

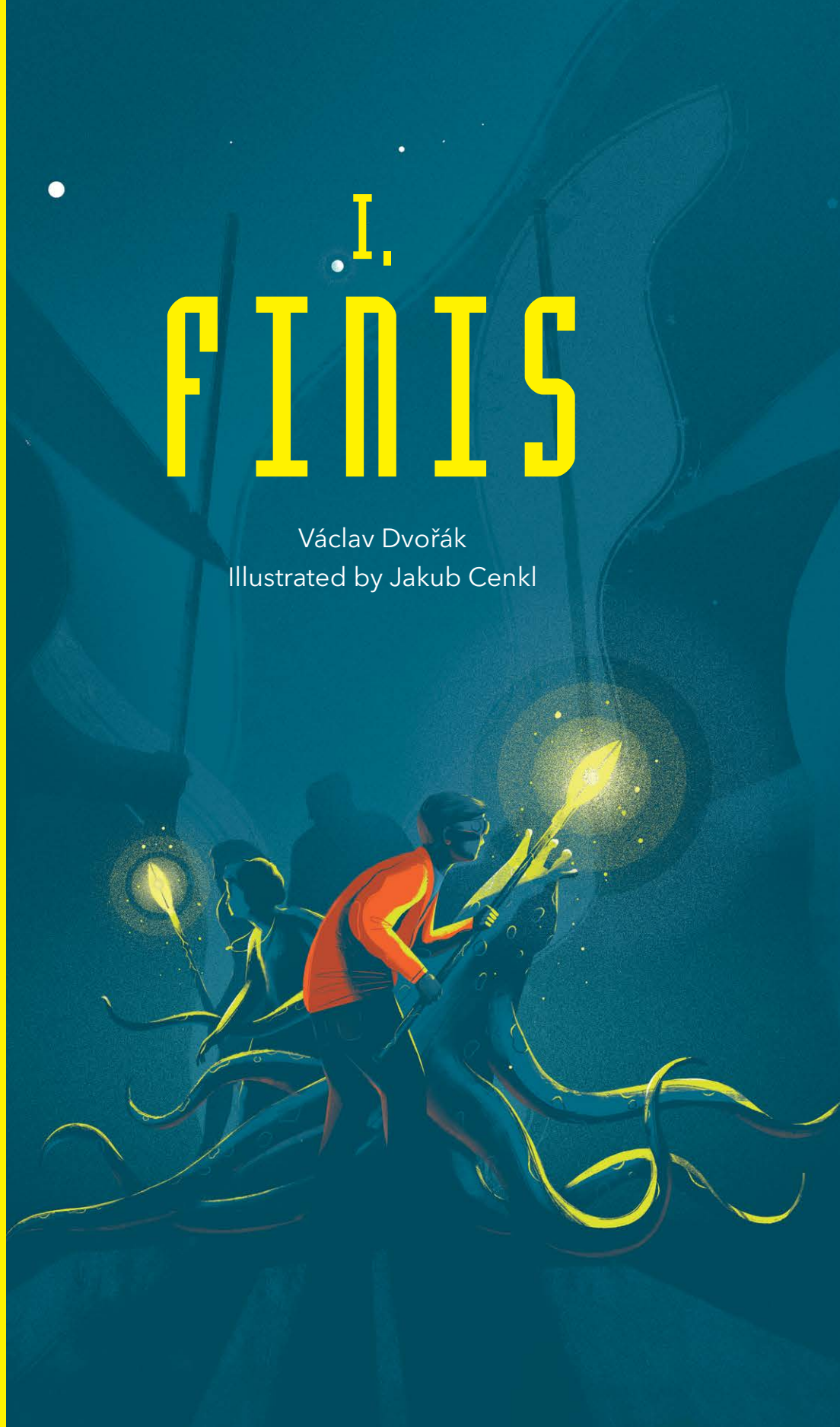
I. FINIS

VÁCLAV DVOŘÁK



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Illustrated by Jakub Cenk



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Our world is coming to an end and no-one, absolutely no-one, is doing anything about it! Is everyone just resigned to their fate?

Well, I'm not ready to give up yet!

"They're checking you out!"

"Who?" I ask in confusion, suddenly torn away from my thoughts.

"The chicks! Who else?" rasps Jake, and it takes me a moment to realize that he means the girls from our class. It's break time and we're standing by the high brick wall beside the school playground. Actually, it's just me that's standing—Jake's sitting, but we're both watching the girls playing their girly games. They're playing catch or hopscotch or just hanging around, shooting furtive looks in our direction. And giggling all the time.

"I want to have loads of chicks," says Jake confidently. "At least twenty."

I look at him uncomprehendingly—I have no idea what he's on about.

"We used to have it tough. Us disabled people, I mean. We never used to get any girls. I mean able-bodied ones. There was just this one really famous disabled scientist who was a bit of a ladies' man, but apart from that we didn't stand a chance. But that's all changed now, you know—like, there isn't so much competition. This is our time, my friend! We can have anyone we want!"

I feel like yelling, launching myself at Jake and shaking him. Usually I only half-listen to him, but today all his stupid banter is really getting to me.

Suddenly I realize why he's being like this. He doesn't know what it's like when you...

"We'll divide them up equally."

I swallow a curse, grit my teeth and pull a face instead. I don't want to listen to the rubbish he spouts and I'm not interested in half the girls from the year! I'll be glad when the break's over and it's time to go back to class.

Jake grins and tries to slide his twisted hand under his shirt. His squirming makes the wheelchair rock from side to side.

Chuckling, he pulls out something triumphantly. "Fancy a ciggy?"

Of course I don't. And neither does he—he's just acting tough. Anyway, he hasn't got matches or a lighter. I slowly calm down and force myself to speak.

"Have you been stealing from Mary again?"

He nods. "She still hasn't cottoned on," he says, failing to notice my shaking voice as he fumbles for a cigarette that's fallen into his lap. "She keeps putting her handbag beside me when she's bundling me up the steps. She's so gullible."

The assistant Mary is actually quite sweet and I'm sure she knows perfectly well that Jake's been stealing from her. I watch him struggling with his ill-gotten gains, slowly tucking the packet back into its hiding place in his clothes, and suddenly I hate him. I hate him for being so carefree, and at the same time I really envy him for it. I wish I had his worries!

I look back at the playground. There's nobody playing tag, running around after a ball or pretending to be superheroes, and there's definitely nobody fighting. Just girls everywhere.

Jake follows my gaze, squinting into the sun.

"I'll let you pick first if you've got your eye on someone," he says slyly.

I look away, saying nothing, then nod towards the wall.

"You're forgetting David."

"Who'd want him?" Jake snorts, and for a moment he fumbles for the controls. The electric wheelchair turns with a jerk in the direction of the other boy in our class.

David's leaning against the wall, standing side-on and gently knocking his head against it in a regular rhythm, looking right through us towards who-knows-what.

"I'll bet you a ciggy he has a fit today."

I shrug, because I couldn't care less about David's fits. I couldn't care less about anything in this world, apart from just one thing!

"Before lunchtime, maybe during the next period," says Jake knowingly. "It'll be a laugh."

Right then my classmate seems even weirder and more messed-up than usual. But all at once it strikes me that it isn't Jake that's messed-up. It's not even our school or our class, where there are no other boys except the three of us.

It's the world we live in that's broken. And there's one thing I long for: to have the power to fix it.



The assistants show up. The long-haired one, Yolanda, takes David's hand and leads him away, while the smiley one, Mary, accompanies Jake to the door. He could manage fine on his own, but he deliberately bumps into whatever he can with his wheelchair to make it harder for her. She's put her handbag beside him again, but this time he won't have long enough to steal more cigarettes.

We go into the corridor. It's a lot darker here than in the spring sunshine, but the filter on my automatic goggles turns lighter in an instant. I go past the lift and run up the stairs to the classroom. A minute or two later, Jake appears and parks his wheelchair by the desk next to mine.

The maths lesson begins, and Mary leaves because Jake can generally manage sums without any help. The same can't be said of David, though. The assistant is with him, and every so often the sound of whimpering comes from the back of the class.

Our world went wrong twenty-three years ago. And I can't believe no-one's done anything about it in all that time. Why hasn't anyone found out who's behind it and how to stop it? I look around. Everyone's acting as if nothing were happening, as if the world were normal. Have they all got used to it? The teachers, the adults, the girls? I catch some of them looking at me.

And who else would they be looking at?

There's another whimper from the back and Jake grins at me. Yolanda's new here, and unlike us she doesn't recognize the signs that David's about to have one of his seizures.

The teacher at the blackboard raises his voice to drown out the boy, who's worked up about something. We turn round to look at the assistant trying in vain to get on top of the situation. We both know it was too late for that the moment we stepped into the classroom after the break.

By the time the autistic boy jumps up and starts lashing out with his arms and legs, everybody is staring. The assistant launches herself at him and tries to hold him down so he doesn't hurt himself. David's too strong for her, though, and he breaks free and runs around bellowing.

"Can... Can I be of any help?" offers the maths teacher timidly, but the assistant doesn't hear him. She's too busy chasing the boy, who is turning the classroom upside down.

"Well, I think...that's probably...the end of the lesson," says the maths teacher in resignation and we stream out of the classroom, which looks like a bomb's gone off in it.

About time too. I hurry towards the wide staircase, which is divided into two flights, one on either side, that connect up to a central landing with stairs leading down to the floor below.

I have to lean over the massive stone banister to see the door to 2B on the ground floor. There's somebody standing on the opposite side of the staircase, leaning over the banister like me. I move my head ever so slightly, but apparently still enough to attract their attention.

It's Agnes. She raises her head, and her long blonde hair, carelessly tied up in a ponytail, spreads out over her shoulders. Her unbelievably blue eyes are fixed directly on me.

I hold my breath and force myself not to move. It's hard, even though I know she can't see through my pitch-black goggles. She gives me a searching look. For a moment her forehead wrinkles and she raises her eyebrows questioningly. Is she trying to work out if I'm looking at her?

She smiles, but then there's a loud bang and we both turn towards the classroom on the ground floor. The door has burst open and the second-years come rushing out, whooping and hollering. Boys and girls—it's almost an even split. I scan the crowd of children and finally see him: a boy with fair, curly hair.

My little brother, Martin. He's shouting like the others, looking forward to spending the long break in the playground. Surrounded by his friends, he pushes his way outside with the others.

As he disappears from sight, the smile freezes on my lips.

How could the time have gone by so quickly? How is it possible that my brother is going to turn eight in just two weeks? Two weeks! Tears appear on Agnes's face and she hides her eyes in her sleeve. Her brother is about to turn eight too. In four weeks. And I have a feeling that in four weeks her smile will no longer be the same.

Nothing will be the same.

We used to walk home from school separately, me on my own and Martin with his pals, but lately my brother's been waiting for me.

"Hi, Peter, do you want me to carry your bag for you?" a few of the girls in my class offer, and it takes a long time to get rid of them. We amble along the streets, chatting.

"You should use your stick," my brother says.

"A white stick's for blind people who can't see anything, and I can see all too well," I protest.

"Mum wants you to."

"Not today," I say, shaking my head. Today we don't much feel like talking, even though it's a special day. It was our last day of school. Mum and Dad have taken time off work, we've got a fortnight's holiday and we're going to the lake. Any other time we'd be planning all the things we were going to do there, but not this time.

"I don't want to go anywhere," Martin suddenly says. He must have been keeping that bottled up inside him.

"It'll be great. We'll go fishing and ride bikes and we'll do that trip to the castle again." I steer the conversation onto safer ground, forcing myself to adopt a carefree tone.

"I don't mean the lake. I mean afterwards."

What will happen afterwards? I'm silent. We go round the corner and there's a group of older girls coming towards us. Their attention is instantly focused on me.

"Grab hold of me," I say. My brother takes me by the elbow and I pretend to be blind. I pull out my folding white stick and start tapping the pavement with it in a regular rhythm.

The girls keep looking at me anyway. They're all a head taller than me. They make a beeline for us and surround us. I can smell cheap perfume mingled with sweat. Martin's hand appears in my palm, clutching it tightly.

"What's wrong with him?" says the tallest of them, a thickset girl with a double chin and red hair, nodding in my direction. She has a gruff, ungirlish voice. "They take the blind as well!"

I say nothing, but I can feel my brother trembling with fear. I grip his hand tightly, hoping he'll be able to handle the situation alone. I let my chin drop down slackly. Where

did these girls spring from? The fat girl examines me from every angle, but she can't see under the close-fitting goggles.

"Get him to take off those goggles!" she orders, her breath on my face.

Martin gives a start and I stiffen. I can't take my goggles off! Out here in the sunlight I'd lose my eyesight. I open my mouth even more and let out a long, inarticulate shriek. My brother finally pulls himself together.

"My brother's autistic!"

The girls immediately lose interest.



"Why didn't you say so?" they snap at Martin, finally leaving us in peace.

We move on and I keep my white stick handy. It's a long time before Martin speaks again.

"What did that girl mean about them taking the blind as well?"

I think about what to say. We don't talk about that. Not with those who are leaving. When I speak, my own words betray me.

"She meant that some blind people leave as well."

"Blind people leave, but you didn't. Why?" Martin stops, his eyes wide. I shrug, because I don't know, I really don't know, and I can't remember what it was like when I turned eight.

"I don't remember."

"Where will I go?"

I'm silent. My mouth's gone dry. These are things we *really* don't talk about.

"Out into the world...to seek your fortune..." I say, falling back on an old wives' tale.

He shakes his head.

"The girls were saying I won't come back again."

I grit my teeth, angry with all the families that only have girls in them. Why do they say that? Why can't they just keep quiet like everyone else?

"What if I did something? To my back, so I'd end up in a wheelchair. Jake didn't leave either."

"That's not how it works. Jake's been disabled since he was born."

"When will I come back?"

All of a sudden I'm just standing there, staring at him silently. Because nobody has ever come back. "Maybe you won't leave either."

"Promise?" asks Martin, my pale face reflected in his pleading eyes. "Do you promise?"

I would love to promise him that, I really would. But I can't make promises that are impossible to keep. And I don't want to lie to my own brother the way people sometimes lie to the dying. I'm holding onto a tiny glimmer of hope that if I don't, my brother won't die.

We have a big, old house with a garden. You can hardly see it from the street because the front door is hidden by fully grown rhododendrons and there's ivy climbing up the wall all the way to the first floor. The door's unlocked, a sure sign that Mum's home and waiting for us. Going inside is like stepping back in time. That's how old-fashioned the entrance hall of our house looks: it's really gloomy with the windows covered by heavy curtains. The filter on my goggles lightens to the bare minimum, but underneath it there's another one.

We go up the creaky wooden stairs to the first floor and walk into the dining room. Its windows face south, it's flooded with sunlight and the filter on my goggles instantly gets darker. The dining room is the biggest room in the house, with other doors leading off it. On the right there's the living room, bathroom and kitchen, and on the left, with windows facing east, are my parents' bedroom and the room I share with my brother.

Behind our bedroom there's another room, but neither Martin nor I know what's in it. We're not allowed in there; the door's kept locked and the key is so well hidden that I've never been able to find it. But Mum and Dad go into the secret room; I've seen Mum cleaning the window in there several times from the garden. But you can't see into the first floor through the curtains. All we know is that we're not supposed to ask about the secret room.

Mum's at home and immediately hugs us. She clasps my brother to her a little longer—but still, it seems to me, not as long as she'd like to. Martin and I set the table for dinner, and then Dad comes back from work and we all sit down together.

At first there's just silence, and then Mum and Dad start talking about the holiday.

I sit and listen in disbelief. How can they chat about such trivial things at a time like this? I can't stand this kind of small talk! I hate pretending nothing's going on. It's so obvious Mum's worried! From time to time she can't keep up the pretence and her beautiful face contorts, revealing wrinkles I've never noticed before—and yet they look deep, as if they've been there forever.

"I don't want to go anywhere," Martin suddenly announces.

"Surely you don't want to go to school instead of being on holiday?" asks Dad, trying to make light of it.

"The girls were saying I won't come back again."

Dad is silent; he swallows. He's like me—he doesn't know what to say either.

"You'll come back, we just don't know when," says Mum reassuringly.

"Where will I go?" asks Martin.

"You'll go out into the big, wide world and then you'll come back again."

I feel like shouting; I'm shaking all over and breathing like I've just run a race. My parents shoot warning glances at me. I don't want to let my brother leave! He won't come back! No-one has ever come back!

Dad gets up from the table and brings over some sweets.

"Help yourselves, but just take one."

Martin chooses one and then I do the same. I suck the sweet and slowly start to relax; my breathing calms down. I look around. Our dining room, table and chairs; the photos of holidays and family celebrations on the walls; the door to the secret room. Everything is still the same and will stay the same. But in two weeks my brother will be gone for good.

The sun has long since set and the stars have come out, but luckily there's no moon tonight. It's almost completely dark in our room and I can finally take off my goggles and rub my aching face. I can see as well as in daylight, except that everything's grey. I sit on the bed and watch Martin. He's asleep and breathing calmly, but I'm still wide awake. I take out a book and try reading. It's no good—I can't focus on the words on the page.

All of them vanish. All of the boys without exception. When they turn eight, on the very day of their birthday, they go to bed and then disappear, dissolve into thin air in the twinkling of an eye. And nobody has ever managed to do anything about it. The only boys who remain are those with some kind of disability that affects the brain. Like Jake with his cerebral palsy or David with his autism. Or me, even though according to many people I'm actually perfectly healthy—apart from my eyes.

I have extreme photophobia. That means my eyes are really sensitive to light, and yet I'm able to read in the dark when other people can't see as far as the tip of their nose. And in situations where other people can see normally, I have to wear goggles that look like the ones welders use. They automatically adjust to the level of light, but underneath them there's another, almost totally black lens, a filter that I control myself. I can only take off my goggles at home in complete darkness.

I try to remember what happened to me when I was eight, but it's no use. It's as if all the events surrounding my birthday were shrouded in mist. Is it possible that nothing happened back then? Did everybody know I wouldn't leave? I've got no memory of a party and I can't even remember what presents I got. I put my mask over my eyes, but I can't get to sleep. I toss and turn long into the night. When I wake up, there's a shock in store for me.

My brother isn't in his bed!

I jump up and run to our parents' room. Even from a distance I can hear him—he must have crept in beside them during the night. Now they're lying there talking. I cautiously peek into the room.

"Am I going to die?" asks Martin, and I hold my breath so as not to miss a word.



"No," says Mum with a sad smile, stroking my brother's hair.

"So where will I go?"

Mum gives a sigh, takes hold of his hand and reassures him, speaking slowly and calmly. "We don't know. Somewhere far away."

"So how do you know I'm not going to die?"

"Whoever is doing this is very powerful. And if they wanted to, they could take us all away at once. But they haven't done that. And that's why I think there's some higher purpose to all of this. We don't know what it is. But we have to hope that you'll come back again."

"Did somebody tell you that?"

"No, but I believe it."

"Like when people believe in God?" says my brother, seeking an explanation for the inexplicable.

"Something like that..."

"I'm scared..." says Martin, starting to cry. I fight back the urge to rush into the bedroom and hug them both.

"I'm scared too," Mum says in a barely audible voice. "But wherever it is you're going, I'll be here waiting for you."

"Am I going to God?"

"Some people believe in God, but I believe," she says, trying in vain to steady her quavering voice, "that you'll all come back again."

I clench my teeth in desperation. My breathing quickens. How can she lie to Martin like this? How can she believe this? How can anyone believe in anything at all? I don't get it. It's so cowardly! To do nothing and just *believe* that...that...

Some people believe that the boys go to God, or to Jesus in heaven. But others say that this path can only lead to hell.

There are only a few days left. They go by in a flash; soon the holiday is over as if it had never even happened and we're back home again. Our relatives show up: Gran and Grandpa and also our aunt and uncle—only our young cousins are left at home.

The party is held two days before. My brother gets a huge Lego set. Any other time we'd be arguing about who was going to build what and fighting over the pieces, but not this time. I sit and search in the pile of bricks for the right one, which I hand to my brother. He's strangely calm; he hasn't asked about anything for a long time. I tell him I need to see the instructions better and deliberately sit so close I'm touching him.

And then it's evening and we're sitting at the dinner table, hardly speaking. My brother's calm and takes a sweet again, but I don't want one.

At night I toss and turn for a long time, then stare intently at my brother. In twenty-four hours he won't be here anymore. I get up, go over to him and watch him breathing.

"I won't let you go. I won't let you leave!" I say. It's only towards morning that I finally manage to get to sleep.

All day long I'm on edge. I watch Mum; her eyes are red from tears and lack of sleep. I know she's been crying, even though she tries to put on a brave face in front of me.

Why don't they do something? They're the grown-ups, after all! They say it's inevitable. When I see their helpless, resigned faces, I feel like screaming. *Do something! Do something to stop this!* But I don't say a word. How can I blame them for any of this?

After dinner, me and my brother go and get ready for bed. He's going to sleep in our parents' room tonight. When we tuck him in, I can't see for tears and then afterwards I can't even cry. Whatever might come for him, I won't give him up!

The lights are turned off, night sets in and we sit there in the bedroom.

I'm determined not to fall asleep. I sit as close to my brother as possible and take hold of his hand. He's sleeping so soundly that he doesn't even stir. I clutch his hand as tightly as I can. I'll hold onto him, even if it should take both of us. *I promise you, little brother, I won't let you go off alone!*

The minutes race by.

I must have fallen asleep; I'm dreaming. I'm moving through dark corridors and I'm strangely light, almost as if I were floating. I'm somewhere underground, perhaps in the dungeons of the castle we visited during the holidays. I walk through the corridors, and in the distance I can hear a strange rapid booming noise. I come to a staircase and start to climb up; I can see a glimmer of light. Something makes me quicken my pace. I hurry up the steps...

Suddenly the dream changes. I'm lying in my bed, but I must still be asleep, because something weird is floating a little way from the bed: a rainbow-coloured, pulsating sphere the size of a tennis ball. It's emitting light, but I'm not blinded, even though I don't have my goggles on. I get up to take a closer look. There's something rippling around the edge of the sphere; it reminds me of wings, or perhaps fins cutting through water. I reach out my hand, but the object moves away. I follow it out of the room and into the dining room, my eyes fixed on the shimmering rays. As if beckoning me on, they lead me around the table towards the door to my parents' bedroom. I watch the floating object as if under a spell—in a dream you have no will of your own—and then I'm inside the room.

Everyone's asleep; I can see Mum and Dad beside the bed and the other grown-ups in armchairs around it. It takes me a moment to spot my brother lying in the middle of my parents' bed. My guiding light stops directly above him, and now it's pulsing with a calm and pleasant light. Suddenly it goes out, disappears, and I take one breath in and one breath out before it hits me that this isn't a dream. I must have fallen asleep and been carried to bed by my parents.

My throat constricts with horror. I'm not even capable of breathing, let alone doing something, crying out, rushing forward.

Out of nowhere, as if it had grown out of the bed, a white shadow appears beside Martin, immediately followed by a second and then a third. They shimmer, stretch out and merge together; they blend into one, completely enveloping my brother. And then, before I have time to blink, the shadows are gone and the bed is empty, the covers lying loosely as if there had never been anyone underneath them.

My brother's gone! I gasp for breath and then I scream and scream and the others wake up and grab hold of me and I'm still shouting. Suddenly I feel something prick my arm and after that there's nothing but darkness.

The pain is terrible, though slightly less now than it was at first, when I couldn't imagine how life could go on without Martin. I spend my days in the study on the ground floor, because visitors don't come in here. I don't want to talk to anybody. I dread the day when I have to go back to school.

The walls of the study are crammed with shelves of books; in the corner there's a heavy writing desk, and in the middle of the room there's a round coffee table with a glass top and two high-backed armchairs. The windows are blacked out. There's so little light in here that I only need ordinary dark glasses.

I'm sitting in one of the armchairs, looking at the books. These days no-one stops me reading the books from the top shelf: the books about leaving. I read one after another, but there's no satisfactory answer to the question "Why?"

I hear muffled voices from the hall, followed by the creak of the door handle.

Dad peeks into the study.

"You've got a visitor," he says calmly, and I feel a surge of defiance. I don't want to talk to anybody!

I hear my father sending someone in and stubbornly continue to stare at the big thick book. I don't want anybody in here!

The door closes, but the person remains by the door. Something makes me raise my head.

Agnes.

For the first time in several days, my breath catches in my throat and my heart beats faster.

She's standing on the threshold of the room, straining to see into the darkness and holding a long box tied up with a bow. It takes a moment for her eyes to adjust, and then she slowly walks towards me, every step accompanied by the creaking of the floor.

For a moment she hovers indecisively; she feels for the back of the chair opposite me, finds it on the second attempt, and sits down on the edge of it.

I don't say anything, just stare at her without moving. She's wearing quite a nice blue dress with white stockings

and shoes. Her hair, pinned up with clasps, is decorated with blue flowers. She's looking right at me.

Is she waiting for me to say something?

She clutches the box nervously and then tries to undo the ribbon. She feels her way along the ribbon and struggles with the knot on the bow for a moment. Once she's managed to untangle it, she takes the lid off the box and pulls out an enormous candle. She places it on the table next to us. The candle's decorated with blue flowers, and Agnes turns it round until a large cross is facing me.

A candle of relinquishing, for my brother.

I continue to watch as Agnes puts the ribbon back in the box, places the lid on top and sets the whole thing on the table next to her.

Then she frowns; in the darkness of the room she can probably hardly see me. I'd like to say something, but I don't know what. All I can think of are lame phrases and useless words.

Agnes stands up and turns towards the door.

I quickly get up from the chair, but my mind is a complete blank.

Agnes stops, hesitates. Suddenly she takes a step towards me, then a second, a third. She's close enough to touch me. She stares at me, her pupils dilated in the darkness. But her beautiful eyes aren't smiling—they are calling out for help. And there's no-one here to answer that call.

Suddenly she raises her hands, and her fingers briefly touch my face. I hold my breath. Agnes takes off my goggles.

I close my eyes—I have to. I keep my eyelids tightly shut. I'm aware of her presence and a sweet scent. It lasts for just a moment, and I picture her scowling because she can't look into my eyes. The floor creaks, the goggles land on the glass tabletop with a faint clink and the footsteps move away.

For the first time in days, I feel alive again. My heart's pounding in my chest and I don't want it to end right away.

The door handle squeaks. I want to speak, to hold her back somehow, so I blurt out the first thing that comes into my head.

"I saw them!"

I still have my eyes closed and I picture her standing by the door, half turned towards the room, her hand on the door handle and her eyebrows raised questioningly. She's straining all of her senses into the darkness, waiting for me to say more, to give some kind of explanation.

"I saw the wraiths that took my brother away."

The handle creaks, the door slams shut and Agnes is gone. I sink back into the armchair.

They weren't shadows, they were wraiths. Wraiths that carried Martin away! I realize I've seen them before. I remember the moment four years ago when they came for me.

I'm sure I watched them just like I did a few days ago. They were far off in front of me, not... Suddenly an image of monsters standing around me flashes into my head.

They came for me, but they didn't take me away!

Because I had woken up?

If they wanted to snatch me but didn't in the end, that means... What exactly?

I sit in the armchair, my mind racing. In my head, images of monsters dancing around me mingle with wraiths watching from a distance.

Why didn't they take me?

Because of my eyes? What makes me think that my eyesight isn't the reason? After all, some boys with real visual impairments have left.

Do they visit everyone and then decide who to carry off and who not to?

Is it because of my eyesight that I can see them? Am I the only person in the world who can see them? Is that why I escaped from them? Since when have I actually had this eye condition? I go into the dining room and look at the photos. In the ones where I'm just a little kid, I'm not wearing goggles. That never struck me as odd before.

Without even knowing how, I'm suddenly standing by the door to the secret room, trying the handle in vain for the thousandth time.

What happened when I was three?

I don't dare ask my parents; I'm worried about them. Mum looks totally different these days. Her wrinkles have grown deeper and changed her completely. Are they new, these ugly furrows around what used to be such beautiful eyes, now puffy from crying? Or did I just not see them before?

A few days have passed, and my parents are about to go out for the first time. They discuss their plans over breakfast.

"Are you coming with us, Peter?" asks Dad, but in a different way from usual. Like I don't have to.

I shake my head and pick at my food.

"Let him stay at home," says Mum, standing up for me. "It's Sunday, it'll be mayhem in town."

Sunday. There'll be the market on the square with music. At midday the bells will ring and people will come out of the church.

"I'll come with you," I say, avoiding their surprised looks.

The town is full of people and cars. There's loud music playing; at times you can hardly hear yourself think. We wander aimlessly around the market and bump into people Mum knows, who give us their condolences. Once again I'm glad I'm wearing the goggles and no-one can look into my eyes. Every now and then I check the time, and when it's getting close to midday I casually steer my parents to the other side of the square.

The bells of the Church of Relinquishing are ringing, and people are beginning to come out. There's a whole procession, with a wedding party at the front. The groom's quite old and the bride is really young; you see that more and more often these days. Behind them come other people I don't know. I'm starting to worry that they didn't go to church today. But there they are; I recognize Agnes's big sisters at the back. They're walking behind their parents, holding their nearly-eight-year-old brother by the hand. Agnes comes last.

Some distant relative appears and starts chatting to Mum and Dad.

I take advantage of the situation, move away and blend in with the procession. Almost at once I find myself next to Agnes. She looks straight ahead, giving no sign that she's aware of my presence. I resist the urge to touch her. We walk along side by side and my heart is pounding like mad. The procession stops at the crossing; the light's red, and I know that when it turns green, Agnes will cross the road and I won't see her again. I take hold of her arm and grip it tightly.

She wants to break free; we turn to face each other. And I say the foolish thing that I've been turning over in my mind for the last few days. I have a sudden moment of clarity; I've never been more sure of anything.

"I'll save him," I shout, but with all the din around us she still has to read my lips. "I'll save your brother!"

She doesn't smile. Her jaw is clenched, her lips pressed hard together, her eyes angry.

She doesn't believe me.

I let go of her arm and tear off my goggles; I'm flooded by dazzling white light. For a brief second I can stand it. Then I close my eyes, but I feel it burning me even through my tightly shut eyelids, even through the hands I use to shield my face. I can't see a thing, flashes of light exploding on my retina like atomic bombs.

I don't even know who fetched my parents. They took me home, still blind, and sent for a doctor. It was a few days before I began to see again.

When you suddenly lose your eyesight, it gives you plenty of time to think—for example, about what you're planning to do. I've got it all worked out, but whenever it hits me what it is I'm about to do, I feel a knot in my stomach. And I still don't know if there's any chance it'll work.

Did she understand?

When the wraiths didn't snatch me four years ago, was it because they didn't want to or because I foiled their plans? It doesn't matter now. All that matters is where they're carrying everybody off to. What's happening to us?

People from the Church of Relinquishing believe that the boys go to God. But if that were really true, if they really believed that, then why would Agnes be so worried? I don't get it.

Mum gave me a telling-off for pulling a stunt like that. Dad was quiet at first and then said something about how it was too bad and now I'd have to be at home all the time.

I sit in the study and once again devour all the books ever published about leaving. I know everything that's written in them; I've read countless theories. All those fantastic accounts of black magic, secret criminal organizations, hidden underground realms and holes leading to other dimensions. But none of it makes sense to me.

The days go by and I'm still not back at school. Next week, my parents say. I feel more and more tense; I'm getting worried that Agnes didn't understand. Or that she understood but doesn't believe me. Or that she believes me and still can't do anything.

I try to read a philosophical book, but I don't understand the words and I can't concentrate. It's Thursday, tomorrow's Friday and then it'll be Saturday. The waiting is unbearable; I keep checking the mailbox.

"Are you expecting a letter, Peter?" asks Mum, and I shake my head.

On Friday the mailbox is empty again—nothing but the newspaper. The postman shakes his head too.

At lunch I play with my food and then go back to the study. I think about who else I know, but nobody comes to mind. My plan has failed.

Dad peeks into the study.

"There's a letter for you, Peter."

My heart skips a beat. I look at the envelope, neither big nor small, made of thick paper. It's addressed directly to me, but it doesn't have a stamp or a postmark. Somebody must have delivered it by hand. My name is written in the kind of neat handwriting only girls have. I open the letter nervously. I'm overwhelmed by that feeling you get when you manage to bring about something you're actually afraid of.

I show the letter to my parents.

"An invitation to an eighth sacrament?" says Dad in surprise, giving me a searching look.

"Do you know what that means, Peter?" asks Mum, her face darkening with worry.

I nod. The eighth sacrament is the sacrament of *relinquishing*. That's what Agnes's church calls the ceremony where someone leaves them.

"I don't think you should go," says Mum, but Dad disagrees and they start arguing. I go into our room—my room now.

"He needs to deal with it in his own way," I hear Dad say, and then there's silence. I picture Mum nodding, perhaps hiding her face in her hands.

It's Saturday and I'm feeling really guilty. When I think about what I'm planning to do, I start trembling. I can hardly look Mum in the eye. But when I see her puffy eyes and her wrinkles, which have grown even deeper, it only strengthens my determination.

At dinner I barely manage to swallow a few bites. Thunder rumbles outside; there's supposed to be rain and high winds at night. Dad says he'll take me in the car—it's all the same to me.

My throat's tight and I feel like I might faint. I try to act as if nothing's going on, as if I'm totally fine. But when I say goodbye to Mum, I almost ruin everything. I hug her tightly, though not as tightly as I'd like to.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" she asks, those horrible wrinkles appearing again.

I nod, pick up the box with the candle Dad got for me, and go and get changed.

It's raining outside, the water falling in sheets over the windscreen. Dad drives slowly, as if giving me another chance to change my mind; the journey seems to go on and on. I'm aware of every turn, every junction, and I wish the journey would never end. It's almost completely dark and I could

probably take off my goggles, but then Dad would see my wide-eyed stare. I almost wish he would so he'd take me back home again. But I only have to think of Mum's face, creased beyond recognition by sorrow, and I'm determined to go through with it.

10

Agnes's parents' house is even older and bigger than ours, with high arched windows and wide steps up to the front door. I go in, hand over the candle and take off my jacket, which is soaking wet from the short walk from the gate to the door.

The house is full of people I don't know, and as soon as I go in a number of them look me up and down. I'm glad I'm wearing my goggles and people can't see into my eyes. They can't believe that someone like me—someone my age—is here at all. I'm rescued from their curious stares by an older lady. She leads me into a room where there's lots of food on tables, although people aren't eating much, just standing around whispering.

I'm handed a small plate of food and then I stand there, looking around me. I can't see Agnes or her sisters anywhere. I feel a jolt of panic that I'm in the wrong house, but then I spot her father going into another room.

I cautiously follow him, and the sight of what's inside turns me to stone.

The room is lit only by a circle of giant candles, which cast their light on Agnes's brother. He's lying in the middle on a bed covered in flowers. He looks dead, but I know he's only sleeping; he's probably drugged. With him are his sisters and parents, kneeling close by, their hands clasped in prayer. I struggle to locate Agnes; she lifts her head and we lock gazes. Even from a distance, I can see her desperate eyes crying out for help.

A priest comes in. The ceremony begins and the room fills with people. I can't focus on the words that are spoken or anything around me; I'm having trouble breathing and the heavy air is making me dizzy. There's nowhere to sit down; everybody stands and then kneels down and prays, and I do the same, even though I don't know any of the words.

The wind picks up outside and drops of water spatter on the windowpanes. I sense the time is near. I try to take off my goggles, but I can't; the candles are too bright, forcing me to put the dark glasses back on. For a moment I can't see anything, coloured blotches dancing in front of my eyes.

The church bell rings in the distance. It's midnight; it's about to happen. I'm afraid I'll freeze the way I did at home. I'm on tenterhooks. The people around me are murmuring an unfamiliar prayer; the branches of a tree strike against the window, and the candles are so dazzling that I can't see the bed with Agnes's brother in it.

Any moment now it'll all be over, and it's so stuffy in the room that I might pass out. On a sudden impulse I jump up and rush over to the window. It won't open. I desperately rattle the handle and it eventually gives way. A gust of wind flings the window open and a blast of fresh air forces its way into the room. The candles go out; I hurriedly tear off my goggles.

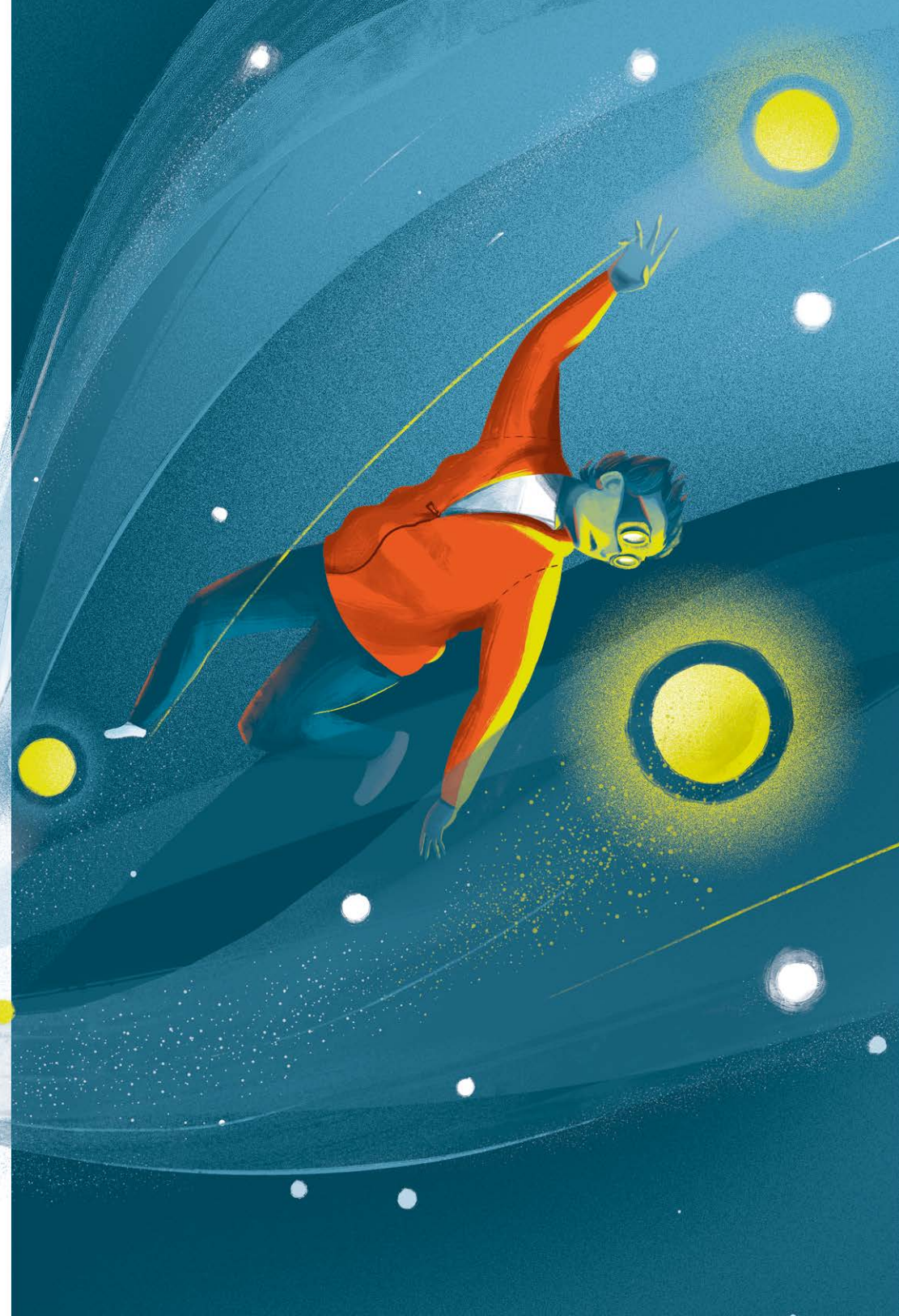
I'm really far away from the bed. Should I make my move? If the wraiths appear now, I won't get there in time!

As if in a dream, a small rainbow-coloured sphere with rippling rays of light appears above the sleeping boy. I look around at the others, but no-one else can see it. The sphere is the same as it was at our house—again it's pulsating, but this time in a completely different way. Instead of being comforting, the light is unsettling; my body is flooded with adrenaline. The light disappears and I make a dash for it.

I pound across the floor as if my life depended on it—or rather, my brother's life.

The journey to the middle of the room takes forever. I'm not going to make it! I bump into someone and stagger but keep running. Astonished faces flash by me. Somebody grabs me by the shirt, but I wrench myself free. I take off and go flying through the air.

I land on the bed in a kneeling position, my knees knocking against the boy. White shadows appear on the bed, shimmer around the figure lying there and envelop it completely. With all my strength, I thrust my hands under the child's body and pull him downwards with a single jerk—so violently that I lose my balance and fall behind him.



I put out my hands, but the floor has disappeared and I don't stop falling. I can't feel my own body—it's as if I didn't have one, as if for an instant I had shattered into a million pieces. I'm flooded by blinding light, but it doesn't hurt my eyes, and my ears are filled with a high-pitched whistling. When I finally land, I feel the impact as if from a distance and the momentum flips me over onto my back.

My God, please let this be a dream!

I gasp for breath. My lungs fill with heavy, dense air and a terrible stench that makes my stomach turn. I want to hold my breath, but I can't stop and keep swallowing that filth over and over again. It's as hot as hell.

But you only go to hell after you die!

The whistling stops and instead I hear a deep booming. I still can't see anything. I have no feeling in my arms or legs and I've lost control of my body.

What if I really am dead?

Something touches me and my heart almost leaps out of my chest. I want to defend myself, but I can't move. I feel claws, slimy and burning hot, digging into my legs and arms and jerking me this way and that. I'm scared of seeing what kind of monsters these talons belong to, but all the same I strain my eyes into the white darkness until I catch sight of them. Screams of terror force their way from my throat, but no sound comes out.

Demons from hell!

They're all around me. Freakish creatures with scrawny bodies covered in dirt and glistening with sweat. Each one is different; they flash past me, their arms and legs distorted, growing out and then disappearing again. I see big, deformed heads with several eyes and a crooked mouth. Their whole faces contort.

They grab my hair and arms, fighting over me. I'd like to defend myself, but there's no strength in my muscles.

"Leave me alone!" I want to shout, but I only wheeze in terror.

I'm on my feet; the monsters let go of me and I collapse back onto the ground. I fall slowly, but this time the impact as I land really hurts.

How can something hurt me if I'm dead?

The beasts pull me to my feet again. This time I remain standing, while the monsters form a circle around me. They're quiet, but maybe it's just that I can't hear anything, only the relentless humming that presses in on me from every side. The creatures draw closer, straining their necks in curiosity and opening their mouths hungrily. They seem to be swaying to a beat, but that's just because my head is spinning. Suddenly I see it.

My sight comes back to me; the image in front of me stops flickering and distorting; the creatures' swaying slows down. But they aren't monsters! Standing around me are ordinary boys, all of them younger than me. Some are completely naked, others dressed in rags, and all of them are dirty and emaciated, their cheeks sunken, their eyes wide and empty. There are dozens of them—white, yellow, brown and black. They press forward, staring at me open-mouthed.

The boys half push and half pull me somewhere.

Are we going to where my brother is?

The light's fading. We're probably underground because the floor's flat. We walk, or rather shuffle along, and I become aware of a curious lightness. The heat's more and more intense, and the boys' sweaty, naked bodies glisten in the darkness. We come to a wall and the boys in front of me bend down. I let myself be pulled to the ground and, with no will of my own, crawl through a low tunnel with the others. It's hard going since I'm tied to the boy next to me and we keep getting in each other's way.



My heart's racing; I look around me, searching in vain for a familiar face. I want to speak but can only croak. I spin around woozily, feeling strangely light, and discover that I have no shoes.

Is this a dream? Is it possible that I knocked myself out when I fell in Agnes's parents' room and all this is happening inside my head?

The boys around me are lit up by rapid flashes, which are beginning to dazzle me. I want to put on my goggles, but the boys come up to me and take my arm; I'm unable to resist. They wind some kind of rag around my wrist; the other end is tied to a young boy.

That reminds me why I'm here.

"Martin," I croak, but no-one answers me. I look around at their faces. He's not here, and neither is Agnes's brother.

Did the wraiths seize me instead of him?

The tunnel comes to an end and I stand on tiptoes to see as far as possible.

Please let Martin be here!

We're in a narrow space, but I can't see my brother. There's nothing but a rounded overhanging rock face, and the boys push and shove one another to get to it. With their fingers they tear at a kind of moss growing on it and hungrily cram it into their mouths.

What kind of terrible place is this?

I become aware of the deep booming that has been shaking me to my bones the whole time I've been here.

I touch the surface of the rock. It's vibrating to the same rhythm.

The little boy I'm tied to gropes around him, and I begin to recover my wits. After all, he can hardly see a thing! I notice a place on the rock that is densely covered with moss and guide his hand towards it. He tears off the plant and hurriedly stuffs it into his mouth.

The kid looks quite ordinary. He isn't emaciated like the others and he doesn't have such a blank gaze. He must have come here recently, like my brother.

"Where's Martin?" I shout over the booming noise, but the boy doesn't understand me and I don't understand the words he says either.

It takes a long time before the boys have finished chewing. We crawl back through the low tunnel and go on further to a place where the boys lie down on the ground. They jostle, kick out with their legs and flail their arms, making space around themselves in a curious dance, and gradually fall into a restless sleep. Some of the boys leave, disappearing into the darkness, while others keep appearing. For a moment I feel a surge of hope that I might see my brother among them. But my brother isn't here; I'm in a different place from him. Something must have gone wrong.

I can't get to sleep. As soon as my head touches the hard floor, the deafening blows go right through me and my heart starts beating at the same speed. Some of the boys twitch and cry out in their sleep; others sit and cry.

These can't be all the boys who disappeared! And they look younger than me—they can't be more than eight or nine years old. Where are the others? Could there be more places like this?

I examine the rag I'm tied with. I could easily break free, but what would be the point?

While the others are dozing, I don't get a wink of sleep. I'm not hungry, but my tongue's sticking to the roof of my mouth with thirst and the heat is giving me a headache.

I hear shouts and the boys get up wearily and automatically move off somewhere in the darkness.

"Akvo!" shouts the kid, following the others, who are going somewhere different from *yesterday*, whatever 'yesterday' might mean.

The boys keep their right hand on the back of the lad in front and use their left to grope their way along the rough

rock wall. We head downwards for long minutes, the ceiling rising so high above us that it's lost from sight. We're at the edge of an abyss, walking along a narrow gallery. The wall opposite us is round, leaning over us, and as we go past it I start to get scared that it'll fall on us.

It's cold down here, and that's good—the cool air helps to bring me to my senses. I notice that the rock beyond the abyss is shaped like a cone. Actually, it's an upside-down hill tapering like a stalactite, and we're heading in a spiral towards its tip.

The humming grows fainter, but the temperature keeps dropping and icy water drips down my neck. We reach the bottom of the abyss. Trembling with cold, the boys step onto the thin ice, which breaks under their weight.

For a moment it's as if they've been injected with new energy. Shouting and jostling, they plunge into the water, and from time to time one of them jumps up, rising about two metres into the air. Some of them scoop up water into their trembling hands and lift it to their mouths; others lie down and drink straight from the surface. I drink too; the icy water burns my throat and stupefies me at the same time.

Directly above us quivers the sharp tip of the cone. I don't understand how an entire hill can just hang in mid-air like that.

We head back up into the heat and sit and rest on the narrow gallery above the abyss for a long time. I watch the boys, their blank stares directed into the darkness; I listen to the cries some of them use to communicate, but I don't understand the words.

After a while we go for another drink and then take a breather again. The strange ritual lasts for hours before we finally begin to climb back up in single file.

Up at the top, we have another rest and then set out for the same place as *yesterday*, to pick moss from the rock that gives off heat, hums and makes the floor, walls and air vibrate.

My stomach is aching from hunger, so I try a bit of the plant. It's horribly bitter and I can't bring myself to swallow it; I spit it out and retch a little. It's the most disgusting thing I've ever tasted.

The kid grabs my hand and puts it on his chest several times.

"Sam, Sam," he says.

I introduce myself too.

"Peter, Peter," repeats Sam in his own way, and that's the end of our conversation.

Another *night* sets in, though it's always just as dark here. The boys lie down to sleep, squirming restlessly again. A few of them go off somewhere and almost immediately a small group of different boys comes back. I'm tired and hungry, so I lie on the floor, which doesn't stop vibrating and pounding.

I try closing my eyes and my mind is filled with a vision of my mother's worried face. When she smiles, tears well up behind my tightly closed eyelids.

What have I done? I've robbed my parents of their second son! I grit my teeth and clench my fists, trembling all over with the effort of holding back the sobs.

I promise you, Mum, I'll do this! I'll find my way back and bring Martin with me. I don't know how, but I'll do it!

14

I awake to someone pulling me by the hand.

"Venu, venu!" whispers Sam urgently while covering my mouth.

He blindly pulls me away from the place with the moss, heading in the direction the groups of boys keep disappearing in. He feels for the wall in front of him and then follows it. We've been walking for about a minute when flashes begin to light up the space in front of us. Soon the light is directly above us. As if hypnotized, I walk beneath it; with my head tilted back, I almost step on the sleeping boys. It seems to me that there's something inside the pulsating light.

Sam leads me back to the wall. A narrow gallery appears in front of us, and we climb up. The air gets stuffier, the humming louder and the light more intense, but I urge my guide on eagerly.

The kid suddenly turns into a very narrow side passage which heads upwards at an angle. A faint glow appears in the distance. We crawl right to the end of the tunnel and look through a tiny round peephole at a curious sunless landscape. The horizon is strangely close and there are no buildings, no trees—not even plants or grass. Nothing but stones and deep hollows whose bottoms are lost in pitch-black darkness. For a long time I observe the strange scenery, where the contrast between the light and dark places is incredibly sharp, but I have no idea what I'm actually looking at.

"Kio gi estas?" asks Sam and I shake my head helplessly.

We climb out of the tunnel and Sam makes to go back down. I stop and give a tug in the opposite direction. The kid shakes his head fearfully, takes my hand and pulls me downwards, whispering something urgently. But I'm stronger and the little boy reluctantly gives in.

We climb upwards. We're about twenty metres high and the thundering blows are louder than ever, but the flashes begin to fade. Above us is the ceiling, and the bright light is coming from a round hole beyond our reach.

Just below the ceiling, the gallery comes to an end, the path plunging into the rock. We continue up a steep track that turns back on itself, and suddenly we're there.

Sam covers my mouth again, but I wasn't going to make a sound anyway.

We're in a dome-shaped space, and in the middle of it, just above my head, there are flashes pulsing to the rhythm of the relentless booming. A large, sharply outlined sphere of light appears in the middle of nowhere, above the place where the floor is missing. The light blinds me, but I keep looking at it anyway, because in the middle of each flash I can make out a small human figure. Each one is different, but I see Martin in every one of them.

Sam pulls me back again, but I don't want to be led away. I pull him towards the light and he begins to resist more and more. I hurriedly unwind the rag that binds us.

Step by step I go closer, staring at the flashes as if hypnotized.

This is where the others go. This is how my brother left!

I'm at the edge of the hole in the floor; I hold out my hand, but I can't reach the light. I step back, take a huge breath in and jump.

I find myself in the air and slowly, as if in a dream, I pass through the flashing sphere. Human figures appear and disappear around me and inside me. I fly out of the orb of light and fall onto the floor on the other side. Horror constricts my throat and the hairs all over my body stand on end.

I'm trapped here. Caught between Earth and the place where Martin has gone.

15

Have I been here for a week or a month?

The days go by one after another; they merge together and I've stopped counting them. Journeys to the depths for water alternate with trips to the rock where that disgusting moss grows. I've learned to eat it, even though it still makes me feel sick—I sleep better afterwards.

I reckon I've seen all the boys here and I've counted them a thousand times. There are precisely ninety-seven of us, but Martin isn't among us. I can't ask about him because I can't make the other boys understand me. They don't even talk to each other, just shout out individual words; they communicate through shrieking, jostling and endless crying.

I've been through this whole underground area, but there are just a few more places with moss located around the booming rock, the ice pool beneath its tip and, right at the top, the dome with the flashing sphere of light.

Other than that, nothing.

I spend a lot of time up there. I spend whole periods of sleep jumping into the flashes and thinking in vain about how to go after my brother. I lie awake wondering why I've remained here and what is beyond the light. I still don't know where I am; all I know is that this is neither heaven nor hell, even though it sometimes seems that way.

Occasionally I catch myself walking along like a zombie, mindlessly following the others. I haven't been tied to Sam for a long time now, but the kid still stays close to me and I can see him getting thinner and his cheeks becoming sunken. But I mustn't become a shadow of myself like the others! After all, I have a job to do here.

Who's doing this to us?

We're on our way back from a trip for water when we hear shouts against the background of the booming.

We run to the place below the light and join the other boys, who are standing around in a circle. A young lad is falling from the pulsating sphere of light. He floats down as gently as a feather and lands among us. He's a scared little boy, struck dumb with terror, torn away from his parents, his hands blindly held out in self-defence.

Why do some boys drop out of the light? And how can I get back into it?

The boy wails. Perhaps he's calling for his mother, but there's no-one here who can understand him. The others lift the lad, half mad with terror, to his feet and tie him to my arm. Fear has taken hold of him—I can feel him shaking. Suddenly everything changes.

The booming.

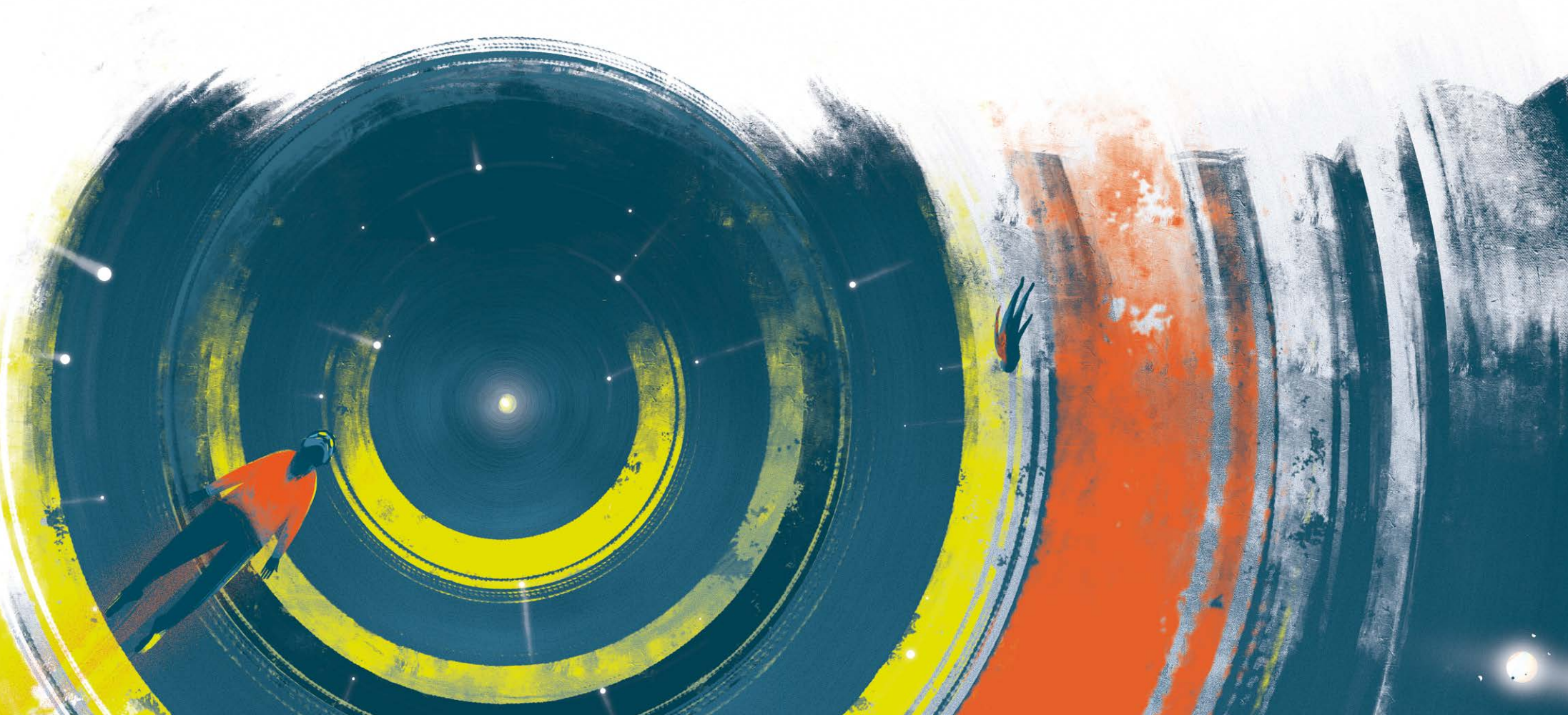
The deafening blows that had been measuring out time for us at regular intervals have stopped and the light above our heads has gone out. Complete darkness and silence sets in—not even I can see anything, and all I can hear is the others' ragged breathing.

The silence is broken by a long, drawn-out, heart-rending sound. The boys start in fright, cry out in terror and look at each other fearfully with their hands over their ears.

16

A small rainbow-coloured ball framed with rippling rays appears in the place where the sphere of light was before. It briefly lights up three times, then abruptly swoops down among us and disappears. On a sudden impulse I throw myself to the ground. I see what happens next through the others' legs. Seemingly out of nowhere, wraiths emerge from the space above us and within an instant they have landed amid the circle of boys.

I can see them very clearly. Monsters with horns on their heads and on their bent backs and claws wielding some kind of staff. With astonishing speed they aim their weapons at the boys, who fall to the ground without a whimper. There are no flashes of light, no shots fired, and in the total darkness and silence it takes a long time for the



They say that nearly all of us came back. And no-one, absolutely no-one, remembers anything. We have no idea where we've been or what happened to us.

I'm back at school and I'm standing by our wall.

"It's all gone to pot!" declares Jake, pulling out a cigarette from under his shirt.

The unexpected return of the boys has turned the world upside down. Although in our class it actually looks the same as before. There are still just three of us lads, including David. The government decided that all the ones who'd come back, regardless of age, would go into the class they'd been in when they disappeared. For the time being, they say. The older ones will catch up easily and will soon overtake us.

"I'm going to ask for another assistant," says Jake. "I don't want Mary any more! She actually slapped me on the wrist, can you believe it?" he snarls, moving his wheelchair back and forth in annoyance.

I'm not listening to him, just watching the third years. We've just been given our report cards and now we're waiting for the ceremony to mark the end of the school year.

I still wear glasses. Not the welder's goggles, just ordinary dark glasses. And I don't really have to wear them, I just can't get used to other people seeing into my eyes. From time to time someone looks at me. People don't quite understand how it is that, unlike the other boys, I came back with my hair. Mum declared that she should have shaved my head while I was at home so I'd look *normal*.

The ones who're happiest we boys are back are definitely the girls.

"We don't stand a chance now," says Jake, taking a long drag on his unlit cigarette.

I squint to the side a little. At Agnes. There's a bunch of older boys swarming around her. She could have any one of them...

"They'll steal her away from you," declares Jake, even though I'm trying as always not to give anything away.

I say nothing, but I have butterflies in my stomach.

People say I supposedly saved her little brother. I left in his place. That's why I appeared at their house. But why should they be grateful to me now that absolutely everyone has come back?

School's out and everybody's heading home. Not far from us, Agnes is with a group of her friends. Now and again she gives me a curious glance. The sadness in her eyes is gone for good and to me she seems more beautiful by the day. We're all going in the same direction, but then we get to the corner of the street and Agnes and the others will head off a different way.



We've been back for weeks and I still haven't summoned up the courage to speak to her.

I feel a slight push from behind. From my brother. I take a few steps towards her.

She stops and looks at me, and I hold my breath, we're almost as close to each other as we were that time in our study. This is my last chance, because after this I won't see her all summer. What if she's got her eye on another boy? Now she smiles encouragingly.

I'd love to say something to her, but only stupid things come to mind.

Agnes is waiting, the huddle of girls is giggling in a really idiotic way.

At least say hi!

Hi? But we saw each other at school!

Her eyes are still fixed on mine, but she's smiling less and less, bitterly. She's saying goodbye with a sad expression and I know that this is the end, that after the holidays everything might be different. But even so I can't get a single word out. Maybe I do say something, my mouth moves, but no sound comes out.

She takes a first step and everything in me seethes, something inside screams. I tear off my glasses, throw them on the ground and abruptly stamp on them.

Agnes turns back, her eyes wide with astonishment—it's the first time she's seen mine.

"I remember," I whisper. All of a sudden I'm short of breath, as if I'd run all the way from school. "I remember where I was."

Agnes inhales sharply, her eyes asking whether I'm being serious.

I nod.

One day I'll say more. I'll say everything, I'll tell people about my older brother. I'm not ready yet, but one day I'll do it. Everybody needs to know who saved them!

Sometimes at night when I can't sleep, I go into his room. Our parents want to give it to me, but I don't want to just yet. For a moment I look at the clean, made-up bed and then I pull back the curtain and observe the stars in the sky.

I believe he's still out there somewhere.

One day he'll come back.

I know it.

The End

Boys are disappearing from Earth. On the day of their eighth birthday, they vanish without a trace, and no-one can prevent it. People have lost all hope—they have even stopped asking themselves where and, most importantly, why the boys are being taken. However, twelve-year-old Peter didn't vanish. The reason may be his extremely sensitive eyes, which are protected by thick black glasses. These allow him to see in the dark and to witness shadowy wraiths stealing his younger brother away. Peter hatches a crazy plan, and it is because of his unusual eyesight that he is able to find his way to a dark and frightening world inhabited by monsters. What has only been whispered in fearful tones up till now begins to take on a very real form—we are not alone. Who is the all-powerful Enemy, where did he come from, what is he planning and why is he doing all of this? The decisive battle is approaching, and the end of the world as we know it is closer than we could have imagined.

For fearless readers from 11 years old.

Awards & recognition:

Magnesia Litera 2021 – price of readers (the most prestigious book awards in the Czech Republic)

Included in the Best Books for Children 2020 (a selection of original Czech books compiled by experts on literature for children and young adults)

Golden ribbon (Czech Section of IBBY) – nomination for literary part, prize for illustrations.