



The Birth of Diego Dazzler

It was raining like it had never rained before. No one in Pickleby had ever seen anything like it. Anything that wasn't cemented, nailed or hammered to the ground, was being washed away by the water. Around noon, the large orange village letterbox floated sadly by. At one o'clock, a wooden trough shot over the village square like a runaway bobsleigh. The water in the river Fludd didn't stop rising and around teatime it knocked at the doors of the houses on the embankment. 'This really is the end,' some people said, and others started to believe it too.

For Zeb Dazzler, it was the worst day of his life. There was a baby in the round belly of his wife Anna, all set to come out on that particular day. The doctor had just called them to say he wasn't able to make it up Mt. Pickle to get to them because of the weather. Zeb knew they couldn't go down to the doctor in the valley either. Going down the narrow road would be a crazy thing to do.

Desperately, Zeb sat at the kitchen table, browsing through *The Pickle Times* without paying attention. Suddenly, he noticed an ad. Zeb never looked at the local ads because he thought they were silly. But this one he couldn't ignore.

FOR A NATURAL BIRTH OF YOUR BABY - COME TO THE SOUR TWIST ESTATE

Zeb knew who lived on the Sour Twist estate. It was Amita, the inventor. She had arrived at Mt. Pickle years ago to live there. Nobody in Pickleby knew why, as she had no friends or relatives in the village. Some folks said Amita was a witch.

Zeb didn't trust her either. He found her strange, and a bit scary too. But when his wife started to puff and moan again, Zeb knew he had no other choice.

And so it happened to be on this particular night, that Zeb Dazzler fought and defeated the heavy rain to bring his pregnant wife up to the Sour Twist Estate.

It was dark when they arrived. With a shaking hand, Zeb dropped the door knocker on the wooden gate.

An old lady opened. She had white-silver hair and ice-blue eyes. When she saw the big fat belly, her eyes popped with excitement. Without saying so much as a hello, she turned her back on them and started to mumble.

'Please... please... let this be the one.'

Zeb was now convinced that Amita was crazy. He was turning to leave, when Anna suddenly started to puff in a high tempo. Quickly, Amita turned back around to face them. Before Zeb could make any objection, the old woman took Anna by her hand. 'This

way!' she said. 'This way!'

Zeb thought they would head inside the building. But instead, Amita guided them through a large, neatly manicured lawn that sloped all the way down to the banks of the river Fludd.

Zeb squinted to look through the darkness, to see where they were going. That was when he saw it looming in the far-off gloom. A pond. Or a spring, maybe. The water was bubbling and emitting a thick fog.

Zeb followed Amita to the edge and looked into the water. That was strange – a light seemed to be emerging from the water. A beautiful, azure light.

'What's this?' he asked.

'The Spring of Dreams.'

'The Spring of Dreams?'

Amita nodded. 'The Spring of Dreams is the ideal place to give birth.'

Filled with disbelief, Zeb looked at her. 'You don't mean to say that – surely you're not expecting my wife to go in that water... and the baby, under water – no way! Absolutely out of the question!'

In a flash, Amita gripped Zeb at his wrist and looked at him very sternly.

'I don't know how to explain this... but it has to be like this. It has to be!'

'Has to be? What are you talking about?' Zeb exclaimed. 'This is

nonsense. Anna! We're leaving – right now!

But Anna had already taken off her clothes. With a deep sigh she stepped into the warm spring. 'Lovely,' she moaned.

'But – this can't be right!' Zeb said. 'And besides, you're lying here in the pouring rain!'

He hardly had finished his sentence, when Amita pulled out a little gray cube out of her pocket, set it on the bank of the spring, and pressed it. The gray matter started to blow up, becoming bigger and bigger, until it reached the size of a hot air balloon. Then it bent forward, in the direction of the water. Zeb was about to jump in the water to pull out his wife, when the now enlarged gray block started to change its form. Zeb watched as windows and a door appeared on the gray shape. It then thinned out into a sheet until it settled over the spring like a dome.

'That's better,' Amita said.

Zeb couldn't believe his eyes. 'How did you do that?' he stammered. But Amita didn't respond. Suddenly, she had a big leather suitcase in her hands from which she pulled out all kinds of things: lotions and creams, cloths, various instruments he didn't recognize, and finally a couple of miniscule diapers. After that, she stepped into the spring to help Anna.

Zeb stood there at the edge of the spring, not knowing what to do.

'Right then. I'll uhm – I'll just wait here then...'

Nobody responded. Anna was moaning and puffing with her eyes

closed, while Amita put some cool rags under her neck and made her more comfortable.

Zeb scratched his head and looked around a bit, to see if there was something else on the Sour Twist estate worth seeing.

What was that?

From the banks of the river, over the lawn, a monkey came walking towards them. A monkey in clothes. He was soaking wet. In his hand, he held a big, wooden bat.

Zeb rushed towards Anna. 'Get up! We have to run! Out of the water, let's go!'

But Anna just gave another moan and didn't move a finger.

Quicker still, the monkey approached. Zeb grabbed the closest stone he could find and stood there, ready to throw.

'Stay where you are! Not one step further!' he yelled, nervously.

'Russula,' he suddenly heard Amita say. 'You're fast.'

Russula?

Zeb took another look at the monkey.

It wasn't a monkey at all. It was only the most hairiest person he had ever laid eyes on. The hair covered his face completely, from his neck until his cheekbones. Then it made its way towards his eyes, came back together at his eyebrows and filled the rest of his forehead.

Weirder still than all the hair were his lips and his nose. They were huge. As if he had dressed up for the circus. Only – it wasn't a

circus. And the bat was not a bat, but a guitar.

Zeb couldn't keep his eyes off him. Russula looked at him, shyly lowered his gaze and turned to Amita. *'The wind and the trees have been talking to me,'* he grunted softly. *'This could be the one. It very well may be!'*

'I knew it!' Amita whispered back.

With a suspicious look, Zeb watched the inventor and her hairy friend whisper.

Talking to the trees and the wind? This could be the one?

Russula took off his jacket, stretched his fingers with a loud crack, picked up his guitar and stepped closer. With his low voice he started to sing a sweet little tune, while he plucked his guitar.

Feel the strength from your heart

Feel the miracle inside

Now the time has come

To give this baby life

Feel the strength from your heart...

Zeb gazed around, from the big hairy man with his guitar, to the dome over the spring that had appeared from a little gray cube, to Amita the inventor, and finally landing on his wife Anna, who was lying with her big fat belly in that azure water that gave off light.

‘A madhouse,’ Zeb mumbled. ‘Worse than a madhouse.’

All of a sudden, the music from Russula started to build in intensity. Anna was puffing and moaning to the rhythm... until the moaning became one big moan... and it stopped... and then...

‘Waa-waa.’

Zeb looked at his wife. Anna was sitting in the water, holding a little boy above her, like a sun in the sky.

But it was not just a baby that his wife held up high. A purple-bluish glow enveloped the child like a second skin. Little by little the glow faded, until it vanished.

At exactly the same moment, the rain stopped. Amita stepped out of the water and pressed something in the dome. Straight away the gray matter started to shrink, further and further, until there was nothing left besides the little gray cube.

Zeb looked up. The clouds had gone away. The moon in the sky was full and motionless, as if the heavy rain of that day had never existed.

With big eyes, Zeb looked to and fro between the sky and the child in the hands of his wife. Carefully, Zeb stepped into the spring and took his son into his arms.

‘A son,’ he said. ‘Diego. Diego Dazzler.’

All the while, Amita remained silent. With big eyes she stared at something, as if she had seen a ghost. Zeb followed her gaze, yet there was nothing there.

Suddenly, she moved her gaze to Zeb.

‘He is very special, do you know that?’ she said, with a catch in her voice. ‘That glow we just saw, it means...’

Amita hesitated and drew a deep breath.

‘It means he is connected to the Magic Field.’

‘The magic *what?*’ Zeb asked.

Amita didn’t explain herself further. Instead, she stepped forward and tapped Zeb’s chest with her forefinger. ‘You have a heavy task’, she warned, ominously. ‘You have to help Diego develop his powers. It’s of the greatest importance, do you hear me? That child can save us all!’

A witch, Zeb thought. You really are a witch. He solemnly swore to leave as soon as they possibly could and to never, ever, return to the Sour Twist.

The First Years on Mt. Pickle

Not many children learn to fly before they learn to walk. But Diego Dazzler did.

His father Zeb Dazzler happened to have one particular hobby: paragliding. As far as he was concerned there was only one mountain for miles around where you could jump off for the greatest glide, and that was Mt. Pickle. When it was nice weather and the wind blew from the right direction, Zeb would hike up the mountain with his parachute and his photo camera. And with a little bit of luck he could soar a whole afternoon above the mountain. If it was really good weather, he took little Diego along. Together they would glide for hours through the air, accompanied only by the sounds of the wind and the birds.

‘We flyin,’ Daddy,’ Diego would say.

‘No,’ Zeb said. ‘We’re not really flying, we’re paragliding. Para-gli-ding.’

‘sactly,’ Diego would say. ‘Lufly Flyin.’

As soon as Diego could run and climb, Zeb would take him up the mountain. During the winters, when the weather was good, they would go sleighing and skiing. Some days they would behave and

stay on the marked ski slopes. Other days they would ski in the deep powdery snow between the trees and leave tracks that nobody else had made before. Zeb knew Mt. Pickle like the back of his hand and he showed Diego all the short cuts and secret places. If the weather was too rough to go outside, they would spend hours examining Zeb's Encyclopedia of Motorized Vehicles. Diego didn't care so much about them, but he loved to listen to Zeb's enthusiastic stories about engines with countless horsepower and cars that were so exclusive, only a few people owned one. 'It's a pity, though, that they all run on Terrafos,' he always exclaimed when he clapped the book again. 'A great, great pity.'

During the summer, they would follow the river bed up the mountain. Zeb showed his son every brook, every streamlet and all the waterfalls, big and small. He took Diego to crevices, ravines and caves that nobody else could find.

During the summer, Zeb and Diego would go to the Giant Forest where his father would show him four hundred year-old beeches and oaks, with trunks as big as houses. Most of the time they wouldn't say anything and would just listen to the sounds of the forest: birds singing, the wind whispering through the leaves and the soft murmur of the trickling water from the Fludd. When they got hungry, they ate beechnuts as snacks until their fingers got cramped from peeling them. Then they would lay down on a bed of moss and leaves to nap in the shade of the giant trees.

If it was really warm, they would swim in the Fludd. A large tree with low-hanging branches stood on the riverbank. Diego called it the Swing Tree. There was a rope attached to the thickest branch of the tree, which Zeb used to swing Diego into the water until they were both tired. Afterwards, they would always climb up the tree and silently ate the fresh buns with goat cheese from Olle Mallet and sausage from Butcher Danglingbone.

One beautiful summer day, while sitting in the Swing Tree again, Diego told Zeb what he had seen that morning: a whole group of men near the cable car in the village, ready to go to down into the valley.

‘What were those people doing there?’ Diego asked.

‘They were on their way to work,’ Zeb replied in a gloomy voice. ‘To the Kragtstad Power Station.’

‘That’s strange,’ Diego said. ‘Today is Sunday.’

Zeb nodded. ‘The workers in Kragtstad don’t have weekends.’

‘That’s not nice.’

‘Not nice indeed.’

Diego thought about what Zeb had said for a minute.

‘What exactly is the Power Station in Kragtstad?’

Zeb drew a deep breath. ‘You see that large field over there, close to the sea, full of machines made of steel? It’s kind of shaped like a hot-air balloon.’

Diego looked towards the valley. Far away he vaguely saw a metallic

glow. 'Below that field, you can see the city. The city looks a bit like the basket of the balloon where the people sit.'

Diego tried and tried, but no matter how hard he tried, he only saw a vague, brownish mist, that as he stared, gradually turned blue. He knew his father could see it. His father had the best eyes in the whole village. Apparently, Diego had not inherited them. Diego did not want to admit he couldn't see it, so he merely nodded.

'That great field, let's call it the hot-air balloon, is what they call the Kragtfield,' Zeb continued. 'There is Terrafos in the ground. Those machines in the field bring the Terrafos to the surface.'

'What is Terrafos?'

'It's a green, yellowish substance. It can be hard as stone or soft like a thick soup. Slimy stuff. We call it muck, which is slang for something disgusting.'

'Muck...' Diego repeated slowly. 'Why do they bring it up?'

'They take the muck to the Power Station. That is that big steel building on the outskirts of the city. Do you see that?'

'Uh- I think so,' Diego lied.

'They make energy out of the muck in the Power Station. You know, energy to make planes fly, cars ride, lights burn, machines work...'

Zeb said, pointing at a factory in the valley.

'Cool!' Diego said.

Zeb shook his head fiercely. 'No, not cool. That muck produces a lot of filth that's put in the air. That's why there's always such a thick

dirty green-yellow smog hanging over Kragtstad. It makes people sick. It's bad for plants and animals, and especially harmful for children. It changes the weather too. Muck harms the whole country.'

'What a pity,' Diego said.

'Exactly,' Zeb replied. 'A great, great pity.'

Years went by. Diego was happy on Mt. Pickle. He had no idea that he was a special child. The only thing he knew, was that he felt things that other people clearly didn't.

Sometimes, those things were nice. Then he knew long in advance that the sun would shine on a particular day.

Sometimes, however, the things he sensed were not so nice.

'Look Daddy.' Diego said one day, when they were sitting in the Swing Tree. Zeb didn't bat an eye. He was busy being fascinated by his new watch. It was 16 minutes past two. Happy as a child, he watched as the second hand moved effortlessly over the dial, on its way to the sixty second mark.

'But Daddy, look!' Diego said, pulling his sleeve impatiently. Zeb looked up, annoyed. His son was pointing to the valley at the foot of the mountain, towards Kragtstad. The thick smoke plumes of the factories and the exhaust fumes of the cars and trucks produced the

vicious green smog that blanketed the town. Zeb hated the sight of it. Every year the fumes seemed to get thicker and thicker.

‘Do you feel that?’ Diego said. ‘Somebody is very angry.’

Zeb raised his eyebrow and glanced at Diego. ‘You mean it looks as if the town is angry.’

Diego shook his head, slowly. ‘No, I can feel it. Somebody in Kragtstad is very angry. Something terrible is about to happen.’

A tear rolled down his cheek. Zeb smiled and put his arm around his son. ‘Yes, sometimes you think you know that something is going to happen. We all have that feeling sometimes, huh? But-’

All of a sudden, a dark cloud blocked the sun. At the same time, a cold cutting wind blew around the mountain. Zeb looked at the sky and frowned.

‘Something terrible has happened,’ Diego cried. ‘Something really terrible.’

The next day, Zeb read in *The Pickle Times* that Kreolf Kragt, the old founder of the Terrafos Company KK Industries and founder of Kragtstad, had died in a mysterious accident. Tragically, he had fallen in the Fludd river and had not come up again. Krudon Kragt, his son and now the only director of KK Industries, had been the only one with his father at the time. He had run to the road to shout for help, but none came.

Suspicious tongues claimed that the son, Krudon Kragt, had pushed his own father, Kreolf, into the Fludd. And that Krudon had only cried for help so as to lead everyone to believe it had been an accident.

With Kreolf no longer alive, people were fearing for the worst. Kreolf had always been a hard worker, very stern and strict on himself and his workers, but always fair to people that didn't stand in his way. His son Krudon was exactly the opposite: he hated work and was known to be malicious and nasty, many times for no reason at all. Together with his bodyguard, Moxxo, he now stood alone at the top of KK Industries. He had become the most powerful man of the area and maybe even of the whole of Rebequin. Zeb found one paragraph in the article so strange, that he read it out loud.

'At quarter past two, Kreolf Kragt was last seen by a lady passing by on a bicycle. At exactly seventeen minutes past two, his son Krudon reached the road and called for help. Therefore, the exact moment Kreolf went missing has been fixed at sixteen minutes past two.'

Sixteen minutes past two: the exact moment Diego had pulled his sleeve in the Swing Tree.

The First Day Everything Changed

Like all other children from Pickleby, Diego went to The Glooth, the only school on Mt. Pickle. Diego had friends, but not a true best friend with whom he could share or do everything with. Diego didn't mind too much. He liked his alone time up on the mountain. A best friend wouldn't understand that, he often thought. What's more, he had his father, who never minded doing nice things with him and was more like a big child himself.

For his tenth birthday, Diego got the present he had always dreamt of: his own parachute. Zeb had sewn the family coat of arms of the Dazzlers – a sun with a large D through it – on the parachute. Anna was against the present, but Zeb told her not to worry. 'He is a sensible boy,' he said. 'He's not like me.'

All they had to wait for was the perfect gliding day. Zeb didn't want to take any risks, so he waited patiently until the sky was all blue and the wind blew from just the right direction.

Every evening after his birthday, Diego went to bed anxiously, hoping the next day would be the day. And every day, he would wake up disappointed. Until the day he woke up, that would change everything.

It was a Saturday morning. Diego sat up slowly and rubbed his eyes.

He looked at the clock. Quarter past ten.

He quickly got out of bed and went to the window.

The sky - bright blue.

The temperature - perfect.

The wind...

Diego put his finger in his mouth and then in the air.

The wind - also perfect!

Diego flew down the stairs like a comet.

'Daddy, is today - do you think... can we? Are we going, I mean - what do you think?'

Zeb looked up from his breakfast and smiled.

'Today you will become a man, my son. Today is the day we go flying!'

Diego jumped into the air and danced around the room. He ran up the stairs, to go to the small roof terrace. He opened the hatch as quickly as he could and jumped outside. He looked around, to the mountain and the village and the valley down below.

Diego felt like screaming. Shouting. Maybe even singing.

But he didn't. Something was creeping from his toes upwards. A feeling. It tingled. It even hurt a little bit. The feeling went up to his belly, then to his heart, and it hung there like a block of ice.

Diego looked towards the foot of the mountain, at the dirty smoke of Kragtstad. Not because he wanted to, but because something had turned his head in that direction. And all of a sudden, tears started rolling down his cheeks.

‘Is everything all right, lad?’ Zeb said, who followed him up the stairs.

Diego couldn’t answer. He pointed to the valley, to Kragtstad. Intrigued, Zeb also looked down, to Kragtstad.

‘What is the ma-’

Zeb couldn’t finish his sentence. A loud bang shot up from the town and echoed up the mountainside. Immediately after the sound reached them, large flames and thick smoke billowed up and started enveloping the town.

Krudon Kragt

In Kragtstad, on the top floor of the KK Industries tower, Krudon Kragt was sitting in his leather chair. His golden pen was making continuous somersaults on the fingers of his right hand. It was ten past ten: exactly five minutes before the explosion. Krudon stared in the distance and saw the nodding donkeys tirelessly extracting the Terrafos from Kragtfield.

Krudon took another good look. Some people said that Kragtfield looked like a hot-air balloon and that Kragtstad was the basket hanging underneath.

But for Krudon, the Kragtfield had the form of a wooden club, like the ones prehistoric people used long ago to knock out wild boars. This club was different, though. This was the biggest, strongest, fastest, most powerful club in the country. Nobody in Rebequin could beat this club. And the only person who could make the club do what he wanted, was he, Krudon Kragt. Krudon the Great.

But, for a long time, the club had been losing its power. Less and less Terrafos was being extracted. Many pumps were idle.

What if there's less and less Terrafos available? Krudon said to himself. What if that huge strong club becomes just a thin straw

that is frightening to no one?

Krudon started to bite his nails, afraid. The thought that he could lose everything made him lose his self-control. And when Krudon lost his self-control, he did strange things. As had happened today. Krudon thought back to that morning. He had decided during breakfast that the Terrafos fountain in front of the entrance of KK Industries was spouting way too softly. It should be more forceful, Krudon had decided. That magic green-yellow stuff should be spouting majestically into the air, as high as the sky if possible, and not like the insignificant arc it was now doing. So, Krudon had called the Power Station, had explained the situation and hung up again. But at a quarter past nine nothing had changed. And nothing had changed at half past nine either.

Furious, Krudon had taken the limousine to the Power Station. There, the manager had explained that it was too dangerous to turn up the machines of the fountain, because they were too old. It was too risky, as the machines could explode. KK Industries should replace some parts first. Krudon knew that, but that would cost money he did not want to spend. Krudon had fired the man on the spot and had sent him away. After that, he had walked to the machines to set the handles at maximum speed, and had taken the limousine back to the KK tower. And there he sat, silently waiting for the fountain to spout as it had never done before.

Krudon went once more to the window. Below him he saw the

Power Station.

Everyone in Rebequin knew what *the Power Station* was. You were not referring to something insignificant. You were referring to the beating heart of the country! Nearly all the energy for the inhabitants of Rebequin came from the Power Station: liquid Terrafos for cars, boats and planes; solid blocks of that green-yellow stuff to make machines run; energy for heating houses, for lamps, and for cooking. Without Terrafos, the country would come to a standstill. Without Terrafos there would be no life. And without Terrafos Krudon had no power.

Krudon had never let on that KK Industries extracted less and less Terrafos. Nobody was allowed to know that.

‘Why is this taking so long,’ Krudon said, grinding his teeth while he looked out the window. ‘Hurry u–’

Before he could finish his sentence, he heard the bang. The windows of the KK Tower shook in their frames. At that moment, flames and smoke plumes shot into the air.

An explosion in the Power Station. It had been too much for the machines.

The machines, that he himself had set at full speed.

Breathing heavily, Krudon stood in front of the window. The golden pen fell from his hand.

This is not good, Krudon thought. Not good at all. What if people found out that he was the culprit?

They might get very angry.

Thank goodness they're so afraid of me, Krudon said to himself.

They might be angry with me, but they wouldn't dare do anything.

As long as I am in charge of Terrafos, as long as I'm the one they work for, they will be afraid of me.

As long as I have the power.

In a flash, Krudon had a vision that was so painful, it seemed as if a sharp needle was being driven into his head.

What if the field was running empty?

The very idea made him shudder from head to toe.

All of a sudden, the telephone rang. It was his secretary.

'Why are you disturbing me?' was the first thing he shouted through the telephone.

'My most sincere apologies,' the secretary said. 'But Mr. Krudon has a visitor.'

'I don't want a visitor.'

'I know, Mr. Krudon. And I once again offer my sincerest apologies.

But I think Mr. Krudon might want to receive this visitor.'

'Why?' Krudon shouted through the telephone.

'Because this man says he can give Mr. Krudon twice as much power as he has right now.'

Krudon felt a wave of contentment rush up his spine. *Power...* such a wonderful word.

'And because Mr. Krudon always says that he is so terribly fond of

power,' his secretary continued nervously, 'I thought Mr. Krudon might-'

'Yes yes all right - send him up.'

A moment later, someone knocked on the large silver door.

'Come in!'

The door opened. Krudon expected to see a man, but all he saw was a goat's head. 'Me-he-he-he,' the animal bleated.

Behind the goat's head a face appeared.

'Good day, Mr. Krudon.'

Krudon beckoned the man to come in. The door opened slowly and a tall man came in. In his arms, he held the goat.

'What is this?' Krudon asked, impatiently.

The man grinned a slightly malicious grin. A grin that could fool an unsuspecting person. A grin that Krudon also put on when he was planning something wicked. It gave Krudon a sense of familiarity.

'This, Mr. Krudon, is the proof,' the man said.

Curious by the man's words, Krudon motioned him and his goat to come closer.

'My name is Bunkert. Bunkert Rotalot. I live in Pickleby, on Mt. Pickle. I work for you in the Power Station. And this is my mountain goat, Jock. Jock usually roams around the slopes on this side, but sometimes he explores the other side of the mountain. Nobody ever goes there, because there is nothing to be found. It's steep,

rocky, and dangerous. But Jock is a mountain goat and mountain goats are great climbers, as you probably know-

'Get to the point,' Krudon said, callously cool.

Bunkert swallowed and continued hastily. 'Right – so, every time Jock goes to the other side of Mt. Pickle, he returns with his legs covered in a green-yellowish substance. It's some kind of sticky stuff, really difficult to remove. Take a look for yourself.'

Bunkert came a little bit closer and lifted one of the legs of the goat. Krudon took the leg in his hand. The other legs were white, but this one was greenish. And very sticky.

Krudon's heart beat loudly as he smelled the leg. His eyes popped. It was Terrafos.

This could mean only one thing... there was a Terrafos source on the other side of Mt. Pickle. Maybe there's more Terrafos there than in the Kragtfield, Krudon thought. Just imagine...

'Moxxo!' He screamed. 'Moxxo!'

His bodyguard entered silently, cleaning his nails with a large dagger. He looked up with a cold stare.

'Yes, master?'

'Prepare the helicopter on the roof. Immediately! We are going to search for Terrafos.'

Missing

In the meantime, high up on Mt. Pickle, Zeb and Diego had come down from the roof terrace. The flames of the explosion had slowly died out and had evolved into large smoky clouds that were now gradually disappearing.

‘Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m really looking forward to go paragliding today,’ Zeb said all of a sudden during breakfast.

As soon as his father mentioned paragliding, Diego rubbed his belly. The strange feeling that something terrible was going to happen was still there, sitting in his stomach like a large block of ice.

With eyes wide open he looked at his father.

‘Today is not a good day to go flying.’

‘What do you mean? It’s a super day! And it’s not called flying, it’s para –’

‘No,’ Diego interrupted him. ‘No, no, no! More terrible things are going to happen. I can feel it!’

Diego ran to Zeb’s parachute and sat down on top of it, angrily eyeballing his father.

‘Come on, Diego, give me my parachute.’

‘No.’

‘Diego, stop it - get off my parachute!’

‘No!’ Diego screamed. ‘Something terrible is going to happen!’

For a moment, Zeb thought of Amita, and the warning she had given when Diego was born. That his son was special. But the next moment brought the feeling of the great pleasure gliding through the air in the sun gave him. It was too tempting a feeling. So he bent down and tried to pick up his son to remove the parachute from underneath him.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done.

Diego went mad. He grabbed his father and closed his arms around his neck as if he was a wrestler.

‘Anna!’ Zeb shouted. ‘Help me!’

Diego didn’t let go. He was hanging on his father’s neck, and didn’t give in for one inch.

Anna got a hold of Diego and tried to calm him down. But her son still wouldn’t let go. With one last mighty attempt, Zeb unclasped Diego’s arms from around his neck, and stepped away.

‘Wouldn’t it be better just to stay here?’ Anna asked her husband, worryingly.

With an angry face, Zeb looked first at his son, then at his wife.

‘I’m not going to let anyone frighten me into staying home! You hear me? Fear is a bad advisor! You keep Diego here. I’ll see you tonight.’

But Zeb didn't come back.

The last one to see him was Runne the goatherd, who lived high up on Mt. Pickle. He said that Zeb had gone paragliding on the other side of the mountain. Everybody knew that you should never venture to the other side of the mountain. It was extremely steep, with ravines and trenches everywhere.

Runne also talked about a helicopter he had seen over there. But he didn't know if it had anything to do with Zeb's disappearance.

The Giant Snake

Weeks passed. Despite all the searches, Zeb was nowhere to be found. It became colder and colder, and the first snow fell.

Diego just couldn't believe that his father had died. If that were the case, I would feel it, he said to himself. And I don't feel it. So he must be alive.

When by the middle of winter, Zeb had still not been found, Anna decided to say farewell. Olle Mallet, the cheese monger and baker, who was also a sculptor in his free time, made a gravestone in the shape of Zeb's parachute. On the stone was written:

ZEBULAH ZACHARIAS DAZZLER

REST IN PEACE – WHEREVER YOU ARE

Because they didn't have a coffin with a body, Diego made a small box in memory of him. He put all kinds of things in it he thought his father would like to have with him: a nice slice of sausage from butcher Danglingbone, a freshly baked bun from Olle Mallet and a photograph of Zeb with Anna and Diego. He secretly added a little note:

I don't believe you're dead – Diego

It snowed lightly during the funeral. The flakes made Diego's cheeks wet as if he was crying. But he didn't shed a tear. I feel you're not dead, Diego thought. So there is nothing to cry about.

Anna gave a speech, about how she had met Zeb. As the snowflakes drifted down, she told the people how Zeb had landed with his parachute and his photo camera on top of her in her back garden and had never left.

Suddenly, Diego noticed an old woman. She was standing by a tree, apart from the crowd, looking at them.

'Who is that?' Diego said, intrigued.

'Amita,' Anna said.

'Amita?'

'The inventor.'

Amita the inventor... Diego remembered his dad telling him about her, and that he should never, ever go towards the area of Mt. Pickle where she lived. With great interest he watched as the old woman slowly walked away from the funeral.

Winter came and went without a sign from Zeb. As spring arrived, so did the heavy rains. Storms washed away everything that was high up on the mountain. One particularly rainy day, Zeb's spare parachute floated under the Dirty Bridge in the direction of Ronnie's Trident.

If anyone still needed a confirmation, this was it. Everyone was

confident that Zeb was dead. Everyone but Diego.

He began to wander alone, searching for peace and quiet. He didn't want to be with friends, because nobody understood him. Diego felt alone, but it was preferred to being misunderstood.

There was something else that was bothering him as well. Diego often had the feeling that he was walking through a thick fog. The trees, the river, the village, his mother... he couldn't see any of it properly any more. He'd always know he'd never had great eyes, but it began to worsen as the days went by.

Diego needed glasses, but no part of him wanted them. Rufus Rotalot, Bunkert Rotalot's son, was a bully at school and would certainly pick on him. So Diego decided he would do anything to not have to wear glasses. He sat in the front row in class and when people greeted him in the street, he would wave back, even if he had no idea who they were.

One beautiful sunny day in spring, Diego was walking up the mountain alone. It was the beginning of the season, when the mountain was not yet very beautiful. The snow had melted and disappeared into the earth, which resulted in a soft mud. If you didn't watch out, you could slip and slide a long way downhill. Halfway through his trip, Diego's hunger caused him to stop and take a freshly baked Olle Mallet-bun from his rucksack. His mother had put extra-thick slices of goat cheese on it. And for a wonderful moment, it made Diego forget everything that had been troubling

him.

As he raised the sandwich to his lips, his nose started to itch. It was a funny kind of itch, the kind that comes and goes as if you're about to sneeze but can't. But it came and went quickly so he merely continued eating.

Below him, Mt. Pickle reached as far as the valley. Then came Kragtstad, with its thick layer of green-yellowish smoke, spread like a transparent blanket over the large gray buildings. A little further down, the dunes started, followed by the light brown beach which lined the deep blue sea.

But these images were hidden from Diego who, without glasses, was still unable to see clearly. He only saw a large green-yellowish blotch that slowly turned into a large blue blotch but besides that, he couldn't distinguish any other details.

Uh-oh...

Another vicious itch crept from the tip of his nose up and over his nostrils. Diego started to scratch his nose like a mad man. And then the feeling came back. A short stab. As if someone stuck a pin in his heart. And then came the jitters everywhere: his toes, his armpits, his tummy, but especially his nose. An inexplicable, irrepressible itch.

Something is about to happen, Diego whispered to himself. There is danger. Something terrible is coming and I have to do something.

All of a sudden there was a loud boom, followed by a few seconds

of complete silence, and then a scraping sound.

Diego turned around. Something enormous came sliding down the hill towards him. It was dark brown, as long as a football field, and as thick as a house. In front were two enormous pale, milky eyes, which seemed as if they couldn't see anything at all. And it was heading straight towards Diego.

Diego sprinted down the hill as fast as he could. He slipped, fell over, rolled a bit further down, got up again and ran on. He blurred past the cemetery like a comet. He raced straight over the Dirty Bridge, towards the square. Panting, Diego looked around.

There was a market today. The market vendors were displaying their vegetables, fruits and other various goods. The inhabitants of Pickleby were either talking to each other or bargaining about the price and quality. It was quite a hubbub.

'Help!' Diego shouted. 'A giant snake is coming. Help!'

Nobody reacted. A few dogs started to bark at him, but no one else came forth.

Puzzled, Diego walked backwards. Suddenly he bumped his head and turned around.

He was standing in front of the statue of Willibrord, the hero of Pickleby. Ages ago, during the Six-Year War, he had saved hundreds of people who had been stuck in the snow.

Willibrord had a large hat on his head to protect his face from the sun, wind, and snow. Diego looked at the large brim of the hat.

In a flash, he stepped forward. He climbed up on the knee and held on to the beard. Shaking, he placed one foot on the large pointed nose and pulled himself onto the wide brim of the hat. Carefully, he stood up. Diego drew a deep breath, cupped his hands around his mouth like a horn, and shouted as hard as he could: 'HELP!'

It was immediately silent. A few ladies shrieked.

'A giant snake is approaching!' Diego screamed. 'He's on his way to the village.'

It remained silent for a moment.

'A giant snake?' someone asked, finally. 'Just how big are we talking here?'

'As long as a football field and as thick as a house!' Diego shouted. For a moment, there was silence. Then someone chuckled. Then a group of people started to giggle. And then everybody started to laugh.

Diego listened to the laughter and the jeering. There was that voice again in his head. *'Don't be so stupid, Diego... Giant snakes don't exist. Come down from that statue. You should be ashamed of yourself - twerp.'*

But Diego didn't come down. The pin in his heart... He could still feel it. And that pin told him to do something else.

Diego looked down. He couldn't see the people very well, but he did see that everyone had started to walk and talk again. 'I have to save them,' he said softly. 'I have to. There is no other way.'

Slowly, Diego started to bounce on the brim of the hat. The bounces turned into hops which then became higher jumps, as if he was standing on a diving board, all set to do a cannon ball in the deep water. But there was no water. Only deadly stones.

'If nobody does anything, I will jump!' Diego shouted.

Cries of disbelief and fear floated over the square.

'ONE, TWO...'

Diego spread his arms like a platform diver, ready for the jump of his life.

'Stop!' a man shouted. 'Stop!'

Diego recognized the voice. It was Olle Mallet.

'I can't just stand here looking. Your mother will never forgive me. If we go with a couple of strong men to have a look, will you be satisfied?'

Diego thought it over. 'OK,' he said. 'But I'm going to stay on this statue until you are back.'

'All right, then,' Olle said. 'But if this turns out to be a prank... You just wait, Dazzler!'

Mud

All the men went up the mountain with spades and hayforks.

‘Alright little snake,’ Olle Mallet grumbled. ‘Stop your hiding, and I will plant this hay fork in your beautiful, thin skin...’

Suddenly he stopped. He squinted and looked in the distance.

‘Guys... I think I have found the snake,’ Olle said. ‘Look.’

An enormous layer of mud was lying still, higher up the mountain.

Two melting blocks of ice were stuck in the front. From a distance, it looked like a giant snake with two large, white eyes.

‘We’re going back!’ Olle shouted angrily, seeing nothing dangerous.

‘That Dazzler...’

‘Wait a minute.’

The men looked up. It was Amita.

‘What do you think will happen if that mud starts to slide further down?’

Olle looked up and shrugged. ‘That’s not my problem.’

‘Is that right?’ Amita said. ‘And what will happen if that mud starts moving again, and slides into the Fludd?’

Olle thought about that for a moment. ‘No idea.’

‘Hm - it would not be very pleasant if all that mud sank to the bottom and formed a big dam. Just imagine if the Fludd’s water could no longer pass through. Then it will have to find another way. And the only other way is through the village. Just imagine if the whole village flooded. That wouldn’t be very nice, would it?’

Amita looked with feigned interest at her nails while she waited for an answer.

The men looked at Amita and then at each other.

‘OK,’ Olle said. ‘All right. We’ll move as much mud as possible with our shovels. But then I’m going back to work. I still have about eighty wheels of cheese to cut today. I’ve had enough of this!’

‘Excellent,’ Amita said calmly. ‘Very good.’

She turned around and slowly walked back, towards the village.

It took a long, strenuous hour before the men were back at the square. Diego was standing high in the air, on the brim of the hat. His legs were so tired that they had started trembling.

Olle Mallet walked in front. He was covered in mud from head to toe. Silently, he approached the statue. Nobody made a sound.

Everyone listened anxiously, to hear what the cheese monger had to say.

‘It wasn’t a giant snake, it was a large heap of mud,’ Olle said slowly.

‘That’s only logical since giant snakes don’t exist. Thank you very much, Dazzler. Thanks for nothing.’

Olle Mallet turned around and stalked angrily away, without looking back. Little by little the other mud-covered men trailed behind.

From the hat of Willibrord, Diego watched as the square gradually emptied. And along with the people leaving the square, Diego felt the strength ebbing out of his body.

‘What have I done?’ he mumbled, his lip trembling. ‘I was so absolutely sure.’

In the distance, someone came running to the square. It was Anna Dazzler.

‘Dear Diego,’ Anna said, nearly crying. ‘What are you doing up there? Please, come down.’

Diego did what his mother asked and carefully climbed down from the statue.

‘What have you done, darling?’ she asked, holding him by his shoulders. ‘Were you planning on jumping off?’

‘Yes – eh... No. I mean - not really. But there was danger, I knew that for sure and... and -’

‘Darling,’ his mother interrupted him, ‘giant snakes don’t exist. You know that, don’t you?’

Diego looked down at her, thoughtfully.

‘Yes...’ he said softly. ‘Sorry. I’m sorry.’

Anna Dazzler bent her knee, grabbed him a bit tighter and looked him in the eye.

‘You really have to start thinking about the things you do, boy. How

do you think people will see you now?’

‘What difference does that make!’ Diego protested.

‘It does, Diego,’ his mother said. ‘People can be cold as ice. If they find you strange, then they won’t want anything to do with you. Then you won’t belong. Then you’ll be alone. Do you understand that?’

Diego nodded. He understood that all too well.

‘You want to have some friends every now and then, don’t you?’ his mother asked with a soft voice.

Diego hated it when his mother started to talk like that. It tickled him inside, in places where he didn’t want to be touched at all.

‘Don’t you, Diego?’

Diego couldn’t stand it any longer. Impatiently, he pulled himself loose and ran home. There he locked himself up in his room for the rest of the day, without saying a word to anyone.

The Loneliest Boy on Mt. Pickle

The next day, Diego woke up to the sound of small children laughing. Diego opened the curtain and looked out.

The five-year-old son of his neighbors was standing on a low wall.

'I'm going to jump!' he shouted. 'I'm going to jump!'

'No Diego, don't!' his six-year-old sister shouted. 'You are bedazzled! Don't do it! Don't do it!'

In stitches they fell on the ground. When they realized that Diego was looking at them however, they quickly ran inside.

'Nice performance,' Diego called softly after them. But they had already closed the door and turned the key.

Diego went to school that morning with a heavy heart. The children on the playground all turned their backs to him. He could hear them snickering as he passed by.

'A Giant snake! What a twerp...'

'...he has gone mad...'

'...really is bedazzled...'

Nobody wanted to sit next to him in the classroom. Even the teacher had a difficult time looking at him. And after school, everybody scurried away from him.

The following weeks continued in the same manner. He wasn't invited to any birthday parties any more.

At night in his bed, Diego often thought about the words of his mother, how people could be cold as ice when they find you strange. And that's the way it is, Diego thought sadly. It's unfair, but that's the way it is.

More and more, Diego withdrew himself to Mt. Pickle. Many times he would head up to the Giant Forest, just to climb in the Swing Tree and sit in the place where he had sat so often with his father. Sometimes he would start talking to Zeb, as if he was there. 'Why were you so stupid, with your stupid paragliding?' he would say. 'Why didn't you listen?'

Still, Diego had that little flame in his heart, which told him his father was alive. But nowadays, he didn't believe that flame as much.

Sometimes he would cry in the Swing Tree. But he did it silently, afraid that if he cried too loudly, Rufus Rotalot might hear him.

The summer holidays had started. Every day, Diego's sole act was to go up on the mountain by himself. His eyesight got worse and worse. After a long and fierce battle of trying to avoid every visit to the optometrist, he gave in.

On his birthday, his mother presented him with his new glasses. They were large, with a black frame. 'I know it's not a nice birthday

present, but those glasses are expensive and I can't afford anything else. Sorry, my boy. Try to enjoy them.'

Since nobody would have come to his party anyway, Diego made no effort to organize anything. He just ate the apple pie his mother had baked and went up the mountain.

There he sat, Diego Dazzler, on a beautiful, sunny, Sunday afternoon, on his birthday, all alone in the Swing Tree. In his pocket he had his present: a simple pair of eyeglasses.

'This is the saddest birthday ever,' Diego mumbled softly to himself. Diego had no idea that that was not going to be the case at all. The only thing he knew was that his nose was itching again...

The Second Day Everything Changed

Diego stared into the water of the Fludd. He thought about the many times his father had told him about the big fish he saw. But without glasses, Diego hadn't been able to see them then, and he couldn't see them now.

What if I try my new glasses, Diego thought for a moment.

Suddenly he heard something: the sound of twigs snapping. And then moaning and panting. In the distance, he could vaguely see a group of boys coming his way and yelling.

'Grab that fatso! Hit him in his fat belly!'

Curious, Diego looked down. A fat boy was standing under the tree. He looked around, frightened, like a hunted animal.

'Psst,' Diego said. 'Up here!'

The boy looked up. It was Balthazar, the son of Butcher Danglingbone.

'Can-you-help-me? I-am-not-an-expert-climber-you-see,' he said, panting.

Balthazar had a strange way of speaking, as if he were an English

gentleman. Diego had never talked to Balthazar before, but he knew who he was. Nearly every morning, before school had started, he would sit in the sandbox, creating sandcastles and moats, even though he was already eleven years old. Balthazar could make the most beautiful things with sand. Diego had once seen him recreate the whole school. He had even perfectly captured the door handle of the main door. But Balthazar hadn't been able to enjoy it for long, because as soon as Rufus had arrived at the playground, he'd immediately started kicking the sand and destroying the work of art.

Diego could vividly recall the image of Balthazar, sitting in the sandbox, breathing heavily and staring at the ground. He'd remained motionless as a statue, until the teacher had lifted him up and taken him inside.

The sound of the yelling boys came closer and closer. The loudest boy was teasing Balthazar in a high-pitched voice. 'Hey there, piece of lard... we'll get you, no use in...'

Balthazar looked at the branches of the tree with a frightened expression, then back down at his body, as if he was wondering how on earth he'd be able to lift his weight up.

As fast as he could, Diego took off his belt and let it dangle down. 'Come on! You can do it.'

Balthazar had no choice. Hesitantly, he put his foot on the lowest branch, grabbed hold of the belt and started climbing. Diego pulled

with all his might. Slowly but surely, Balthazar Danglingbone disappeared between the green leaves. Puffing, he pulled himself up to the spot opposite Diego, where Zeb had sat so often. Meanwhile, the yelling boys had reached the tree. Diego carefully peered down through the leaves. There were three of them. Diego recognized them all from school, but he only had eyes for the biggest one.

Rufus Rotalot.

When Rufus looked at you with those gray eyes, you felt as if a bloodhound was sniffing you up and down. Rufus was a professional at discovering secrets you would rather keep hidden. And if he found one out, you were in trouble. It was a great, great pity he was so tall and strong.

‘Where is that fat guy? I still have a score to settle with him. Hey, balloon, where are you?’

Rufus was now standing directly under the tree. He stretched out his arm and leaned against the trunk. Balthazar could only stare, horrified. His mouth hung wide open and without a sound he inhaled all the oxygen he could. It looked very strange, Diego thought. Like a silent film.

Slowly, Balthazar’s hand went to his coat pocket. He carefully pulled out a bottled soda. He opened the cap and brought the bottle to his mouth, looking horrified at Rufus’ head, below.

Maybe it happened because he looked down. Or maybe it was

because he was so frightened. Either way, the bottle never reached Balthazar's mouth. Instead, he accidentally poured the first couple sips over the branch below. First it formed a small puddle which then changed into a tiny stream that painstakingly slid down the trunk ... slowly but surely in the direction of Rufus Rotalot's hand. 'I know you can hear me, Fatso,' Rufus shouted. 'You can't be far.' The first drop was now very close to Rufus' thumb. A few more seconds and then...

In a split second Diego grabbed the bottle from the hands of the boy and threw it as far as he could. The bottle landed with a loud crackling sound in the bushes further away.

'There!' Rufus said. 'There he is!'

The bully pulled his hand away from the trunk and ran off in the direction of the sound. The soda flowed down right over the spot where his hand had been just a second before.

When Rufus was finally out of sight, Balthazar looked at Diego with a grateful glance, without saying anything.

Then, he put his hand out. It was small, and a bit fat too, Diego noticed.

'My-name-is-Balthazar,' he said in a high voice. 'Balthazar-Danglingbone. You know: from-the-butcher. But-maybe-that-information-had-already-reached-you.'

Balthazar enunciated every word so loudly and clearly, it made Diego laugh.

‘What-is-the-matter?’ Balthazar said, surprised. ‘Have-I-said-something-you-might-find-funny?’

‘Everything you say is funny,’ Diego said.

Balthazar looked down and frowned. Apparently he was thinking very hard. It looks as if he has to go to the loo, Diego thought.

‘I-do-not-understand. What-is-so-funny? Do-you-find-my-name-funny?’

Diego hesitated for a moment. ‘No, your name isn’t funny. It’s the way you speak. You sound like a real gentleman. And I find that funny, because you are a boy, just like me.’

Balthazar looked at him. ‘I-think-I-understand,’ he said slowly.

‘Great. My name is Diego. Diego Dazzler.’

‘That-I-knew. Never-the-less: nice-meeting-you-Diego-Dazzler.’

‘Yes,’ Diego said. ‘Very nice meeting you, too.’

Balthazar turned his face in the direction of Kragtstad. Apparently he was thinking hard again, because there were deep wrinkles in his forehead. Just when Diego thought Balthazar had gotten lost in a daydream, the boy turned to Diego again.

‘Was-Zeb-Dazzler-your-father?’

‘Not *was*... *is*. My father isn’t dead!’ Diego snapped back immediately.

Diego’s words startled Balthazar a bit. He turned his head and sat there, thinking.

‘Then-why-are-you-so-sad?’

Diego looked at him, irritated. 'I'm not sad. And if I were sad, you would be the last one to know.'

Balthazar looked down again, thinking deeply. 'And-how-many-people-would-you-tell-before-you-would-tell-me?'

'What?'

'If-you-are-sad, how-many-people-would-you-tell-before-you-would-tell-me? If-I-know-that, then-I-know-how-long-I-have-to-wait.'

Mama Mia, Diego thought. This boy takes things so literally.

'No idea,' Diego replied. 'And it's none of your business. Besides, I'm not sad!'

Balthazar looked away. With a sad face he stared in the direction of the valley.

'All-right,' he finally said. 'As-you-wish.'

'Exactly,' Diego said, a little bit surprised. 'That's the way it is.'

'Ex-actly.'

Balthazar pulled three large chocolate bars from his one coat pocket, and four from his other. Diego could hardly hide his surprise. He had never met a boy with so many sweets.

'How many Reffies did that cost?'

'Reffies...' Balthazar said cautiously. 'Are-you-referring-to-the-national-monetary-unit, the-Rebequin-florin?'

'Yes, of course!' Diego exclaimed. 'Reffies. That's what they're called, right?'

'I-prefer-to-pronounce-the-complete-name,' Balthazar said. 'But-I-will-adjust-my-language. The-price-was-only-four-and-a-half-Reffies, because-they-were, as it-is-called, on-sale.'

Balthazar offered Diego a piece of chocolate. It looked a bit sweaty. Diego declined.

'It-is-yummy,' Balthazar said, putting a piece in his own mouth.

'Aren't all those sweets bad for you?' Diego asked.

Balthazar looked up quickly, kind of disturbed. Diego knew that kind of face. It was a don't-bother-me-with-things-that-everybody-has-already-bothered-me-with face. Diego had such a face when people asked him whether he missed his father.

'Sweets-are-not-the-most-appropriate-food-for-a-growing-child, like-me. But-I-just-happen-to-like-them. They-calm-me.'

Diego thought for a moment. 'All right,' he said finally. 'That's all right with me.'

'Exactly,' Balthazar said, and now he was a little bit surprised. 'That-is-the-way-it-is.'

Diego nodded. 'Exactly.'

A bit uneasily, they sat opposite each other.

'Let-us-climb-out-of-this-tree,' Balthazar said, finally. 'We-can-not-remain-here-all-day.'

Diego nodded approvingly. A little bit later, they were standing together on the bank of the Fludd. It was late afternoon. The sun was already turning red.

Diego put his hands in his pockets. He felt something. Ah, yes - his glasses.

Slowly he pulled them out. He held them up and examined them in the sunlight. Diego still had weeks of vacation, but his thoughts were already on the first school day. He imagined how everybody would ignore or ridicule him and how Rufus would bully him. Diego held the glasses in his hand and readied himself to throw them in the river.

'Is-that-a-sensible-idea?' Balthazar said.

'No. But I'm doing it anyway.'

But Diego didn't. Because all of a sudden, something else attracted his attention...

The Black Octopus

A horrible sound came from the middle of the river. Someone was screaming as if they were being stung by hundreds of bees at the same time.

But no... It wasn't screaming. Someone was singing: very loud and very much out of tune.

Diego looked up the river, in the direction of Mt. Pickle. Something was floating downstream. Diego could see that it was black, but that was all. It floated in the middle of the river, rocking happily to and fro, screaming like a kitchen maid who had just seen a mouse. Diego squinted to determine what it was, but he couldn't see. At least... not without glasses. He looked disgustingly back at the frames.

The black thing started to scream again, rocking with every note. Diego couldn't wait any longer. With a jerk he put his glasses on. For the first time in his life, Diego Dazzler saw everything clear as day. He looked around, breathless. Suddenly, he was able to see the veins on the leaves. He could see the pine trees high up on Mt. Pickle, and then, higher still, the green mountain meadows. He could see the carp shooting through the blue-green water with

ease. And he could see that the huge, dark thing in the middle of the river was an enormous octopus. A big, black inflatable octopus with eight tentacles. Stranger still was the girl in a black bathing suit, lying in the middle of the octopus. She was wearing large black sunglasses with lenses in the shapes of hearts. And on her ears she had two large seashells, connected with a black wire to the black music player in her hand. She opened her mouth again. That is quite a big mouth for such a little girl, Diego thought. He peered through his glasses at her teeth and swore he could see the fillings... they were black.

‘DO YE WANNA DANSZ WITH ME, LALALALA’.

Goosebumps raised on Diego’s arms. He put his fingers deep in his ears and closed his eyes, trying to block out the sound.

That was a little bit better. Slowly, very slowly, the sound faded.

When Diego could hardly hear her any more, he opened his eyes again.

She was floating along in the distance. Diego could just distinguish the arms of the octopus. He also saw they were picking up their pace downstream. Straight towards Ronnie’s Trident.

Ronnie’s Trident. The waterfalls.

‘I-think-we-have-to-run,’ Balthazar said calmly. ‘Otherwise-something-will-go-wrong.’

Ronnie's Trident

Diego started to run. The girl was still screaming like a suckling pig and not seeming to notice the danger.

Further down, the current of the river was clearly flowing faster. Foam bubbles were floating on the water. Just a little bit further and the girl would arrive at Ronnie's Trident. Three prongs, in this case three branches of the river, that came together again further down.

Everyone in Pickleby knew that the left branch was the safest way to go down. That way, you had a beautiful view of the valley and what's more, you didn't go too fast.

The right branch was for adventurers. A few rocks here and there, frothing water, and a nice speed. Perfect for a summer afternoon with a side of adrenaline.

But no one, absolutely no one, would dream of ever taking the middle branch.

The waterfall. The rocks. The whirlpool.

But this girl was apparently not aware of these, because the octopus was headed straight for the middle branch.

'Watch out!' Diego shouted as loud as he could. 'Watch out!'

Finally he got a reaction. The girl took off her sunglasses, wiped a strand of hair from her face, looked around and slowly realized what was happening.

'I'll help you!' Diego shouted. But he had no idea how to get to her. She would be drawn towards the middle branch in the fast current, dragged under the Crooked Oak and then -

The Crooked Oak. That was the solution.

Kala

On the last piece of ground next to the waterfall, the Crooked Oak was fighting a lifelong battle with Mother Nature. His large powerful roots were being pushed up by the hard soil. But he held on, courageously, with everything he had.

Diego ran over the footbridge that connected the right branch of Ronnie's trident to the Crooked Oak. The cold water splashed against his legs. Without thinking, he climbed the old tree. He carefully crawled forward to a large branch that hung over the water.

The seething water was now very close. A piece of wood came floating down with great speed and fell into the abyss of water below. Diego saw and heard how it was split into pieces by the black rocks under the waterfall. His heart pounded in his throat. Diego stretched his arm out as far as he could.

No, that wouldn't work. His hand was still too far away from the water.

Diego looked around. Balthazar was standing on the other side of the footbridge. He looked fearfully at the thin, wooden boards.

'Balthazar! Come here!' Diego shouted at the top of his voice. 'I

need your help!’

Diego watched the fat boy straightened his back when he heard those last words. With a determined look on his face, he looked at the opposite bank, closed his hands around the ropes of the bridge and put his foot on the first panels.

Instantly, Balthazar’s foot went right through one of the wooden planks. His body slid down and became stuck between two other panels.

Diego glanced at the approaching black octopus, then back at Balthazar. ‘Help!’ He screamed once more. But nobody heard him. Diego looked again at the girl. Frightened but fierce, she stared at him.

I don’t want to see this.

Diego closed his eyes. As he did, he felt the water spraying his face. That was strange...there hadn’t been that much water spraying his face a moment ago. At the same time, it felt as if his world was tilting forward.

Diego opened his eyes again. The branch he was clinging to was moving closer to the water’s surface, along with the rest of the Crooked Oak.

Surprised, he looked behind him. Balthazar was lying just behind him on the thick branch, pushing the tree down with his enormous weight.

The girl was now nearly direct underneath him. She stretched out

her arm, as far as possible. Diego grabbed her wrist and held her as tightly as he could. Together they watched as the black octopus crashed down onto the rocks, along with her heart-shaped sunglasses and her black music player.

Slowly, very slowly, Balthazar and Diego slid back and pulled the girl with them. A few long moments later they all fell safely to the ground, exhausted.

Diego staggered to his feet and pointed towards the foot bridge. He was too tired to speak. Without a word, they walked back over the wooden planks to the opposite side of the river. Balthazar walked a bit more carefully than the first time, while the girl followed, silent with shock, and Diego, spent, trudged behind.

The moment Diego set his foot back on land, they all heard a loud, cracking noise.

The crooked oak had fallen. Its branches were now laying in the water. Its mighty roots were ripped out of the ground and sticking straight in the air towards the sky. The tree stood its ground for a few moments more as a last farewell, then fell into the water without any resistance. The next thing they heard was the deafening sound of the breaking and splintering bark.

They stared at each other, flabbergasted. 'Just imagine if that had happened any earlier...' Diego said and looked at the strange girl. He knew everyone on Mt. Pickle by face and name. But he had never seen her before.

‘Who are you, anyway?’ Diego asked.

‘Me? I’m Kala.’ She stuck her hands out to greet them. Diego took the right hand, Balthazar the left one. They both mumbled their names in reply.

‘Well, thank you very much for saving me!’ she said cheerfully.

‘Thanks to you I get to walk around this mountain a bit longer.’

‘Well, anyone would have done it,’ Diego muttered.

Kala looked at him surprised. ‘Are you mad? You nearly killed yourself. Not many dare to do a thing like that. You are heroes, kids!’

I am not a kid, Diego thought. But he didn’t say anything.

Diego took another good look at Kala. It was as if she was hiding something behind those fierce looking eyes – some kind of pain. A pain Diego was all too familiar with.

‘What’s the matter?’ Kala asked suddenly.

‘Eh - nothing,’ Diego said, surprised. But he couldn’t resist and looked once more at her eyes. Were they black? For a moment it looked as if they were.

‘You rather like black, don’t you?’ He asked clumsily.

‘I certainly do,’ Kala said. ‘Just like you, I see.’

‘Black? Me?’ Diego asked surprised, looking down at his clothes. There was no black to be seen.

Balthazar tapped on his shoulder and pointed to his glasses. ‘Your–glasses–are–black.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Diego said.

Kala seemed to be looking around for something. ‘There is only one small problem,’ she said. ‘I have to go home. But I haven’t lived here that long. Actually, only a couple of days really, and I don’t know my way around very well.’

‘We can take you,’ Diego offered, and Balthazar nodded approvingly. ‘Where do you live?’

‘The Sour Twist Estate.’

Diego looked at her as if he’d been stung by a wasp.

The Sour Twist Estate... the house of Amita, the great inventor.

‘Are you sure?’ Diego stammered. ‘I mean are you sure you live at The Sour Twist Estate?’

Diego thought of his father who had forbidden him to go there. But you’re not here to stop me, Diego thought. At least, not for the time being.

Kala nodded. ‘Why, is anything the matter? Doesn’t your mummy let you go there?’

‘What? Of course not,’ Diego answered quickly. ‘What makes you say that?’

And so the three of them set off through sun-drenched Pickleby, past the farms and green meadows, which covered the mountain like a quilt, back to the Dirty Bridge. And then, from the Dirty Bridge, they walked to The Sour Twist Estate.

The Sour Twist Estate, Diego thought. I’m finally going there.

Diego was so distracted at the thought, he didn't even notice that his nose was still itching.

Talking Trees

The rescuing of Kala was not the only exciting thing that happened that day. Higher up on Mt. Pickle, at the source of the Fludd river and only a few miles away from the seething water near Ronnie's Trident, someone was standing on a rock. Stark naked.

It was Russula, the tree-man.

Russula was the only person who could walk around naked on Mt. Pickle without really being naked. His whole body was covered from head to toe with thick, curly hair, as if he was permanently wearing black, woolen pajamas. Below him was the clear water where the Fludd river flowed from. The rock he was standing on protruded from the stream, making it look like a springboard. Russula rubbed his enormous hands while he looked at his friends around him, the forest giants.

With his large yellow nails he picked his ears and listened. He heard not a peep. No noise from the village, no animal breaking the silence. There was only a very, very soft murmuring of the leaves, that was all. He stood there with a very content smile on his face, making braids from the hairs of his nose.

Thank goodness, Russula thought. No message from the trees. Just a nice, quiet day... just the way I want it to be.

But he was mistaken.

Behind Russula stood was an enormous apple tree. Its branches hung over the stream. The tree moaned under the weight of all the ripe fruit.

Russula bent his knees, jumped in the air and made a cannon ball in the water. The water lapped over the side of the banks and soaked a surprised squirrel who had been busy nibbling on an acorn.

Russula snorted when he surfaced. The water was freezing cold. But Russula's hair was so thick and warm, he enjoyed the coolness of it. He shook the water out of one ear and then out of the other. He swam a few strokes with his head above the water, enjoying the view.

Suddenly, an apple fell onto the crown of his head. Russula cursed. Within a second, another apple fell down, on exactly the same spot. The sting made Russula growl. But he didn't quite lose his temper - on the contrary. Russula became curious.

This couldn't be a coincidence. This was a sign.

Carefully, he looked up at the tree above him.

All of a sudden it started to rain apples. Russula held his hands above his head, but curiously enough, none of them hit him.

The raining of apples stopped just as quick as it had started. Russula looked around, surprised. The apples were floating in the water.

They had formed a large floating ring around him.

Slowly, worms started coming out of the apples. Big black worms.

They wriggled as they came pouring out. Russula looked with wide eyes and then addressed the tree.

'You speak in riddles, great friend, but I can understand one thing...

A bad thing has arrived - a danger from within.'

Carefully, he started to pick the apples one by one out of the water.

On Their Way to Amita

Meanwhile, Diego, Balthazar and Kala were walking along the river, on their way to The Sour Twist Estate. Diego glanced around. For the first time in his life, he could see everything as clear as can be, thanks to his glasses. Diego looked a bit longer at the mountain and realized it was quite an unusual mountain. It looked as if a group of giants had thrown a great party and had flattened a large part of the mountain by their dancing. And there, on that flat piece of land on the mountain, was their beautiful Pickleby.

Diego looked at the water in the Fludd and for the first time, he was able to see the bottom of the river. The last sunbeams of the day shot arrows of light through the water, which bounced off the pebbles and produced rainbows in the water.

Life is so beautiful, Diego thought for the first time in a long period. And what a pity I need glasses to see all of it.

‘Isn’t it strange?’ Kala said suddenly. ‘The river seems so innocent. On the mountain near The Sour Twist Estate the water doesn’t seem to be so free-flowing at all.’

The Sour Twist Estate... home of Amita, the old lady at the *funeral-that-wasn’t-a-funeral*.

The Sour Twist Estate was a lot more than just the castle on the river. Amita's property covered a much larger area. No one on Mt. Pickle had even close to as much land as her. Amita didn't bother to put a fence or wall around it. It wasn't necessary, because nobody dared to come that close anyway. People in the village regularly heard loud bangs thundering from the castle over the mountain. Sometimes they saw clouds of smoke in all colors of the rainbow. Not to mention the loud barking. Diego had heard it once: a deep growling bark that could make the leaves on the trees shiver. Diego searched the sky. A few stray sunbeams were still being thrown over the mountain. The shadows of the trees had become longer than the trees themselves. He looked up the mountain with a slight shiver. The Sour Twist Estate...

Maybe I don't even want to see it, Diego thought. Hesitantly he put his glasses in his pocket.

'Anything the matter?' Kala asked.

Diego looked at the ground and said nothing.

'You will really enjoy it,' Kala said. 'The castle is super. And Amita is...' Kala hesitated for a moment. 'Amita is ... well, she's a little bit strange.'

Strange. That didn't sound very inviting, Diego thought.

Kala glanced at Balthazar for a second. 'And Art the 47th... well, he's just the best cook there is. Nothing like it.'

'Art-the-47th?' Balthazar asked, as he stroked his tummy. 'I-have-no-

idea-who-that-is, but-I-definitely-look-forward-to-meeting-the-
man!'

Without waiting for an answer he set off in the direction of the dark
trees.

Beast

They walked slowly through the forest that separated The Sour Twist Estate from the road. Diego looked up to see if the sunbeams were still there, but he couldn't see anything through the canopy of leaves. It had suddenly turned quite dark. Dark and silent.

'Wroafff...'

There it was - that terrible barking.

Diego started to run, with Balthazar at his heel.

The sound came closer and closer. He could hear the beast panting.

I'm going to lie down on the ground and play dead, Diego thought.

Then he will leave me be.

Diego dove down, closed his eyes and held his breath.

The animal came closer, step by step. Diego heard the twigs

snapping under its feet. It panted. It drooled. And -

It licked him in the face.

Diego opened his eyes. He was looking into the eyes of a bear. No, wait, it was a dog. An enormous dog.

'Beast...' Kala said softly. *'Beast... come here... don't be afraid. Come here...'*

The dog heard Kala's voice, opened his mouth and barked once

more.

Diego put his hands over his ears. A gust of breathe came out of the dogs mouth, which made Diego's hair stand up straight.

Kala was standing next to him. Wagging his tail, the dog went up to her and pushed his nose against her.

'This is Beast,' Kala said. 'Isn't he sweet?'

Diego looked again. He had never seen such a big dog. He was pitch-black. His eyes were red and a bit bloodshot, like a bloodhound. But it wasn't a bloodhound. His ears were small and stood up proudly resembling a small bull dog's. But you could fit ten small bulldogs in this body. His fur was rough, like a rough-haired dachshund. But this dog didn't quite resemble a dachshund either. It seemed more like a calf or a horse.

'Beast is the ultimate mix,' Kala said. 'Nobody knows what kind of dog he is. But he's the sweetest one on earth. Beast doesn't believe in violence, do you Beast?'

The dog went up to Kala and licked her face. His tongue was so big, Kala's face almost disappeared behind it.

'Come on, Beast - home!'

The dog trotted up in front of them. Balthazar followed as fast as he could.

Diego hesitated. Something held him back. His nose still itched.

He looked around. He was alone now.

'Well, I guess I have to...' he mumbled. He quickly ran after his

friends. Suddenly he bumped into Balthazars' big body, who was looking up at something.

Diego followed his gaze. They were standing right in front of the biggest castle he'd ever seen.

The Sour Twist Estate

Diego and Balthazar stared at the towering, dark gateway.

Kala pushed it open and turned around with a mischievous look on her face. ‘Close your eyes...’

Diego didn’t want to. The events of the day had leeches all the energy out of him. He wasn’t looking for any more surprises.

Sulking, he closed his eyes. Balthazar followed suit and closed his as well.

‘And... open them.’

For a moment Diego thought he was watching a movie. He stepped forward, carefully.

This wasn’t a movie, this was real.

To start out, he gazed upon the largest room he had ever seen.

There were no corridors, no walls and no stairs. In fact, the whole castle was one gigantic room.

Diego looked up. The ceiling was so high it made him dizzy staring up.

And what were those large, pillar-like things standing all over the place? They were all different though, Diego could see that.

He grabbed his glasses impulsively from his pocket and put them on

his nose. Immediately, he saw everything clearly, as if he had stepped out of a fog.

What a sight...

The pillars were trees. Beautiful sturdy trees, with long, strong branches. And the most beautiful tree huts Diego had ever seen had been built in those trees. Some of them you couldn't even call tree huts, because they were as big as normal-sized houses.

Suddenly, Diego bumped into a vine hanging down from the ceiling. Looking around, he noticed many vines similar to the one he had bumped into hanging within reach. .

Kala grabbed one tightly and swung through the air. Diego didn't give it another thought and followed her lead.

Balthazar watched them with a scared look. 'It-is-probably-sensible-if-I-walk,' he said solemnly. But nobody heard him.

Diego was swinging around as fast as he could. He had no idea where he was going. He looked at Kala to lead him... but she suddenly let go and was falling through the air.

Oh great, Diego thought. Now that we brought her home safely, she'll have to go straight to the hospital.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Kala was shot back into the air like a cannon ball, made a triple somersault and grabbed a hold of the liana, picking right back up where she left off.

Wait a minute...

That wasn't a normal floor she'd fallen on. It was a trampoline floor.

Diego didn't allow himself to have any second thoughts and let go. He landed, shot back up like a rocket and grabbed the liana again. 'This is great!' he screamed. 'I can't believe this!'

While he was flying up and down through the air, Diego looked around to see what else to the castle consisted of. And that was quite a lot.

Towards the back of the castle was one large glass wall, a kind of super-super-super-window. Diego had never seen anything like it. Through the window he could see an enormous garden, bordered by the Fludd river.

While Diego had been taking in his surroundings, Kala had landed on top of one of the tree huts. Diego swung to the hut and landed on the wooden floor.

'This is the lounge hut,' Kala said. 'Down there you see the reading hut. That is the carpentry hut – which is actually never really finished – and that one over there is the bath hut.'

Diego looked at the bath hut. A thick transparent pipe carrying rainwater came down through the roof. Below the hut, another pipe filled with water came through the floor and went to the large glass wall. There, the pipe forked into numerous small tubes, which spread out underneath the glass wall like endless blood vessels.

'Look, that's what you call using energy intelligently,' Kala said proudly. 'We recycle the warm water used in the bath hut for heating.'

‘What-are-those-peculiar-little-animals-I-seem-to-see-in-that-glass-wall?’ Balthazar asked loudly from below.

‘Fire flies,’ Kala said. ‘Our own source of natural light.’

Diego glanced around and tried to take in all the hall had to show him.

It wasn’t really a castle. The building looked more like a dome. The trees were standing in a circle of sorts, with the largest tree in the middle.

‘Come along,’ Kala said suddenly, ‘I will show you the garden.’

She put her fingers in the corners of her mouth and whistled twice, very loud and shrill. Without a sound, a door in the enormous glass wall slid open.

Amita

The garden was immense. You could easily fit a football field in it. Kala went deeper into the garden, towards the Fludd, and then finally turned towards the castle.

‘Everything you see here was built using only what Mother Nature gives us,’ Kala said with a loud voice, as a true tour guide.

Diego followed her gaze. The whole roof of the building was overgrown with grass and weeds. Three sheep and two mountain goats were grazing on top of it and were staring down at them with bored expressions.

‘The roof, for instance, is made of grass,’ Kala continued. ‘During the winter the grass keeps the warmth in and in the summer it keeps the castle nice and cool. The grass even sucks up the water, so it never leaks. Of course the grass has to be cut. And that’s what our grazing friends are for.’

There were large, round openings in the roof and in the glass wall, where ventilators were rotating. The blades of the ventilators were covered with a shiny metallic material. It reminded Diego of the little flower mills his mother used to buy for his birthday, when he was younger. But these were a hundred times bigger.

‘Those are Energyfans,’ Kala explained. ‘One of Amita’s inventions. They turn in the wind which produces energy. You know, energy to cook, for our lights, to heat the house... all that stuff.’

Diego had never seen an Energyfan. He had seen big windmills, but not this kind.

‘Why do they shine like that?’ he asked.

‘Those shiny things are sun collectors,’ Kala said. ‘When the sun shines, the Energyfans capture the sunlight to make energy.’

‘It-reminds-me-a-little-bit-of-our-ventilators-in-the-shop. They-cool-the-meat-when-that-is-necessary,’ Balthazar said.

‘They also do that,’ Kala added with a smart look. ‘If it is too warm or if we need fresh air, the windows open at the back and they send in a cool breeze. So Energyfans can do three things: produce energy from wind, from sunlight and blow fresh, cool air.’

Show-off, Diego thought. As if she invented all of it herself.

Impatiently he turned around, to see what else there was to do.

There was another dome close to the river Fludd. It was much smaller in size than the castle. It looked as if it was made of wood.

Like the castle, this dome was full of huge round Energyfans. The shiny blades were turning around very slowly.

‘What is that?’ Diego asked.

‘Amita’s workshop,’ Kala answered. ‘Off limits!’

While Diego was staring at Amita’s workshop he suddenly saw steam rising up. It came from a place in the middle of the lawn.

Curious, Diego went closer. Looking closely, he could see the water bubbling.

That was strange... the water emitted light. Light-blue light.

Suddenly Diego felt warm and dizzy. The water attracted him, and he stood there entranced. It was as if it was talking to him.

All of a sudden, something shot out of the water like a rocket. It looked like an animal, some kind of silver-gray octopus with loads of tentacles.

Afraid, Diego jumped back.

It wasn't an animal, it was a woman. And those were not silver-gray tentacles, but rather long and wild silver-gray hair.

'Amita!' Kala shouted, surprised. 'We didn't see you.'

'Well, look at that,' Amita said loudly, pushing her hair back. 'We have visitors.'

So this was Amita...

Diego thought of the *funeral-that-was-not-a-funeral* and how Amita had had been standing there, on the outskirts.

Why had she come that day?

Amita put her fingers in her mouth and whistled, shrill and piercing, twice long and once short. The next moment light beams shot out of the ground. In no time, the garden was completely lit up.

'Well...' Amita said, who was suddenly standing in front of them in a black bathrobe. She shook her head to throw her hair back. 'Well, well, well...'

She let her eyes rest on Diego for a moment.

'I am Amita,' she said. 'And who are you?'

Diego and Balthazar introduced themselves.

'Balthazar Danglingbone... and Diego Dazzler,' Amita repeated, with an emphasis on Diego's name.

You know who I am, Diego felt immediately. But I haven't met you before.

'Mind-if-I-ask-what-you-were-doing-there?' Balthazar asked, pointing at the water.

'That's The Spring of Dreams,' Amita said. 'Every day I go in and float around for a little while.'

'Even-if-the-temperature-is-below-32-Fahrenheit?' Balthazar asked.

'Yes, then too.'

'Is it nice?' Diego asked.

'As if you're floating in heaven,' Amita answered with widened eyes. 'And that is where the danger is... If you float too long, you don't want to come out. The Spring of Dreams is addictive.'

'If it's so dangerous, why do you do it?' Diego said.

Amita set on her haunches and looked intently at each of them.

'When I float in The Spring of Dreams, I dream about how I can save our country from ruin.'

'Is-it-necessary-to-save-our-country?' Balthazar asked.

'Absolutely,' Amita said softly. 'More than ever.'

She looked at them ominously. The water from The Spring of

Dreams dripped from her hair and left small, shiny spots in the grass.

'Those-trees-inside-are-beautiful,' Balthazar said, looking up at the castle. 'Very-intriguing.'

'You should always keep trees close to you,' Amita said. 'They remind us that nature never leaves any garbage. If they're able to do that, why can't people?'

'I-respect-your-point-of-view-Madam,' Balthazar said, nodding approvingly.

'Amita,' she said. 'Call me Amita. Now come along, you must be hungry.'

Mapples and Cocrapes

Balthazar, Kala and Diego followed Amita over the lawn to a glass dome next to the castle. Diego looked through the window. He saw palm trees, high grass and fruits in all colors hanging from the branches.

Curious, Diego entered the dome. It was warm and humid.

‘Welcome to the Jungle,’ Kala said.

A splashing sound filled the room. At the back of the dome Diego spotted a small waterfall. The water came from the castle through a pipe and filled a pond. Diego went closer and held his hand under the water.

‘It’s very warm.’

‘The water keeps it warm and humid here,’ Kala said. ‘At the same time it makes for a really lovely shower.’

Diego thought of his mother who was always angry if he left the warm-water tap open too long. ‘Isn’t that expensive, a warm-waterfall? I mean, doesn’t that cost a lot of muck?’

Kala shook her head. ‘The water is heated with the energy from the Energyfans. It’s water is the rainwater that we collect. Doesn’t cost anything. We do nothing with muck here.’

In the meantime, Balthazar had moved to where the fruit was hanging. He gently stroked and squeezed some pieces to test their ripeness. When Diego got closer he realized it was a kind of fruit he'd never seen before. He held a fruit in his hand that looked like a mango, but felt more firm.

'That's a Mapple,' Amita said, who was suddenly standing behind them. 'It's a combination of a mango and an apple. They are hard as apples and sweet as mangoes. You can eat them with the peel. Try it.'

Balthazar didn't wait a second and took a large bite. Diego followed. It tasted wonderful. The sweet taste of the mango with the fresh sour taste of a juicy apple. While enjoying the Mapple, Diego strolled past a palm tree. At least, that's what it looked like. But this one didn't have big coconuts, but bunches of smaller sized coconuts. Diego pulled one from the bunch. Strange... they were not as hard as coconuts. In fact, they were rather squishy.

'Cocrapes,' Amita said. 'A combination of a coconut and a grape. You can pull the peel off with your hands.'

Diego tried one. The peel came off very easily in two pieces, as if it were a present that couldn't wait to be unwrapped. Out came a juicy, shiny, blue-white fruit. Diego took a bite. The mix of coconut and grape caressed his tongue. The fruit was juicy, but not as soft as a grape. It was rather firm and contained harder bits, nearly as crunchy as granola.

Diego picked a bunch off the tree and started peeling the next one. He was so busy enjoying the fruit, that for a moment he completely forgot about his itchy nose.

Art the 47th

In the meantime, Amita had been filling her basket with all the nice things the Jungle had to offer. She took a few avomatoes – avocados that were reddish inside and tasted a bit like tomatoes, but without the large pit of an avocado – and some purple strips from the meat making plants in the back corner.

‘We’re going inside,’ she said. ‘Art the 47th is going to cook for us.’
‘Art-the-47th?’ Balthazar said excitedly. ‘You-make-me-very-curious, Madam.’

Together they walked through the garden back to the castle, past the trees and the trampoline floor, straight in the direction of a big, shiny, sturdy...

It was a machine. Diego could see that. Or rather: he could hear that, because the thing made a loud, grinding noise. Every now and then you heard a puff, a groan and then it went silent again. It looked like a gigantic, oval, iron bowl. There was a big tube on top of the bowl.

‘Right,’ Amita said. ‘This is to make our mugs and plates...’

She took three old carton boxes and threw them in the tube of the machine. Then she opened her big basket with the delicious foods

from the Jungle.

‘... and we fill the mugs and the plates with these.’

Amita added everything from the basket. Then she fetched a large bucket of milk and emptied that into the tube as well. Finally, she threw in half a package of cane sugar, a few large spoonfuls of flour, a large red pepper and a package of butter with the wrapping still on. Diego and Balthazar looked on with interest as everything landed somewhere in the belly of the machine with a soft thump. Then Kala opened a small door in the side of Art the 47th. There was a large screen behind it. It was lit. Diego crept closer to see what it read.

PLEASE WAIT A MOMENT...

The bowl now sounded like a huge clothes dryer that was going faster and faster and faster, making all kinds of noises... puffs, groans, thumps, clunks, thuds and even louder thuds...

Suddenly, as fast as it had begun, the noise stopped. They all looked at the screen.

I CAN MAKE THIS:

NICE THICK MAPPLE SHAKE IN CARTON CUPS

SPICY HOTDOGS WITH AVOMATO BREAD

COCRAPE CHEWING GUM IN PAPER WRAPPING - SUITABLE FOR BIG BUBBLES

MACOCUCAKE (JUICY MAPPLE – COCRAPE CAKE)

HERBAL TEA

Kala looked at Balthazar. 'Art has made his menu. What do you want?'

Balthazar looked excitedly at the screen. 'Everything-that-is-on-it-please!' he said, drooling.

Kala selected everything and pressed *start*. The machine slowly started to make noises again. They heard loud bangs of metal hitting metal, the sound of whipping cream being squirted, the hissing sound of a steam engine... and then went completely quiet again.

Slowly a little door opened on the other side of the machine. A tray appeared, with large cups filled with lovely thick Mapple shake, big chunks of Cocrape chewing gum in paper wrapping, some steaming hot dogs, a plate full of juicy slices of macocucake and a pot of hot tea.

Balthazar immediately took a large piece of cake and started to eat to his heart's content, smacking his lips and making a lot of noise.

'So this is Art 47th ... my Art-cycle machine,' Amita said. 'Art can make something great out of everything – whether it's food or rubbish. And that's a good thing, because there is way too much rubbish'.

'And why is he called Art the 47th?' Diego asked.

'Because the first 46 were no good,' Amita replied. 'Even Art the 47th has fits. Sometimes he makes the strangest things. He's a bit stubborn.'

‘Stubborn...,’ Diego muttered. ‘And it failed 46 times?’

Amita stared at him. ‘Failures don’t exist, my boy. We just found out 46 times how *not* to make an Art-recycle machine.’

‘That-is-an-interesting-theory,’ Balthazar said cautiously.

Diego was thinking. A stubborn recycling machine... a castle with tree huts and a trampoline and lianas... The Spring of Dreams... an inventor... a girl that screams louder than a hurricane... a boy who speaks as if he is the president of the country... fruit he had never heard of... and the biggest dog he had ever seen...

Diego removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. I’m dreaming, he thought. If I open my eyes, I will be lying in my own bed and it will be time to get up.

He walked in the direction of the large glass wall and looked out.

Behind the glass dome, he could see the river Fludd glistening in the rising moon. The water flowed slowly, like thick chocolate.

Wait, that was strange... someone was floating in the river. One of his arms came straight out of the water and held a small bundle of clothes high and dry above the water. He stepped onto the embankment and walked in the direction of the castle - stark naked.

Russula

The naked man walked briskly over the lawn. As he drew closer, Diego could see him better. He was covered with hair. All over. Even his face was covered.

Suddenly the man stopped, as if he had sensed danger. Cautiously he looked left, then right, then straight up into Diego's eyes.

As fast as he could the man tried to cover himself with one hand.

With the other he clumsily started to put his clothes on.

Behind Diego, someone whistled. The door in the glass wall slid open and Amita stepped outside.

'Russula! What brings you here? Do you want to join us for a meal?'

Russula looked at her with gloomy eyes.

'I did not come for a meal – I wish I were, I say.'

'I was sent here by the trees... Danger is on its way.'

Diego couldn't believe his ears. He looked at Amita, but she didn't seem to be surprised at all.

'Great danger?' she responded.

Russula nodded. Amita looked gravely in the distance.

'This requires an Emergency Dive.'

Diego was flabbergasted. With a questioning look on his face, he

stared at Amita and the big hairy guy.

Amita went quickly inside, followed by Russula. She talked with Kala for a moment.

Kala's eyes widened. Then she nodded in approval and walked over to Diego. 'You are very lucky,' she said. 'We are going to dive.'

'Dive? Into the river?'

She shook her head. 'You will see. We have to hurry up – there's danger coming!'

Kala went to walk away, but Diego grabbed her arm.

'Wait a minute... This *is* a joke, isn't it?' Diego asked, with a slight chuckle.

But Kala was as serious as ever. 'We never make jokes about a Dive,' she said. 'If the trees say there is danger, then we have to act immediately.'

'But trees can't speak!'

Kala looked at him, surprised. 'How do you know? Have you ever tried?'

Blushing, Diego scratched behind his ear. 'Uh -no. But I don't think trees are intelligent enough to be able to speak.'

'No?' Kala said. 'So trees can make fresh air out of stinking Terrafos fumes, but they aren't able to speak? What nonsense!'

She walked away angrily and left him by himself.

Wow... Diego thought. This has got to be the strangest birthday of my life. *Ever*.

The Dive

Amita walked briskly through the castle, straight past Art the 47th, stopping to stand next to a large boat. It was perched at the beginning of a track that went up and over the trees in a wide circle. ‘This is Cruiser,’ Amita said, getting into the boat. ‘Our house taxi. Hop in.’

Slightly overwhelmed, Diego climbed on board. Balthazar got in, holding on to the tray with food and drinks without spilling a single drop. Kala and Russula followed. There was even room for Beast. With a nimble jump, the dog jumped in between them as if he had been doing it all his life.

Amita pressed a button. The boat took off with a slight jolt and climbed up the track with a rattling sound. Diego took a moment and gave his surroundings a good look. Most trees had only very large and thick branches, without twigs. Nice trees, Diego thought. Perfect tree-hut trees.

The tree in the middle was the thickest, but also the barest. Only at the top did it have a few thick branches that spread out. As if the tree was a tower with just a very large bird’s nest in top. As they reached the top of the building, Diego could see that there was a

large wooden terrace on top of these branches, like an island in the air.

Cruiser stopped next to the terrace with a soft, moaning sound. Slowly, Diego climbed out of Cruiser and looked around. From that spot they undoubtedly had the best view of the inside of the castle. Diego saw how the fireflies filled the immense glass wall and started to glow in the twilight. It was the most beautiful light he had ever seen.

‘Sit down,’ Amita said.

They all sat down at the large round table in the middle of the terrace. The table top was made completely of glass. In the middle was a small black box with a very big camera lens. It looked like a projector. Maybe we’re going to watch a movie, Diego thought. In front of each one of them was an electrode in the shape of a heart. Amita whistled another tune. Slowly, the roof above their heads slid open and revealed a beautiful star-studded sky.

Balthazar put the tray of food and drinks on the table. Everyone grabbed a couple of items, famished from their day.

Here I am, Diego thought, sitting in a tree hut in a big castle, drinking Mapple-shake and eating juicy macocucake and hot dogs and blowing bubbles with Cocrape-chewing gum. And what was it they were here for?

Ah, yes, a Dive. An Emergency Dive.

‘Do you know what we are going to do?’ Amita asked suddenly.

Diego and Balthazar both had their mouth full and shook their heads in a clear *no*.

‘In this Dive, we’re going to look for the danger - together.’

Amita took a deep breath. Suddenly she put her hands up in the air. She sat motionless as a statue. The wrinkles in her forehead pulled together as if she was angry. I could easily put a pen between them, Diego thought. Or maybe even two.

Just when he was about to put another piece of cake in his mouth, Amita lowered her hands and opened her eyes. She looked as if she had been far away, Diego thought. Very far.

‘Something bad has come to Pickleby,’ Amita said. ‘Russula heard it from the trees. And trees never lie.’

If trees can make fresh oxygen from stinking exhaust fumes then they can also lie, Diego thought. But he didn’t say it. It didn’t sound logical that trees would lie.

‘You have to have a lot of courage to take a Dive,’ Amita continued. She looked intensely at Balthazar and Diego. ‘You have shown your courage this afternoon by saving Kala. Can you also be courageous now?’

Diego sat up straight again and looked confusingly at the others.

‘What do we need courage for?’ Diego asked in a faltering voice.

‘To look at the danger. I need you to take a good look at the danger. You are children. And children see those things much better than adults. So...’

Amita looked Diego firmly in his eyes.

'Can I count on you?'

For the first time that evening Diego touched his nose. It still itched.

And it had never itched for that long a period of time before.

Diego removed his glasses, put them down on the table and scratched his nose as hard as he could.

The Danger

There they were, sitting very high under a star-studded sky... Diego, Balthazar, Kala, Russula and Amita. And they were looking for the danger. Beast was stretched out on the wooden floor next to Diego and didn't seem to be interested in any potential danger whatsoever.

'But- what do I have to see?' Diego squeaked. 'I don't see anything and I don't hear anything. I don't even know what to look for.'

Amita smiled. 'We're going to help each other.'

From one of her pockets, she produced a little flask and took a gulp. Then she frowned, as if she had bitten in a lemon. Tears sprang in her eyes.

'What is that?' Diego asked.

'Puresour,' Anita said, nearly choking. 'One of my inventions. I need this to get enough contact with the Magic Field. So I can see the danger.'

'The Magic Field? What's that then?' Diego asked.

Amita hesitated. She tried to escape Diego's inquisitive stare and looked away.

'You'll see.'

'Are-you-going-to-share-this-concoction-with-us?' Balthazar asked suddenly, hopefully licking his lips.

Amita shook her head. 'Children don't need this. Only grown-ups do.'

'Why doesn't Russula take it then?' Diego asked.

It was silent for a moment.

'Russula is – different.'

Amita screwed the cap on the bottle and put it next to her on the table. 'Enough questions. Let's begin! Put the electrode on your body. Doesn't matter where.'

Diego put the electrode that was lying in front of him on his arm.

Kala put hers on her forehead, and Balthazar placed it on his fat white calf. Amita waited patiently until everyone was ready.

'Great - and now we tell each other something that bothers us,'

Amita said. 'Something we find terrible, gruesome or appalling. A secret.'

'W- what? Why?' Diego asked.

'To open ourselves up to each other.'

'What do you mean? Aren't we open now?'

Amita bent forward and put her mouth close to Diego's ear.

'Something is bothering you, Diego,' she whispered. 'I can feel it. It is lying on your chest like a rock. Tell us about it, and you will feel better.'

Diego cringed and shrugged his shoulders.

‘How do I know I can trust you?’ he whispered back.

‘You don’t know,’ Amita said softly. ‘You either feel you can or you can’t.’

Amita looked him straight in the eye. Diego had difficulty detaching himself from her gaze. Finally he looked down, defeated.

‘You don’t have to join,’ Amita said to all of them. ‘Only if you really want to.’

Kala was nervously plucking at her shirt. Balthazar looked at the stars and frowned heavily.

Amita looked at everyone and cleared her throat. ‘I will begin. I’m afraid our country is lost. That our Mt. Pickle will be ruined forever. All because of that dirty Terrafos, that filthy stuff we call muck and because of all the exhaust fumes and gases people produce with it.’ She closed her eyes. ‘I think of that every day. Sometimes it makes me so sad that I feel I could cry for days.’

Everyone fell silent, while they let the words of Amita sink in.

Russula started to speak next. His voice was so low, that it seemed to make the air vibrate.

‘I am afraid of people. Don’t want them too close to me. When I want to talk to someone, I prefer to talk to a tree.’

His voice broke. They all looked at the large, hairy man. He looked sad and pushed his enormous lower lip forward like a four-year old child and folded his hands in his lap.

Balthazar started to shift uneasily in his chair as he cleared his

throat. 'I-am-a-bit-different. I-mean: I-take-everything-literally. Let-me-give-you-an-example: I-now-think-we-are-going-to-dive-into-something, because-we-are-in-a-'Dive'. I-wonder-if-the-water-of-the-Fludd-will-flow-inside-and-fill-the-whole-castle. If-that-happens, I-would-like-to-know-whether-we-will-get-oxygen-tanks-and-flippers-and-masks-and-I-would-like-to-know-where-they-could-be-, because-I-do-not-see-them-anywhere. But-it-probably-is-a-'so-to-speak-dive'.'

Balthazar frowned and pulled at the tuft on his head.

'People-hardly-ever-say-when-it-is-'so-to-speak.' I-find-that-very-difficult.'

Diego couldn't believe what he'd just heard Balthazar say. It must be hard being you, he thought. Even harder than being me.

There was a moment's silence. Diego looked at Kala. They both hadn't said anything yet. *I'm not going to do this*, Diego thought. He started repeating it in his mind. *I'm not going to do this, I'm not doing this, I'm certainly not doing this-*

'My parents are not here,' Kala said suddenly. 'They are sailing in the eternal waters, looking for the Fish of Happiness. And when they find it, they will throw out a net and drag it to the coast. Then they will use it for a nice fish soup and give it to everybody to eat and all people will be happy.'

Kala shook her head, sad. 'But maybe that isn't true..., ' she murmured softly. 'Maybe they are just dead.'

The girl looked up, with tears in her eyes.

‘But I still think they could also be sailing on the eternal waters.’

Diego looked at her. He realized with a shock what he had seen in her eyes earlier that day. That pain, that he had felt before.

‘Your parents died in the explosion in the Power Station!’ Diego sputtered out without thinking.

Surprised, Kala nodded. ‘How did you know...’

Then Diego started to talk. As soon as the first word had left his lips, he knew he wouldn’t stop. ‘I see and feel things nobody else feels,’ he said, hoarse from emotion. ‘And I hate it! It makes me do silly things I don’t want to do. And now no one wants to have anything to do with me, and even worse, my father has disappeared. Why? Because *he* didn’t want to listen to me! And he was my best friend - my only friend!’

‘What would you like to say to your father, Diego?’ Amita said softly.

‘That I hate him!’ Diego screamed all of a sudden. The words shot like bullets from the bottom of his heart to his mouth. And he could not have stopped them, even if they had sealed his mouth with stitches. ‘I hate you! You shouldn’t ever go flying when it’s dangerous! You should have listened to me, do you hear me? You should have listened!’

Diego screamed. His voice echoed in the large room. He looked quickly at the stars, because he didn’t want to look at the others

with tears on his face. Diego halted, took a deep breath, and continued.

‘And I hate myself! I don’t want to feel all these things!’

Diego’s shoulders were shaking. At last the tears appeared that he had kept back so long. Nobody stirred. He felt how Amita gently took his hand in hers. He looked up through his tears.

‘Well done, boy. Now give Kala a hand.’

Diego did what Amita had said. Kala did the same with Russula, who did the same with Balthazar. Amita gave Balthazar her right hand and closed the circle. ‘We have shared our secrets...’ Amita said.

‘You need courage to do that. Now we are joined together. Do you feel that? That is real energy.’

And Diego did feel it. He felt how the wave of energy went from Amita’s hand up: through his arms, over his chest and his head, and through his other arm and hand to Kala. It tickled. The wave circled faster and faster through his body and got stronger every second.

‘Watch the screen,’ Amita said excitedly. ‘See-Our-Brain does the rest.’

‘It’s a brain viewer,’ Kala whispered in Diego’s ear, pointing to the black box in front of them. ‘That’s it. You write it like this: C.R. Brain.’

‘A brain viewer... what is that?’ Diego asked.

But Kala didn’t answer. Instead, she pursed her lips and whistled a little tune. Immediately the big glass wall changed into a gigantic

white screen. The next moment the camera lens shot a bright beam of light through the room.

The Glasses that See Everything

Diego put his glasses on and looked with wide eyes at the enormous screen in front of him, that just a few moments ago had been a glass wall filled with fireflies.

The light from the camera eye changed... Diego started to distinguish shapes and colors... and suddenly he saw himself sitting in the Swing Tree, together with his father. They were eating buns from Olle Mallet and were having a great time - precisely the thought that had been running through his mind.

Besides his own thoughts, Diego now saw something else appear on the screen: Balthazar in a diving suit with large goggles and flippers. He swam around in the castle and held a soaking wet piece of macocucake in his hand.

In the top right-hand corner of the screen, an image appeared of a man and a woman. They were in a small boat, dragging a splashing fish in a net to the coast, with a broad smile on their faces. Clearly a thought of Kala's. And to the left, a little higher than the middle, Diego saw a picture of Russula, sitting in a circle with talking trees. 'Think about the danger,' Amita said impatiently. 'Think of what the danger could be. We have to get a picture. One collective picture. Then we might know more.'

What is the danger... Diego asked himself. What's the danger, what's the danger...

Suddenly all pictures faded. Something else appeared instead. It became sharper and bigger, until a very sharp picture of Pickleby filled the entire screen. The famous red roofs of the white houses shone happily in the sunlight. It looked like a painting.

The next moment Diego felt something in his chest. A sharp pain. 'Ouch!' he shouted.

Bang.

In front of them, on the screen, they saw the town hall explode. The next moment they saw smoke and fire, and then running people and panicking children.

Diego was breathless. His heart beat violently inside his chest. Just as sudden as the explosion has appeared, the whole screen went black. And then, out of the darkness, a huge face materialized. A man's face. But his eyes were invisible.

'That's it!' Amita said excitedly. 'He is the danger! He is trying to hide! He doesn't want to be recognized!'

The man's hand became visible. The hand held a lipstick. Carefully, the hand colored the lips. Then the face started to laugh. A really horrible laugh. The sight of that horrible laugh was enough to make Diego feel sick. He couldn't look at it any longer.

'Keep watching, Diego!' Amita shouted. 'We have to know who it is!'

Diego suddenly had the feeling he was ill. A sickening, nervous feeling spread from his stomach through his body.

Diego removed his glasses, put them on the table and wiped his face desperately. He pushed out his chair with a wild gesture and turned it away from the screen. One of the legs landed right on top of Beast's tail.

Beast squealed. He jumped up and started to run around in circles. He barked once very loud, so piercingly that it hurt Diego's ears. Then he turned his huge body around. His long, stiff tail wiped Diego's glasses off the table with the bottle of puresour. Together they bounced towards the edge of the terrace, the bottle and the glasses, doing summersaults and pirouettes as if they had been a circus act for years. And then, with a final, elegant bounce, the bottle and the glasses jumped over the side.

Everyone held their breath and listened. Just as Diego thought they had both landed somewhere in a branch, he heard the shattering sound of breaking glass, followed by a moment's silence.

Then, they heard a rumbling sound as if a giant dryer had started. It went faster and faster. Then the cracking sound, followed by some puffs, some snorts and grunts and finally, three loud thuds. And then it all stopped as fast as it had begun.

Art the 47th ... the machine had pulverized his glasses.

They all crawled to the edge and looked down. There was Art, silently letting off steam.

‘That doesn’t look too good,’ Amita said. ‘Let’s go down and see what happened. This Dive is over anyway.’

Everyone boarded Cruiser. The boat descended slowly. As soon as they touched the ground, Diego got out and ran to Art 47th.

The little door was open. The screen was flashing. Diego read the text on the screen.

I CAN MAKE THIS FOR YOU: GLASSES THAT SEE EVERYTHING

Diego looked around in desperation. ‘I just want my own glasses back!’ he shouted, whimpering. ‘My mother will kill me if I break my glasses!’

Amita looked at him sadly. ‘I’m sorry Diego. Art pulverizes everything that is thrown into the tube. He can only make what he offers.’

Diego turned away, angry and sad. Nobody dared say anything.

‘Your glasses are broken anyway,’ Kala said, breaking the silence. ‘I mean - you’ve got nothing to lose, right?’

Diego thought about the situation for a moment. ‘All right then,’ he grumbled. ‘Make them. You can start that strange Art.’

Immediately Kala hit the start button with her fist. The next moment, they heard the sound of metal hitting metal, then a sound as if a whipping-cream spray can was being emptied and then the noise of a hissing steam engine... and all was quiet.

The little door opened with hardly a squeak. With shaking hands, Diego took his glasses out of the machine. He held them in the

daylight and looked over them carefully.

The glasses looked exactly the same. The temples were the same, the frame was just as black. Diego hesitated, then put them on. He looked around.

He could still see as clearly as before. Maybe even better.

Diego sighed in relief. Just a pair of glasses that see everything.

Logical, Diego thought, because that is what glasses do. They let you see everything.

‘Do-you-really-see-everything? And-if-you-see-everything, can-you-tell-me-what-everything-is?’ Balthazar asked. ‘Because-I-am-really-curious.’

‘Nothing special,’ Diego said. ‘Just the same.’

He looked up at Balthazar. That was strange... Balthazar was suddenly in pajamas. He opened a cupboard door and took out a chocolate bar. He stuffed it into his mouth and went back to bed.

Diego blinked. How was that possible? They were in the castle.

Startled, Diego removed the glasses.

There was Balthazar standing next to him as he was before. Not in pajamas, but normal clothes.

‘Why did you remove your glasses, Diego?’ Amita asked, as her inquisitive eyes looked for his eyes. ‘See anything special?’

‘No, no, everything is fine!’ Diego said.

Suddenly he had had it. He had enough of the castle, enough of those silly meetings about dangerous things. Enough of trees, flying

boats, inventors, and rhyming hairy men. Diego wanted to go home.

'I have to go,' he said.

'Me-too!' Balthazar added immediately.

Together they ran to the exit. Kala followed them and closed the door behind them. Amita and Russula remained standing beside Art 47th.

'What do you think?' Amita said.

'Whatever you may think of this – there is something a bit amiss,'

Russula snorted decidedly.

'The glasses that see everything...' Amita said. 'I would really like to know what our young friend sees with those.'

Home

Diego and Balthazar walked home under a blanket of stars as Diego thought about what he had seen: Balthazar in pajamas, getting a chocolate bar.

‘Do you ever get up at night to eat a chocolate bar?’ Diego asked.

‘Every-night,’ Balthazar replied, surprised. ‘How-did-you-get-hold-of-that-information?’

‘Uhh - I don’t really know,’ Diego said quickly. ‘I was just wondering whether you ever do things like that.’

‘Oh-OK.’

They were both dead tired. Diego was glad that he didn’t have to say anything and that Balthazar didn’t say anything either. They walked together over the Dirty Bridge in silence. Pickleby was asleep. The sound of their footsteps echoed off the walls of the deserted Main Street.

They arrived at the square. The statue of Willibrord was lit by the moonlight. I’m glad I didn’t jump off your hat, Diego thought to himself.

All the important shops of the village were located on the square. You had the bakery of Olle Mallet, who would start again at four o’clock in the morning to make fresh bread, crispy croissants,

baguettes, tarts, blueberry muffins and other goodies. Next door was the cheese shop of the same Olle Mallet. His specialty – goat cheese with ginger – was already on display in the window. Next to the cheese shop you had café The Sour Depth. Diego had often looked through the window and had seen Zeb tell fisherman’s tales to anyone who was willing to listen.

Next to the Sour Depth you had the butcher shop, Danglingbone. Diego looked at the window. He realized for the first time how terribly tidy the steaks and chicken legs had been laid out next to each other. Must be Balthazars’ work, he thought.

Diego glanced at his new friend. It was time to say goodbye.

‘Maybe-we-will-see-each-other-soon,’ Balthazar said. ‘And-maybe-not. Anyway, I-guess-time-will- tell.’ Balthazar smiled a little bit.

‘Hypothetically-of-course, because-time-cannot-speak.’

Diego shook his hand. ‘Eh, yes, exactly. You said it right.’

Balthazar opened the door at the back, the entrance to the house above the shop.

Diego watched him go, turned around and walked away. It was only a few minutes’ walking to his house. When he got home, he found his mother sitting at the table, reading a book.

‘Finally - there you are!’ she said, worried. ‘Where have you been all this time?’

‘Here and there and everywhere,’ Diego said, avoiding his mothers’ inquisitive eyes. ‘Eh... I’m going to sleep. Good night.’

Diego wanted to run up the stairs quickly, but Anna Dazzler got hold of his arm. She looked at him carefully.

‘Come on, put your glasses on. For me.’

Diego put them on reluctantly. His mother looked at him with a tender look in her eyes.

Strange... She looked much younger, all of a sudden. And she had a baby on her arm, whom she was covering with kisses.

Diego took another good look at the baby - and recognized his own face.

‘Those glasses make your eyes much bigger,’ his mother said. ‘As a baby, you also had such beautiful, large eyes.’

His mother kissed him on the forehead. She wanted to hug him, but Diego ran up the stairs to his room as fast as possible, closed the door, and removed his glasses.

‘The glasses that see everything...’ he mumbled to them. ‘The glasses that see strange things is what you mean.’

Diego opened the window and looked outside. Below him, the mountain stretched all the way to Kragtstad. Thousands of lights twinkled skywards. But Diego only saw a large hazy light. He suddenly realized that he had never seen how it really looked down there. I’ll put the glasses on once more, Diego thought. One last time.

Slowly he placed the temples behind his ears and looked down, curious.

Diego was surprised by the beauty of the sight. Suddenly, Kragtstad didn't look threatening at all. It reminded him of a village in a fairy tale.

'Maybe I'll keep you for a little while longer,' he said to the black thing, as if it could hear him. He put them on his night table, put on his pajamas and went to sleep.

No Longer Alone

Diego walked through Pickleby. The whole village was deserted.

Some buildings were reduced to rubble.

... I have to watch out for the bombs.

He walked through Main Street towards the square. He approached the statue carefully, bent down, and sat down with his back using it as a support.

Suddenly, the statue tapped him on the shoulder. Diego looked up.

The statue was not Willibrord. It was the man from the Dive with the horrible laugh.

Diego could not see his eyes, no matter how hard he scrutinized.

They were hidden in a haze.

... Who are you? ... Show yourself!

The man grinned and put lipstick on his lips, pursed them for a moment and fell into a fit of laughter. With every laugh that came out of his mouth, one of the buildings on the square exploded: the cheese shop, the bakery, Butcher Danglingbone...

... No - Balthazar!

Diego wanted to run, but the man from the Dive put his hand on Diego's forehead and stopped him.

... Balthazar! Balthazar!

‘Diego, wake up! You’re having a nightmare.’

Diego opened his eyes. His mother was standing next to his bed with one hand on his forehead.

‘Is everything all right, dear?’

Diego nodded, confused. ‘Er – yes. Sure, everything’s fine.’

‘Good. You have a visitor, darling. A girl is standing at the door, It’s a uh, a - a girl in all black.’

Diego jumped out of bed, surprised. ‘A girl in all black?’

Curious, Diego put on his clothes and went down the stairs. Kala was standing at the door in her black outfit.

‘Good morning!’ she screamed.

Goodness, did she ever have a loud voice, Diego thought.

‘Do you want to come out and play?’

Diego frowned. ‘You mean *hang out*. Playing is for four-year olds.’

‘Whatever suits you, kid. Do you want to hang out?’

Diego hesitated. He still found her strange. But it had been a long time since anyone had wanted to do something with him.

‘Where?’ Diego said.

‘Where? On The Sour Twist Estate, of course.’

Diego recalled last night, with the strange Dive into the Magic Field and Art the 47th. His head told him not to go. But the thought of spending time swinging on the lianas and eating Cocrapes made his heart sing.

‘All right,’ he said, all of a sudden.

‘Don’t forget your glasses,’ his mother shouted. But Diego closed the door as fast as he could and darted off. If there was anything he didn’t want with him, it was those glasses. Diego had had enough of strange things. He would rather walk around as if in a thick fog, than put those things on his nose again. Together, they walked out of the door towards the square. First, they went to Butcher Danglingbone.

Balthazar was busy putting the sausages in a perfect circle in the window. Diego had to knock on it four times before he looked up. When he saw Diego and Kala a broad smile appeared on his face. He removed his apron and came outside.

‘Good–morning-Diego-and-good-morning-Kala,’ Balthazar said politely.

‘Morning, Balthazar. Doesn’t that drive you crazy, arranging all that meat into perfect rows?’ Kala asked.

For a moment Balthazar looked up, worried.

‘Crazy? I-hope-not. Is-that-possible? Can-you-go-crazy-from-arranging-meat-into-perfect-rows?’

Diego tapped on Balthazar’s shoulder. ‘So to speak, Balthazar. Kala wants to know whether you enjoy putting all that meat in a perfect order.’

Balthazar gave a sigh of relief. ‘Ah! The-answer-is-yes. I- love-doing-it. It-calms-me. Like-eating.’

‘Well,’ Diego said. ‘I guess you won’t want to hang out with us

then.'

Balthazar beamed. 'On-the-contrary. Hanging-out-with-you-makes-me-happy. And-being-happy-is-more-important- than-being-calm.'

He removed his apron, folded it carefully, put it inside, and came outside again.

Together they walked through the streets of Pickleby, on their way to The Sour Twist Estate. Diego looked at his new friends. For the first time in a long, long time he didn't feel lonely.

Holidays

From then on, every day, Diego, Kala and Balthazar went together to The Sour Twist Estate.

Diego and Kala would often swing in the lianas and jump on the trampoline. Balthazar preferred to float around in The Spring of Dreams, with closed eyes and a broad smile on his face. Every now and then he had to be pulled out and told off by Amita, because he had stayed in too long.

Amita often withdrew to her workshop on the riverbank.

Sometimes she stayed there the whole day and evening. Kala told Diego that she sometimes worked there throughout the night as well. What on earth is keeping you so busy, Diego wondered. But Amita never said anything about her activities in the wooden dome by the riverbank.

Amita told the children about Supergum, the stuff with which she could make self-inflating objects. She explained how it worked. In no time, Diego, Balthazar and Kala had built a huge slide that shot them into the river with enormous speed. By the end of the day, all they had to do was press the knob and the slide shrank itself until it was a little piece of gray matter again.

‘Why isn’t everything made out of Supergum?’ Diego asked one

time.

‘Too expensive,’ Amita replied. ‘Maybe someday.’

When they got hungry, they’d go to the Jungle and picked Cocrapes, avomatoes, Mapples or a piece of meat from the meat-giving plants. Then they’d let Art the 47th do the rest. Sometimes they soaked in The Spring of Dreams, and if they’d had enough, they would dive into the Fludd. Kala was an excellent swimmer and would shoot through the water like a dolphin. However hard he tried, Diego could not keep up with her. ‘Just forget it, boy,’ she would say. ‘I learned to swim before I could walk.’

Some days they managed to get Beast to run after a ball or to swim with them, but he preferred to lie lazily in the sun without moving a muscle. Sometimes, Diego would use Beast’s belly as a pillow and would snooze with him. Beast didn’t mind anything much, as long as you didn’t touch his food.

One of Diego’s favorite spots in Amita’s garden was the Hill of Thoughts. It was a little hill next to the river. There was a large beech tree in the middle of it. Diego loved beechnuts. Every time he opened one, he would think of his father.

On the top of the tree was a small tree house. From there you had a wonderful view over the valley. Because Diego always left his glasses at home, he couldn’t truly enjoy the view. But the peacefulness of the Hill of Thoughts made up for it.

From time to time, Russula showed up to take care of the lawn. The

trees had not spoken to him since their warning of danger. Neither had anybody mentioned the mysterious man with the horrible laugh from the Dive. And Diego was very happy about all that.

Kala's Story

The more time he spent with Kala, the more Diego wanted to know about her. She never talked about her life or how she got to Mt. Pickle. And Diego didn't dare ask her.

After two weeks however, his curiosity prevailed. 'Where do you actually come from?' he asked all of a sudden, while they were sitting with Balthazar in the tree house on the Hill of Thoughts. Kala sighed heavily. An awkward silence followed.

'Sorry. Shouldn't have asked,' Diego said quickly. He was about to take a dive into the river, when she started to talk.

'I am a Leosi,' she answered. 'You know, the fishermen.'

Diego had heard about them. The Leosi were dark people with skin the color of milk chocolate. They were known to be stubborn, brave and full of temperament. They lived off fishing. Once, his mother had shown him photographs of grinning Leosi canoeing against big waves in small, slender canoes.

'I am from Lake Konka,' she continued. 'Our tribe had been living there for over two hundred years. We thought we would stay there forever. But suddenly, the weather changed. In summer, there was less and less rain and water. Some days we would have to walk for over an hour with our canoes to reach the water. And in the winter,

it was the other way around. The water came closer and closer to the village. The waves became higher and stronger. It became very difficult for our fishermen to go fishing, dangerous even. But a Leosi isn't afraid, you hear me? A Leosi laughs at fear! So they kept on going. With the canoes, against the waves, in good weather and bad weather. But then, one night, a thunderstorm with rain, thunder and lightning...'

Kala stopped. She stared in the distance with a solemn gaze.

'Within a single minute, our whole village was washed away. We only just managed to get away in time.'

'How-could-something-terrible-like-that-happen?' Balthazar asked.

Kala looked at him furiously. 'They say it's the muck. When you burn it, the gasses go up in the air and change the weather, or something along those lines. Nobody can prove it, though. And KK industries denies everything, of course.'

Diego looked quickly at the plumes of smoke in the valley and grimaced.

'In the beginning, we wandered around,' Kala continued. 'We had no more Reffies, so we had to beg for food. We met people who told us there was work in Kragtstad. So we went there, like a lot of Leosi. My parents got a job in the Power Station of KK Industries. Strange, isn't it, to work for the enemy that ruined our village with his dirty muck? I couldn't understand it. But my parents took the job, because work meant money, and money meant a house and

food.'

Kala glanced at them with her furious eyes.

'I hate Kragtstad. It's ugly, dirty, gray, and grimy. It's noisy all day. The green-yellow air you inhale gives you a sore throat and runny eyes. And my parents worked day and night, because in Kragtstad the workers of the Power Station people don't have weekends. Therefore I was very often home alone. But I didn't complain. A Leosi doesn't complain, do you hear me? Complaining is not for us!' Kala put her chest out and looked proudly around.

'But then the explosion happened. Both my parents died on the spot.'

'How did that happen?' Diego asked, thinking back to the moment he was standing on the terrace, watching the explosion.

Kala shook her head. 'I don't know. Nobody survived to tell.'

Diego looked at Kala. I am sure it didn't happen out of the blue, he thought. But he didn't say anything.

'We buried my parents at sea,' Kala continued. 'And now they are sailing in the eternal waters.'

The girl slumped a bit. Diego felt an urge to put his arm around her, but he couldn't find the courage.

'Because we had no family in Kragtstad, I was put in an orphanage a day after the funeral. I hated it. This is not for a Leosi, I thought. A Leosi has to be free! That night I ran away. The police of Kragtstad were looking for me, so I hid in the cable car. Suddenly the thing

took off. The next moment I found myself in Pickleby. I didn't know anyone. I was afraid people would ask me all kinds of questions, so I just walked up the mountain. I arrived at The Sour Twist Estate. I was tired, so I rang the bell and asked if I could eat and drink something. Amita let me in and listened to my story. Then she said: "I like you. You know what? I'll just adopt you. Go pick out a tree hut." And I did.'

'What-an-extraordinary-story,' Balthazar said.

Diego nodded yes. He looked once more at Kala. No father, no mother, no house... how awful, he thought. Compared to that, my problems are nothing. I will never complain again.

But the moment he said that to himself, Diego knew he would never keep the promise.

Muck

It was an extremely warm, very dry summer. The people of Pickleby said it had never been so hot. The earth became rock hard and cracked from the lack of rain. In some places, the river Fludd was no more than a rippling stream. In places where a month ago you couldn't touch the bottom, you could now wade through the water. It suited Diego, Balthazar and Kala just fine. Beautiful weather every day. If it was too hot, all they had to do was simply dive into the Fludd. Yet, Amita was worried. 'This isn't normal!' she exclaimed one day, while enjoying a glass of chilled Mapple juice in the shade. 'It's because of the muck.'

'How-does-that-work-exactly?' Balthazar said. 'Because-I-am-a-little-in-the-dark-on-that-subject. So-to-speak, that-is. I-can-still-see-clearly-of-course, as-we-are-in-daylight.'

'The muck is burned,' explained Amita, 'in the motors of cars, boats, and planes, and also in the machines used in factories. This creates the energy in order for the motors to run. When the muck is burned, however, different gasses are produced and released into the air. In many places, you can see the pollution, such as in Kragtstad. In many other areas, the pollution is not visible to the naked eye, yet it still lingers in the air around us, without us

noticing.'

Amita took another sip of her Mapple juice and continued.

'The gasses in the air stop the warmth in the ground from rising up, so that it can no longer escape. Meanwhile, more gasses are produced. That's why the temperatures keep getting warmer and why strange things are happening. Such as this drought, or those short, heavy rains.'

'Then why don't they stop using the muck?' Diego asked in anger.

'Because Krudon Kragt earns a lot of money using the muck. There are two things that Krudon Kragt loves: money and power.'

Krudon Kragt...

Diego had heard of him. The young heir of KK Industries. They said he was spoiled, arrogant, nasty and merciless. He ruled KK Industries and Kragtstad with an iron fist.

'But why don't the prime minister and all his ministers in Jobriv do something about Krudon Kragt?' Kala asked.

Amita leaned in closer and narrowed her eyes. 'They say that even the government is afraid of him,' she whispered.

Diego looked up, surprised.

Balthazar cleared his throat. 'Question: what-use-are-money-and-power-to-someone-if- the-world-where-he-has-that-money-and-power-is-ruined?'

'Good question,' Amita said. 'And the answer is: I don't know.

Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe he finds it more important to be

powerful in a ruined world, than to be powerless in a successful one.'

Balthazar closed his eyes and sighed deeply. 'Second question: what-happens-with-Rebequin-if-there-is-no-more-muck? What-will-cars-and-trucks-use-for-energy? What-will-airplanes-use? How-will-ships-travel?'

'Well, let me think,' Amita said. 'Then a lot of people wouldn't be able to go to work or to the supermarket. Then hardly anyone would be able to earn money. That would also be problematic.'

'Can't all those cars and planes use something else?' Diego asked. 'Doesn't something like clean muck exist?'

Amita's eyes widened. For a moment Diego thought he had caught her red-handed.

'That would be a good solution,' Amita said slowly, 'but it's dangerous to do things like that.'

Diego, Kala and Balthazar looked up, surprised.

'Krudon Kragt doesn't want an alternative. He's afraid that people will no longer need his muck. If Krudon Kragt doesn't want it, then you had better be careful.'

Amita's remark startled Diego. 'Is Krudon Kragt really that powerful?'

'Yes.'

'That isn't fair,' he hissed through his teeth.

Amita looked at him. 'Life isn't fair, Diego.'

She stood up, wiped a few blades of grass off of her overalls, and walked back to her workshop.

‘Think about it a bit more,’ she said. ‘It would be great if you came up with an improved idea.’

‘I think you already came up with a good one,’ Diego said suddenly.

There it was again: an unexpected sentence he didn’t know was coming, shooting out of his mouth without warning.

Diego bit his tongue. Everyone was silent. The only sound they heard was the wind rustling through the branches.

Amita stopped. With a twinkle in her eyes, she looked back.

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘Maybe. But I can’t say any more about it.’ She raised her eyebrows. ‘It’s secret - a very terrible, horrible secret.’

They all watched as she opened the door of her workshop and locked it as it closed behind her.

I can’t take this, Diego thought. I’ll go insane. I will definitely go nuts.

I have to know what she’s up to.

Adventuring

Diego jumped up as his alarm went off. It was a Sunday, six o'clock in the morning. Amita always slept in on Sundays - providing the perfect opportunity for Diego's little plan.

Diego hopped out of bed and got dressed. Just before he left, he thought of his glasses. Diego hadn't worn them in a very long time. Maybe you will come in handy today, he said to himself. He cleaned the glasses, put them in his pocket, and left.

The door of Amita's workplace had no handle on the outside. She always opened the door by whistling a little tune. A few days earlier, Diego had happened to be playing near Amita's workshop and had heard the tune. He accidentally happened to have practiced that tune to perfection while at home, too.

Diego looked around. He heard a million sounds: twittering birds, the wind softly rustling the leaves, and the water floating by with a nearly inaudible murmur. But there was not a soul to be seen.

With a thumping heart, he put his hands around his mouth, wet his lips for the best sound, and whistled.

Nothing happened.

I shouldn't expect anything better, Diego thought. I shouldn't be

here in the first place. A feeling of guilt crept through his body and constricted his throat. He had already lifted his left foot to leave, when the door opened, just like that, without making a single sound.

Diego snuck in and looked around. In front of him was another door, a much smaller and narrower door.

He walked towards it and pushed. It didn't budge.

Diego steadied his feet and pushed as hard as he could with his shoulder. The second door didn't give an inch.

Suddenly, Diego felt a draft. He turned around. The first door had closed, as softly as it had opened.

There he was, caught in a place that was completely off limits.

Confused, he straightened himself and tried to think. I'll just whistle the same tune, he thought, so that the first door will open again.

Then I'll leave this place and no one will ever find out.

Diego closed his eyes and whistled the same melody he'd used to open the first door. Immediately, the second door swung open.

Of course... Diego thought. Simply the same tune as the first. At home we use the same key for the garage as we do for the house. Makes sense.

Behind the door, he saw a purplish, shimmering light.

Little White Worms

Diego sighed deeply. Once inside, he found the ceiling of the workshop to be very tall, but pleasantly so. The large, round windows allowed rays of light to shine into the room. The sunrays were intercepted by rotating blades of Energyfans. The shadows they cast on the floor looked like rhythmic dancing flowers. For a moment, Diego forgot he was committing a crime.

There was a workbench in the middle of the room. Laying on top of the workbench, Diego saw all sorts of different useful tools: pliers, keys, a welding gun, hammers, and some iron scraps.

Along the walls was an assortment of machines he couldn't quite make out. At least, not without glasses.

Diego touched his pocket. He hesitated. Should he put them on? It wasn't that interesting after all; just a few machines, some tools, a fire extinguisher, and in one of the corners, a large purple tarp - Diego was startled. At the same moment, his nose began to itch. Diego moved closer to get a better look. The large purple tarp separated a large part of the dome from the rest. Exasperated, Diego leaned his hand against the tarp... and fell straight through.

Diego jumped up and glanced behind him, astonished. The piece of cloth wasn't even torn. A slight stirring was the only evidence that he had just stepped through the cloth.

'Cool stuff...' Diego mumbled softly.

It was warm, a much warmer temperature than on the other side of the tarp. Diego looked around. Against the ceiling, three red hanging lamps were producing a ton of heat. Diego wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead and further examined the area.

A large basin was standing against the back wall. It was long and sloped upwards with a sheet of glass covering it. An enormous television screen hung above it.

A strong stench rose from the basin. The strong smell was so overpowering that Diego pinched his nose tight with his fingers.

A microscope was screwed onto the glass sheet, in the middle. A sturdy video cable connected the microscope to the screen. On the screen, Diego could vaguely see small white things moving slowly.

Diego felt in his coat pocket for his glasses, put them on, and looked again.

The moving things looked like tiny worms. They were snow-white and smooth as billiard balls. One of the worms stretched... and further... and further... and broke in two. At the same moment, a few drops fell from the two halves.

That one must be dead, Diego thought. As dead as a doornail.

But nothing like it. Astonished, Diego watched as the two little

worms grew longer... and longer... and then broke in two again.

Now there were four of them.

‘What is this?’ Diego mumbled. ‘Are they going to keep on multiplying like that?’

Deep in thought about what he had just witnessed, he shuffled on - until he suddenly hit his head.

A clear, colorless pipe ran throughout the whole room. It started at the back of the long basin and ended at the other side of the room, in a mason jar.

There was a white sticker on the pipe. Something had been scribbled on it. Curious, Diego approached it and took a closer look. He recognized the handwriting as Amita’s.

Microbe: Dirty Little Siegfried

Diet: used plastic bread bags, moldy coffee filters, rotten tomatoes and old newspapers.

Amount of Salvadus: six drops per hour

‘Dirty Little Siegfried...’ Diego said, surprised.

He looked around. A singular drop of what he assumed to be Salvadus was working its way up the pipe at the speed of a snail. It was the very first drop.

‘Maybe you need some energizing food,’ Diego said aloud. ‘Because this isn’t getting us anywhere.’

He glanced at the screen again. The little white worms were crawling across the screen at a sluggish speed. Diego watched one of the worms individually. It floated amongst its friends as if it were rolling in the grass on a lazy summer's day.

Suddenly, the worm started to move faster. The next moment it shot up like a cannon ball. From the opposite side, another worm shot over the screen.

The activity increased with every passing second until Diego could only see a large wriggling mass on the screen: tiny worms, that broke apart at amazing speeds, with liquid drops falling out, caused by the splitting of their bodies.

All of a sudden, Diego felt cold. With chattering teeth, he wrapped his arms around his body.

The light changed. The red glow of the lamps had disappeared. Diego looked up through the window at the full moon, which was bizarre, because it was morning and there shouldn't be a moon. Suddenly, Diego heard a rushing sound as if he was standing next to a river. Diego looked up. Instead of drops, Diego saw a stream rushing through the pipe. The stream became stronger and more forceful, until the mason jar was overflowing.

The Salvadus made its way across the table and splashed to the ground. The puddle became bigger and bigger and began moving in the direction of Diego. He quickly stepped back, but he wasn't fast enough. His sneakers were already wet. Soaked and sticky.

I have to get out of here, Diego thought. This is not good.

As fast as he could, he turned around, dove through the tarp, and fell straight into Amita's arms.

Caught

Amita looked at him angrily, her eyes bulging.

‘The Salvadus!’ Diego squeaked. ‘The Salvadus! It’s overflowing!’

Amita glanced through the tarp that readily opened for her, and wrapped itself cozily around her neck.

‘I don’t see anything,’ she said, irritated.

‘The Salvadus, on the floor!’ Diego insisted.

Amita looked again. ‘There’s nothing to see.’

She grunted once more. Diego removed his glasses, scratched behind his ears and stuck his head through the tarp again.

Without his glasses, he couldn’t see very much. But it was clear that there was no liquid on the floor.

‘The little worms,’ Diego muttered. ‘They were all shooting across the screen and...’

That’s when Diego began to understand what had happened.

His glasses. It was all because of his glasses. They had made him see strange things. Again.

Ashamed, he looked down at his shoes, waiting for whatever it was that was going to happen.

‘Diego, Diego...,’ Amita sighed. ‘You don’t know what you’ve done, boy. Go get the others. We have to talk.’

A short time later, everyone was sitting silently around the table in the workshop. Balthazar had just arrived and was still panting from the climb up the Sour Twist. Kala looked with a questioning look in her eyes from Amita to Diego, but Diego kept his stare fixated to the floor.

Amita was furiously walking around the table. Suddenly, she stopped. The wrinkles on her forehead danced threateningly up and down.

‘Diego snuck in here this morning,’ she said, her voice booming, ‘though I had strictly forbidden it.’

Amita looked at him scornfully. Kala added her own look of disdain. Diego wished he could disappear into thin air.

‘So now my little secret is out,’ Amita continued. ‘I have to tell you everything. I don’t want to, but that’s the way it is.’ Amita sighed deeply. ‘I hope you can carry this burden.’

Dirty Little Siegfried

‘Do you know why I became an inventor?’ Amita asked.

‘Is-it-maybe-because-you-like-it?’ Balthazar asked.

‘Certainly, inventing is fun. But there is more to it. I want to save our country from ruin.’

Balthazar was thinking deeply.

‘I-don’t-really-see-how-Mapples-or-Cocrapes-or-supergum-can-save-our-country.’

‘You’re right,’ Amita said. ‘They can’t. But microbes can.’

Kala, Diego and Balthazar grimaced. ‘But - microbes are dirty,’ Kala said, questioningly. ‘They can make you ill and cause disease!’

Amita nodded. ‘Some microbes can. But there are far more beneficial microbes than bad ones. Did you know your body is full of microbes? And that there are ten times as many in the air around us? They hang around us like a living shield. They protect us from other harmful microbes. In fact, you could even say they keep us alive.’

Balthazar looked at the air around him with the utmost concentration.

‘They are invisible,’ Amita said. ‘To the naked human eye, at least. You can only see them with a super-microscope.’

‘Ah! That-explains-a-lot,’ Balthazar said, relieved.

‘But where do they come from?’ Kala asked.

‘Microbes are the oldest inhabitants of this world. They were the first living things ever. One could even say they’re our ancestors.’

Amita stared off into the distance before continuing.

‘Microbes are strange. They don’t lay eggs or have offspring. They simply split apart into two segments and multiply.’

Balthazar frowned with a troubling look in his eyes again.

‘As-if-they-break-their-body-in-two? That-is-very-strange.’

‘Yes. But wait, it gets even more bizarre: some of those microbes make a type of juice when they split apart. And do you want to know what the strangest thing is?’

Amita bent forward and started to whisper. ‘One of those microbes makes a very unique juice. I call it Salvadus.’

Diego, Balthazar, and Kala looked at each other.

‘Super-clean muck,’ Amita hissed. ‘As clean as water.’

Amita got up and walked to the tarp in the corner of the workshop.

‘Just step through this tapestry,’ she said. ‘And you can see it for yourself.’

Weird, it really does almost suck you in, Diego thought, as he stepped through the tapestry again. It tickled a little bit.

Not knowing what to expect, Kala and Balthazar hesitated for a moment, but then followed his lead. Amita walked past the basin

and pointed to the white wriggling worms and the drops on the screen above the basin.

‘I call this microbe Dirty Little Siegfried,’ she said, ‘because it looks like my old Uncle Siegfried: snow-white and as bald as a bowling ball. And just as dirty, too.’

Balthazar watched intensely as the Salvadus drops moved slowly through the pipe. Amita grabbed the mason jar and held it against the light.

‘If cars were to run on this, you wouldn’t get any exhaust fumes. Just clean, pure air.’

Amita smiled and looked at the mason jar, but as fast as the smile had appeared, it was wiped off her face. She turned her gaze to stare at each of them. Diego could see a red vein in the white of her right eye.

‘Everything you see here is top secret, do you understand? Nobody can ever know about this. If Krudon Kragt finds out that we are making clean muck out of microbes, we are in grave danger.’

‘Even if it’s such a small quantity?’ Diego asked.

‘Even if it was nothing more than a singular drop.’

Diego swallowed and looked at Kala.

‘Dirty-little-Siegfried-isn’t-very-active-yet,’ Balthazar said suddenly, to change the subject. ‘At-this-speed-it-will-take-...’ - he closed his eyes to calculate - ‘twenty-nine-days, five-hours-and-twenty-six-minutes-to-fill-that-jerry-can.’

Amita wiped her brow and rubbed her eyes. She looked very tired.

‘You’re right, it’s not going very fast. Just a few drops per hour.’

Diego looked at the mason jar and thought about what he had seen earlier that morning through his glasses. Waves of Salvadus flowing through the pipe, even overflowing the mason jar.

A drop of sweat fell from his eyebrow and rolled down his nose.

That’s strange, Diego thought, when I saw all that through my glasses it was freezing and the moon was shining.

‘Why is it so warm here?’ he asked hesitantly.

‘The microbes don’t function well in other climates,’ Amita said. ‘All scientists have agreed on that. The warmer, the better.’

If all scientists believe that, then it must be true, Diego thought. So he kept his mouth shut about what he had seen earlier.

Flape

Summer passed slowly. Amita did all kinds of tests with the Dirty Little Siegfrieds. She added some old newspapers, which only resulted in one extra drop a day. Then she did a couple tests with a hard plastic doll and some salt. That resulted in just three extra drops per week.

Sometimes Balthazar would sit the whole day in the workshop, watching the screen. Sweating like a horse and armed with a large jug of Mapple juice and hotdogs made from the meat making plants, he would watch as the little worms slowly grew, split in two, and then crawled on in an endless mass of wriggling worms. Diego didn't understand how someone could do that the whole day, but Balthazar found it all 'extremely-interesting' and diligently took an endless amount of notes.

Very often, Amita would grow tired of carrying out all the different experiments in order to try and make more Salvadus, and would instead busy herself with her other inventions. Those were Diego's favorite days.

She had been working on the *Flape* for the last couple weeks. 'The name comes from the words *Flying* and *Cape*. 'I'm sorry, I'm just not very good at creating names,' Amita had apologized when

showing them.

The Flape seemed to be a creatively designed pair of overalls. Amita had looked at the silhouette of a soaring eagle in order to make the design. Wings extended out from shoulder straps. Two small jet engines that ran on Salvadus were attached to the ankles to project you up into the air.

The first flights were not much more than uncoordinated prances on the lawn. And the energy consumption only allowed them a few minutes of this prancing until the last of the Salvadus was used up.

‘Can’t we get some muck from the village?’ Diego asked one day. ‘That way we could test it longer and more efficiently.’

‘Muck?’ Amita shouted outraged. ‘Terrafos? I will never have anything to do with that rubbish. Conversation over!’

So they had to wait a full week before the army of Dirty Little Siegfrieds had produced a few more drops of Salvadus to run another trial.

In the meantime, Russula had built an enormous sandbox for Balthazar. He had mixed the sand with special clay that he retrieved from the bottom of the Fludd. This made the sand much stronger, enabling Balthazar to build bigger and stronger models. Russula had also made an awning that gave Balthazar shade and protected his pieces of art work from the rain.

‘I-do-not-know-what-I-should-say-to-thank-you,’ Balthazar said. ‘I-do-not-say-that-to-be-polite-or-anything, but-because-I-do-not-

know-how-I-can-express-these-deep-feelings-of-gratitude.'

Diego had never seen anyone play as happily in a sandbox as his new friend. In the span of just a couple of days, Balthazar had created a model of Amita's complete property and all its details, including the Energyfans in the round windows. Balthazar had even made them sparkle with glitter. Immediately afterwards, he'd embarked on an even larger project: a miniature Pickleby. First, he built Drift Alley, with special emphasis on number seven, the house of the Dazzler family. Diego knew that this was Balthazar's way of saying that Diego was his best friend. In turn, he thanked Balthazar by constantly providing him with hotdogs, Macocucake, and Mapple pie.

Diego hoped fervently that Amita would be successful in making Dirty Little Siegfried produce more Salvadus, as he had seen that one day with his glasses. He desperately wanted to make a real flight with the Flape before the end of summer vacation. He wanted to soar high above the Giant Forest, free as a bird.

But unfortunately, that didn't work out. Even though Amita had managed to double the efficiency of Salvadus production and the Flape was now in its third improved version, it was not enough to take you more than one bumpy little trip over the lawn and back. After that, the Salvadus was gone and there was nothing else to do but wait, wait, and wait for more to be made.

Back to School

The first day of school back from summer vacation, Diego got up with a stomach ache. He rubbed his tummy. No, this was not a normal tummy ache. I am definitely coming down with something, Diego thought. Like a wounded soldier, he limped downstairs to his mother.

‘I don’t feel well,’ Diego complained. ‘I think I’m sick.’

‘Don’t be silly, boy,’ Anna said. ‘Get dressed and eat your breakfast. And don’t forget to put your glasses on! Otherwise you won’t be able to see what the teacher writes down.’

Diego sighed deeply. His fairy-tale life had ended.

When he was all dressed and ready to go to school, he stepped into the room to say goodbye. His mother was reading *The Pickle Times*. Diego’s eye fell on the front page:

MAGNITRUM BOMBS IN PICKLEBY?

‘Magnitrum Bombs ...’ repeated Diego slowly.

‘What? Oh yes,’ his mother said. ‘It’s nothing to worry about. A few Bomb-specialists have come to Pickleby to do an investigation on whether there are still some lost Magnitribombs in the ground.’

You know, from the Six-Year War.'

'The Six-Year War? But that was ages ago.'

'That's right honey, you're right. But they say they could still explode! And they fear they might, with the risk of minor earthquakes as a result.'

'But we've never had any earthquakes. Why would there suddenly be any risk of having any now?'

'It says here that there's been some indicators that Mt. Pickle could experience some trembling. Many years ago, two other mountain villages had to be evacuated because of it. All the townspeople had to leave. Oh well, it could all just be Codswallop, so I wouldn't worry about it. They need to fill the newspapers with something, right?'

On his way to school, Diego thought about the end of the past school year, how the children had ignored and bullied him. It probably won't be any better now, either, Diego thought gloomily. One thing was crystal clear to Diego: the first thing they would tease him about were his new glasses. These strange, new glasses that made him see strange things.

Diego started to get nervous. He thought about the way they'd made fun of him last year. He definitely didn't want to go through that again.

Diego looked around. He was walking on Fludd Road, along the river.

Suddenly, he had the strong urge to get rid of his glasses. He took them in his hand, stretched his arm backwards, put one leg forward and tensed his muscles. 'I'll throw them right in the middle, where nobody will ever find them, Diego thought. And then I'll just tell my mother that I lost them.

'Stop!'

Diego jumped. It was Police Officer Sorety, approaching him quietly in that typical skipping way of his. Diego had always wondered why he walked like that. Sorety had his chest puffed out like a proud peacock. His police hat, which was too big for his head, danced up, down, and all around on his blond head of hair. The trousers of his uniform were too short and revealed his white, skinny legs.

'If it isn't Mr. Dazzler. What are we doing over here?'

'Uh, nothing special,' Diego said. He tried to hide his glasses up his sleeve, but Sorety had already seen them and stuck out his hand.

'Ah ha – glasses! And why were we wanting to throw them into the Fludd?'

Sorety always said *we*, regardless of who he was talking to. Strange, Diego thought, because I'm here all alone. He lowered his eyes and didn't know what to say.

'Do we have a problem with these glasses?'

Diego shook his head.

'Very well. Then I suggest we put them back on again and keep them there.'

Sorety gave them back to Diego, gesturing him to put them on his nose.

‘And what do we want to become later?’ Sorety said suddenly.

‘Uh - a pilot seems nice.’

‘Ah. A pilot! And do we think we can become a pilot without glasses?’

‘No, Officer Sorety.’

‘Exactly. Now put your glasses on immediately and off to school you go.’

Diego put his glasses on and stared for a moment at the village policeman.

‘Officer Sorety? What did you want to become when you were young?’

For a moment Sorety was taken back by this question. ‘What I wanted to become? Boy, that’s a difficult question...’

He stared dreamily over the Fludd River. Diego followed his gaze over the water. Then he looked again at Sorety and – What was that?

Unlike the moment before, the policeman was suddenly wearing a snow-white tutu. He took a few steps and then pirouetted in the direction of the river. The Fludd had changed into an enormously large stage. And the trees on the other side had become people. They were standing and applauding enthusiastically. Sorety curtsied, his eyes filled with tears of happiness.

Diego removed his glasses. There was Sorety, in his police uniform. Nothing out of the ordinary.

‘What I wanted to be? You don’t ask a policeman questions like that!’

Sorety’s voice sky-rocketed in octaves, so high, he nearly squeaked. He shifted his gaze towards the ground, not quite meeting Diego’s eyes.

‘I’m sorry, Officer Sorety,’ Diego said. ‘I’ll never do it again. Uh... Officer Sorety?’

Irritated, the policeman looked back up at Diego.

‘Do you like ballet?’

Constable Sorety’s eyes bulged as he blushed. ‘That’s enough!’ he squeaked. ‘Off to school you go!’

Quickly and angrily, he skipped off.

Diego looked at the glasses in his hand. Maybe this can be more fun than I thought, he said to himself.

Diego put the glasses back on his face and continued on his way. Behind him, he heard a truck chugging along. It was the garbage collector passing by. It stopped in front of him as the garbage man got off the ledge of the truck and, with a sulky face, inspected the rubbish bags on the pavement. Diego studied the man patiently and waited to see something unusual. Sure enough, it didn’t take long until his patience was rewarded.

One of the rubbish bags was no longer gray but gold. Curious, the

dustman opened the bag. The bag was full of money. The green bills flew up and out of the bag as they danced around him. He closed the bag as fast as he could and ran to the end of the street, laughing with joy.

Diego removed his glasses. There was the garbage man again. This time, instead of opening the bags, he threw them into the open container of the truck with a bored expression. He felt Diego's gaze on him and turned around to glare at him.

'What's the matter?' he said angrily.

'Uh... nothing. By the way, do you ever open up the bags to find anything nice in the rubbish? Perhaps a bag filled with money, for instance?'

Immediately, the dustman dropped the bags he was holding and stared at Diego, with his jaw wide open.

Diego quickly turned his back on the dustman, trying to hide his chuckling.

As fast as he could, Diego walked the rest of the way to school.

With a twinkle in his eyes, he entered the school playground, looking at all the children to see if anything happened.

Suddenly he saw Rufus sticking out in the crowd. There he was, the big bully, with his father Bunkert Rotalot. Bunkert held his son's head back as if he was about to clock him in the ears. Rufus seemed to realize what was about to happen and ducked, but he was too slow. Bunkert hit him upside the head not once, but over and over

again. Diego came to realize they were no longer standing on the playground, but inside a garage. Rufus was standing in the corner, crying, while his father gave him a sound beating. Finally, the father walked away, leaving Rufus crying against a wall.

So that's how it works, Diego thought. Rufus is bullied by his father - so he bullies us.

Rufus walked with a menacing look through his garage towards Diego. He came closer and closer.

Wait... Rufus was no longer in the garage. He was walking on the playground. This was no longer a thought of Rufus's he was seeing with the glasses. This was real.

Diego felt a wave of fear roll through his stomach. He quickly walked backwards, but was stopped when he hit the fence behind him.

'Well, well Dazzler...' Rufus said, with a grin. 'I almost didn't recognize you with four eyes. You know you look really stupid, don't you? Idiot.'

Rufus grabbed Diego's coat. Oily strands of hair danced like little devils in front of his eyes.

Suddenly the school bell rang. For a moment Rufus was distracted. As fast as he could, Diego broke loose and ran to the entrance. He nearly collided with Balthazar and Kala.

'Good-morning-Diego-my-friend,' Balthazar said solemnly.

'What a cool school, dude!' Kala shouted. 'You know I've never

been to school? We got our lessons around the camp fire. I always thought I'd hate school. But it's not bad at all, in my opinion!'

Everybody passing looked with surprise at the girl with the shrill voice and the strange black outfit and then glanced scornfully at Diego and Balthazar.

Well, it's clear and irreversible, Diego thought. We're going to be bullied, period.

But Diego couldn't care less. There were three of them now, which was a whole lot better than being alone.

Nobody Sees What Diego Sees

In the classroom, Diego sat down at his table. He was thinking about Rufus and the things he'd seen that morning with his glasses. Balthazar plumped down on the chair next to him and sighed. His chair cracked as if in agony. Kala sat down on his other side. Diego looked at his friends, deciding whether he should tell them about what he had seen that morning. He stared into the nothingness in front of him and thought about Officer Sorety, the garbage man, and Rufus being smacked around by his father.

'Diego! Diego!'

Kala and Balthazar were staring at him.

'Uh? What?'

'We were asking you how your new glasses are,' Kala said.

Diego tightened his lips, sighed deeply, and looked at them. 'I see strange things,' he whispered. 'As if...'

'As if what?' Kala said, full of anticipation.

'As if I can see what people are thinking and feeling.'

'That-is-extraordinary, to-say-the-least,' Balthazar said. 'Can-I-try-them?'

Diego gave the glasses to his friend. Balthazar put them on. His fat head pushed the temples out a bit.

‘Look at me,’ Diego said, thinking about the yummiest chocolate bar he had ever eaten. ‘What am I thinking of?’

Diego started to make smacking movements with his mouth, but Balthazar didn’t react. ‘I-do-not-see-anything,’ He said finally. ‘I-mean-I-see-you-but-I-assume-that-is- normal. I-did-get-hungry-from-all-that-looking. I-wouldn’t-mind-a-delicious-chocolate-bar.’ He gave the glasses to Kala, grabbed one of the seven chocolate bars from his pocket and started to remove the wrapper without making a sound.

Kala put the glasses on and stared intently at Diego. ‘Here goes,’ she said. ‘You promise to think of something fun?’

Diego thought of the trampoline at the Sour Twist, how he had been catapulted into the air like a canon ball. He hopped a little bit on his chair.

‘I see something,’ Kala said. ‘As if you’re hopping on your chair.’

‘That-is-probably-because-he-is-hopping-on-his-chair,’ Balthazar said.

‘Oh.’

Kala removed the glasses and returned them to Diego.

‘But what did you see, then?’ Kala asked Diego. Balthazar didn’t say anything, but also looked at him expectantly.

‘Oh, nothing. Forget it.’

Diego put the glasses in his pocket, opened his school book, and started his work.

The Bomb Brigade

The rest of the morning passed by as if it was a normal day. All children were sitting quietly at their desks doing their arithmetic and geography. Diego was engrossed in a difficult division problem, when suddenly a wild itch spread over his right nostril.

At the same time, the pen on his desk started to tremble. Then the floor started to shake, followed by the windows. The tables knocked against each other with a loud bang. The windows shook madly in their frames.

After about five seconds of everything knocking together, there was complete silence.

All the children went to the windows and looked eagerly outside. A short distance from the school, where the old fire station had been this morning, now stood only a couple of smoldering walls. Kala, Balthazar, and Diego looked at each other. They didn't have to say anything, because they were thinking the same thing.

The explosions in the Dive. They had felt the exact same.

From off in the distance, something approached with high speed.

An enormous truck arrived and stopped in front of the fire station.

Two people got out and walked to the smoldering rubble.

Diego had to know more and put his glasses on. It was a dark man and a sturdy woman.

On the side of the truck he saw two words.

BOMB BRIGADE

G.K. Kortraund

The rest of the day was anything but normal. Whenever he could spare a moment, Diego would go to the window to look at the remains of the fire station. But there was nothing more to be seen. However, he did see the school concierge setting up a podium and microphone on the school playground.

Throughout the day, Diego's thoughts constantly wandered back toward the Dive. Over and over, he would picture the face of the man laughing maliciously as he put on his lipstick.

Diego was lost in thought when he heard a loud buzz coming from outside. Many inhabitants of Pickleby were gradually entering the playground, talking to each other agitated.

When the bell rang, Balthazar, Kala, and Diego all ran outside as fast as they could. When they reached the playground, it was already packed with a crowd. It seemed as if the whole village had arrived at the school. All the fathers and mothers were whispering nervously to each other. Butcher Danglingbone, his apron covered in blood, was shifting from one leg to the other. Olle Mallet was glancing around nervously, wearing a troubled look on his face. The Scrivener, as always, was in his best suit, nervously combing the few hairs he had left over his skull, while keeping his eyes on the gate.

Finally, the mayor arrived. He walked towards the stage with a single piece of paper in his hands. Behind him, two people followed: a sturdy woman and a dark man with an impressive moustache.

The Bomb Brigade.

‘Dear fellow citizens...,’ the mayor began with his deep, raspy voice.

‘Rarely have I had such a hard time conveying a message to the people of Pickleby. But we happen to be in a situation that even in my wildest dreams I would never have dreamed possible. It appears that the ground on which we live is not as safe as we thought. The explosion this morning in the fire station was no coincidence. We can all be thankful that the Bomb Brigade arrived to the scene as quickly as they did. They have investigated the cause of the explosion. I would like to hand the microphone to... Mrs...’

The mayor put his glasses on, looked at the paper and frowned.

‘Kortraund. Mrs. G.K. Kortraund.’

‘Kortraund...’ Diego whispered to his friends. ‘What a strange name.’

‘Strange lady too,’ Kala added.

The sturdy woman stepped onto the stage, took the microphone from the mayor, and looked at the crowd.

‘I will be brief,’ she said with a high voice. ‘This morning we investigated the explosion at the fire house. The material we found comes from a magnitrum bomb.’

Horrified expressions spread throughout the crowd.

‘Magnitrum: the-lethal-ammunition-that-was-used-in-the-Six-Year-War. That-is-really-serious,’ Balthazar mumbled.

Diego thought about the article in *The Pickle Times* from this morning and nodded.

‘We believe the bomb probably exploded due to the vibrations that come from the heart of Mt. Pickle,’ the woman continued. ‘We don’t know why this is happening now, but some things just can’t be explained.’

Diego thought about the vibrations that had preceded the explosion. He had never experienced anything like it. It had felt like an earthquake. A little earthquake indeed.

The woman glanced around. ‘If a magnitrum bomb explodes from somewhere in the ground, that typically indicates there being more in the surrounding area. If the vibrations continue, you may all be in great danger. For the next twenty-four hours, we will be inspecting the surroundings for the presence of magnitrum with our special equipment. I hope we don’t find anything. Because if we find more bombs, there is only one solution...’

Mrs. Kortraund stopped and looked around at the crowd. Her pause seems just a little too long, Diego thought. It’s almost as if she’s enjoying herself.

Diego could not see her face very well without his glasses. He pulled them slowly from his pocket and put them on.

‘... That everyone leaves Mt. Pickle,’ Mrs. Kortraund continued, ‘for

a couple of months, maybe a year... or possible even forever.'

'Oh, it won't get to that point!' Olle Mallet exclaimed, outraged. 'If everything has been fine for so many years, then surely it can't change from one day to the next? You'll never get me out of here!' The crowd applauded Olle. Mrs. Kortraund calmed the excitement with a gesture.

'You are very right,' she said in her high-pitched voice. 'We still don't know enough. We will do everything we can to make sure it won't come to that. But just imagine...'

The woman closed her eyes and started to talk softer, nearly whispering.

'Just imagine if there was a magnitrum bomb under this beautiful school...'

She pointed to the Glooth, that lay behind her in the sunlight. 'We wouldn't want to someday have to say: If only we had left earlier...'

A couple of mothers in the crowd uttered cries of disbelief and started to sob.

'The only good news,' she continued, 'is that help is arriving. Krudon Kragt himself is coming to Pickleby to help in any way he can. He will be at the Glooth tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. Everyone is invited.'

Immediately, everyone in the crowd burst out in conversation with their neighbors.

'Krudon Kragt, helping?' Kala said. 'That would be a first. I really

don't see that happening.'

G.K. Kortraund looked at the crowd with a satisfied expression.

Diego watched her closely. He could now see her face perfectly well with his glasses on. She looked at the Glooth with tight lips. As if she wanted to suppress something. Funny, it looks like she's almost holding in a laugh, Diego said to himself.

Don't be so silly, Diego Dazzler. Where do you get such strange thoughts? Pull yourself together.

Diego looked at the Glooth. The school looked nice, with all that sun, almost as if it was gleaming. Diego couldn't imagine that a bomb would ever demo –

Boom...

Diego jumped. A terrible bang hit his eardrums. He watched as the school collapsed to the ground, right in front of his eyes.

Mrs. Kortraund was still standing on the stage. Grinning with laughter, she watched how the Glooth became nothing more than a pile of smoldering, burning rubble.

White faced, Diego looked at the mess.

'Diego! What's the matter?' Kala asked. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'What's the matter? Look for yourself - the school!' Diego shouted. Kala and Balthazar looked at the building.

'What-do-your-eyes-see-that-my-eyes-don't?' Balthazar asked, curious.

Diego looked at Kala and Balthazar. Slowly but surely, it started to dawn on him.

His glasses.

Diego took them off and looked at the Glooth. There was the school, in the same place, sitting silently in the sun, with everything the same as it had always been.

‘The school collapsed,’ Diego stammered. ‘And that Mrs. Shortround was just watching it all happen, grinning with laughter.’ ‘Kortraund,’ Balthazar said, who had an alarmingly good memory for names and numbers. ‘G.K.-Kortraund.’

‘I don’t care about her name! I’ll tell you: there’s something terribly wrong with that woman. We have to find out what she’s up to. Come on.’

Kala frowned and looked once more at the school and the woman of the Bomb Brigade, who had stepped away from the podium.

‘The school is still standing there,’ she said carefully. ‘And I haven’t heard that woman laugh.’

‘I-can-confirm-what-Kala-says,’ Balthazar remarked like an experienced police inspector. ‘It-seems-to-be-a-fact-that-the-school-is-still-there-and-that-Mrs.-G.K.-Kortraund-did-not-laugh-out-loud.’

Irritated, Diego looked at his friends.

‘Are you feeling alright, Diego?’ Kala asked.

‘Yes,’ Balthazar said slowly, looking at the ground. ‘That-time-with-

the-giant-snake-you–also-saw-things-that-were-not-there.’

Diego felt a stab in his heart. ‘Thank you, Balthazar Danglingbone...’
he hissed with a shaky voice. ‘Thank you for nothing!’

Kala stepped in. ‘Diego... please calm down. You two are good friends!’

‘Not when *you’re* around,’ Diego snapped. But as soon as he’d said it, he was sorry.

The pained look on Kala’s face made it seem as if she was about to cry. But the next moment, she pulled herself together, straightened her shoulders, and stalked away without saying a word.

Diego was left alone with Balthazar. ‘Maybe you should go join her,’ Diego said to him, ‘because we are no longer friends.’

For the second time in the last ten seconds, Diego regretted his big mouth.

Balthazar looked at him. His eyes glistened for a moment.

Please get angry, Diego thought. Then we could get angry at each other and make up tomorrow.

But Balthazar didn’t get angry. Balthazar was never angry. He was only sad.

Diego couldn’t look into those loyal, puppy-dog eyes. To avoid the awkwardness of the moment, he looked everywhere except at Balthazar. Suddenly, he noticed Mrs. G.K. Kortraund leave the playground together with the dark man.

‘Right - I’m eh – I’m off,’ he said.

Before Balthazar could say anything, Diego had already left the playground and was following the bomb brigade.

Into the Lion's Den

Diego was running on the sidewalk alongside to the road. Every now and then, he would dive behind a hedge or into the bushes to make sure he wasn't spotted. The man and woman of the Bomb Brigade drove slowly with their heavy equipment truck. A short while later, they arrived at the outskirts of the village, near the Dull Forest and the rubbish dump. Diego dreaded coming to this area. The houses were old, stinky, and constantly on the verge of collapsing.

This was also the neighborhood where Rufus Rotalot lived - a good enough reason not to hang around.

The truck stopped in front of an old, rundown house at the end of the road. The woman got out and carefully looked around.

Diego quickly dove behind a neighbor's garbage can. The front door to the rundown house opened. A tall man, Diego thought. But he couldn't see very well without his glasses.

The Bomb Brigade went inside and closed the door.

Diego carefully crept around the house, looking for a way to get closer. I'm crazy, Diego thought. crazier than crazy. I'm a madman who wants to die. Nevertheless, his body inched on without hesitating.

The whole back yard was a jungle of weeds and neglected bushes. Diego sat down on his knees behind a large plant and observed the scene: two boarded-up windows on the ground floor, a door, an open upstairs window with a drainpipe next to it...

Don't do it, Diego, a voice in his head said. Go away and forget what you've seen and never come back.

But Diego didn't listen.

Stealthily, he crept on his stomach towards the house. He reached the drainpipe and slowly started to pull himself up. He noticed that the pipe was fixed to the wall with just a couple of rusty screws. Please be sturdy enough, Diego pleaded silently.

Up he climbed, inch by inch. He heard loud voices coming from inside the house. They seemed to be arguing.

Suddenly, the drainpipe was slowly coming loose from the wall, bending backwards in the direction of the garden.

Diego threw a glance at the open window that was getting further and further away from him. Like a monkey he leapt from the drainpipe and latched onto the window's handle. The window squeaked as it swayed from left to right, with Diego hanging on. The drainpipe, no longer burdened by his weight, bent back against the wall like a limber twig.

'Who's there?'

The tall man jumped through the back door into the garden and looked around. Diego looked down out of the corner of his eye.

It was Bunkert Rotalot.

‘Come out, come out wherever you are,’ Bunkert said coaxingly, picking up a large stick from the ground and looking around. ‘I won’t hurt you.’

Diego’s hands started to sweat and were gradually sliding off the handle.

‘There’s nothing to be afraid of... come on out here...’

Diego closed his eyes, ready to fall and be caught.

Suddenly, he heard the door close. Diego looked down. Bunkert had gone inside again.

With his last bit of energy, Diego climbed up into the open window, clamped his hands around the windowsill, and silently slid inside.

Panting heavily, he rose, rubbing his painful arms and hands.

When the pain had subsided, Diego looked around the room.

It was dark inside. He could see an opening in the floor in the middle of the room where light was shining through. Diego carefully dropped to his knees and crept like a snake towards the light.

In the room below, three people were sitting around a table. Diego put his glasses on. It was the Bomb Brigade, together with Bunkert Rotalot.

Bunkert was drumming his fingers on the table. In his throat, a huge Adam’s apple was constantly bobbing up and down. Would you look at that, Diego thought. Bunkert Rotalot is nervous.

The man of the Bomb Brigade had a small shaped head like an egg and an insignificant chin. His eyes were squinty and thin as a crack in the sidewalk. He had a moustache that went from one corner of his mouth to the other. He was sitting quietly as he carelessly sharpened a dagger, playing with it as if it were a toy.

The woman was sitting with her back towards Diego. The only thing he could see of her were her hands. Large, strong hands.

‘Is everything ready?’ she asked.

Bunkert nodded. ‘The bomb has been placed.

‘Good. And that inventor-’

The man with the moustache grinned maliciously.

‘Taken care of.’

Bunkert wanted to leave the table, but suddenly the woman grabbed his wrist.

‘Remember... there is no going back.’

Bunkert swallowed for the umpteenth time and looked at the woman, frightened. Then she let go.

‘Right – Well, I should go get changed’ she said.

The woman stood up, walked with large strides towards the stairs, and took them up two at a time. She was standing on the landing in no time and had her hand on the doorknob... the doorknob to the room where Diego was hiding.

Giant Snakes

Diego dove into the corner and hid behind the curtain next to the window. His legs were shaking. He pressed himself against the cold wall.

Mrs. G.K. Kortraund entered quickly. She turned on the light and walked straight past Diego to the sink and mirror in the corner. Grinning and with a dreamy look in her eyes, G.K. Kortraund looked in the mirror to inspect her make-up. Diego carefully stuck his head out from behind the curtain to a better look at her.

Her eyes were becoming bigger and bigger. She looks excited, Diego thought.

He quickly looked down at the wooden floor, afraid his shoes might bump into something and make a noise.

But the floor was no longer made of wood.

It was made of cobblestones. Here and there were ones that were dislodged, exactly as in the streets of Pickleby.

It took a few seconds before Diego knew what was happening.

The glasses.

The glasses made him see G.K. Kortraund's horrible fantasies.

What's more, he was standing in the middle of her venomous thoughts.

Frightened, he looked around. Little by little, the room changed, until it seemed as if they were standing on the square of Pickleby.

Boom...

With a grin that spread ear to ear, G.K. Kortraund watched as the town hall exploded.

Boom...

The Glooth collapsed like a house of cards.

Boom...

The statue of Willibrord exploded into thousands of pieces. His hat flew over the square like a lethal frisbee.

And – Amita.

The body of the old inventor flew through the air like a dead doll.

Her ice-blue eyes were wide open and lifeless.

Diego couldn't keep watching. Everything in Pickleby seemed to be exploding or collapsing. Adults and children were running around in a frenzy. And G.K. Kortraund was laughing, louder and louder. Her eyes were wide open and glowing like burning coals. Her laughter became more and more wild until it changed into a hysterical, insane whinny. Diego could see the spit dancing on her lips. She waved her hands wildly in the air.

Diego was getting nauseous.

In Mrs. Kortraund's fantasy, the room had changed into a large, desolate crater. Enormous shiny objects started to grow out from the walls. Big, round, shiny...

They looked like snakes, Diego thought. Giant snakes. But that's impossible because giant snakes don't exist.

Spewing from the mouths of the snakes was a slimy, bright-green poison.

A wave of nausea shot through Diego's body. Enough, he thought. I'm seeing things that aren't there. I've had enough. Diego grabbed the curtain.

Kkggg.

It tore a little. Not much, but just enough to attract the attention of G.K. Kortraund. Immediately, she looked around like a bloodthirsty predator.

'Who's there?'

She walked slowly towards the curtain. She opened her hands, ready to grab at anything she found.

That very moment, a small stone hit the back of Diego's head. With a jerk, he looked out of the open window.

Beneath him, in the back garden, stood Kala and Balthazar.

Balthazar had laid himself under the window on the ground. He hit his big, fat tummy with both hands.

'Let-yourself-fall,' he whispered. 'The-fat-content-of-my-belly-will-make-for-a-pleasant-landing.'

Diego looked down. It was high.

I don't dare, Diego thought. I won't do it.

G.K. Kortraund was now very close. She ripped away the curtains and looked him straight in the eye. Suddenly, Diego saw her thoughts through his glasses: how she closed her hands around his neck and started to squeeze - tighter, and tighter, and tighter...

Diego saw his own face turn purple.

'It's not real!' Diego shouted. 'It's not real!'

As fast as he could he pulled his glasses from his nose and threw himself backward. For one scary moment he flew through the air. Just when he thought he wouldn't survive, he made a safe landing on his friend's layer of fat.

Clouds

Diego, Balthazar, and Kala ran back to the school. Exhausted, they dropped to the ground in the grass of the schoolyard.

What a day...

Diego wanted to scream. To hit something. And then maybe even cry a little.

He started to turn over that day's events in his mind: the room in the Rotalot house. G.K. Kortraund's evil thoughts. The town hall exploding, like when they were looking at the big screen during the Dive. Amita flying through the air like a doll. The crazy woman and her hysterical laugh. The giant, shiny, silver-colored snakes and the slimy poison dripping from their mouths.

And then the discussion at the table. Diego could still hear it.

'Everything ready?'

'The bomb has been placed.'

'Good - And that inventor?'

'Taken care of.'

I am sure, Diego thought. I am sure I'm not imagining this.

He got up quickly and dusted off his clothes. 'Come on, you guys! We have to do something! We can't stop now. The Bomb Brigade wants to blow up the town, and we just can't-'

But Balthazar and Kala stayed put and looked down at the ground. 'I don't know what's happening here,' Kala said, 'but I want to know what Amita thinks of all this, before we do anything else.'

Diego thought of Amita. Maybe she can help me, he thought. Because I am completely in the dark.

Before they could even raise a fist to knock on the castle's heavy door, Amita had already opened the door. She was wearing her overalls. There were black tar spots and other messy bits and pieces in her silvery hair. She scrutinized the three children with a worried expression.

'Come on in,' she said softly.

Beast was lying peacefully on his back in the middle of the jumping zone when he saw the children come in. He jumped up and bounded towards them, happily wagging his tail. But Diego didn't feel like petting Beast. He just stood there, his head bent and his gaze on the ground.

'I think it's time we had a little chat,' she said. 'Just you and me.'

Diego shrugged his shoulders.

A few moments later, Diego was sitting with Amita in the tree hut on the Hill of Thoughts. Amita had brought him a glass of Mapple juice, but Diego couldn't take a sip. He kept his eyes on the old woman, waiting for her to berate him like a child.

But Amita didn't. She kept quiet, while she restlessly paced up and

down the hut again and again. After what seemed like an eternity, she stopped and turned to him.

‘It’s high time I tell you something, Diego,’ she said. ‘About who you really are.’

Diego tried again to take a sip of his Mapple juice, but could hardly swallow it.

Amita had told them everything about his birth and the purple glow that had surrounded him. And what that meant: that he was in touch with the Magic Field.

‘The Magic Field...’ Diego muttered. ‘We were making contact with the Magic Field during that strange Dive at the Nest. But I still don’t understand it. And why is it so special that I am in contact with it, if we all were?’

Amita thought for a moment. ‘We all have moments of contact with the Magic Field. The inklings when we just know something is going to happen, and then it does. That is the Magic Field talking to us.

You can’t see it - but it’s everywhere.’

Amita looked at Diego again for a moment. ‘However, very rarely someone is born who is always in touch with the Magic Field - whether he wants it or not. Someone like you... the child that sees, hears, and feels it all.’

A silence fell over the hut. Diego and Amita stared into space, both caught up in their own thoughts.

‘So... that’s why I see things nobody else can see,’ Diego said finally.

‘Yes.’

Diego looked at his glasses. ‘I bet it also has to do with these,’ he said. ‘I mean, they were created from all those ingredients that got mixed up with that bottle of Puresour. Right?’

‘Maybe. The Magic Field works in mysterious ways.’

Diego stared at Amita. ‘How come you know all this? About me and the Magic Field?’

For a moment Amita stared back at him, but then looked the other way. ‘That’s enough for now, Diego.’

Amita said no more, but Diego knew enough. You know a lot more about me, he thought. Maybe you know me better than my own mother does.

Yet, he didn’t continue his questioning. Amita was right: it was enough for now. He already had enough on his plate.

Amita stared at Diego with her big, ice-blue eyes, but Diego wished she would look at anything but him.

‘You are special, Diego,’ Amita said. ‘Very, very special. With your gift you could save us all.’

‘Gift? It’s not a gift. I hate it,’ Diego said. ‘Besides, I don’t even understand what it all means half the time, what with all the strange thoughts and feelings.’

‘You can learn to control that,’ Amita said calmly.

‘Oh, great,’ Diego exclaimed. ‘As if that’s what I’m looking for!’

Diego hid his face in his hands. Amita's words were ringing in his head.

'Why don't you tell me everything that happened, Diego,' Amita said.

Still irritated, Diego started to talk hesitantly about all the things he had seen and experienced. About the Salvadus he had seen streaming out of the pipes when he had broken into her workshop. About the collapse of the Glooth, that he had seen that morning on the school playground. About how he had climbed through the window to the top floor of the Rotalot house and about the explosion of the town hall in the fantasy of G.K. Kortraund. He told her how he had seen her fly through the air like a limp doll and about the shiny snakes and their poison.

Suddenly Diego stopped. 'I don't want to talk about it anymore,' he said. 'I can't stop thinking about it all. But the more I don't want to think about it, the more I can't help it!'

Amita, who had been listening to him attentively without interrupting, stood up. 'Relax,' she whispered. 'Just relax.'

'I don't know how to relax!'

'I'll help you. Get up and stand next to me.'

Hesitatingly, Diego got up.

'Very good. Now, put your hand on your belly. Do you feel your breathing? Do you feel how your belly expands and then constricts?'

Diego felt the air flowing in and out of his body. In and out... in and out... as if he was rocking, like a boat on the water. His tense shoulders slowly started to relax.

‘Diego, have you ever been afraid something terrible is about to happen - and then it doesn’t?’

Diego had to think for a moment. ‘Yes, I was afraid I would be teased all day at school because of my glasses. But that didn’t happen at all.’

‘Exactly,’ Amita said softly. ‘Because that’s the way thoughts and feelings are. They just happen to be there, like clouds that pass by. Some are white innocent clouds, others are very dark, some cause rain and thunderstorms, and others are so thin that the sun shines through them. And you are the blue sky that sees all those things. But the blue sky cannot be destroyed - and neither can you.’

Me, a blue sky that cannot break, Diego thought. He had never looked at himself that way before.

‘Come,’ Amita said. ‘Put your glasses on and look at me.’

Curious, Diego put the glasses on, took a deep breath, and looked at Amita.

What was that?

Amita was suddenly no longer sitting next to him in the tree hut. She was standing at a funeral. She walked slowly in the direction of a white coffin and bent over to look in... only to see herself. The dead body was her own.

Diego pulled the glasses off his nose and wanted to sprint out of the tree hut and forget what he'd just seen.

Amita grabbed his arm just in time. 'Look at me!' She ordered.

Diego did not want to look, but he did anyways.

There it was again, that radiant light in her eyes. That light that was too beautiful to be bad, Diego thought. It had to be good.

'I'm afraid to die,' Amita said. 'Like nearly all old people. I often think of my own funeral. But that's okay. It's only a fear. I'm far from dead, right?'

Yes, Diego thought, this wasn't somebody who was nearly dead or dying.

'It's alright to be afraid of something,' Amita continued. 'We all think of things we don't want to think of. They come and go, keep us distracted, as if they are super important. But those thoughts are nothing more than clouds floating by. And you know, Diego...'

Amita bent over a little bit.

'If you are afraid of those clouds, they will linger on and become bigger and darker. But if you dare to look at them, they sometimes have surprising things to say.'

Diego thought about what she had said. Meanwhile, the old inventor was fussing around, quickly setting something up in the tree hut. When she stepped away, Diego saw a little black box with a camera lens sitting on a small wooden table.

C.R. Brain, the brain reader.

Amita held the electrode in her left hand. Diego thought back to the first evening in the castle when C.R. Brain had projected its large beam of light onto the huge rear wall of the castle, like a film-projector. How they had all looked at their own thoughts with C.R. Brain, at the danger they could all feel. At that strange man without eyes with his lipstick and the explosions.

‘Alright,’ Amita said. ‘Put the electrode on your body. I will aim the beam of C.R. Brain at the river and then you will think of what happened to you. Together we will look at your thoughts, to see if we can discover something useful. What do you say?’

Diego looked nervously at C.R. Brain. ‘I- I wouldn’t know what we could discover,’ he muttered.

‘Diego... You are the only one who has seen the thoughts of that woman,’ Amita said softly. ‘If we look at them again with C.R. Brain, we might discover a way to unmask that Bomb Brigade.’

Amita slowly stretched her arm and offered him the electrode.

‘But - I don’t want to look at my thoughts,’ Diego said. ‘I hate my thoughts!’

‘All those thoughts are only clouds, Diego. They cannot touch you.’

Diego stood up. Agitated, he made his way to the rope ladder.

‘I don’t want to! Leave me alone, will you?’

He climbed down angrily and walked towards the banks of the river, tightly holding his glasses in his hand. He looked down at the black frame and the lenses. On the left lens he saw a few small grease

stains. The right already had a small scratch. Normal glasses, Diego thought. You look like a normal pair of glasses, nothing else. But looks can be deceiving.

With the glasses in his hand, Diego steadied his feet and pulled his arm back. Then he threw them as far as he could into the river, turned around, and stalked home.

Nowhere to Go

When Diego returned home, he ran to his room, locked the door and fell flat on his bed.

I'm in trouble, Diego thought. I'm in deep trouble. If G.K. Kortraund finds me, or Bunkert, or Rufus, or that strange man with the dagger, I'll be doomed.

Diego's mind rattled on. Pickleby is also in trouble, he thought.

Everyone might have to leave. But where would we go?

And Amita. Amita was also in danger. The greatest danger out of all of them, maybe.

Diego looked at the canvas that hung at the foot of his bed. It was an enlarged photograph of him and his father, high up on the mountain. Anna had it made for Diego after the funeral-that-wasn't-a-funeral. Zeb had his arm tightly hugging Diego's shoulders. They both were smiling and looking at the camera.

'And you can't help me either,' Diego said angrily. 'Thanks for nothing.'

Exhausted, he fell asleep.

Diego was walking over Mt. Pickle.

... strange ...everything looks black and white.

...wait ...it must be my glasses.

But the glasses had attached themselves to his face. No matter how hard he tugged on them, he simply couldn't take them off.

Diego looked down. From down in the valley, huge shiny giant snakes were creeping up the mountainside. Slimy poison was dripping from their mouths. The man without eyes and with a lipstick in his hand sat on top of the first snake. Screaming with laughter, he passed Diego on his way up.

The next moment, Diego was standing in Amita's workshop. He could hear a sad melody playing that seemed to be coming from behind the tarpaulin. Diego stepped through it. The moonlight was shining through the window. It was cold, too.

Diego looked down. He was standing up to his waist in clean Salvador. On the screen he saw little white worms moving around with incredible speed. In front of him, Amita was floating in a coffin. She was deathly-pale and her eyes were closed. Suddenly she sat up, opened her eyes, and looked at him.

...these thoughts, they're only clouds, Diego.

...they cannot touch you...

Diego woke with a jolt. He looked at his alarm clock. It was 2.00 a.m.

'Even my dreams have gone mad,' he sobbed silently. 'When will I finally have some peace?'

Diego laid back down, turned on his side, and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Cheese Fondue

The church bells had just struck seven o'clock. There was no wind and the sky was turning blue as dawn spread across the horizon. Everything appeared to be fine – except for the birds. They weren't singing.

The streets began to tremble. Gradually, they started to shake more and more violently, until the end of Diego's blanket slid off, exposing his feet.

Boom...

An enormous bang swept through the streets of Pickleby. Diego jumped out of bed and ripped open the curtains. Large clouds of smoke blocked his view, but then slowly disappeared as the flurry of activity from the streets below blew them away.

There was a big black crater between Danglingbone's butcher shop and the café The Sour Depth. Olle Mallet sat with his wife and son in front of the crater, whimpering.

The cheese shop had exploded.

Diego dressed as fast as he could, grabbed a baseball cap from the coat hooks, pulled it over his hair, and ran outside.

The smell of burnt cheese fondue swept across the square. A fast-growing crowd was assembling in front of the gaping, smoking hole

that had once been the cheese shop.

Carefully, Diego squeezed his way between the villagers. Everybody was staring at Olle Mallet, who was now on his knees, sobbing as he looked at the ruins of his cheese shop.

Suddenly, the sound of his tears were muffled by the ripping sound of a loud diesel engine. The Bomb Brigade truck was racing towards them and stopped just behind Diego. G.K. Kortraund got out, followed by the man with the egg-head and the long thin moustache. 'Make way!' G.K. Kortraund yelled, in a high voice. 'We have to conduct an investigation immediately!'

Diego grew nervous. He pulled the cap lower over his face so as not to be recognized and ran back home, as fast as he could.

Standing on the corner of his street was Bunkert Rotalot. He was leaning against the wall, looking up and down Drift Alley. Just before Bunkert could turn his gaze to him, Diego shot down the closest alleyway.

Diego wandered through the streets of Pickleby like a stray cat. He couldn't go home. Aside from that, he had to make sure to watch out for the Bomb Brigade. But in order to avoid them, I guess I should probably be able to see straight, Diego realized gloomily. And that's not possible, because my glasses are lying at the bottom of the Fludd.

Suddenly, he heard a familiar sound. It was the diesel engine of the

Bomb Brigade truck. Diego's heart thumped as he jumped into a garden and pressed himself flat to the ground.

Slowly, the truck approached - until it stopped right in front of his nose.

The woman got out of the truck and emptied an ash tray out onto the street, without giving the littering a second thought. Then, she stepped right back in.

The truck was stopped a couple meters away - close enough for Diego to notice something peculiar, even without his glasses.

A large thick metal plate was hanging down underneath the vehicle. It was fixed with a couple of strong iron rods to the underside, just high enough that you wouldn't be able to see it while standing up. Diego had seen something similar to it before. But he just couldn't put his finger on where.

The truck took off again and disappeared around the corner. When it was far enough away that Diego felt it was safe, he climbed out of the garden, walked back to Drift Alley, snuck back into his own back garden, and climbed up through his window. He tiptoed to the living-room and peeped outside. Bunkert Rotalot was nowhere to be seen.

'What now, what to do,' Diego mumbled, as he paced past the bookshelves.

Suddenly his eyes fell on a large, thick book that sat on the bottom shelf. It was Zeb's Encyclopaedia of Motorized Vehicles.

In a split second, Diego realized it was no coincidence that his eye had fallen on that particular book.

The truck. The truck and the steel plate.

Diego picked it up and leafed through the enormous book like a madman. He read the titles above the pages out loud. 'Steam engines... Sports cars... Trucks... Specialized trucks...'

Specialized trucks: that was it. His fingers glided over the pages.

There it was.

The Drum-Truck.

With his heart in his throat, Diego read the caption below the picture.

The Drum-Truck is a specialized vehicle used for shaking up soil. It slams the metal plate to the ground with great force. At maximum power, the thud of a Drum-Truck cause vibrations that feel similar to a minor earthquake.

Diego shut the book.

Those tremors weren't coming from the mountain. The Bomb Brigade and their Drum-Truck were making those tremors themselves.

Excitedly, Diego looked out the living room window again. Through the curtains, he caught a glimpse of the square and the new ruins of the exploded cheese shop. The last smoke clouds had cleared away. It was unnervingly quiet in the square. There was not a soul to be seen. Even the shops had closed for the day.

Suddenly, a sound from outside made his ears perk up. He could hear the throbbing sound of some kind of motor. Gradually, it grew louder and louder until it became deafening. Diego opened the window and looked out. A helicopter was flying low over the village. As fast as he could, Diego snatched a pair of binoculars that were laying on the table and looked up out the window. It was a black helicopter with two silver letters on the side: K.K.

Right - Krudon Kragt was supposed to come to Pickleby to help all the villagers. Diego had forgotten all about it.

Without warning, his nose started to itch uncontrollably. The itch extended all the way to the soles of his feet that made him kick and stamp like an impatient horse.

I have to go to that meeting, Diego thought. *I have to.*

Five Thousand Reffies

Exhausted, Diego arrived at the gate of the school. The whole playground of The Glooth was already packed with the citizens of Pickleby. The helicopter had just landed. Diego walked up to the machine to get a closer look. A slim man get out and walk towards the stage. Krudon Kragt.

Diego looked him over. He was wearing a white suit, a white shirt, and shiny white patent leather shoes. He walked towards the stage with a smile. As if he's going to a celebration of some sort, Diego thought.

Diego pulled his baseball cap further down over his face and, looking at the ground as much as possible, made his way forward. He shot through the crowd as fast as he could without drawing extra attention until he was standing in the front row near the stage. He was so close now that he wouldn't have needed his glasses even if he'd had them.

The mayor, who was in front of the microphone, had already given his speech. '... So now the moment has come,' he concluded, 'that I step aside for a moment and let Mr. Kragt tell you why he is momentarily here.'

Krudon Kragt took the microphone from the hands of the mayor and looked into the crowd. The smile that had covered his face just a moment ago was gone.

‘Dear friends,’ he began, hesitatingly. ‘Early this morning, a second magnitrum bomb exploded in your village. I have consulted with the Bomb Brigade and they have informed me that your village is far from safe. There are still seismic vibrations coming from the heart of Mt. Pickle. And the ones that you all have recently experienced might not even be the worst of it.’

A wave of anger and sadness swept through the crowd. Olle Mallet couldn’t hold his tears back. The ever-hardy man was crying like a small child. Within seconds, most of the inhabitants of Pickleby had joined him and were sobbing, until even Butcher Danglingbone couldn’t keep his eyes dry.

Krudon Kragt kept silent and stared at the broken faces in the crowd. He blew his nose with a dramatic gesture and held his hands in front of his face.

‘I want to help you,’ he said. ‘I want to make you an offer. It isn’t fair that you might be standing in the street one day with nothing to your name but a few suitcases...’

Olle Mallet started to sob noisily again, soon followed by the rest of the villagers.

‘I am prepared to take over the dangerous risks and responsibilities of Pickleby,’ he said ceremoniously. ‘I can offer five thousand

Reffies for the whole village and a job for anyone who wants to work in my Power Station.'

The crowd reacted as if stung by a wasp. 'Our village is being squandered!' Olle Mallet shouted through his sobs.

'Five thousand Reffies!' Butcher Danglingbone howled. 'My shop alone is worth more than that!'

Everyone started to raise their voices and shake their fists.

Krudon Kragt looked impatiently at the buzzing crowd. Suddenly he'd had enough. 'Do you think *I'm* benefitting from this at all?' he shouted angrily through the microphone. 'With a village filled with magnitrum bombs in the ground? I can't do anything with it! I'm doing this for you. You should be grateful I even came here and am making you this offer. It's dangerous to even be standing here!' He looked around at the villagers with an accusing expression. 'Take it or leave it! I want your signatures by tomorrow morning at nine o'clock sharp. If not, you all can just forget it!'

Krudon Kragt waited for his words to settle in with the crowd. He stared out at his audience like a tyrant.

Suddenly, he looked Diego straight in the eye.

For a moment, Krudon Kragt looked as if he'd seen a ghost. Then, the fear in his eyes gradually changed into fury. A cold, ice-cold, horrible fury.

Diego looked breathlessly into the deep, dark eyes of Krudon Kragt. His knees started to tremble.

That man wants to kill me. But why? He doesn't even know who I am.

Finally, Krudon Kragt tore his gaze away and addressed the crowd. 'Five thousand Reffies and a job!' he hissed. 'And not a crumb more.'

He marched off the stage, pushed the microphone back into the hands of the mayor as if he was nothing more than a servant, made a beeline for the helicopter, and flew off.

The mayor was trying to calm the crowd down with gestures. But everyone was talking frantically, sitting on the ground, or crying into their hands.

Meanwhile, Diego started scanning the crowd for his friends. He found Balthazar sitting on the edge of the sandbox, proudly admiring the miniature helicopter he had just modeled.

'You've got to help me!' Diego shouted, running up to him. 'We just *have* to prove that the Bomb Brigade is lying!'

Balthazar opened his mouth to answer, but didn't have the chance. Kala came running towards them with tears down her face. 'Amita's missing!' she shouted. 'I can't find her anywhere!'

Diego had the feeling that the ground under his feet had disappeared. The only person who could help them was gone. He shivered as G.K. Kortraund's fantasy flashed through his mind: Amita flying through the air like a lifeless doll.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Officer Sorety.

‘Well, well,’ the policeman said. ‘If it isn’t Mr. Dazzler and his friends. You are all under arrest for trespassing on the property of Mr. Rotalot!’

Diego, Balthazar, and Kala all glanced at each other.

‘Let me just tie my shoe laces first,’ Kala said suddenly and knelt on the ground.

‘Officer-Sorety, I-have-to-inform-you-that-this-is-an-extremely-bad-moment-to-go-with-you-to-the-police-station,’ Balthazar said loud and clear. ‘We-are-dealing-with-an-emergency-situation. Amita, you-know, the-inventor, has-disappeared, so-it-seems, and-evidence-suggests-it-may-be-a-criminal-act.’

‘Yeah? Well that might be the case young man, but that is not our priority at the moment. Hurry up, off to the station. You too, young lady!’

Kala did what Sorety had asked her to do. But as she stood up, she gave a swift but cunning look to Diego and Balthazar.

‘Follow me!’

Sorety puffed out his chest, properly placed his cap on his blond hair, and went to put one foot forward. But he couldn’t, as Kala had tied his shoelaces tightly together. ‘Sh-,’ Sorety mumbled and fell face forward in the mud.

The three of them took off together as fast as they could.

‘So - where shall we go?’ Kala asked, panting.

Diego could think of only one place.

On the Run

Diego nervously whistled the tune that had given him access to Amita's workshop the other day. Balthazar was the last to go in, carrying a truckload of Mapple shakes, hot dogs with avomatobread, macocu cake, and a few bunches of Cocrapes. Inside the workshop, everything looked the same as before. The Encyclopaedia *The Wonderous World of Bacteria* was lying next to the tools that lay scattered across the table. Diego knew Balthazar had frequently been leafing through it. From the corner of his eye, he saw the Flape with its two fascinating ankle engines standing against the wall.

'Right,' Kala said, as she looked at Balthazar taking on his third hotdog. 'What now?'

Diego looked at his friends and cleared his throat. 'I think it's time I tell you something about myself,' Diego said.

Then he continued to tell them what Amita had told him, about the Magic Field and his birth. Diego went on, telling them in detail what he had seen with the glasses. The collapse of The Glooth, the visit to the Rotalot house, G.K. Kortraund's horrific fantasy, Amita flying through the air, and the exploding statue.

'The-Magic-Field,' Balthazar mumbled, in awe. 'It-is-like-the-microbes! It-is-everywhere, but-you-cannot-see-it. At-least: we-cannot-see-it. You-can-with-those-glasses-of-yours, of-course. How-extra-ordinary.'

Balthazar switched his train of thought and looked at Diego. 'I-knew-there-was-something-different-about-you-Diego-Dazzler. I-mean: you-are-not-a-normal-kid, like-me.'

'You? Normal?' Kala exclaimed. 'If anyone's not normal, it'd be you, Balthazar.'

Balthazar thought about that for a moment. 'Maybe-I-should-not-have-used-myself-as-an-example-of-the-average-child.'

'I think we're all far from normal,' Diego said.

'You're right,' Kala agreed. 'And besides: who would want to be normal anyway?'

I wish I was, Diego thought to himself. But he didn't say it out loud. Finally, Diego told them about the Salvadus overflowing up to his waist, how he had seen the moon shining while it had been morning, and how cold it had suddenly become behind the tapestry.

'You know what?' Kala said. 'I actually think I believe you. You would have to be a genius to just have thought this all up by yourself.'

Balthazar was especially interested in the Salvadus. 'Your-story-about-the-microbes-and- the-Salvadus-production-in-relation-to-

the-temperature-and-the-full-moon-intrigues-me-immensely,' he said. 'Extremely-interesting.'

Balthazar took the Encyclopaedia from the table and started to leaf through it. Soon he was so lost in its pages that they you had to pinch his arm to get his attention.

'So... your glasses really are the glasses that see everything,' Kala said. 'Where are they now?'

'I threw them in the river,' Diego answered softly.

'Well that's just terrific,' Kala said. 'Now how are we going to find out what the enemy is thinking?'

Diego was silent for a moment. That was the last thing he had thought of.

The Wind Speaks

The Giant Wood was slowly getting darker and darker. Russula was sitting in front of his tree hut watching the arrival of dusk, moving occasionally only to pluck his guitar.

He would have liked to hum a relaxing tune at the same time. But he couldn't.

Russula looked around restlessly. Something was about to happen. He could feel it in the air.

Russula looked at his fingers. They slid faster and faster over the strings. An ominous, angry melody flew from his guitar into the dark forest. At the same time, a biting wind started to blow.

Russula opened his eyes and ears as much as possible, like an owl in search of prey.

His music became wilder and wilder. And then, as if by an invisible force, something opened his mouth and pulled rhythmical sounds from his throat.

'op e evil - op e ife

I necary ive your ife

ave te ild ho ees all

ho ears an a o ho eels all'

Russula repeated it time and time again, each time faster and more wild than the last. Gradually the sounds became words. Russula listened to the message that came over his own lips.

'Stop the evil - stop the strife

If necessary give your life

Save the child who sees it all

hears it all and feels it all'

Russula sprang up, dropped his guitar, and ran immediately into the dark forest.

Off Balance

Dusk had already descended on the Sour Twist. To distract themselves from thinking of Amita or the situation they were in, Diego told Kala all the nice things he'd done with his father on Mt. Pickle. She especially loved to hear the stories about flying through the air. Kala wanted to know everything: what he'd heard and seen, how a person stayed up in the air, and what it felt like. But Diego couldn't describe much more than how it gave him a tickle in his stomach that continued a while after landing.

Kala sang old songs in the Leosi language and explained what they meant. Most songs were about fish, fishing, eating fish, sun and sea, and relaxing on the beach. 'A real Leosi is a bit lazy,' Kala said indulgently. 'But not because he wants someone else to do the work. A Leosi is relaxed because he thinks it's stupid to work so hard if it isn't necessary. That can only make you unhappy, right?'

Suddenly they heard a loud click. At the same time, a red light started to glow softly, illuminating the whole room. Within the next couple seconds, it had doubled in brightness and intensity.

'The-automatic-switch-for-the-heat-lamps,' Balthazar said, without looking up from his book. 'Amita-programmed-it-to-keep-the-dirty-little-Siegfrieds-at-the-right-temperature.'

Amita, Diego thought anxiously. Where could she be? He looked at Kala and knew she was thinking the same thing.

At the moment the heat lamps had switched on, a man had stepped onto the lawn of the Sour Twist. Like a predator, he crept in the direction of the workshop. His long moustache glistened with beads of sweat from the exertion. One by one, they dripped off onto the knife he held between his teeth.

He was just a few meters away from the dome when he stopped. He looked up with great interest at the round windows. *I'll do it quickly, he thought. I'll smash through the window, jump inside, and finish the job. Then there will be no more obstacles.*

Suddenly he felt a breeze ruffle his hair. The next moment, a great hairy monster was standing in front of him.

The man with the moustache was caught off guard. But he recovered quickly.

'You're done for,' he hissed to the monster. 'Just the same as those kids.'

'I have no fear, though I know you have a knife,' Russula said.

'I'm not afraid to die. Do you dare risk your life?'

The man hesitated for a moment but then lunged for him.

Russula stepped aside just in time. The blade brushed through the hair on his head.

The man ran once more towards Russula, waving his arms

frantically and brandishing his knife. But he still couldn't manage to touch him. Russula moved around the man graceful as a dancer, waving his hands through the air in a mystical way, confusing the man with the moustache.

Little by little, the fight intensified. The man, his frustration growing, continued to aggressively lunge at Russula, eventually grazing him twice with the point of his knife. Blood trickled through Russula's chest hair. But Russula didn't flinch.

Slowly but surely, the man drove Russula further and further away from the Sour Twist, in the direction of the river. Russula kept on walking backwards, until he could go no further.

The man approached him calmly, with an icy glare on his face.

'Well, well. Would you look at that,' he said with a malicious smile.

'A good knife is much stronger than your life. Are you still prepared to die?'

The man thrust the knife with all the force he could muster in the direction of Russula's heart. But where Russula had been standing just a moment ago, was now just thin air.

In shock, the man looked around.

The tree man had somersaulted forward underneath his arm and was now standing behind him. '*Those who are guided by anger will never win,*' Russula whispered in his ear. '*Your balance will be lost, your common sense wears thin.*'

Russula gave the man a push on his back. The man tumbled head

first into the water, dropping his knife in the process. He surfaced snorting and sneezing then quickly swam away.

Russula waited until he saw the man reach the banks of the opposite side. Then he scrambled away among the trees.

Mysteries

Diego heard a splash. Nervous, he quickly walked to one of the windows and looked outside.

Nothing. Everything seemed quiet.

Slowly, he shuffled back. He tried to fall asleep again. But his thoughts kept going round and round in his head.

The Bomb Brigade and the vibrations they had been making out to be earthquakes... the explosions during the Dive... the laughing man with the lipstick who concealed his eyes... the giant, shiny snakes... the thoughts of G.K. Kortraund, and his dream... Krudon Kragt, looking at him as if he wanted to kill him...

What did they all have to do with each other?

Diego thought of the other day, when he had been sitting with Amita in the tree hut on the Hill of Thoughts.

They are clouds, Diego. They cannot touch you.

Yes, Diego thought. I must dare to confront my thoughts. I must dare to look. 'The only thing is - I don't dare,' Diego muttered.

He looked at Balthazar, who was still reading. With large eyes, he devoured page after page of the Encyclopaedia of the life of microbes. I could stare at you for an hour calling your name, Diego

thought, and you wouldn't hear or see me.

Diego closed his eyes and listened to the rustling sound of the pages being turned.

The soothing sound slowly eased him to sleep. Therefore, he didn't hear when, at one o'clock that night, Balthazar finally closed the book, got up, walked quickly through the tapestry and turned off the heat lamps.

Alone with C.R. Brain

Diego woke up with a shock. It was ice cold in the room. He vigorously rubbed his arms and legs trying to get warm. He could see the sun rising through one of the windows.

He got up slowly, stretched his stiff arms and legs, and walked to the window. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful. The rope ladder to the tree hut was hanging down motionless.

Diego knew what he had to do.

He took a deep breath, whistled the tune to open the doors, walked to the tree hut, and climbed the ladder.

Everything was exactly the same as the day before. C.R. Brain was sitting on the table in front of him, next to the connected electrodes.

Diego thought of Amita's words. *They are only clouds... thoughts and feelings, they come and go... they float along... they cannot touch you...*

'Alright then. Here goes nothing.'

Diego stuck the electrodes to his arm, aimed C.R. Brain at the dark waters in front of him, and whistled the tune Amita had whistled during the Dive. C.R. Brain kicked to life. A light beam shone from

the camera's lens, growing brighter and brighter.

Diego took another deep breath and looked at the images of his thoughts that were coming to life on the water's surface.

In the first image, he was standing on the statue of Willibrord. He saw once more how the square emptied. It was painful – but less so than when it had just happened. That's strange, Diego thought. As if he had distanced himself from it, and thanks to C.R. Brain, was looking at the memory through the eyes of a stranger.

Diego thought back to that horrible moment in the Rotalot house with G.K. Kortraund. He saw her once more roaring with laughter on the square of Pickleby. Then he saw Amita and the statue flying through the air, the saliva on G.K. Kortraunds lips, the crater after the explosions, the shiny giant snakes as they rose slowly out of the ground, and the greenish poison dripping from their mouths.

Gradually, the snakes came closer and closer. One opened his mouth wide. Diego was so frightened, he nearly got sick to his stomach.

Keep looking. Keep looking.

But -

Wait a moment -

Those weren't giant snakes at all.

They were pipes: enormous iron pipes.

And that wasn't poison...

Once again Diego looked carefully at the greenish stuff that was

dripping out of the pipes. Then reality hit him like a slap to the face.

Terrafos.

Muck.

The snakes were big, metallic pipelines for dirty muck.

Diego was confused.

Why would someone from the Bomb Brigade fantasize about pipelines for muck?

There was only one person interested in muck and that was Krudon Kragt.

But then who was G.K. Kortraund?

Wait a minute...

G.K. Kortraund... eleven letters...

Krudon Kragt... also eleven letters... twice the letter 'k,' and also twice the letter 'r' ... and the rest...

G.K. Kortraund had exactly the same letters as Krudon Kragt.

Without stopping to remove the electrodes, Diego took the little black box under his arm and went down the rope ladder.

Extremophile

Kala was waiting for him at the foot of the tree.

‘Krudon Kragt is G.K. Kortraund!’ Diego shouted. ‘He wants to destroy and empty our village so he can lay down pipelines for Terrafos. It’s as simple as that, I can’t believe I didn’t see it before!’ He rambled on, explaining what he had seen thanks to C.R. Brain. Kala listened, while her eyes got wider and wider with every word he said. ‘Unbelievable,’ she muttered, when he was done. ‘And what’s more: I think you’re right.’

Suddenly Diego realized she was soaking wet. He looked at her inquisitively.

‘Here - a present,’ Kala said. She opened her hand. Laying in her palm were his glasses.

‘I dove in the Fludd to get them for you. They were lying exactly in the middle of the river. A good throw, really.’

Diego took them and looked at Kala gratefully, not knowing what to say.

The sun appeared from behind a cloud. Diego looked up. ‘What time is it anyways?’ he said with a worried expression.

‘Considering-the-position-of-the-sun-and-the-length-of-the-shadows-I-am-sure-we-can-say- it-is-probably-a-quarter-to-nine,’

Balthazar said, emerging from the workshop.

‘In fifteen minutes the village will be sold!’ Diego groaned. ‘We’ll never get there in time. What do we do now?’

‘We-might,’ Balthazar said, ‘follow-me.’

Balthazar stepped through the tapestry with Kala and Diego following his lead.

It was chilly on the other side. The heat lamps were off. But strangely enough, the Little Dirty Siegfrieds flashed across the screen.

‘Dirty-Little-Siegfried-appears-to-be-an-extremophile,’ Balthazar said carefully, tapping the Encyclopaedia with his fingernail. ‘He-is-very-rare-and-a-bit-strange: like-you-and-me, so-to-speak. Other-microbes-only-move-when-it-is-warm. But-Dirty-Little-Siegfried-likes-it-cold-and-chilly. He-works-preferably-in-the-middle-of-the-night, when-the-moon-shines. When-you-told-us-what-you-had-seen-through-your-glasses, I-became-very-curious. And-that-is-how-I-figured-it-out. They-worked-very-hard-throughout-the-whole-night. And-look-at-the-result.’

Balthazar held up the mason jar. It was filled to the brim with Salvadus.

Diego threw his arms around his friend gratefully, then sprinted towards the Flape.

Rufus

Diego shot through the air like a jet, holding C.R. Brain under his shirt. His glasses sat tightly on his nose.

The Flape performed perfectly. The engines on his ankles purred happily. Diego looked back. The clean Salvadus wasn't leaving a single trace of exhaust.

All of a sudden, the helicopter of KK Industries appeared over the mountain ridge. It flew just in front of him in the direction of the school. Diego dove beneath the tree line as fast as he could.

Moxxo, the man with the long, thin moustache was piloting the helicopter. Krudon Kragt sat next to him, in his white suit and with a stony face. He reached down with his handkerchief and wiped a mud stain off of his patent leather shoes.

'You disappoint me, Moxxo,' Krudon said. 'You did not accomplish your mission last night. You're lucky it was the first time that's happened.'

'I hope I will have another chance,' Moxxo said, 'So that Mr. Krudon can still be satisfied.'

'Don't let it happen again.'

Diego landed at the edge of the forest. Through the trees he could see the back side of The Glooth. He carefully took the Flape off, sat down on the ground, and started to undo the ankle engines. He was so concentrated, that he didn't notice the three boys that had crept up on him and were suddenly surrounding him. The largest took a step closer and gave Diego a vicious kick in his back. He screamed in pain.

He looked up to get a glimpse of his attackers and found himself staring straight into the face of Rufus. A hammer was tucked in his belt. Two of his cronies were standing behind him.

Rufus studied the Flape with interest. Then his eyes fell on C.R. Brain. He forcefully pulled the little black box out from underneath Diego's arms.

'Careful!' Diego shouted.

Rufus looked at him and mimicked him as if he were a little girl. His cronies laughed obediently.

'Careful? Careful? Let's make a deal. How about if we very carefully beat you up? That seems like a great idea to me!'

Diego looked through his glasses at his bully. There it came: the nasty plan Rufus had in mind for Diego. He saw himself hanging in the arms of the cronies with a bleeding face, while Rufus, boiling with anger, worked his fists into his face.

The images he saw were interrupted by reality. Diego felt as Rufus pulled him up by his hair. Now he cocked his other hand back and

clenched his fist.

‘You are afraid of your father!’ Diego shouted suddenly. ‘Your father hits you, in your garage. And then you cry. And that’s why you bully other children!’

Rufus stood still as if rooted to the spot. His face turned white.

‘How do you know-,’ he stammered. ‘How do you know that-’

Diego looked at Rufus, fumbling like an insecure lamb. ‘Actually, you’re just pathetic!’ Diego continued. ‘A pathetic little boy who craves a little love and attention. Poor little Rufus!’

Rufus looked at him with tears in his eyes. He struggled to hide them from his cronies, but it was too late. One of them had a smirk that slowly grew from one side of his face to the other. The other looked at Rufus, afraid but then soon also grinning.

Finally, Diego thought. This is the moment when Rufus will run off, crying, and will leave me alone forever.

But he was mistaken.

Rufus gripped the handle of the hammer from his belt and stepped forward. ‘I hate you, Dazzler!’ he hissed.

Diego looked at him and saw a frightening thought: Rufus hitting him in the head with the hammer and blood spouting in all directions.

Rufus stepped forward and lashed out with the hammer. Diego stepped back in the nick of time. He looked at his opponent, frightened of what his next move would be.

Suddenly, he noticed something odd in the way Rufus was moving. He was teetering a bit. As if he was trying to find his balance. You are not made of stone, Diego said to himself. You are not as tough as you look. *You teeter.*

With all his might, Diego threw a kick to the center of Rufus's knee. And again. And again. And then the other knee. Howling in pain, Rufus staggered back. Then he collapsed and fell forward in the moss.

His two cronies and Diego looked on, confused.

'You'll pay for that, Dazzler!' Rufus screamed, moaning in pain. Diego didn't answer. Before anyone could react, he'd grabbed his belongings and ran in the direction of the school.

Going Once, Going Twice...

Diego studied the school playground from behind the bushes. Everyone was there. The helicopter had already landed. Behind the stage hung a large white banner with two large, silver letters: KK. The wooden podium that the pastor uses for his Sunday sermons was standing in the middle of the stage.

The man with the moustache was standing on the right side of the stage, like a security guard. He turned his head slowly left to right, constantly scanning the area so he could keep an eye on everything. Bunkert Rotalot was standing on the left. Sorety was strolling between the people with a serious look on his face. Krudon Kragt and the mayor were standing by the steps to the stage, waiting to approach.

Diego sat down between the bushes, overlooking the situation. It's hopeless, he thought. The moment they see me, they'll catch me.

I can't go back now.

He slowly let himself down on his stomach and inched forward until he was directly behind the stage. Then he got up carefully and looked over the edge.

The podium.

There was an opening under the wooden podium with a little curtain covering it – the perfect place for a hiding spot.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the far end of the schoolyard.

The Scrivener's wife had fainted. The Scrivener was standing over her, fanning her face, and wearing a worried look on his face.

Diego looked at Krudon Kragt, Sorety and the man with the moustache. They were all looking at the small crowd that had gathered. Quick as a flash, Diego crawled upon the stage and, hunkering low to the ground, shot towards the space underneath the podium as fast as he could, and closed the curtain.

One second later, Diego felt the vibrations of the mayor stepping onto the stage. His footsteps walked straight towards the podium. Diego watched as the mayor slid his hand under it, grabbed the curtain, and opened it.

Diego's nose was less than two inches away from the mayor's silk trousers. The hand of the mayor moved in the direction of his nose – and then rose to the compartment above Diego's head, taking out the microphone. Diego's heart nearly jumped out of his chest.

'If there has ever been a moment in the history of Pickleby that defies description, then this is that moment,' the mayor said with a trembling voice. 'I now give the microphone to Krudon Kragt.'

Krudon Kragt stepped onto the stage, tapped the microphone a few times with his forefinger, cleared his throat, and started.

'I suggest that we don't stretch this situation out any longer than

necessary,' he said. 'Just imagine if we were to have more tremors this instant - and who knows where the next bomb might explode.'

The last bit of courage that the inhabitants of Pickleby had disappeared with the somber words of Krudon Kragt.

'I repeat my offer: five thousand Reffies for the whole village and a job for anyone who wants to work in my factories in Kragtstad.'

A shiver went up Diego's backbone. He looked at the legs of Krudon Kragt. He wasn't wearing socks. Diego carefully balanced the electrode of C.R. Brain between his two fingers.

Just set your mind to it. Concentrate and -

Done. The electrode cup was stuck on Krudon Kragt's left shin.

Diego waited a moment. No reaction. Krudon Kragt was so absorbed in his speech, he hadn't noticed a thing.

Great, Diego thought. Now all I have to do now is boot up C.R. Brain and point the light beam towards the white KK-banner. Then, everyone can see what Krudon Kragt, aka G.K. Kortraund, is really thinking. Now just to turn this thing on -

Oh no.

Diego almost bit his tongue when he realized that C.R. Brain would only start when he whistled the tune. And if he whistled the tune, Krudon Kragt would definitely hear it. He would pull him out from under the podium and – Diego didn't want to think about it.

'Now, I want to start with the votes,' Diego heard Krudon Kragt say.

Diego whistled the tune as softly as he could. He looked hopefully

for the light beam to shine from the box. But nothing happened.

‘Those who agree with the offer, signify by raising your hand,’

Krudon said.

More than half the people raised their hands. Krudon could hardly suppress a smile. ‘Great, very good. Going once...’

Diego whistled a bit louder. But still nothing happened.

‘Going twice...’

Diego shook C.R. Brain as he whistled once more. But in an effort to put his lips as close to the speaker as possible, his head hit the top of the podium. Just enough to make it wobble. And teeter. And lean. And -

Bonkk.

The heavy wooden podium fell to the ground.

Diego looked up, straight into the furious eyes of Krudon Kragt and then out at a very surprised crowd.

And for a single moment, it was deafeningly silent.

Unmasked

Diego looked at the frozen crowd in front of him and then back up at the furious Krudon Kragt above him.

‘He is G.K. Kortraund of the Bomb Brigade! And he wants to ruin Pickleby, so he can install pipelines for Terrafos!’

Krudon Kragt stared at him with a look that could kill. Moxxo was about to run onto the stage, but Krudon Kragt gestured him to remain where he was, as he regained his composure.

‘Well,’ he said sickly sweet, ‘if it isn’t Mr. Dazzler. I’ve heard about you. And here you are, at it again with your dazzling powers.’

The crowd giggled. ‘Watch out, Diego!’ somebody shouted. ‘Watch out for that giant snake behind you!’

Diego looked back at the crowd, at all the laughing people.

He was getting dizzy. Everything seemed to be swaying. His mouth was getting dryer by the second. He had the feeling a metal choker was being tightened around his throat.

For a moment Diego thought of running away, and never coming back.

‘It’s all about the Terrafos!’ Diego squeaked. ‘It’s about the muck! There aren’t any bombs in the ground! He put them there himself and -’

The grins in the crowd changed to jeers. Relieved at the reaction, Krudon Kragt jeered along.

‘That’s enough,’ Krudon said into the microphone. ‘Officer! Would you escort this boy off stage so we can finish our meeting, please?’

Sorety marched toward the stage with firm steps.

Diego took the moments he had to collect his thoughts. There was only one thing he could do.

He whistled the tune of C.R. Brain as loud as he could.

It worked. A light beam shot through the air.

Diego dived between the legs of Krudon Kragt and walked to the other end of the stage, with C.R. Brain in his hand.

‘What are you doing, boy?’ Krudon said in a sharp tone.

Diego didn’t respond. Instead, he aimed the camera lens on the large white banner.

‘Officer!’ Krudon shouted. ‘Do something!’

Sorety marched faster with larger strides up the stairs, towards Diego. He reached out to grab him by the arms. But he didn’t.

Instead, he stood there, rooted to the spot, and staring with wide eyes at the movie on the white banner... starring Krudon Kragt.

Everyone stood in silence as they watched how the director of KK Industries was planning to grab his pistol and shoot Diego Dazzler in the chest.

You could have heard a pin drop. The crowd was appalled at the images that were being projected in front of them.

Not realizing that his thoughts were being projected for all to see, Krudon Kragt looked into the changed faces of the crowd. Shaking with anger at the delay, he wiped a straggling hair from his face and grabbed the microphone. 'Alright everyone!' he said, his voice cracking. 'Put your hands up in the air once more!'

'What are your plans for Pickleby?' Diego shouted. 'Why are you here?'

'Everyone knows that very well,' Krudon hissed, while continuing to look at the crowd. 'I want to help you all and-'

The silence grew more deafening with every image that flashed across the white banner. Everyone watched in horror at what Diego had seen many times: the explosions, Krudon Kragt roaring with laughter, the black crater that had once been Pickleby, and the pipelines for the green-yellow muck.

The wife of the Scrivener, who had just come to, dropped her glass with a little scream and fainted for the second time.

Krudon Kragt looked furiously at the crowd. 'Going, going, gone!' he shouted with a breaking voice, at the same time trying to hit the podium that had toppled over with the wooden gavel.

Nobody reacted. The people stood there, frozen to the ground with their eyes glued to the film.

Finally, Krudon Kragt looked behind him. There on the screen, he saw his own criminalizing thoughts.

A bolt of shock ran through his body. Then, he became demented

with anger.

‘Dazzler!’ He hissed. ‘I will kill you.’

Krudon threw open his jacket and jerked out a pistol. But he didn’t get the chance to even lay a finger on the trigger.

Olle Mallet and Butcher Danglingbone had jumped on-stage and grabbed him by his arms. Krudon screamed like a piglet, but Olle and the butcher didn’t let go.

‘How dare you,’ Olle Mallet said, panting. ‘Where do you get the nerve?’

The cheese maker pulled his clenched fist back, ready to put all his anger and frustration about his lost cheese shop into one blow.

And then a gunshot.

‘Let go of him,’ someone said.

No one had thought to pay attention to Moxxo. That’s why nobody had realized that he’d climbed onstage with a pistol at the ready.

Olle and Mr. Danglingbone did as the man said. Krudon ran from the stage and fled to his helicopter, followed by his bodyguard and Bunkert Rotalot.

The tension had exhausted Diego. He watched in a trance as the three men stepped into the helicopter whirring for take off.

A thought suddenly gripped him.

Amita.

Diego didn’t think twice. He ran as fast as he could to the helicopter. The doors were already closed. The machine slowly

lifted from the ground.

Diego banged on the window with his fist. Krudon Kragt whipped his head around and looked at him furiously.

‘Amita!’ Diego screamed. ‘What have you done with Amita!’

Krudon shot a disgusting grin at him and said nothing. He simply gave him a sneer for a moment longer, until the helicopter shot up in the air.

Krudon didn’t have to say anything. Diego had seen everything he wanted to know in his murderous thoughts.

He ran back hastily and donned the Flape. Balthazar and Kala came running through the school gate as he shot into the air. Like a coasting eagle, he hung above the surprised crowd.

‘Amita is tied to the statue of Willibrord with a time bomb!’ Diego screamed at his friends. ‘Don’t go near it!’

When he was sure they had heard him, he turned around, and flew at breakneck speed in the direction of the statue.

The Last Chance

Diego thought the rushing sound of the wind in his ears would deafen him.

He shot over the water of the Fludd like a bullet. The square quickly came into view.

Diego breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the statue of Willibrord still standing there, as immobile as always.

We actually get out of this alright, Diego thought. I'm nearly there.

Tschiukk.

Anxiously, Diego looked back. The helicopter was flying directly behind him. Krudon Kragt was steering. Moxxo and Bunkert Rotalot were holding on to the helicopter with one hand. In the other, they held a pistol.

Bunkert aimed and shot again.

Tschiukk.

The bullet went straight through the wing of the Flape. I need cover, Diego thought frantically. He shot down closer to the ground. The street cobblestones quickly rushed up to meet him. Just in time, he leveled off and started zigzagging horizontally between the lampposts and the houses.

One wrong move and they'll have to scrape me off the wall.

Suddenly, Diego reached the edge of the village where there was hardly any protection from the bullets. In front of him, he could see the Dull Forest looming.

Diego looked up, panting. Moxxo was standing on the side bar of the helicopter and was aiming his pistol at him. Diego pulled up his wing and made a pirouette.

Tschiukk.

The bullet missed him. Diego saw a tornado of sand fly up from where it buried itself into the ground. With a thumping heart, he weighed his options.

If I stay here, they'll shoot me.

I have no choice.

Risking his life and severe damage to the Flape, Diego dove into the Dull Forest. All of the trees looked alike. They were all the same length, the same width, and were all very much solid. Everything that made the Dull Forest look dull suddenly seemed life-threatening. With a second's notice, Diego came within an arm's length away from smacking into a tree. Realizing he couldn't avoid it, he pulled his feet up with all his might and placed them on the bark and pushed off. He shot further into the forest like a flying kangaroo.

Keep going... further... keep going. They can't see you in here.

Just as he was about to reach the edge of the forest, Diego looked up and scanned the sky.

The helicopter had fallen behind. He had lost them for now.

This is my chance. The only shot I've got.

Diego eased himself to the ground and started to crawl on his hands and knees, gathering stones.

The helicopter was still circling above the other side of the forest.

Diego could see them as Bunkert and Moxxo searched the ground, their guns at the ready.

Diego took a deep breath, started the engines of the Flape, shot straight up in the air, and waited there.

The helicopter was about a football field away. Spotting him, it turned around and shot towards him like a giant, angry wasp. From the sharp turn, Bunkert lost his balance. He fell back inside the helicopter.

Diego clenched the stones in his hands, uttered a loud warrior cry, dove forward, and as fast as he could, flew in the direction of the helicopter.

His move surprised Moxxo. But not for long. Moxxo aimed again, taking his time before he pulled the trigger.

Tschiukk.

Diego felt the impact of a bullet hit his shoulder. The pain shot through his body.

Keep going. Can't stop now.

Diego peered through his waving hair. He was only thirty yards away from the helicopter now. Moxxo was aiming again.

A bit more... just a little bit more...

Diego opened his fists. The stones shot with great speed towards the helicopter. The front windshield was shattered immediately. One of the stones hit Moxxo on his hand. He dropped his gun with a cry of pain.

Diego pulled up the wings as fast as he could. His arms felt as if they were being pulled out of their sockets. Frightened, he looked at the turning blades of the helicopter that were steadily drawing nearer.

Rise. Please rise.

Diego closed his eyes. The sound of the helicopter was so overwhelming, Diego thought he might go deaf. An enormous gust of wind razed his body and nearly pulled his glasses off his face.

Then, everything was over. Diego found himself floating in the air, like a leaf in the wind, numb from pain and exhaustion.

He opened his eyes. In the distance, the helicopter was flying towards Kragtstad, leaving behind a thick funnel of smoke.

I made it. I won.

For a moment, Diego felt victorious. But at the same time, he knew that this was not really the end. He felt it, deep in his bones.

Something terrible was about to happen.

Just before the helicopter flew over the mountain ridge, Diego watched in horror as Bunkert was pushed out of the helicopter door. With a blood-chilling scream, he crashed down and disappeared into the Dull Forest.

They murdered him. They just murdered Rufus' father.

Suddenly, the engine on his left ankle started to sputter. The Salvadus was nearly gone.

And I still have to save Amita, Diego thought.

He could already distinguish the silhouette of the statue on the square in the distance. He pulled up and dove towards the village, as fast as he could. Maybe I'll make it, he thought. Maybe I'll arrive just in time and -

Boom.

Diego saw the head of the statue explode like a ripe tomato. The rest of the statue blew apart, sending shards of rock flying in all directions, breaking all the windows in the square.

Diego felt tears running down his cheeks. At that very moment the left engine stopped whirring – immediately followed by the right one.

There was Diego, gliding high in the air, silently, and with a view of the destroyed statue and square under him.

Suddenly he was tired. Very, very tired. The pain in his shoulder spread through his whole body. He was freezing cold and shivering.

With a heart as heavy as stone, Diego let himself descend.

It took some moments before he realized he was falling. And fast. Diego looked at the wings. They were full of bullet holes. The wind went straight through them, tearing at the already punctured material, and gradually making the holes bigger. The ground was

coming towards him at a tremendous speed.

Diego didn't care anymore. He closed his eyes. A happy thought popped in front of his eyelids – he and his father, floating through the air for hours and hours, just like they used to. A smile slid over his face.

Diego didn't see the large shadow that passed over him. The only thing he knew was that he suddenly felt much lighter, as if he really was flying.

When he landed softly on the bank of the Fludd, Diego was already unconscious.

Awake

Diego opened his eyes. He was lying in his bed. He no longer felt light, but as if a boulder had fallen on top of him. His eyelids hung like lead curtains over his eyes.

It was dark outside. A soft cracking sound came from the corner of his room.

Diego looked up. Amita was sitting in a chair in the corner, looking at him with eyes full of concern.

Diego wanted to shout her name. But he only managed to clear his throat. A sharp pain lanced from his shoulder through his body.

Exhausted, he closed his eyes again. I'm dead, Diego thought. Just like Amita.

Diego opened his eyes for the second time.

It was light out now. His eyelids didn't feel quite as heavy as before. The sharp pain in his right shoulder was still there with every movement he made.

I can't imagine that you feel this much pain in heaven, Diego thought.

He looked expectantly at the chair in the corner of the room. It was

empty. Diego felt his heart crush into a thousand pieces.

Sounds were coming from the hallway. The door was opened and a tray with warm rolls and fresh orange juice entered - carried by Amita.

'You're awake,' she said. 'Great. It's about time, considering you've been laying there for three days.'

Diego couldn't suppress his cry of joy. He wanted to jump out of bed, but Amita told him to stay put. The old woman put the tray down, sat down on the bed, and embraced him firmly.

'The child that sees, hears, and feels it all,' she whispered. 'The child that can save us. Well, you made a great start.'

'What happened?' Diego stammered. 'How did you-'

'Eat first. I'll catch you up on what's happened in the meantime.'

Diego began wolfing down the rolls, all the while keeping his eyes fixated on Amita. Not heeding Diego's warning, Kala and Balthazar had run to the square, together with Olle Mallet and Sorety. Risking their lives, they had freed Amita from the statue. They just managed to get away before the bomb exploded.

'Krudon Kragt was only after money and power,' Amita explained.

'On the other side of the ridge is a large underground reservoir of Terrafos. But to transport it to Kragtstad, Krudon Kragt had to own Pickleby and the surrounding land - land that belongs to me. He knew I would never sell to him and that the inhabitants of Pickleby would put up a fight if they knew what was really going on.'

‘I’m just glad the truth is out there,’ Diego said enthusiastically.

‘And that Krudon Kragt is finally behind bars.’

Amita said nothing and looked at the floor.

For a second, Diego completely forgot about the pain in his shoulder with the knot that took form in the pit of his stomach.

‘You don’t mean to say that -’

Amita looked up at him and nodded.

Krudon Kragt was a free man. Yes, he had been arrested, but they had released him the next day due to lack of evidence. The police of Kragtstad had stated there was no proof that he had placed the bombs or was, in fact, part of the Bomb Brigade. They said that he had only pulled out his pistol to shoot Diego as an act of self-defense. Even worse, Krudon had stated that Bunkert had fallen out of the helicopter, and that it had all been a big accident.

Diego sat up in his bed with a furious expression. Amita put her hand consolingly on his arm.

‘Life isn’t fair, Diego. But if we do our best, we can make it better.’

‘That doesn’t really make *me* feel any better,’ Diego replied persistently. Angry and tired, he dropped his head on his pillow.

‘There is one thing...,’ Amita said hesitantly. ‘One thing nobody understands very well. How did you manage to land? The wings of the Flape were shredded. It’s a miracle you survived. Diego?’

But Diego was sound asleep.

Farewell

Diego's life had changed for the better.

He received the highest recognition award a Pickleby-er could get.

Jokes about giant snakes were few and far between. Wherever he went, he was showered with compliments and pats on the back.

Bunkert Rotalot's funeral was somber. The Rotalots had no money and nobody wanted to chip in for a nice headstone for the worst traitor Pickleby had ever known. So Rufus himself had handmade a wooden sign.

On a dreary day, together with his mother, he brought his father to his last resting place. That very day, Diego had also gone to the cemetery to put fresh flowers on Zeb's grave.

Diego looked gloomily at the headstone of his father. 'It's a pity you can't see me now,' Diego said loud. 'I think you'd be proud of me. At least, that's what I hope.'

Diego had a strange feeling when he talked like that. He still felt a little fire in his heart that told him his father was still alive.

He took a deep breath, put the flowers on the grave, and stood up.

A large bird circled high above his head, but Diego didn't take notice.

On the other side of the cemetery, Bunkert Rotalot was being

buried. With a grim face, Rufus threw dirt on his father's coffin. He was furious and clenched his teeth tightly, not shedding a single tear.

It was no coincidence Diego had chosen that day to go to the cemetery. He still had a certain feeling of sympathy for Rufus, no matter what he'd done in the past. Just like Diego, Rufus now only had a mother for a parent. What's more, the bully was being shunned by everyone in the town because his father had betrayed them all. Not too long ago, Diego had been treated the same way. Despite of everything Rufus had done to him, Diego still felt sorry for him. But most of all, Diego was curious and wanted to know what Rufus thought of him, too. Whether he was still angry that Diego had humiliated him in front of his henchmen.

When they looked each other in the eyes that dreary morning, Diego knew that things between them would never be okay.

Whale Shark

On what was probably to be the last summery day of the season, Diego, Kala, Balthazar, Amita, and Russula were all sitting together in the tree hut on the Hill of Thoughts. It had rained every day the past week. But today, the weather was perfect.

They looked in silence at the valley below them. Diego knew they were all thinking about the same thing: Krudon Kragt.

Diego had seen him earlier that week on television, at the opening of one of his new factories. He'd stood there in his white suit and beamed, just as he had on their own stage, as the crowd below him cheered half-heartedly.

The past few weeks, hardly any newspaper, web site, or news channel had mentioned what had happened on Mt. Pickle. Even their own newspaper *The Pickle Times* seemed to avoid the topic as much as possible. Diego knew why: fear. Everyone was afraid of Krudon Kragt.

'He has to be stopped,' Kala said with a bitter look on her face. 'We have to retaliate and strike back. I still have a score to settle with him.'

Amita smiled faintly.

'Well, am I wrong?' Kala shouted annoyed. 'If we don't do anything,

nobody will.'

'If you are a small fish swimming in the sea, would you fight a big, bad shark?' Amita asked.

'I would!' Kala said determined.

Diego knew she meant it, too.

'Those who are guided by anger will never ever win,' Russula said.

'Your balance will be lost, your common sense turns thin.'

Amita looked up. 'Russula is right. Fighting often only leads to more fighting. One hits the other and the other hits back, even harder.

One draws a knife, the other draws a pistol. One arrives with a tank, and so on and so forth - until there are many dead and nobody remembers why it all started in the first place.'

Fighting can also be beneficial, though,' Diego argued. 'I'm no longer afraid of Rufus. It is rather the other way around now, I think. He's a little scared of me now.'

'Ah,' said Amita. 'And do you two get along now?'

Diego blushed. 'Uh - not really. But we don't have to, do we?'

Amita looked at him. 'Sometimes you have no choice. But it may come in handy one day, should you need each other. That is what great leaders do, Diego. They are better at making friends than fighting.'

And that's what you expect from me, Diego thought. That I become a great leader.

Diego was glad to have regained his self-confidence. But him, a

great leader? No, he didn't see that happening.

'Fighting-with-Krudon-Kragt-will-only-take-us-further-away-from-the-real-issue-at-hand,' Balthazar said. 'Because-why-is-Krudon-Kragt-powerful? Why-is-he-so-to-speak-the-shark-and-are-we-the-little-fish, as-Amita-said? Because-he-has-muck-and-everybody-else-needs-it.'

'Exactly,' Amita said. 'You hit the nail right on the head – no, not literally, Balthazar. What if we were to make a lot of Salvadus? What if we made sure there was enough clean Salvadus for all of Rebequin? That way, we could get rid of a lot of our land's pollution, too. And what if we made sure everyone puts Energyfans in their houses so that they won't need Terrafos anymore?'

'Then everybody will want our energy,' Kala said. 'And we will be the shark.'

'Or a whale,' Amita said. 'I'd rather not be a shark.'

'A-whale-shark,' Balthazar said. 'That-seems-like-a-nice-compromise-to-me.'

'Whale sharks can also be attacked by ordinary sharks,' Kala said.

'Did I ever tell you the story of the Leosi and the whale shark? Well, it was a very warm summer that year and they had to go way out to catch fish and...'

Diego looked at his friends and let his thoughts wander. He closed his eyes for a moment and thought about Amita's words.

The child that feels, sees, and hears it all... The child that can save

us...

Maybe it's all a load of garbage, Diego thought.

One thing was certain: Diego was not very enthusiastic about saving Rebequin single-handedly. What he did suddenly feel like doing, however, was taking a good dive in the Fludd. It was probably one of the last days of the year where it would be warm enough.

There's plenty of time to save Rebequin, Diego thought. But a good dive in the Fludd – now that, you never know when it'll be your last. Diego got up, grabbed the rope, and with a loud warrior cry, swung into the river.

THE END

Dear reader,

I hope you have enjoyed Diego Dazzler & The magical glasses.

Part two, Diego Dazzler & The return of the eagle, is also available.

Part three, Diego Dazzler & The master of dreams, will be translated in English soon. The fourth and last part will first come out in the Netherlands in the beginning of 2017, and will then be translated.

To be continued...

Maurits