission. And every time, Tina denied it, saying that it was not her fault.

“I haven’t set foot in your room. It was Elfie,” Tina said, all worked up.

And Fayia, and Guk, and Kika and Elfie again...

As Mik was still coming to do his maths homework at Kristian’s place, Kristian had made it a habit to hide all the tiny boots, sticks, wands and bags before anyone else saw them. Only when any outsiders had left their home did Kristian go to Tina and scold her for breaking into his room.

“It wasn’t me,” Tina would say repeatedly, and Kristian, muttering angrily, would realise that he might as well just go back to his room.

One day when he returned from school Kristian saw a big puddle in the middle of his room. At first, he thought that Spook was to be blamed, but the puddle seemed too big.

Kristian lowered himself, groaning, to the puddle and smelled it...It didn't smell of anything. To tell the truth, it just looked like ordinary water.

"Tina!" Kristian whooped.

After the third yell the door opened and a playful face appeared.

"Why are you screeching like that?" Tina asked.

"Come here!" Kristian said, angrily.

Tina came in and stopped at the puddle. Having stuck her finger in it, she then licked it thoughtfully.

"Water," Tina said and Kristian cringed as he watched his sister.

"You shouldn't put everything in your mouth," he said.

"But how can I find out what it is then?"

"I think you know quite well what it is," Kristian said crossly.

"And how am I supposed to know?" snapped Tina.

"I doubt Rainwoman was doing the watering in my room," said Kristian. "You've got to stop it, once and for all. You are not to enter my room without my permission, I forbid it!"

"I haven't been to your room!" Tina insisted. "How many times do I have to tell you that!"

"So who has been here then? Maybe Elfie organized water battles here?" Kristian commented, sarcastically.

Tina had fallen into thought.

"No, not Elfie," she said finally, quite seriously. "They must be the water spirits...They usually leave splashes behind ... But why in your room?"

"Yes, really...why? You know, I've had enough!" Kristian snapped, really annoyed. "Go on, get lost, get out of my sight!"

Tina, offended, looked at her furious brother and left the room. But Kristian, grunting, started to mop the puddle, deciding that after another outburst like this he would put a padlock on his door. Then Tina would have to go looking for the key.

For a while afterwards, Kristian got a bit of peace. He assumed that their last bust-up had finally had the desired effect on his sister, and he soon forgot all about Elfie's boots as well as the puddle.

Meanwhile, autumn had well and truly arrived. The trees turned yellow and red and finally started to scatter leaves, like reminders of the bygone summer. Spook became softer and fluffier until he resembled a walking pillow of sheep's fleece.

"Does that dog think that we are going to put him outside for the winter?" laughed Mum, looking in amazement at the fleecy ball of fluff. But Spook must plainly have had his own doggy considerations, and so continued taking the growth of his fur quite seriously.

One Saturday morning that was more like summer than any they had seen in a long while, Dad loaded the whole family into the car and they headed off for the countryside. On the outskirts of the city they got stuck in a long traffic jam of cars whose occupants, like them, were full of good intentions for leaving the city. White, round clouds floated in the bright blue sky and it crossed Kristian's mind that if Spook was let out of the car window, he would quite likely shoot straight up into the air and turn into a cloud.

"Where are we going?" asked Tina.

"To do autumn chores," replied dad.

"What kind of autumn chores?"

"We'll be raking leaves until our hands are covered in blisters," Kristian grunted.

In reality, he didn't have anything against raking leaves. He liked the smell of the garden in autumn, he liked the tang of smoke as it mixed delicately with all the other autumnal forest and countryside smells. He was grunting out of principle.

When Dad turned off the main road they clattered through a scrubby forest of fir trees until these thinned out and it became more barren and then, they were there.

"Hah!" exclaimed Tina and, along with Spook, the two of them were first out of the car. Chasing each other, they dashed across the green lawn towards the house. In the middle of the lawn there was a great oak, the biggest offender when it came to the plentiful carpet of leaves.

It never smelled like it did here in the city. Especially in autumn or in spring when everything was changing. Mainly because in the city there was nothing that could change, Kristian concluded to himself when he'd got out of the car. Apart from Spook's coat, of course ... but then that didn't belong to the city but rather exclusively to Spook.

Lost in thought, Kristian didn't look where he was going and suddenly cried out in pain as his foot twisted in a hole in the ground.

"Agh! What's that?" he yelled, having almost fallen flat on the ground.

"The moles," his Dad said gravely, coming up behind him. "They've dug up almost as far as the house, the little rascals. Well, nothing to be done! We aren't going to battle it out with them now, are we? Besides, the winter is almost here."

Moist mounds of dark earth were to be seen everywhere, as if somebody had been throwing soil around. Some were quite fresh, others a bit more greyish as if they had been dug several weeks ago.

"Kris, get the rake and start raking!" urged Dad. "I'll join you in a moment."

Kristian took the shed keys from his dad and went to pick up the rake. The shed stood behind the house and all household goods, both essential and non, were stored there. As the non-essential stuff always outnumbered the essential, and it had a nasty habit of constantly increasing, the shed's contents were always growing. They were always talking of cleaning it out, but no-one was brave enough to actually do it.

Kristian liked the shed. On rainy summer days he and Mart used to sit there and listen to the rain rattling on the roof. Besides, it was the only place where Tina didn't dare look for them since the little girl was actually afraid of the shed.

Kristian unlocked the slightly rusty padlock and, having taken it off, opened the shed doors. Inside it was damp and dark. The shed didn't have any windows but light streamed in through the half-open door and the gaps between the wall slats. Along both walls, long boards were piled up. They had once been intended as building material for some project or another, but they had never been used. They made a good seat in summer. Kristian pulled at one board, but now, in autumn, it felt cold and damp.

At the back the shed was full to the ceiling with all kinds of junk. Closer to the door there were several rows of firewood and a couple of buckets of pinecones. All the tools were propped up at both sides of the door so that they could be reached easily. Kristian took all three rakes and left the semi darkness of the shed for the broad daylight.

“Kris, step back!” shrieked a high voice and Kristian shrunk back.

Tina bolted passed him and Spook followed, dashing in her wake and barking in excitement. They ran up the hill to the side of the shed and darted into the forest.

Kristian followed them with his eyes for a while and then headed towards the house.

Having propped two rakes against the wall of the house, Kristian took the third one and made for the furthest end of the lawn. There seemed to be fewer leaves there, probably the oak's impressive foliage didn't stretch quite that far.

When he had been working for a while, Mum and Dad came out and joined him. He listened in on their conversation with half an ear. They spoke about the weather, of the previous summer, and their voices were relaxed and carefree, in keeping with a lazy Saturday. But then Dad mentioned something about Rainwoman and Kristian started to pay more attention.

"Next week and exactly for a week," Dad said.

"Are you serious?" exclaimed Mum. And it seemed to Kristian as if she was worried about something. "And what are we supposed to do? We'll have to look for a new nanny urgently, I can't take any days off now."

"Nothing we can do." His father shrugged his shoulders. "She has to go to her country house, something has happened to her sister. She must have fallen ill or something..."

"I didn't even know she had a sister," Mum said.

"Neither did I. But obviously she has."

"What's wrong?" Kristian asked. "Rainwoman...Isn't aunt Rain going to be with us next week?"

"So it seems," his father confirmed. "I hope it's nothing serious and she'll be back in a week."

"And who is going to take her place?" Kristian wanted to know.

"We'll have to figure it out," his dad said, without much conviction.

For a while, all three raked the leaves in silence and in no time the lawn was clear.

“We’ll release autumn up into the air in a moment,” said Dad cheerfully, glancing at the big pile of red-yellow leaves.

“How are you going to release autumn up into the air?” wondered Tina, who had just come running over and was now pushing at the crunchy leaves with her toe.

“Like this,” laughed Dad. “The leaves will turn into smoke, then they’ll sail up into the air and tell the clouds that they can start sprinkling snow.”

“Will they really?” Tina couldn’t help wondering. “But I left my boots at home...”

Mum and Dad laughed, but Kristian just grinned.

“Don’t worry, it is not going to snow today,” Dad comforted his daughter. “The clouds haven’t made any snow yet, so your boots can stay in the wardrobe for another couple of weeks at least.”

“Really? ... Well, that’s alright then,” Tina was glad. “But Spook and I have been in the forest!”

“And what did you see there?” asked Mum.

“Oh, nothing special,” Tina replied. “Only Spook ran through some funny brambles ...”

Everybody looked at the dog. He really did look as if he had run through some *funny* brambles. His white, fluffy coat was full of knots and was interwoven with some sort of tiny twigs, or a kind of thistle. Mum, having seen him, crouched down and started to pull it out of his fur.

Dad set fire to the heap of leaves and flames shot up into the air, making the non-existent clouds immediately start producing snow.

Then Dad brought some firewood from the shed and threw some logs onto the smoking fire. Mum went indoors to put the tea on, whilst Dad set about putting some sausages on to skewers.

“Oh!” Tina cried out, suddenly, rummaging in her jacket pockets and looking around her. “Spook’s collar!”

“What?” asked Kristian, absentmindedly, pushing some half burnt logs back onto the fire with a stick.

“I’ve lost Spook’s collar,” said Tina sulkily, and her face contorted as if she was about to cry. “We were running somewhere, I’d put the collar into my pocket, and now it’s gone ...”

“Come on,” said Kristian. “Don’t start crying. Where could it have fallen out?” “I don’t know...” whined Tina. “Somewhere in the forest...”

“All right, wait here, I’ll go and look for it,” said Kristian and headed off in the same direction in which he had previously seen Tina and the dog running. The forest started right behind the shed and it was quite overgrown. Dad was always about to clear it but it was the same old story as the one about unnecessary things – the job just kept being forgotten. And on those rare occasions when Dad did remember, there was always something more important to do. And so the forest behind the shed had started to look more like a jungle than woodland.

“No wonder Spook ran into brambles,” thought Kristian, hacking his way through the undergrowth, looking for Spook’s collar.

Something dark attracted his attention. A short distance from a largish mole-hill was something on the ground.

“Aha!” Kristian said and went closer, quite sure that he had found what he was looking for. But it wasn’t Spook’s collar.

On the moss among a few blueberry bushes a tiny mole was lying on the ground. Kristian nudged the mole gently with his toe, but it didn’t move. It was obviously dead. Frightened, Kristian

shrank back, but then decided to study the dead animal closer. He had never seen a real mole before.

Holding his breath, the boy bent closer and scrutinized the tiny, black coat. It seemed strangely flattened. Like a deflated balloon. Kristian prodded it once more with his toe, turning it upside down. And then he finally realised why it looked so strange. It really was just a coat. For a moment or two Kristian continued to stare at it in astonishment and then, frowning, headed back to the family. He had completely forgotten about Spook's collar.

Meanwhile, the logs had turned to embers and sausages were sizzling over them, releasing their wonderful smell over the whole garden. Seeing her brother's return, Tina dashed to meet him.

“Did you find it?” she shouted.

“What?” Kristian was baffled. “Ah ... No, but never mind. We'll buy a new collar.”

Tina looked at her brother suspiciously.

“What's the matter?” she asked. “Why are you acting so strange?”

“Me? I'm not being strange.”

“Yes, you are. It looks like you've seen something really weird.”

Kristian raised his eyebrows. Really. Tina wasn't that far from the truth. But he didn't have the slightest wish to tell Tina what he had just seen.

Later, when they were eating sausages, Kristian sat down near Dad and asked quietly:

“Some animals shed their skins, don't they?”

Dad looked at him in astonishment:

“Why are you asking? Yes, snakes tend to shed their skins...and lizards can shed their tails...

What made you think of that?”

“In the forest behind the shed there is a mole’s skin, a mole’s coat ... you see, do you understand?”

“What?”

“Mole,” Kristian said. “Only there is no mole inside. There’s just the skin.”

Dad looked at his son as if he had lost his mind.

“Now you’re talking nonsense. Moles certainly don’t shed their skins!”

Kristian nodded thoughtfully.

“I thought so as well, but in that case where did that skin come from? And just beside a mole-hill?”

Dad was still staring at his son, dumbfounded. Finally he said:

“All right, I’ll go and have a look. Where was it?”

“Right behind the shed,” Kristian said. “Where the small fir trees start. And see if you can find Spook’s collar, too, Tina’s lost it,” he shouted to his dad’s receding back.

He was back in no time and Kristian asked impatiently:

“So? What do you think?”

“I didn’t find anything there. Neither mole-hills nor skin. Nor Spook’s collar.”

“How could you not notice it?!” exclaimed Kristian. “The mole-hill was as clear as can be. It was much bigger than those in the garden.”

But Dad continued to shake his head.

“There wasn’t anything there. However I am not going for another look. Goodness, I suppose I’ll have to clear that bit of forest next summer, you can’t even walk through it. As to the mole ... well, I’m sure it was nothing unusual, it must just have been because of some fox.”

Kristian shook his head in disbelief, but he had no intention of going back into the undergrowth. Tina had already forgotten about the lost collar and was playing madly with Spook in front of the house.

Meanwhile Mum and Dad were discussing who might be able to look after Tina while aunt Rain was away. For now the only real option seemed Edward – the son of one of dad’s workmates who studied chemistry at night but was free during the day.

“Do you think he’s up to looking after children?” Mum sounded doubtful.

“Well, I guess if he’s up to studying chemistry, he must be up to looking after a child,” Dad replied.

“It’s not the same thing!” Mum was still not convinced.

“If I’m not mistaken, he’s already done it once,” Dad commented thoughtfully.

“And how did it go?” Mum asked anxiously.

“I don’t have a clue,” Dad confessed. “I guess it was just once. Haven’t heard of him looking after that child another time.”

Mum was clearly not happy about it.

“But how come? What happened to the child?”

“He started kindergarten.”

Mum decided that if there were any other options open to them, it wouldn’t be Edward looking after Tina. As it turned out later, there were no other options.

“Eh, look at Spook!” they heard Tina suddenly cry out.

Everybody looked in the direction where Tina and Spook were playing in front of the house.

The dog was behaving strangely. Just then he was rubbing his head on the ground so hard that you’d think he was about to rip his ear off his head. When he had rubbed his black ear in the

grass long enough, he started rubbing the other – the white one. A moment later he stretched out flat on the ground and started rolling from one side to the other.

After rolling about for a while, he jumped up onto his paws and started sniffing the ground. Then he ran forwards a bit, sniffed the ground again and, after first stretching himself out on the ground, started rolling back and forth like before.

Everybody watched the dog, aghast.

“What is he doing?” asked Tina. “Is his side itching?”

“Maybe he’s got fleas,” Kristian guessed, giggling.

“Maybe he has finally understood that we’re not going to throw him out of the house in winter and he wants to get rid of his extra fur,” laughed Mum.

“Not really,” said Dad. “He’s camouflaging himself.”

“What?” Tina didn’t understand. “What’s he doing?”

“I think some big animal has crossed this patch of garden, a wolf maybe, and now Spook wants to take on his smell so that the animal won’t be able to smell him, so to speak.”

“Now you’re exaggerating,” Mum laughed. “Where did you get such an idea?”

“I am completely serious,” Dad said. “Wouldn’t you do the same if you didn’t want somebody to detect your real smell?”

Kristian frowned.

“If Mum didn’t want somebody to smell her true smell she would definitely not roll in the grass. She would simply put on some perfume. That would set any wolves running for miles.”

Mum felt embarrassed.

“Well... I don’t use that much perfume.”

“Hah!” said Kristian. “That’s what *you* think.”

Meanwhile Spook, obviously having decided that he had at last absorbed enough of the wolf's smell, stopped rolling about on the ground. He bounded cheerfully over to Tina and kept jumping around her.

“You silly thing,” laughed Tina. “We’re about to go back to the city. And there will be no wolves around there – you’ve done all that rolling for nothing!”

“Don’t say that,” Kristian reproved, with a serious face. “On our way home we might be attacked by a pack of wolves and then Spook will be the only one to get out alive.”

Now Tina looked really scared and Mum told Kristian not to talk such rubbish in front of his little sister.

“Don’t worry!” Kristian replied. “After all her animals of shadowworld a wolf is nothing to be scared of.” And he headed back towards the house.

Mum and Dad looked at each other, at a loss for words, but Tina glared angrily at her brother as he walked away because he had given her secret away.

On Monday morning, when all the family were sitting round the kitchen table having breakfast, the doorbell rang.

“Thank goodness, he’s here!” exclaimed Mum and raced to open the door.

Edward came into the kitchen and Kristian, Dad and Tina all studied him with curiosity. Edward was a skinny guy, his hair quite long, black and dishevelled and a bewildered expression on his face. He was wearing a white shirt tucked carelessly into his jeans, and in general he looked as if he didn’t know where he was. Having looked at the family sitting at the table, Edward nervously pushed up his black-framed glasses and said shyly:

“Good morning! I’m Edward.”

“Good morning, Edward!” Dad replied. “Thank you for helping us out. Tina, come and say “hi” to Edward!” he urged his daughter.

Tina eyed the dazed guy suspiciously as he continued shuffling about in the doorway.

“I’m Tina,” she said. “Are you my nanny?”

Edward blushed almost imperceptibly and nodded. Mum’s anxious face emerged behind his shoulder. As Edward stood immobile in the doorway, Mum couldn’t get passed him. After waiting in vain for him to move she cleared her throat loudly, and at that very instant Edward jumped aside, hitting the chair that stood by the wall.

Kristian chuckled and Edward blushed again. His father had finished his breakfast and got up from the table as Mum started giving Edward his instructions.

“Lunch is in the fridge ... you just have to heat it up ... Here’s juice, here’s tea ... Here I’ve written both my and my husband’s work telephone numbers. So call if anything happens.” And Mum gave Edward a slip of paper that he pushed into his trouser pocket. Kristian had the impression that in ten minutes he would have forgotten where it was.

“Oh, yes... and this is where we keep the dog food,” Mum remembered, and pulled open the cupboard door.

Edward was so taken aback that it was clear that he hadn’t yet seen Spook. Kristian laughed – Edward was now definitely trying to work out if Mum had meant that the dog food was for him and Tina.

“Yes” Tina exclaimed. “Have you met the Spook of the house yet?”

Edward recoiled. He obviously thought it was most unfair that he was only now being told that the house was spooked. He had opened his mouth ready to protest when Spook himself bounded, barking, into the kitchen.

“Here he comes!” Tina exclaimed excitedly, jumping up from the table and running to the dog. But Spook wanted to make his acquaintance with the stranger first. He stopped barking and, with his head crooked to one side, approached the young newcomer.

Edward, his body tense, stared down at the dog. The dog was looking up to him, apparently equally apprehensive.

Then he barked and wagged his tail a couple of times.

Edward let out a sigh of relief. Their acquaintance was made.

“Yes, as to the dog food ...” Mum added. “Spook will be eating with you. That is, I mean, at the same time. He never has lunch alone.”

Leaving Edward completely and utterly baffled by this strange piece of information, Mum decided that everything needing clarification had indeed been clarified and headed out to the hall where Dad was waiting for her.

Kristian glanced at his watch and realised he needed to get going too, otherwise he was going to be late for school. But he still took the time to warn Edward first.

“Oh yes, by the way,” he started, and Edward looked nervously at him. Waving towards Tina he continued: “Keep a good eye on her! She has a nasty habit of getting into my room and playing funny games there. And make sure that she doesn’t flood the house.”

Having terrified Edward completely with his parting shot, Kristian jumped up from the table and left for school.

When Kristian finally dragged open the school door, Mart was already waiting for him.

“Where have you been?” he moaned, looking at the watch. “The bell’s going to go any minute...”

That very moment the bell rang and both boys sprinted along the corridor towards the stairs.

“Edward came this morning,” Kristian, still racing along, managed to get out. But Mart still didn’t get him.

“Edward who?”

“Well, Tina’s new nanny....while Rainwoman is away...”

They had run to the second floor and now, standing at the door to their class, they looked at each other, their faces grave.

“...hired till the first of next month. It means...” Their literature teacher stopped talking the moment the classroom door opened slowly and Kristian and Mart, both embarrassed, entered the classroom. Kristian, who had run all the way to school, was bright red in the face and panting. In the silence that filled the classroom upon their entrance, the boy thought his panting could probably be heard out on the street.

Someone giggled.

“Quickly, to your places!” ordered the teacher.

Kristian and Mart didn’t need to be told a second time and darted to their desks.

“So getting back to what I was saying,” the teacher continued, still glaring angrily at the latecomers, “you have two weeks before you have to hand in your work. There isn’t much time left, but it should be plenty to get it all done.”

“What’s he talking about?” Kristian whispered quite loudly to the girl at the next desk.

“Shhh!” the teacher hushed before the girl had time to open her mouth to answer. “Kindly refrain from disturbing the class any more than you have done already.”

Somebody giggled and the teacher continued.

“The event I was just talking about is the photography competition. You all know that every year the school organizes a photography competition. This year is no exception. You are to submit photos on the following themes – “The City”, “My friends and I”, “Autumn” and “Family”. One picture per theme, four pictures altogether. No more, no less.”

Having made his announcement, the teacher paused and then said,

“That is all, I am not going to repeat it. If anybody wants more information, go and check the information board. And now let’s start the class.”

But Kristian wasn’t in the least inclined to start the class. He was highly intrigued. Because there was only one thing in the world that he loved more than running and maths, and that was photography.

Kristian was of the opinion that if literature could be seen as pure key searching, photography was the complete opposite. Mart didn’t take his point of view seriously, but Kristian wasn’t going to change his mind on the matter.

“Photography is as real as you and me,” he repeated several times.

When Mart mentioned that photographers are often viewed as artists, Kristian disagreed most strongly with him.

“Bosh!” he exclaimed. “Nonsense! Photography is not art. Life is!”

The discussion stopped there.

Kristian spent the entire lesson *not listening* to the teacher. When the bell for break time rang, he had filled two pages full of doodles and decided what his pictures on the themes of “The City” and “My friends and I” were going to look like.

“What rubbish topics we’ve got this year!” Kristian said during the break. “What kind of topics are “Autumn” and “Family”? What can you photograph for those?”

“What’s so hard about that?” wondered Mart. “Just line up the whole family on the sofa – and you’ve got your picture!”

Kristian, astounded, looked at his friend.

“Are you mad? I’m not taking a picture like that, no way! That’s one to stick in the family album...You can’t even hope of coming first with a photo like that. By the way, did he mention what prizes are going to be awarded this year?”

“No. At least, not in front of us. But it should be up on the board.”

Quite a big crowd had gathered in front of the information boards. Kristian quickly squeezed through the throng and saw a big, yellow poster.

“Photography competition...Four themes, four pictures...So, so...” Kristian murmured, studying the poster. “A-ha, here it is...the main prize – the new digital Sony camera...DSC-12X 100 II...Wow!” Kristian sighed. “That is something!”

“What is it?” asked Mart, pushing his way through to join Kristian.

“The new digital Sony...” Kristian repeated dreamily, staring at the poster as if under a spell. “Super definition, great processor, super sensor... Exactly what I’ve been after for ages. I’ve got to have it.”

“Me too,” someone standing close to them teased, and Kristian jumped.

It was a small, sandy-haired girl with a boyish haircut. She was looking at Kristian with a challenging air.

“Ha!” said Kristian, since nothing else came to mind.

“You can say *ha* as much as you like,” the girl said, “but you’re not going to win that camera.”

Mart let out a half laugh, but Kristian got angry.

“You know what,” he said to the girl. “Let’s not start fighting over the prizes until we have something to show for ourselves.”

“There won’t be any contest,” the girl said in a self-assured manner, tossing her boyish head. “You’ll see soon enough for yourself. “ And off she went.°

“Ha!” Kristian said again. “Isn’t she a smart aleck!”

“Who was that?” Mart asked.

“Linda,” Kristian said and giggled. “Her dad is a photographer, and she thinks that the prize and all will just fall into her hands. She must be joking.”

“How do you know her?” Mart wondered.

“She’s in the year below us and in the photography club,” Kristian said. “But never mind...” he pouted. “We’ll soon see in two weeks’ time which of us is the best.”

Kristian was so carried away by the thought of the upcoming competition that he couldn’t concentrate on his schoolwork. Most of all, he was worried about the family theme, and paid no attention to Mart’s useless suggestions on how to deal with the topic. So when, for the sixth time, Kristian categorically refused to consider his idea of taking a straightforward photo of his family, Mart waved his hands in the air and said he didn’t have any other suggestions.

“As if you’ve had many ideas before!” Kristian frowned.

When lessons were over and they were walking home, Kristian searched around him for something that would fit the bill for the “Autumn” category.

“Oh, almost anything would be ok for that one!” exclaimed Mart, who had grown rather tired of Kristian’s speeches about the competition.

“No way!” replied Kristian. “There is never a time when just anything would be ok! Not to mention when we’re talking about a competition where you’ve got the chance of winning a brand new digital *Sony*,“ he added, lowering his voice.

“Why can’t you take a photo of those trees?” Mart asked, pointing to a row of linden trees along the school fence. “Or this heap of leaves?”

“Because those trees would simply look too ordinary in the photo, and that heap of leaves would just look dirty,” Kristian said and grunted. “Ah, if only I already had a camera like that! Then I could take a picture of a muddy puddle and still get first prize!

“Ha!” Mart said.

They continued on their way.

“And what are you thinking of doing for the “Friends” category?” Mart asked suddenly, eyeing Kristian suspiciously. “I hope you’re not going to ask me to pose for you?”

Kristian burst out laughing, and Mart let out a sigh of relief.

“Don’t even think about it!” Kristian, still laughing, said. “Even if some nice girl fancies you, don’t imagine I’m going to exhibit your portrait for general viewing.”

Mark, blushing, murmured something.

“I’m not planning on taking a photo of either you or my family,” Kristian announced.

“What then?” Mart asked.

“I’ll let you know,” Kristian replied mysteriously, but then grew sulky remembering that he still didn’t have any precise idea himself. On the side of the pavement there was a bench. Kristian sat down and started mulling some ideas over.

“What are you thinking about?” Mart asked eventually, getting bored.

Kristian only growled in response. Mart patiently waited for Kristian to start speaking, watching as the wind chased three yellow-brown leaves along the pavement.

“Linda is the least of my worries. She has taken a few decent pictures, but not many. I doubt she has suddenly turned into a photographic genius...”

“What are you worried about then?”

“Alex,” Kristian said *wryly*. He seemed to think that was enough to explain everything, and was very surprised that Mart didn’t know what he was talking about.

“What?” Kristian exclaimed, shocked. “You don’t know who Alex is?”

Mart shrugged his shoulders. What did he care about this Alex!

“Alex is the best photographer in the school!” Kristian shouted so loudly that he made a woman passing by jump out of her skin. “Do you know that picture hanging in the ground floor corridor? The one of the waterfall?”

“Yes, I do,” replied Mart.

“That one was taken by Alex,” announced Kristian, and the admiration could be heard in his voice. “He shouldn’t even be allowed to enter the competition, he’s as good as it gets. Besides, I guess his camera is very similar to the prize, if not even better.”

“Then perhaps he’s not even going to enter,” Mart commented.

“No, he is,” Kristian said, convinced. “He likes to remind everyone that he is the very best.”

Mart shrugged again. He thought that Kristian’s pictures were pretty good, besides which he hadn’t seen any of Alex’s pictures except the one of the waterfall.

“It will be fine,” Mart said, but Kristian still looked quite grumpy.

“Now, I’ve got to go home and check how Edward is doing,” Kristian said at last, and got up. “This morning I thought he was going to take Spook’s lunch for his own and eat the lot, bowl and all.”

“Give me a call me if you can’t handle the new nanny,” Mart offered and winked.

“I will do!” laughed Kristian and they went their separate ways.

When Kristian reached the door to their flat he had a bad feeling that something was wrong. The boy glanced at the door but didn’t notice anything unusual. The door was shut, and the door knob in its place. The entrance hall was in silence and everything seemed quiet and calm in the flat. But something was worrying Kristian. Getting his key out, he unlocked the door.

In the hall he stopped dead with his mouth wide open.

Chaos reigned all around. Loads of clothes were draped over hangers and shoes were scattered right across the hall, and strangest of all, the carpet had been rolled up and laid across the hall.

The first thought that sprung to Kristian’s mind was that thieves had been at work ...

“Tina!” Kristian screamed, and dashed inside.

In the living room he froze again because there, in the middle of all the mayhem, Tina was sitting peacefully, playing with Spook. Spook, whining with pleasure, ran to greet Kristian. Tina waved absentmindedly to her brother and rolled the rubber ball to the dog. Having made sure that his sister was alright, Kristian sighed with relief and had a closer look at the mess.

It looked as if a very careless and impatient thief had been busy in there for a couple of hours at least. Edward was nowhere in sight. It dawned on Kristian that he might be the one to blame for all this mess.

“Tina,” Kristian said.

His sister finally looked in his direction.

“Tina, where’s Edward?”

“Edward?” Tina repeated, rather distractedly. “Perhaps he is in the kitchen. I don’t really know...”

Kristian found it odd that his sister shouldn’t know where the person who was meant to be looking after her was.

The boy went to the kitchen, carefully climbing over the objects scattered all over the floor, from overturned chairs and upended flowerpots. Having cautiously opened the kitchen door, he looked into the room.

A hunched shape was sitting at the table. It took a moment for Kristian to realise that it was Edward.

He went into the kitchen. The hunched shape jumped and let out a silent cry. Seeing that it was Kristian, Edward gave a huge sigh of relief and nervously jumped to his feet.

“Thank goodness someone has come home at last!” he exclaimed, staring at Kristian as if he were his saviour.

“What’s going on here?” Kristian asked, frowning.

Edward flinched as if he was in pain and waved his hand about.

“Ah, you’d better not ask ... you don’t want to know.” He collapsed again onto the table and put his head in his hands.

“But I would still like to know!” Kristian insisted. “What’s this terrible mess? What’s been going on here?”

“Nothing! Nothing at all!” exclaimed Edward and jumped to his feet. “That is I haven’t done anything. I should have taken your warnings seriously, but me, fool that I am, thought what harm could a little girl do...” He started pacing back and forth around the kitchen, shaking his head in disbelief.

Kristian started feeling unease. There seemed to be something wrong with Edward.

“What warnings do you mean?” Kristian asked. He hadn’t understood a word Edward had said. “What warnings? What little girl?”

“Your sister,” whispered Edward and glanced fearfully at the door. “You did tell me to watch out, but I didn’t listen to you and let her out of my sight...And then the horror started...”

“Wait, wait,” Kristian said. “I don’t understand. This wasn’t all done by Tina?!” he laughed. “Tell me all about it, from the beginning.”

Edward dashed to the table and collapsed onto a chair so heavily that it groaned beneath him.

“It all started like this. After you all left, Tina went to her room because, she said, she wanted to draw. I took my book and sat down in the living room. For a while everything was peaceful, but then there was a bang in Tina’s room. I went to have a look, to see what it was all about, but everything seemed fine. Tina said a book had fallen from the shelf.”

Kristian was looking, wide-eyed, at Edward. He was starting to think that Edward was to be blamed for the whole thing. Meanwhile, Edward continued his story.

“Then Tina said that she was tired of drawing and wanted to watch TV. So I turned it on for her and she sat down to watch some cartoons. I went into the kitchen to start studying for my exam.

“And?” Kristian asked impatiently. He thought that Edward was just trying to gain time.

“And then it all started,” Edward said, and fell silent.

“What started?” Kristian grew even more impatient.

“All of it,” replied Edward, solemnly. “Everything just started crashing and smashing all over the place, but when I went to have a look what was going on, Tina was sitting quietly watching a programme on TV.”

“So?” Kristian urged him to go on. “Then none of this is her doing?”

“Then whose is it?” exclaimed Edward.

“A *good question*,” Kristian thought, but didn’t say anything.

“What has Tina got to say about all of this?” he asked.

“The same as you. That none of it is her fault.”

“Whose is it then?” it was Kristian’s turn to ask then.

“Aha!” Edward exclaimed victoriously. “That’s what I’d like to know! But as there wasn’t anyone else about except Tina, me and the dog, it shouldn’t be too difficult to find out.”

“*Of course not*,” Kristian thought to himself, crossly. “*It must definitely have been you!*”

“And it was not me,” Edward said, as if he had read Kristian’s thoughts. “And it wasn’t the dog either. He’s too small.”

“Even if he was fully grown, Spook would hardly be capable of rolling up the carpet and throwing it across the hall,” said Kristian, sarcastically.

Kristian spent the rest of the afternoon with Edward, till his parents came home, tidying up. Tina kept getting in their way and dispensing completely useless advice until Kristian had had enough and sent her to her room.

“Stay there and don’t come out until we’ve finished,” he ordered.

“And how will I know when you’ve finished?” Tina asked.

“I’ll call you,” Kristian snapped.

“All right,” Tina submitted unwillingly and frowned. “And try to finish by half past five when my film starts.”

“If somebody hadn’t trashed the flat, then that somebody wouldn’t have to be stuck in her room,” Edward said meaningfully, staring at Tina.

“Exactly,” Tina agreed and, having called Spook, disappeared.

“Whoever is to blame, it’s not Tina, or Spook,” Kristian stated. “They couldn’t have reached any of those pictures that were pulled down, even if they stood on a chair.”

The boy kept glancing nervously at his watch, longing for his mum and dad to get home. Because, even if Edward looked entirely normal and, pouting, was cleaning up soil from around the flower pots, there was still a chance that he might be overcome by a fit of craziness again at any time.

When Mum got home at half past five, Kristian and Edward had finished tidying up, so Mum was spared the horrible surprise which had greeted Kristian when he’d got home. Soon Dad was home too and Edward surprised everyone by announcing that he wouldn’t be available for child minding services from then on.

“It’s all too much for me,” he stated tragically, confusing the parents. “I have enough with my own problems, I can’t take stress like this every day.”

Mum and Dad looked at each other, at a loss for words, but Edward didn’t bother to explain in any more detail. Kristian, on the other hand, didn’t want to give his opinion on the day’s events in front of Edward. Edward hurriedly bid everyone good bye and raced away, leaving Mum and Dad at a complete loss.

When Edward had gone, Kristian finally told his parents what had happened in their absence and expressed his version of events. It was obvious that they were both horrified that they had

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Translated by Žanete Vēvere - Pasqualini

entrusted their daughter to such an unstable person, but then Tina came into the room and threw everyone's ideas into complete disarray.

"Poor Edward!" she said, making herself comfortable in front of the TV to watch her movie. "He was so scared. I tried to calm him down, but he was so frightened that he hid in the kitchen and put his hands over his ears so as not to hear all that banging."

Kristian and his parents couldn't make head or tail of it.

Dad went over to the TV and turned the volume down.

"Hey, turn it back up!" Tina shouted.

But Dad answered firmly, "First, we want to know what's been going on. Can you tell us what happened here today?"

"Absolute mayhem," Tina replied happily, still staring at the TV.

"So I gather," Dad said wryly. "And who was to blame for this mayhem? Edward?"

"What?" Tina laughed. "I told you he hid in the kitchen and didn't come out all day."

"OK, fine. You won't be watching any more of your film today. Go to your room and do as you please. Maybe next time you'll try and behave yourself!" Dad was absolutely livid.

Tina hadn't expected such a turn of events. First she tried to justify herself, saying that it wasn't her fault, then she started crying.

"But I was just playing," she sobbed, but their father stood his ground.

Kristian wasn't sure that his dad was right. He couldn't even begin to imagine how Tina, small as she was, could have created such a terrible mess. He concluded that later, when Tina had calmed down a bit, he would try and get to the bottom of it.

That evening a storm got up.

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Gale-force winds smashed against the walls with such force that Kristian, sitting on his bed with his feet wrapped up in the covers, felt a cold blast of air every so often.

“The wind is actually coming through the walls,” thought Kristian, dragging his eyes away from the atlas and looking out of the window. The curtains were moving slightly as if somebody was hiding behind them, undecided as whether to come into the room or stay hiding there. The heavy curtains were not drawn, and a full white moon glowed in at the window. Clouds were blowing over it at an amazing speed and shadows were playing out a spooky pantomime on the opposite wall.

Kristian shivered and turned his attention back to the atlas. They had a test on the European capitals the following day and he still had a third of Europe to get through ...

“Zagreb, Ljubljana, Zagreb, Ljubljana...” Kristian kept repeating under his breath, before realising that he no longer remembered which capital belonged to which country. “Agh!” he exclaimed crossly and, having thrown the atlas on the bed, kicked himself free from the covers.

The room was cold and Kristian, shivering, went to check if it was just as cold in his sister’s room.

It wasn’t cold at all in Tina’s room. Obviously the wind was blowing from the same direction as always, straight in at Kristian’s bedroom window. Tina seemed to be asleep already but Kristian quietly switched on the bedside light anyhow and looked at his sister’s bed.

Tina wasn’t asleep. She was lying in bed with her eyes wide open and still seemed to be holding a grudge.

Kristian sat on the bed and ruffled Tina’s blonde head, but Tina frowned and turned her back to her brother.

“There, there ...” said Kristian, soothingly. “Don’t be like that ...”

Tina murmured something incomprehensible that let him know that she had every intention of carrying on being like that for some time to come.

“Tell me what really happened today,” Kristian said. “I won’t be angry.”

“Mmmm...” snarled Tina.

“It wasn’t Spook, was it?” Kristian asked.

“Of course, not!” Tina replied, outraged, and finally turned to her brother. “How could it have been Spook?! He can’t fly, can he?!”

“Sure,” Kristian agreed. “And as you don’t fly either, it must have been Edward.”

“Maybe...” Tina muttered, unwillingly.

“Maybe what?” Kristian asked. “So it was Edward after all?”

“*Maybe* he is tall enough to pull pictures off the wall,” Tina said slowly. “But anyhow, it wasn’t him.”

“Not again!” Kristian exclaimed. He started to be annoyed by his sister’s roundabout way of answering, and besides, he still had half of Europe waiting for him ... “Look, stop mucking around!” he said furiously. “Just tell me who did it, will you!?”

Tina frowned again and squinted at her fuming brother.

“How am I supposed to know? I wasn’t standing watching who did it, was I?”

That made Kristian angrier still.

“Alright then!” he shouted and jumped to his feet. “Be as stubborn as you like and don’t tell me. It’s all quite obvious to me, anyway!” And Kristian dashed out of the room, switching off the night light on his way.

Evidently their parents had called it an early night because the hall was in complete darkness and there was not even the tiniest light coming from the crack of their bedroom door. Kristian was

feeling for a light switch when, at the far end of the hall, almost behind him, something suddenly moved. Kristian froze instinctively and, only a moment later, realized that it must have been Spook.

“Hey, Spook!” called Kristian quietly, so as not to wake his parents.

Spook replied, but it wasn't from the far end of the hall. A quiet whine came from Tina's room, but now there was absolute silence at the far end of the hall.

“Mum?” Kristian cried out a bit louder, but there was no answer. He felt goose bumps all over. He continued feeling his way blindly along the wall whilst trying not to make any noise. At last he managed to find the switch and the light came on, but at the precise moment it clicked on, he heard a kind of snarl from the far end of the hall.

Kristian let out a terrified scream and his mum and dad both shot out of their bedroom.

“What's the matter? Are you all right?” Mum asked, worried.

Kristian nodded without taking his eyes off the far end of the hall from where, he was sure, the strange sounds had come.

“There was something there,” he said at last.

“Where? In that corner?” Dad asked. “A mouse, maybe?”

“No, no, it wasn't a mouse. Must have been something bigger. And it wasn't Spook, he's in Tina's room.”

Dad had a good look around the far end of the hall. He even moved the shoe rack.

“Nothing there,” he announced finally. “Still, I'd better put a mouse trap down all the same.”

“Oh no, not another mouse invasion,” Mum groaned.

“The winter's coming,” Dad explained. “It's getting cold outside and the mice are coming in.”

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“We really need to do something to make sure they don’t. Have you closed up the holes the last ones used to get in?”

“Yes, I have, but obviously these mice know other ways, too!” Dad laughed. “Good night, Kris!”

“Good night!” Kristian snapped, and went to his room.

“I blame it on all those capitals,” he thought, picking the atlas up again off the bed and pushing it into his bag. “All those Zagrebs and Ljubljanas and you start imagining goodness knows what ...”

Yanking off his sweater and jeans he climbed under the bedcovers and listened to the gusts of wind outside for a while. But thinking about all those capitals sent him to sleep in no time and he dreamt that the storm, under the cover of darkness, had entered the house and hidden at the far end of the hall, and that, the moment he switched on the hall light, the storm leapt out of its shelter with an angry grunt and went mad pulling the paintings from the walls and smashing flower pots.