

Sugar High School

A novel by Magnus Itland.

This is a book about friendship with the strength of love, the borderlines of romance and the broad range of warm feelings that can exist between young people. It also includes some supernatural elements and a bit of drama near the end. I have not included material which I expect most readers to find crass or objectionable or that they would be ashamed of reading in a family setting. I consider the book appropriate for ages 11 and up, but due to the high school setting it will probably appeal mostly to those who have experienced that part of life.

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With that out of the way, onward to Sugar!

Chapter 1: Morning

"I can't believe the nerve of those people!"

It is morning. Two teenagers are sitting at the breakfast table in the robust wooden farmhouse. The two are brother and sister, the only two children in the Lithus family. The farm is the only one remaining in the small town, probably because it lies in the hillside a bit outside the town center. A small road down the hill is visible from the kitchen window. It is too narrow for two cars to meet, but then again you don't normally meet cars driving up here.

The angry one is the oldest, a boy of 17, muscular for his age and with brown hair and hazel eyes. To make it even more clear what he thinks, he is scrunching the local newspaper into a ball and throwing it across the room. "They think they can do whatever they want to common people, just because their grandfather was an angel!" "Whatever they want? Like, go to high school?"

"That's easy for you to say. You're not the one who gets your school ruined. Besides, you adore the pretty-boy."

"No matter what I or you think, he has the right to go to a public high school. And ours is the closest."

"Look Trine, it is quite bad enough that they have to live in the mountains straight inland from here. Tourists and weirdos all year round. But coming to our school! Can you imagine the circus? There will be camera teams in the classrooms, paparazzi in the restrooms, hidden microphones everywhere. The world's most famous boy coming to mingle with common humans for the first time in history. Can you imagine?"

"Oh yes..."

"Not like that! That not the kind of imagination I'm talking about. Besides, you're only 15. It's not like you would have a chance even if you met him, which you won't. Besides he may be gay for all we know. He's certainly prettier than you."

"I did not know you could judge prettiness in boys..."

"That's not what we're talking about!"

"Yes it is. Tom Lithus, the world's leading pretty boy expert!"

"You think that is funny?"

"Hilarious! I'm totally going to tell all the girls in class you said that."

"I am totally going to spank your ..."

"How about spanking some pretty boys?"

"I don't have time for this! I'm off to school, and if I even see that fluffy angel boy, I'm gonna tell him exactly what I think about him!"

After the boy has stormed out, Trine picks up the newspaper and smooths it. She looks at the picture of the slim blond teenage boy and smiles dreamily. She already has that picture in her scrapbook, of course. It's not like the local paper would have an original photo. Still, it is a beautiful picture, as they all are. Her eyes barely touch the headline:

"Betelgeuse" to Sugar Hills High School!

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THAT SAME MORNING, straight inland from Sugar Hills and the Lithus Place farm. The Starborn Manor, awe-inspiring in its simple yet massive form, marble softly gleaming in the diffuse brightness of the morning sun reflected from the mountain tops. The building stands on top a round grassy hill in the middle of a pristine green valley, grass giving way to trees that continue halfway up the majestic Norwegian mountains,

until the steepness is too much even for the tenacious small birches.

Inside the manor, a woman of stunning beauty is looking over a teenage boy. Her son, as should be obvious from the silky blond hair they share, and the exquisitely balanced details of face and body, radiating beauty that most humans can only crudely hope to copy. This is a beauty that cannot quite be captured in a photograph, although these give a hint. But it is like a light that radiates from the soul within, taking on the color of the perfectly proportioned bodies and the balance of every movement, as if they were stained-glass windows conveying the light of a higher world.

"Mommy, I have met humans before. The Lees and the Johnsons and Murti and Aunt Jocelyne are human, right? The Hosts when we are abroad. Not to mention that **Dad** is human!"

"True, but they are **special** humans. One in a million, they are chosen by fate and drawn to us. Humans of extraordinary honesty, purity and depth of spirit, servants of fate, drawn in by the same Heritage that protects us from the corrupted ones."

"Well, the Heritage **will** protect me, you know. And Johnson will take care of the house. Besides, I will be here every weekend and probably many nights in between. It's not like I'm moving to Mars." The boy smiles, and she smiles back.

"I know, Ben. But even though I am half Visitor, I am still a mother. Just seeing you before me, I wish that we could be together forever."

"We will, Mommy. Together for all eternity. But now I have to go to the human world. Do I go with your blessings?"

"Always." They embrace, and she strokes the thick blond hair as she kisses his forehead one last time before they part.

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There is a subtle irony in this, that the people who live closest to the school are usually the last to arrive. This means that Tom is somewhat early, although later than those who come with the school bus from the Valley. It is comforting to see the familiar faces. Although Sugar Hills has grown a bit every year, it is still a small town where everybody knows everybody. And Tom has seen most of these since grade school, although classes are different now in high school. Still, there are Jonas and Andrea who became his friends during the first weeks in grade school.

"Ah! The farmer has arrived! A new school year can begin." Jonas flashes him a friendly grin.

"Seems we are stuck together again, huh?" Tom puts down his school bag.

"You've heard the news too, right?" says Andrea. She seems way too happy for the topic at hand.

"The angel boy? Yeah."

Jonas recites like reading a book: "Benjamin Betelgeuse Starborn, son of the world's only superheroine, the half-alien Anita Antares Starborn. Possessed of unknown mystical powers inherited from their alien ancestors, the Starborn family is the living heritage of the Visitors who saved our world from the brink of total war."

"I wish they would drop those silly star names though" says nearby Jurgen. "It's pretty clear by now that the Visitors came from an alternate time stream rather than another planet."

"I think it is kinda cute" protests Andrea.

"Don't tell me you're infatuated with the boy as well" says Tom and shudders. "My little sister is like, ooh Benjamin, ooh!"

The boys laugh, but Andrea does not. She starts instead to study the contents of her knapsack.

More students continue to trickle into the room, but no camera teams, somewhat to Tom's surprise. Perhaps it is not legal to shoot video on the school, but he had not expected the media to bow to such formalities, not on such a grand occasion. The bell rings, the classroom fills almost entirely with students, and finally the teacher arrives. Mr Stranden, a bookish man in his thirties with a quiet dignity that seems slightly out of place in a place such as these. He is generally rumored to take his job seriously, which is a pity when his job is teaching in high school. Even a largely suburban high school such as Sugar High.

"Good morning, youngsters! And welcome to a new year with new exciting opportunities to learn and develop your young skills. Let us first go through the class list to see if all are present."

There is a soothing normalcy in this at least. Tom can finally relax. He must admit his imagination has blown things out of proportions. He looks out the window and there are no blimps with photographers and tele-lenses. He smiles at his own folly. But he does not smile too broadly, for he is sitting in the second row. Even though there are only a few desks empty, and even though the classroom mostly fills up from the rear, he prefers to sit up here. Not that he is a teacher's pet or overachiever or anything, but there is simply too much distraction back there. That's where the ADD crowd sits, as he likes to call them. There is always whispering and muttering and passing of paper scraps of dubious contents. Besides, back there are mostly boys. His tastes run in a somewhat different direction, and the front rows are heavy with girls. In fact, he could have sworn that Andrea's feminine charms have grown noticeably over the summer holiday, not that he has any intents on her of course, they are childhood friends and all. But she was always skinny and late to develop for her age, so it's probably all natural...

What's with the silence in the room? Did anyone just die?

"Which is" continues Stranden, "none other than Benjamin Betelgeuse Starborn! For our class to receive such a honor is unique in the history of the world!"
Starborn? Here? In **this** class?

The door opens, and a young boy comes in. The silence is absolute.

Chapter 2: Visitors on Earth

Years ago, when Tom was just a boy, he had stayed out longer than usual, up in the valley, further from town than the farm. He was making his way home and it was already very dark. He could barely see the old road, the one people had used before the new tarmac street from town through the valley on the other side of the river. He had gone here before often, he knew the way. But the darkness ... he wasn't afraid of the dark, not really. But a darkness like this, you could get lost if you strayed from the road even a few steps. And the road was narrow and in disuse. He wasn't all that afraid, but he did not like it at all.

And then the heavy clouds had drifted and revealed the full moon overhead. For eyes used to almost total darkness, it was as if the night suddenly became day. The road was clear, each tree along it cast in sudden brightness. It was a moment he would not forget as long as he lived ...

And yet he had not thought about it for a long time. Not until now.

The slender blond boy came in and stood beside the teacher. Then, of all things to do, he bowed deeply to the class, looking down. "Pleased to meet you! My name is Benjamin Starborn, but friends call me Ben. I hope we can be friends."

That's what he said, but his voice was like a song, like a melody played on silver bells. It wasn't like any voice Tom had ever heard before. And now, looking at the boy, he realizes that no, Benjamin Starborn is not a mere human. He is that, and more. Despite the humble posture, he radiates the quiet dignity of a prince who knows that he must inherit the world. Even looking down, he seems to shine ... not literally, not really, but ... the whole room is so much brighter than before he came in. It is as if a simple beauty is reflected from the very walls. Not just the boy. The blackboard, the desks, even the teacher and the other students seem to shine with a newfound beauty. It is as if Tom's eyes have been half closed and suddenly he has opened them. Everything suddenly seems more ... real. More colorful, vivid. Things are here, now.

And nothing is more here or now than the blond new student. Beside him, the walls themselves could be mist and he would walk through them if they barred his way. The world shifts, in one sudden movement it rights itself upright after having lain down for a thousand years. It snaps to rightness, and is centered around this one boy. The waves of the distant oceans, the strong winds on which clouds ride, the forests and mountains with their roots, they exist to serve this one boy. If he would call them, they would do his bidding. Finally, he has come.

With a sudden lurch, Tom's heart begins to beat again, and he draws a long breath. What was that? And yet, although he is back, aware of himself again, he can still sense it. Now finally he realizes what the big deal is. It is not about being a pretty boy. It is something much deeper. Whatever it is.

"Welcome to our class, Starborn. If you would, could you take that seat, beside Tom here. Ah, on the second row. Tom?"

Tom blinks. Then he realizes that he is supposed to make this easier. He lifts his hand, waves and reaches out to indicate the free desk beside him. And the angel boy looks and notices, and then looks at him for a moment. Their eyes meet. Sometimes eyes can speak. Rather than just looking, they can convey a feeling or add a nuance to something said, or they can seal a shared secret between two who

have seen the same thing. Tom has always taken this for granted. But he has never before seen it like this. These eyes express such a deep gratitude for the small unnecessary favor, as if he had performed some heroic feat or great sacrifice instead of just showing the boy his desk. But then ...

The Starborn's eyes widen in surprise or recognition. As if he had seen something familiar but unexpected. And Tom can't look away, he is drawn into it, even though he does not know what it is. For a long dizzying heartbeat it lasts, and then suddenly the other bows again, more slightly, and walks to take his seat. Silence falls again.

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Stranden may be an idealist, but he is not an idiot. He knows that any normal class now would be forgotten before it was over. So instead ...

"Today we will start with an overview on the history of the Starborn and the Visitors. Betel... Ben, please correct me if I make any mistakes.

"For thousands of years, there have been legends about angels. These are not just from Judaism and its descendant religions either: The Japanese have their Tenshi, and India has the Gandharvas, the Heavenly Singers. The details vary, but they are always described as beautiful and awe-inspiring, powerful in a magic way. We don't know if these were actually Visitors. Even though they were all considered a force for good, the legends tend to describe them in religious terms, as messengers and servants of gods. But the gods people believed in back then were themselves rather limited by our standards. Certainly the Visitors did not call themselves angels or refer to any of these older stories in any way.

"Time passed, and legend faded to myth. Meanwhile, the Age of Science was upon us. Great inventions were made, such as railroads, cars and airplanes. But rather than using all this for the good of all mankind, the most powerful European countries enslaved the whole world, and then started to prepare to fight each other for world supremacy. For each passing years, more and more dangerous weaponry was piled up, alliances were made and plans were laid, plans of war, mass murder and treachery. Nobody wanted to show any weakness, and so we came closer and closer to the brink of total war.

"Nobody can tell what kind of history we would have had from then on. Perhaps the war would have continued until humanity, or at least civilization, was wiped from the face of the Earth. Luckily we will never know. Because in 1914 the Visitors suddenly appeared.

"They were not an army. By most accounts, there were 17 of them, but the truth is that we do not really know. They never appeared all in one place. The most that were ever seen together were five, as they witnessed the signing of the Eternal Peace Treaty. More often than not they would travel alone. And they did not travel by plane or by boat: They simply disappeared in one place and appeared in another. To this day, nobody knows how they did that. As far as I know, even the Starborn cannot do that. Is that right, Ben?"

"It is. My mother believes it may come with age. She is only 89, after all."

"Uhm, that is right. The Visitors claimed to be centuries old, even though they only looked to be in their 20es. We don't even know whether they are mortal in our sense of the word. They never talked about it. In fact, they never talked much at all, although they seemed able to learn any language easily. Mostly they would just walk through the cities, and wherever they went, miracles happened around them.

"The power of the Visitors, and now the Starborn, is still a mystery to science. It seems to influence probability, so that extremely unlikely events happen much more

frequently. These are overwhelmingly good events: The blind begin to see, the sick becomes well, wounds heal and cancer disappears. People overcome bad habits and recover from mental afflictions. Occasionally when a Visitor passed by, even the newly dead would return to life. The Visitors did not do this, it just happened in their presence. I am not sure if they even knew about each miracle. Ben?"

"My mother says that she can sometimes feel a movement in the Heritage, when something big happens. But she cannot for instance put her hands on a sick child and heal it. Either it happens or it doesn't. It doesn't help to hang out in the same place for a long time, either. It is better to just move through and come back another time."

"Do these things happen to you too?"

"Mom... my mother says that the Heritage is stronger when all three of us are together. But I don't know any more than that. This is the first time I am alone with lots of people, really."

"Oh, that's right. So, boys and girls, be sure to tell us if a miracle happens! Although you seem all quite healthy right now..."

"I said the events were overwhelmingly good. Some bad things happened as well, but these happened only to a small group of people. There were a few who hated the Visitors, either because they came in the way of their own plans to profit from war and misery, or because they considered them a blasphemy. Some people made plans to kill a Visitor if they got the chance. This was not easy since you never knew where they would appear next, but eventually one would appear in a city where an enemy waited. They never got to shoot at them, though. Just like unlikely things happened for good, other unlikely things happened to these people. Their carriage broke down, their rifle jammed, they fell and broke a leg. None of them even came close to harming a Visitor.

"For almost a year the Visitors traveled all over the world, spreading hope and love and talking to selected people, teaching them to connect to the invisible force of goodness that surrounds us all. They never told people to convert to a new religion or to let go of an old. This is why we don't think they were angels in any traditional meaning of the word. They were not messengers of any one god, but simply set an example of how to connect to the forces of good. They also claimed to be human, except that on their world everybody was born with an inclination to connect to the invisible force of goodness. Clearly it is more than just wanting to do it ... they also have some kind of talent for channeling this force. But that they were human was proved only a few months after they departed in 1915. Then was born a girl who was half Visitor. She grew up to become Anita 'Antares' Starborn, a living reminder of the heritage of the Visitors.

"We believe that her father did not leave her behind out of ignorance or callousness. The Visitors must have known that she would have a safe and happy childhood with her mother and grandparents. And they must have known that she would continue their work in the world. Also, as long as the Starborn are among us, the legend of the Visitors will not decay to myth and from there on to become religion. The Visitors never wanted to found a new religion, they wanted to make this world a better place for everybody.

"Even though the world did not yet know about the Starborn, there were many who wanted to continue the work of the Visitors by living good lives, connecting to the invisible force of goodness, and act with fairness and mercy in trade and politics. The stockpiles of weapons were quietly scrapped, for there were new governments chosen by the people who did not want to wage war. And even had they tried, people would have refused to take up arms against their fellow men. Instead it became common to settle in the countries of former enemies, or other countries as people started to no longer care who had been whose enemy. This is why we speak English here in

Norway, for instance. With so many people from many different nations moving to this wide open space, it was no longer practical to cling to the old languages. Instead people started to speak the one language that was understood by most people. So even though we may have some weird dialect forms, we all speak English now.

"But spiritual progress does not come easily to our world, it seems. Although many wanted to connect to the invisible force of goodness, it is hard for most of us and takes a long time even to get a short way. And most people are not very patient. So they never truly connected to any mystical force, but just made it into a ritual of prayer and meditation, and then tried to live good lives by the standards they already had, much like people going to church. And a generation passed, with children growing up who had never seen the Visitors or felt the strange power that surrounded them. New schools of thought took hold, which claimed that since we are after all a different breed of human, we should not try to walk the path of the Visitors but find our own way. In the early 1940s, some even tried to revive nationalism.

"It was then that Anita Starborn stepped forward. Traveling from city to city, she would visit hospitals and the poor districts. And where she went, miracles would happen. Not as great or as many as with the Visitors, but miracles even so. Soon mayors all over the world begged her to come visit their city, and even promised to pay her handsomely. She accepted to have her expenses paid, but little more than that. There were enough of those who needed the money, she said, in their own cities.

"As the years passed, her fame grew, and so did her power. Young people realized that the Visitors had not after all been a legend like the rest, and it changed their lives. A few of these people became the Starborn's personal friends. And one of them, a British hermit living in northern India, eventually became her husband. From that union, a boy was born 17 years ago. He was named Benjamin, although the papers soon started to call him by the star-name Betelgeuse. The rest, as they say, is history. Or, in this case, the rest is future."

At this point the whole class, or at least most of it, spontaneously applauds and cheers. Even Stranden seems taken aback by this. It is not likely such a thing has ever happened before in this classroom. But then again, unlikely things are supposed to happen around a Starborn, right?

Chapter 3: Important people

Dinner is waiting when Tom comes home. This is one of the benefits of being the son of a farmer – not only is there no need to wait for them to come home from work, but they also tend to eat dinner early. Of course, having your dinner prepared by a farmer is likely to mean it is very traditional. That's OK, Tom is not looking for excitement on the stove, but simply to still his hunger. He seems to vaguely remember that the food was more elaborate back when Mom was still alive, but it's so long ago, he may be mistaken. At least he remembers her, unlike Trine. Or that's what she says. He is not so sure ... she was two at the time.

Speak of the devil – or even just think of him – there is Trine. Of course, she was home earlier than him as usual and has already eaten. That means she is here for the talking. Not hard to guess about what.

"So ... did you see him?"

"You could say that." He deliberately picks one extra potato, finding one large enough to count.

"So ... how was he?"

"Who is 'he'?" asks their father, from the living room. The door is open as usual so he can hear them quite fine.

"Betelgeuse" replies Trine.

"The Starborn boy" says Tom at the same time.

"Oh. They in town?"

"Dad! He goes to the high school here now! Don't you read the papers?"

"Well, I use to skip the celebrity stuff."

"Dad! He's not just celebrity ... he's the most important person on Earth!"

"Uhm, sis? That would be his mother, I think."

"Well, perhaps for now. So ... you did see him?"

Tom hesitates. If he tells her that Benjamin Starborn sits at the desk next to him, she'll faint. Which would be kinda entertaining. But she will also go "squeeee!" for the next several days or weeks and try to make him deliver love letters to a boy she doesn't really know. On the other hand, if he lies, he is committing a small sin and besides she will be really angry when she finds out. Well, sooner or later she will be angry for something anyway. But not today. Evasion, then.

"Of course I saw him. We have classes in the same wing after all."

"Squeeee! He is incredible, right?"

"To be honest, I was mistaken. You won't hear me say that often, so enjoy it. He is not just a pretty-boy. He acted very polite and mature for his age."

"I knew it! I knew it! Everybody who has met him says he is fantastic."

"Of course. So is his mother, and probably his sister as well."

"TOM! She is just 13!"

"Huh? What do you...? No way! I'm just saying that they are all more than human. It's in the family. They are born to be fantastic."

"Puh. For a moment there, I thought you were, you know, perverted."

"I'm not! And neither is he, so calm down."

"That's not the same! I'm 15! Only two years younger."

"And the age of consent is 16 here in Norway. Besides, he is not the type to flirt with the locals. Even if you had been pretty, which you are not."

"Meanie."

"But really, he is like a prince ... a prince of the world. He cannot just think about the girls here in Sugar Hill. He is going to marry some very important woman someday. Someone very deep and spiritual, no doubt, just like his father is. The best woman

that humanity has produced in our generation. Somehow that doesn't sound like you, does it?"

Then again ... he is not the best boy that humanity has produced, or that Norway has produced, or probably even Sugar Hill. So why did the Starborn say what he did? In the lunch break. Not after the first class, when everyone was busy staring at him, and he took the time to shake everyone's hand. Not after the next class, when he met with boys and girls from other classes. But in the lunch break, when Tom sat down with his home-made pack of sandwiches, alone on a low concrete wall. And then suddenly Ben had come and sat down beside him. Nobody was following him, for some reason. Perhaps the famous magic field did it or something.

"You must be an important person to me" Benjamin Starborn had said, just like that.

"What?" Tom almost lost his sandwiches but managed to catch them.

"When I first saw you, you seemed familiar. But we have not met, have we?"

"No. I never saw you before, except in the papers and on InterView."

"I thought so. I would surely have remembered. Then it must be a glimpse of the future."

"The future?"

"Mom ... my mother says that when you meet someone who will be very important to you, it is a bit like you already know them. I'm not sure if that is just our family though."

"I don't know, I never heard it before."

"She felt that way with all the people who are working at the Manor. And most of all with my father."

"Well, we are going to be in the same class for the rest of high school, that might be it."

"Perhaps. But no one else in the room was familiar. Not even the teacher."

At some point the magic must have slipped, because at this time a couple teachers came running and escorted Benjamin to a lunch table that was prepared for him and some visiting dignitaries. Tom had been left behind with his sandwiches and his bafflement. He was Benjamin Starborn's important person? That just didn't sound right, somehow.

Tom looks up from his plate and finds that Trine has left. Well, that's probably for the best. He finishes, puts away the plate and walks into the living room.

"You made Trine upset" says his father. It does not sound like an accusation, although it is. It sounds like a simple statement of fact, as if talking about the weather.

"I had to. She has a crush on Ben... the Starborn boy."

"Is that so bad?"

"Huh? How is that not bad? She can never have him. He is as far above us as ... well, we are just not in the same league. We are just common people."

"Nobody said that she can have him."

"But..."

"She needs to learn about her own feelings. Girls are different from us. For us men, love starts with wanting, and then we have to learn to give. For girls, it starts with romantic dreams, and only later do they learn the power of desire."

"Well, I'm not an expert on girls..."

"You need to become one. You're old enough that love should soon become part of your life. You need to understand girls. They are not like us."

"What does that have to do with her crush?"

"It is natural and good that they have crushes on someone they cannot get. Sure, they will be heartbroken, but not horribly, because they knew deep down all the time that it couldn't be. In fact, she would probably be scared out of her mind if he actually talked to her."

"I can imagine."

"So let her be, OK? Let her dream while she can. It's not like anyone will get hurt."

Chapter 4: Foreign exchange

A week has passed, and Tom is getting used to the new way of things. The quarter-angel boy is still a bit overwhelming, although Ben really does his best to not take up too much space. Of course he knows the answer to every question. Of course he knows more than the teachers on every subject. But he doesn't show off, he does not answer unless asked, he watches the teacher with quiet dignity even though he doesn't need to. He is attending school, after all, so tries to be a good student without making the others look bad. Somehow he manages it. But just as the class is starting to settle into some kind of normalcy, they come to school on Monday and this happens.

"Class, I know this is a lot in such a short time. But we are getting another new student in our class, beginning today. Her family just moved to Sugar Hills, and the Board of Education has decided that she should join our class. Please welcome our new student, Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore Von den Hoyenburgh!"

The door is opened, and a girl steps in. She is slim, tan, and dressed in something that cannot possibly be meant to be school clothes. In fact, the dress looks like something out of a fairy tale. There is a stunned silence. She moves with a fluid grace, self-assured and clearly unfazed by attention. She turns to the class and her eyes immediately seeks out something. It is not hard to guess what. A moment later, when she sees him, her eyes grow wider for the first time. Tom knows that reaction. Even when people have seen Ben on TV and in the papers, they cannot possibly be prepared for the real thing. Although it seems that the other students never had quite that epiphany he had. They were still impressed, though. Who wouldn't be?

There are still a few free desks, and Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore is placed by the window. If she has any shorter name, she has not mentioned it. She glides over to her desk and sits down with royal dignity. Clearly this is no random middle class girl. So, her family just moved here? She doesn't at all look like the type of people who just move here.

It does not surprise Tom when, as soon as the bell rings for the first break, the new girl immediately walks over to Ben. "Mr. Starborn, I presume?" she says and curtsies. She looks every bit like a princess ... or rather an actress playing a princess. "I have heard so much about you! I hope we can become great friends." She has a very well modulated voice, probably she is a good singer as well.

Ben smiles the same smile he normally gives to anyone. "My friendship is free" he replies immediately, as if he had waited for this. "And it must be freely accepted." The girl frowns momentarily, as if this was not at all what she expected to hear. Then the perfect smile is back on her face and stays there as she curtsies again and returns to her place.

In the lunch break, Tom and Ben and Andrea and Jonas converge on their favorite spot. After the first couple chaotic days, the three of them had found a nice and peaceful place and Ben had trailed along with Tom, who seems to have got the role of anchor in Ben's new world of high school. Most of the students are too much in awe to try to really befriend him after the first introduction, but Tom doesn't really have much choice. Quarter-angel or no, the guy is unfamiliar with high school life and needs people to hang out with. He is, after all, $\frac{3}{4}$ human as well.

"What's with that new girl?" muses Jonas. "She looks really out of place here."
"Did you see that silk dress?" asks Andrea. "It must have cost more than the rest of the clothes in the classroom put together!"

"So that was silk?" Tom is no expert on clothes, certainly not girls' clothes.

"Oh yes. Wildly expensive and certainly made by professional seamstresses."

"Wow. What's a girl like that doing in a place like this?" Tom can't resist the phrase.

"I think she did not come by her own free will" says Ben slowly.

"Huh?" "What?"

"Someone has instructed her. She was told what to do, what to say. Even to the point of coming here in the first place. There was a shadow of ... enforcement ... no, not quite that, but similar. Obligation. As if she owed it to someone."

Tom does not dispute it. He has no idea how Ben can just know things, but he probably would not understand even if the other explained. It's probably a Visitor thing.

But after school, as he walks the long road up the hillside, something catches his eye. He turns and looks. There, one of the houses at the very edge of town. Large cars are parked nearby, and the place is swarming with people. Most of them seem to be construction workers, and they have already excavated most of the lot and put down foundations. Now they are raising the skeleton of a much grander house, a villa the like of which Sugar Hills has not seen before. There must be well over a hundred workers there, swarming like ants, working at a frantic pace.

"Yeah, I heard it too!" Trine is excited. "I heard this billionaire had bought the Jensen's house and now they are replacing it with a real luxury castle! There's supposed to be lots of swimming pools and someone said there would be palm trees. Can you imagine, palms in Norway?! That's so crazy!"

"This smells fishy. Do you know what I think?"

"It's about Benjamin!"

"Exactly. I think she is here to try to sink her claws in him."

"That's awful!"

"It won't work though. He cannot be impressed by expensive stuff."

"Of course not!"

"Or by fine titles and long impressive names."

"Not at all!"

"You know what she's called? Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore Von den Hoyenburgh!"

"Ha ha ha! That's so ridiculous! Von den Hoyenburgh!"

"If they think a rich, pretty girl will impress him..."

"She's pretty??"

"Oh yes. Like a movie star. She's slim, tan, long dark tresses, expert makeup, the whole thing. Alright curves too."

"Cosmetic surgery no doubt."

"If so, it's well done. Looks very natural. It could be she's just born pretty. It happens to some people."

"That's not fair! People should not be both rich and pretty!"

"Actually it makes perfect sense, because rich people marry pretty people."

"That sucks!"

"Well, Ben was not impressed. He seemed to pity her."

"He did?"

"Oh yeah. He went like this: She doesn't really want this, she just has to do it."

"Then her heart is not in it."

"She'll still try to do whatever it takes to get him."

"She's not gonna make it, right?"

"Absolutely not. But what's it to you anyway? It's not like ... oh, forget it."

"I am just thinking about what is best for the world. We can't have rich greedy bastards corrupting the world's future."

"Uh huh. Well, sooner or later she'll give up on him."

"What? What are you thinking? You pervert! First 13 year old girls and now this! You would want to take advantage of a heartbroken girl? Besides, you're so not in her league. Farm boy!"

Girls. Just when you think you understand them...

Chapter 5: A new "friend"

In the town of Sugar Hills, people are going about their business. Most are at work, or school for the youngsters. Some are out shopping. Pensioners sit on the benches in the park in the early autumn that is really still late summer, or if less adventurous they nurse a cup of coffee in the local café.

At a street corner, a woman looks briefly at her ring. It is not a wedding band; it is thin and silvery, with a small enameled plate bearing a simple symbol. She glances only briefly before she moves on. Nobody is likely to notice that here and there in the town, several others have the same type of ring. Otherwise, they may look different. This woman looks like a businesswoman with a bit expensive tastes. Nothing to draw attention, really, but she is certainly better dressed than most who are out and about in this town right now. This, and being a little shorter than usual, are the only things that stand out. But it may be too much.

She knew that Norway was a rich country, and that gender equality had come even further here than in most of the world. This businesswoman disguise seemed perfect. And with these fashionable sunglasses, nobody is likely to notice her slanted eyes. Even so, she is worried that she may attract too much attention. She does not let that worry show, though. She moves on with the dedicated steps of someone who knows her role in the world. Although the role she is playing is not her true role in the world.

In another age and another place she might have been called a ninja. Now, she is just a businesswoman, but her business is not quite like ordinary business. Like the others on her team, she is in Sugar Hills to ensure the safety and success of the Young Lady. If they fail, their lives are forfeit. She is bound by honor and duty to complete the task assigned to her, by any means necessary. She is not doing it alone, but each of them has their own task at any given time. And none of them intend to fail. Ever. For a member of their guild, failure is not an option.

*

"OK, this is just plain weird." The lunch club has convened again in its usual spot, and Tom is bringing up the great event of the day. "This is the second time in less than a week that a rich and pretty girl from another country transfers to our class."

"Smart too" adds Jonas. "She speaks English really well for someone from the opposite side of the planet."

"I don't like this at all" says Andrea. "They are not here to study, but to get close to Ben."

"I suppose that can't be helped." Ben doesn't seem too worried. "Since good things are supposed to happen around us Starborn, it makes sense that some people want to be near us. Although I don't think any special things have happened at this school except Roger not needing glasses anymore."

"Well, he was nearsighted as a mole" says Jonas.

"There are certainly more. I know of one girl in the B class, she always have horrible menstrual cramps, but the last time the pain disappeared as soon as she came close to the school. Just like that."

"She didn't say anything to me about it." Ben sounds mildly surprised.

"Ben! Girls don't talk to boys about their menses!"

"They don't? I didn't know."

"I don't know what's more disturbing, the fact that you don't know or that I'm talking about it."

"But you weren't talking about your menstruation, you were talking about another girl's."

"But even so. I guess it's because, well, you seem so innocent. Not like you would have any dirty thoughts even if we talk about things like that."

"Dirty? I know some old religions claim that menstruating women are ritually unclean, but it is a natural biologic function. Inconvenient, sure, and painful for some, but I would never refer to it as dirty."

"I think you just confirmed my theory. But to blend in with us humans, I still think you shouldn't bring the topic up unless someone specifically mentions it to you."

"OK."

"Well" comments Tom, "it's not like Ben is a traditional healer, what with the laying on of hands and stuff."

"YOU, on the other hand, are NOT immune to dirty thoughts! Eww! I shouldn't even have brought it up with you two around."

"What?" Jonas sounds hurt. "I haven't said a word."

"As if I don't know you! But it can't be helped, I have to have you two around since I can't be alone with Ben."

"You can't be alone with me? Why not?"

"It is one of the things you just don't do. A boy is not supposed to be alone with a girl unless they are family or childhood friends or something."

"This is another unwritten rule, like don't talk about menstruations?"

"Yes, exactly the same sort."

"OK. It's a good thing I came to this school, I am learning a lot."

"That's why we all come here" says Jonas blandly. "To learn about girls."

*

The two new girls, Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore Von den Hoyenburgh and Takikawa Aiko, don't seem to bond all that well despite them both being transfer students from private schools abroad. They are also both obviously from very rich families, as evident from their clothes and the cars in which they arrive at school. Yet the looks they give each other are both cold and wary. Even more confusing however are the looks they give Ben, and they look that way often. Looks of admiration, of course – how could anyone not admire him? - but also nervousness. Tom is reminded of what Ben said: They are driven by obligation. He wishes he could simply tell them that this is a pointless way to approach Ben. But it would not matter, and it's not his place to tell people what Ben thinks anyway.

Trine would definitely have told them anyway. Trine would, in fact, definitely have told them off. Of this, Tom has no doubt.

"Another one! Will they just continue to pour in until the whole school is full of rich little bitches from all over the world?"

"Quite possibly. Jonas told me that house prices in Sugar Hills have doubled since school started. Everyone is hoping for some rich family trying to buy their way in."

"That's horrible!"

"Not for the people who own the houses. I understand the Jensens and the Bergs got a small fortune for their homes, even though the houses were torn down as soon as they were out of them."

"They're destroying our town!"

"Now you see it too."

"But it's not the Starborns' fault! It's the rich bitches!"

"I'm not sure they even wanted to come here. I think they do it for their family. Or at least Ben said ..."

"You have **talked** with him? You call him **Ben**?"

"Well, uhm, you see, he has requested that people call him Ben. So we should respect his wish, right?"

"Squeeee! That's so cute! Ben..."
"Actually he didn't request the whole world to say that, just his classmates. He ..."
"CLASSMATES?!?"
"Don't shout. My ears hurt."
"You said he was in the parallel class, didn't you? You were lying again?"
"Well, I didn't *technically* lie."
"Did too!"
"I said we were in the same wing."
"You didn't say you were in the same classroom!"
"I didn't say we were not, either."
"You were **so** lying! Why? Why did you do this to me?"
"Well, what would you have done if you knew I was in his class?"
"I would have had you ask him to sign a picture or something."
"See? He doesn't like that kind of thing. He does not want to be a celebrity. He is in this school just to make friends and learn to live with people."
"Well, I would like to be his friend too."
"Millions of girls all over the world would love to be his friend."
"But millions of girls don't have a brother in his class!"
"Still, what makes you so special? You are just an ordinary girl, not smart or pretty or anything."
"You're not exactly Robert Redford yourself. Or Einstein. Are you his friend?"
"Well, I guess I am."
"See? Why can you be his friend and not I?"
"Trine, you are underage."
"You are a boy!"
"Yeah, but I don't want to be more than friends."
"Well, I want to be friends too."
"Girls can't be friend with famous boys. Then they become girlfriends. You are too young to be a girlfriend."
"Why can't **he** decide that? Why you?"
"Because I go to his class because it is my class. You don't go to his class so you have no reason to meet him."
"Well, you could invite him home once. Jonas and Kristian have been out and in of this house as long as I can remember."
"Trine, you don't just invite Starborn or kings or presidents home to jump in the hay."
"You said he did not want to be famous, he wanted to have friends. Friends visit friends."
"You would faint if he came home with me anyway."
"That's beside the point."
"No it's not. Friends don't faint when they see friends. Friends don't go 'squeeee!' over friends. Friends don't have pictures of friends all over their bedroom. *Friends don't fall in love with friends!*"
"Of course he will never love me. I'm not a total idiot. But I still want to be his friend. I still want to be as close to him as I can. Not because I am fantastic, I know I'm not. Because **he** is."
"You don't even know him!"
"That's what I want you to change!"
"If wishes were horses, we would all drown in horse manure. I just can't do it, OK?"

Chapter 6: Day of sadness

You don't know a girl has money because she comes to school in a long black car. You don't know for sure just because she has a uniformed chauffeur. But you suspect she may have money if the uniformed servant who opens the car door for her is not the chauffeur but someone who evidently has been brought along solely for this purpose.

These are the lighthearted reflections that pass through Tom's head on a cloudy Monday morning. His mood soon becomes more somber. Takikawa seems more nervous than usual, but that's really no skin of his nose. Possibly it does involve Ben somehow, though. But Ben is immune to danger, so really no reason to worry. More disturbing, however, is the frustration on Andrea's face. And then he sees Jonas, and his heart becomes really heavy. His childhood friend seems on the verge of tears.

"Jonas! What's happened?"

"They ... the idiots! The stupid idiots!"

This is not a very exact description and could fit on a lot of people they both know, so Tom makes an effort to pinpoint the problem more exactly. Finally Jonas spills it all.

"We're moving. One of those foreigners have bought our house. Bought our home!! Just like that!"

"That sucks. That really sucks."

"Yeah. Dad says we could need the money. Of course, everyone always needs more money. We had a good life here. We would not have needed the money if they hadn't tempted him!"

"That's so unfair. But at least you don't need to move far."

"We can't buy anything here. The prices are wild now. We'll have to move to the next county at least. Somewhere people don't go to Sugar High."

"That sucks like a vacuum."

"I have all of my friends here. I have everything here! Why? I thought only good things was supposed to happen around the Starborn. This isn't a good thing at all!"

"Well, your dad may disagree very strongly with that. A few years pay for nothing but living in the right place is kinda a miracle."

"But I have to leave all my friends!"

"Perhaps you'll get new and better friends there."

"Stop making things up to comfort me! It's just not right! I trusted him, but he has ruined my life!"

"I don't know how it will work out, but I think the miracle power always work for good in the end. I just can't see how yet. Perhaps we'll see it later."

"Everyone just stabs me in the back. Ben, my parents, you. All of you. You don't really care as long as it doesn't hurt you!"

"That's not true! I'm gonna miss you too. I just don't think the miracle power cares much about loneliness. The Starborn seem to be more alone than almost any people on Earth."

"Well, they don't need to share it with everyone! I don't even want to see him. I'm going home. They can't make me go to school. I'm quitting this school anyway, so why bother?"

"But ..."

"No. I'm going. Have a very nice day and have fun with all of your friends."

OK, so that wasn't a very good way to start the day.

*

"You didn't know?"
"Not at all. No wonder he was upset!"
"But ... I thought ... you looked none too happy yourself."
"That wasn't for him, that was for me."
"Andrea...? Don't tell me you're moving too!"
"Hah! Not quite that far. I'm just going to be in class B from next week."
"Class B? Why?"
"Evidently there are already too many students here compared to there, and some Very Important Empress necessarily needs to be here in class A."
"The one who bought out Jonas."
"Could be. Unless there are even more of them."
"Perhaps we will all be squeezed out of class A."
"Ben alone in a class of snobby girls."
"Poor guy. Oh well, if so at least you and I will be in the same class again."
"Unless they buy up the whole town so we too have to move."
"My dad would never sell the farm. He would die first."
"Yeah. It's just ... I'm just not sure that would be enough to stop them."

*

"Not everything that happens around me is because of the Heritage, Tom." Ben looks at his friends with sympathy in those deep, clear blue eyes. "Not even here in the classroom, much less in the town, or in countries far away. I am not a god. Just a nexus, or that's what Murti calls it."
"Murti?"
"One of my home school teachers, a friend of Dad. He is an expert on spiritual energy and things like that."
"But I thought your miracle energy protected you."
"It does. It protects me from being shot, poisoned, bombed ... all kind of things like that. But it does not protect me from being lonely. It does not even protect me from making mistakes, unless I stay aware. I take no joy in causing sorrow to others, that is true. But sometimes it may happen anyway. I don't control all things. Even my ancestors were not gods, much less I. Surely you knew?"
"I guess."
"I guess we were just asking you because we hoped you could comfort us somehow" says Andrea plainly. "Like telling us that it will all be alright."
"I am sorry Andrea. I cannot guarantee that even for my friends. But I can try to teach you how to Connect, so it will be easier to be at the right place at the right time."
"Uhm, I'm not very big on those kind of things."
"Most people are not" Ben says evenly.

Tom knows about Connection, of course. Some people call it the religion of the new age. Others say it is just what people used to call meditation or yoga or even prayer. Some say it is related to the Christian concept of being "born again". It seems to mean so many different things to different people that it doesn't really mean anything at all. Supposedly it is a way to shift the mind from its usual way of thinking to somehow becoming aware of the invisible force of goodness that surrounds us all. The Starborn are, well, born to it. Other people can supposedly achieve it, but details are vague to say the least, and it sounds like a lot of trouble.

"Mr Starborn, Sir?"
"Yes?" Ben turns toward the Japanese girl. They have spoken before, almost daily since her arrival, but always briefly and about inconsequential things. For some reason, Ben has never given her or Hoyenburgh the 'my friends call me Ben' speech. So they both address him with his last name, at the very least. If anything, she seems

more than usual polite today.

"I was wondering if you would consider having lunch with me?"

Ben looks at her with large blue eyes. "Do you want me to share my lunch with you?"

"No, no! I... I made an extra lunch box. For you. If you would accept it."

"That does not make sense to me."

"What?"

"I have come to understand that those who have more should share with those who have less, but those who have less are not supposed to first share with the more wealthy."

Miss Takikawa looks at him as if she suddenly does not understand English after all. As she does not answer, he continues.

"Certainly it would be more fitting if you, who have a much poorer life, asked me to first do you a favor. If you want, I will share my lunch equally with you." He pulls up a paper bag and shows two rather large sandwiches.

The girl backs away, as if the simple sandwiches were dangerous weapons. "No... no..."

"Then I would prefer to eat my own lunch today in the company of those who have sought my friendship by their own free will."

She turns and flees as if from a dangerous criminal. Tom and Andrea look until she disappears around a corner. "What was that all about?"

"I did not speak to her."

"Huh?" "Then who?"

"My words were for those who sent her. She is a slave. A servant will do his work, and then live his life. The two are not the same. But a slave can be forced to do that which should only be done by free will. A slave has no life outside what he is told to do. This girl is a slave. That is why I cannot speak to her, for she cannot choose to accept or discard my words. She must take them to her owner."

"Aiko is a slave??"

"Yes. Even though she is born to a family of great power, she has been raised a slave. Is it not sad?"

Chapter 7: The plots thicken

"Those were his exact words, honored father."

"I see."

"How dares he talk like that to the Lady!"

"Be silent, Akihira-kun. The Starborn is right. I have not yet been surrounded by yes-men for so long that I believe I am the most powerful person in the world. Anita Starborn is. And after her, her son. As it is, we are their vassals at best. The only hope for our family to gain lasting power is through the Starborn. The young man is right: We are begging for a great favor. We are asking him to share his future equally with us, as he hinted. Do you realize this now, my daughter?"

"Yes, Sir."

"We underestimated the young man. We thought he was just a boy and would be flattered by the attention of a beautiful girl. But he is already playing our game, and playing it well. We will have to take a completely different approach from now on. But fear not. This only makes it more interesting. A game of Go is never lost after two stones, no matter where on the board they lie."

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"Excellent! Our rival is already disgraced. She moved too fast, not taking the time to learn the local customs."

"Besides, she's a slant-eyed shrimp."

"Don't get too proud, Katharina. Before the winter, a dozen more rivals will appear. They are less resourceful, which is why they have not arrived on the scene yet. But men's tastes are always a bit random. While they are unlikely to choose an ugly and stupid girl, they will not always go for the smartest and most beautiful. We must take care."

"But we are already using them for our own ends, are we not, father? I noticed at school today that two of the locals are already being removed."

"Yes. The principal and the real estate agent are being most appreciative of our private contributions. I gave them your list and encouraged them to start from the top where applicable."

"Two of the Starborn's three best friends already leaving the class. And the one that remains is a farmer. A farmer! Can you imagine?"

"How utterly inappropriate!"

"Disgusting! A boy who works with dirt and unwashed animals!"

"It beggars belief that a man of angelic descent would mingle with such creatures, the lowest of the low in the civilized world. In so far as this backwater village can even be called civilized."

"The farmer is strong and well built. Some of the local girls tell me that they find him attractive, in an animal kind of way."

"Surely you do not imply that a son of angels would follow the path of the men of Sodom!"

"Father! Of course not! I just meant that this lowly creature enjoys some degree of popularity among the locals."

"That makes sense. These cold lands were never part of the Holy Roman Empire, after all. Rather it was the womb from which countless barbarian tribes were spawned. It stands to reason that civilization does not very deep here! I am truly sorry that you have to spend the years of your first bloom in such a wilderness, my dear. But the Cause goes before everything."

"I will do whatever is required of me, father."

"Good! I expected nothing less. And we are ahead. In a game of chess, the right

opening move is the key to victory."

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Tom has informed his sister of the latest developments, and draws the logical conclusion: "Mark my words, some nefarious plot is being, uhm, plotted."

"That's horrible! Who knows where they will strike next!"

"Well, that would probably be me."

"You?"

"Well, Jonas and Andrea and I used to hang out with Ben every day at lunch. It can not be a coincidence that they both are leaving class before anyone else."

"That's **really** horrible! Perhaps they will strike at you through me!"

"OK, that's over the top. Nobody knows that you even exist, and even fewer care."

"There can't be fewer than nobody!"

"Anyway, you're just an underage girl. You are of no interest to Ben, and therefore to his enemies."

"And you are just an ugly farm boy. Why would anyone be interested in you?"

"Pinch me if I know. The teacher just plopped Ben down on the desk next to mine, OK? It all started from there."

"Perhaps the criminal syndicate will kidnap me and hide me in a forest cabin and threaten me with knives while an evil actress impersonates me at school and when you find out and try to rescue me you are captured too but then Ben shows up and beats the bad guys one by one and rescues us both from a fate worse than death!"

"That's the stupidest plot I've ever heard! You got that from one of your books, right?"

"Christina's Secret."

"I knew it! I just knew it! You read way too much of the stuff. I bet it is one of those tenderloin books, right?"

"Like, what??"

"Tenderloin books, that's what I call them. You know, 'he stroked her tenderloin' and stuff."

"That's ridiculous! Do you even know what tenderloin means?"

"Well, not really, but that's because I'm not into that kind of thing!"

"That's for sure! It's meat!"

"Well, something like that anyway. I'm sure I have seen it with my own eyes. I bet I would find it somewhere among all those books of yours."

"It's meat I tell you! Food!"

"Well, if anything happens to me, be sure to marry a good farmer who can take over the farm, OK?"

"Tom! Don't talk like that! Besides, it's not like Jonas is dead. He is just rich. It is not the same thing."

"Pretty close, though."

"And Andrea is just over in the other class."

"As long as she doesn't make any trouble, at least."

"You are not going to change classes too, are you?"

"Nope." He answers without even thinking, although he can't say why.

"Good, because it would totally ruin my chance of ever meeting Ben."

Chapter 8: To Russia with love

"TOM! Come, quick!"

Tom drops his textbook, jumps to his feet and tumbles down the stairs. "Trine?"

"Look! Look! There he is!"

She is not pointing at some shady character come to kidnap them and put their home to the torch, however. Rather, the stylish metallic black box where the entire front is their window to the world: The InterView. Thanks to the incomprehensible magic of modern technology, people all over the world can watch anything from local trade fairs to international news. In this case, it is the latter.

"They're in Moscow!"

Right. Ben had mentioned it, just briefly. He would be traveling with his mother and sister this weekend. That wasn't really a big surprise, the Starborn travel a lot.

"Squeeee!"

There he is, indeed. Together with his cheerful little sister and their majestically beautiful mother. And they are surrounded by a sea of people. They are all cheering and singing. The camera zooms out, out, out. Cut to footage (wingage?) from a plane above the city. There must be hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps a million or two. Tom isn't an expert on such things. But the whole center of Moscow is packed with people.

Tom stares vacantly at the screen, where the picture is now taken from so far above the city that it looks more like a map. Somewhere near the center of that map is a tiny dot, and in the middle of that tiny dot is the boy who used to sit beside him in class every day. OK, there would probably not be that many people if only he came and not his mother. But even so. It is as if he deliberately masks this part of himself when he is with his friends. Tom suddenly remembers the awe he felt when he first saw the Starborn in the flesh. But after their eyes met the first time, it is as if he stopped caring about it. He can still remember it, he can still feel it, but it doesn't matter, because they are friends. How strange.

The map picture disappears suddenly, replaced with a closer picture from the street. Someone is waving a crutch in the air, triumphantly. It is not hard to guess what has happened. These things always happen when there are Starborn and lots of people. Others may go to a control one of the next days and find that their cancer is mysteriously in remission. An alcoholic comes home and finds that he has no interest in liquor anymore. There are lots of miracles that don't show on Interview. But crutches look good on IV. He suddenly remembers a quip he read somewhere: "Religion is like a crutch. If you need it, it makes your life better. And even if you don't need it, you can still use it to bash people upside their head."

This really does look like religion. People coming together to witness miracles, to hear a message of love and unity, and to just be together in a good way. Perhaps this is why the churches are mostly empty these days ... it is a new age, where religion is not found in old books but in the world where people live. Or perhaps not religion exactly, but faith. And hope. And love.

He glances at Trine, who is still eagerly following the screen, no doubt hoping to catch a glimpse of the wonderful Benjamin Betelgeuse Starborn. The scary thing is that he can understand her, even though he is a boy. The kind of words people use when they are in love, those are the only fitting words to use about someone like that. But he

can't admit that, of course. People would start thinking weird things. Especially Trine.

The screen changes again, zooms in to the trio on the platform. Trine squeals. Then it zooms all the way in to Anita Starborn, and she looks into the camera and starts to speak. Of course, being in Moscow, she speaks Russian. While small countries such as Norway have adopted English, and much of the world uses it as a second language, the large countries still use their own national languages. And Anita speaks them all fluently. Of course. It is probably not even some spiritual gift. He has already noticed that Ben can learn anything, whether a new word or a new skill, simply by studying it once. If you tell him something, he will remember it for life and can recall it whenever needed. He never falters or searches for the right word when asked about anything in class. In fact, the teachers have already stopped asking him, perhaps to not discourage the other students.

Since this is an English feed, the speech is subtitled in English with a short delay. She is talking about the need to give each other room to grow as different people, because it is through the sum of our differences that we can reach the full measure of what it means to be human. No one can be everything at once. We need each other's different experiences. But in truth, she could have talked about the price of fish in Madagascar, and people would still have wept with joy. Her melodic voice, the wisdom and confidence that radiates from her face, would be enough to stun anyone even if they did not understand a word.

At this moment, people in China are surely watching this, at least those who can afford InterView. The same in Brazil, France and many other places where they don't speak English. They are probably thinking the same thing as he is. How strange ... one world, united, is all Tom has ever known. But in times gone by, the rule was that countries were at war or recovering from a war or preparing for the next. For thousands of years, violence was the natural way to solve misunderstandings and conflicts of interest. If not for the Visitors, perhaps it would still be like that. If civilization had even survived. Probably not.

After Antares' heartfelt plea for peace and love, the camera zooms out again. Predictably, Trine squeals again. And for a moment, Ben looks straight into the camera, and his lips and his eyes form that shy little smile, exactly like he does at school. Tom could have sworn that Ben was looking right at him. But of course he wasn't.

"I wonder who he was smiling to?" says Trine.

Tom reels as if from a blow. Ben's family is right there with him. He is not smiling to them. His smile must be meant for someone else he know. Could he possibly know that Tom would be watching? No, that's madness. Everyone who has met him at some time is probably thinking the exact same thing right now.

"We will now switch to the Conference on Environmental Repair in Cairo..."

"Well, that was it" says Trine and disconnects the feed.

Chapter 9: The beauty of it all

"Good morning!" "Morning!" The students are milling into the classrooms, and the place rings with greetings. Not least where Benjamin Starborn goes. Fellow students stop and wave, no matter what class they are in. Everyone knows him. He smiles and waves back, but still ... when he has passed, nothing is new. Despite the words of acknowledgment, they don't know him any better than before, and he doesn't know them any better either.

As the beautiful blond boy enters the classroom, a girl in long flowing dress curtsies deeply. Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore Von den Hoyenburgh is already in place to welcome him. At a safe distance from her, another girl bows deeply. TakikawaAiko has started to wear jeans and a cardigan, but she is still overly polite. Besides, the jeans and cardigan are tailor-made for her, although not everyone may notice.

"Welcome home, Ben" says Tom as the other sits down beside him.

"I thought it was you who watched me on InterView" replies the other. "I felt someone looking at me, after my mother's speech."

"You felt someone looking? I think more than a billion people were looking!"

"But someone special."

"Well, I did look, but I am hardly the most special guy in the world."

"So far, to me you are, except for my father I guess. But I know his eyes."

"You know when he is watching you on IV??"

"Sure. He is my father, after all."

"I can't remember if I have asked this, but can you read thoughts?"

"Not really. Only emotions."

"Oh yes. I think you may have said so already."

"Yes, I told that I always know where my mother is, but I cannot talk to her in words that way."

"Right. Well, I'm still not convinced it was me, but I did watch that time."

"As I expected. Of course, I would also have watched if you were on InterView."

"Hehe. That's not going to happen in a lifetime. But you are there so often that every child knows your face."

"Not every child in the world, of course."

"No, of course. I mean those who have IV. But I think most people have, these days."

Ben falls silent after that. He does not speak again until the first class is over.

*

Trine isn't home from school often. Even though she is doing well and is ahead with homework, she hates to be away from school and not know what she is missing. But today she makes an exception. She woke up totally pickled in snot, her voice all but gone, and for good measure it's that time of the month as well. "Tenderloins!" She snorts. Laughing would hurt her throat, and besides she never laughs alone.

Automatically her eyes go to her bookshelves, jam packed with almost exclusively romance novels. And on her desk are a couple new ones that she hasn't even read yet. This seems like a good time. She grabs *The River Valley Clan 14: Rebecca's Great Adventure* and stretches out on her bed. This is bound to be good, Rebecca is her favorite character so far.

*

"Tom?"

"Yes?"

"What do you do when you are not in school?"

"You mean after school, or summer vacation and such?"

"For instance after school, or in the weekends."

"Well, after school I go home and eat. Then I usually do my homework. If Dad needs help on the farm, I do that, but that's not much now that we only have sheep and vegetables. Then I watch InterView mostly. Although sometimes Trine and I and sometimes Dad play some kind of game. Dad played more before."

"Trine is the name of someone in your family?"

"My sister. Have I really not mentioned her?"

"No. Only your father, and only briefly. I did not know you had any siblings."

"Trine is the only one. She is 15. We're the only ones ... Dad never married again."

"Again?"

"My mother died while she was pregnant with the third child. I think my Dad feels guilty for it in a way. He doesn't talk about it though."

"That must have been hard for you all."

"Yeah, well, I guess ... I was too small to really understand, I think."

But Ben doesn't answer. When Tom looks at his friend, he is surprised to see silent tears slowly leaking from closed eyes.

*

"Rebecca, there is something I have wanted to tell you."

"What is it, Paul?"

"You are going to think I am crazy for saying this."

"Never. Paul, you know you can tell me anything. Anything at all."

"Rebecca ... the first time I saw you, all I could remember was your eyes. They were so beautiful. And they still are."

"Paul!"

"I knew it. You'll say I am crazy."

"No, no, that's not it. But this is not something a boy should say so casually!"

"I don't say it casually. Rebecca, I love you. I have always loved you."

"I knew it! Ah ... ah ... choo! I knew it!" Trine grabs another tissue. After reading a couple hundred romance novels, she has become a real expert on finding out not just who is in love with whom, but when and where and how they will confess. 'Perhaps I have a natural talent' she thinks. 'One day I may start writing my own novel. Now that would be something!'

*

"Tom, may I ask you a favor?"

"Sure! If I can do it, I will."

"Could I visit your home?"

"Huh? The farm? Why?"

"I wish to see how you live. To see your family. To see the world that is yours."

"Well, sure. Anytime."

"Today?"

"Huh? Well, uhm, sure. Why not?"

"Thank you. I will tell Johnson that I go with you." Ben picks up a pocket telegraph. While they are not all that common, they are growing more popular. Ben's is a very plain model, but functional with a standard keyboard. It almost looks strange to see him with something so decidedly non-magical as a pocket telegraph. Of course, he hits the small keys with fast, unerring precision. Tom really can't imagine how he

would avoid pressing down at least two at a time with those sausages he got for fingers. But then again, farmers don't wear pocket telegraphs.

*

Of course, after the mandatory confession of love, the novel starts to heat up. Having read the 13 first books in the series, not to mention the previous series by the same author, Trine knows what's in store. A couple more chapters and things will get quite steamy. And she won't have that today. She is **so** not in the mood. Hot love does not mix well with snot and tears and ... well, pretty much every imaginable body fluid known to man, or rather to woman. This is not her day. Changing back into her well-worn pajamas, she burrows deeply in her bed and tries to sleep.

*

"These fall days are really beautiful, don't you think?" says Ben as they start on the long road home.

"Well, I guess, when it's not raining."

"But rain has its own beauty. Water is, after all, the true elixir of life."

"Still, I would rather see some of it fall in Sahara and other places that really need it. It's not exactly something Norway is short of."

"To me, each part of the world has its own beauty. From the majestic naked mountains covered in snow to the hot jungles completely overgrown with life, there is so much variation just on this one planet! How wonderful a place this world is. And we have not yet truly seen the countless other worlds out there. Who knows what beauty and drama they hold?"

"Not me. And I'm afraid I'm never going to know, either."

Ben smiles. "To find beauty and satisfaction in the things that are always at hand is the greatest good of all."

From another, such invincible cheerfulness might have been irritating. But with Ben, it is contagious. Looking around, Tom can see the hundred colors of the trees that are still just beginning to change into their fall colors. The colors get muted when the shadow of a cloud passes over them, then explodes into brightness again when the rays of the sun touch them.

"Do you know what it means that you can sense beauty, Tom?"

"Huh? Well, it means that things are pretty."

"Ah. I ask in a clumsy way. What I mean is, do you know what it signifies? What it tells us?"

"Never thought about that. I thought everyone could see beauty except the blind."

"But the blind can find beauty in music, and even the deaf can appreciate the smell of a flower, or spices, or a well made meal."

"Well, yeah. I don't think I really get your question."

"When you can sense beauty, it means your spirit is alive!"

"Huh?"

"The body absorbs energy from food we eat. But the spirit can absorb spiritual energy in different ways. From other people, from nature, or through pure spiritual opening to the invisible power. When we are hungry and eat, we feel pleasure. When we absorb spiritual energy, the pleasure is called beauty."

"Wow. I never thought of it that way."

"The higher the energy level we absorb, the more intense is the beauty. Those whose spirit is almost dead can only absorb low energies such as hate and fear, and will try to provoke these emotions in others. This gives them a kind of satisfaction. But those who can feel love will without fail be able to see beauty. And those who are awake to the energy all around us, will see beauty all around as well."

"So you who can connect directly to the Power, you live in a beautiful world all the time?"

"Yes, we do. Everything is aglow with beauty. And I feel that you can sense some of it too."

"I guess. A little."

And as he looks around again, things look a little more beautiful than they did before. It may be just his imagination, but if so, it is **good** imagination.

*

She has been awake again for a while, although just barely, drifting between pain that wants to keep her awake and lethargy that wants her to sleep. But when she hears clatter and Tom's voice in the hallway, she gets to her feet. Slightly woozy, she leans against the wall for a few heartbeats before her strength returns. Then she waddles out on bare feet, still in her too small and washed-out pajamas. "Tom? I'm drowning in snot and having a bad case of girl day here. Pliiz go make ... me ... a ..."

The hallway is unnaturally bright. And in the center of the brightness stands the world's most beautiful boy, the prince of her dreams, the incarnation of perfection, every hair exactly where it should be. His large blue eyes are wide open, staring straight at her.

Chapter 10: Meeting by accident

Trine stops breathing. Like a small furry animal caught in the headlights of an oncoming express train, she can do nothing but stare at her sudden doom. She has not been this unpresentable since she stopped soiling her diapers. Fresh out of bed, her brown hair is pretty much everywhere it shouldn't be. With her pajamas in the wash, she is wearing the old ones that she should have thrown away two years ago. They are too small, worn thin and exhibit a fetching pattern of care bears. Her nose is dripping, and she just announced that it was that part of the month. And of all days in her life, totally without warning, Tom decided to bring home his classmate: The universally acclaimed Prettiest Boy In The World, the one whose pictures are all over her bedroom and filling a couple heavy scrapbooks. Benjamin "Betelgeuse" Starborn. He is looking at her with surprise, and then announces:
"You must be Tom's sister. Your eyes are beautiful."
The floor rushes up to meet her.

"Ben, you just don't say things like that!"

"What? She is your sister, isn't she? She even looks a lot like you."

"You don't comment on a girl's eyes. It is reserved for people who love each other."

"I love her. She is your sister."

Ben kneels beside her and feels her heartbeat. "She seems to only have fainted. I did not know she was sick." He picks her up. Tom is not at all surprised that the slender boy is much stronger than he looks. Probably another Visitor thing.

"Just lay her on the couch. In here."

"Strange, normally the Heritage would warn me if I was about to inconvenience someone that much."

"It is probably all for the best. But please don't talk to girls about their eyes or how pretty they are."

"This is one of those unwritten rules, like don't talk about menstruation and don't be alone with one girl?"

"Exactly! Do you start to see the pattern in it now?"

"No."

"You really are innocent."

"Yes, as far as I know. Who wants to be guilty anyway?" He looks closer at Trine.

"Those clothes are awfully tight. In the first aid leaflet it says..."

"Trust me, she is far more likely to faint again if you unbutton them."

When the room stops spinning, Trine can hear voices from the kitchen. Tom and Ben discussing one of the deeper mysteries of geometry, from the sound of it. Well, more like Ben explaining it. Ben! Suddenly the whole sorry thing returns to her with crushing force. She staggers to her feet and runs for the main bathroom.

She starts to cry as she stands in the shower, the tears mingling with the water and disappearing. Her life is ruined. All her dreams are crushed. Having seen her like this, he will laugh every time he even thinks of her. She knows she is not pretty, but why, why, why did he have to see her like this?

And then, suddenly, the rest of the memory returns from an orbit around the moon. But it seems totally out of place. Could she possibly have heard that? Or is it something she dreamed? It must be from the book she read before she fell asleep. He cannot possibly have told her that she had pretty eyes. You just don't say that to a girl you have barely even met. And especially someone as miserable as her.

She is drying her hair when she notices that her nose is not dripping. Her throat is not sore. And she is not hurting anywhere else either. She is completely, totally healthy from top to toe. It is a miracle! The irony of it is almost too much. She carefully brushes her hair in front of the hot air fan until she is satisfied that not one hair is out of place, then brushes it a little more. That's when she comes to think that she did not bring the clothes to change into. No way she is worming into those PJs again now. But her room is along the hall and up the stairs. What if he is out there and sees her? No way. She grabs the largest towel she can find and drapes it around her body, or at least all the essential parts. There. She carefully opens the door just a little and peers out. Not a soul in sight. She can hear Tom's voice saying something from the living room, so they must have moved in there. If she moves rapidly past that door, she won't be seen. Ready, set, GO! She moves with the speed of a frightened deer.

"To the right. Got it."

That's not Tom's voice. It is the beautiful musical voice of their guest, who steps out from the living room door, turning toward the smaller bathroom down the hall, just at the moment she races like a living rocket across the paneled floor. If she were driving a car, she would not even have taken her foot off the accelerator, much less put it on the brakes. She is not driving a car, which is good for his health, but it does not stop her from crashing into him at full speed, sending them both sprawling across the floor. They come to a stop well beyond the doorway, with her on top. As the stun of the impact wears off, she gasps for breath and finally finds it. The room is spinning again. Miraculously, she is unhurt. He was the one who got the unexpected meeting with the floor this time. He is lying on his back, and opens his eyes wide as she struggles to get up on her hands and knees.

That's when she notices that the force of the collision has made the towel slip somewhat. On the bright side, it still covers her middle and most of the rest it used to cover. Just not everything. For a heartbeat or two she just stares at his surprised eyes, large and blue like perfect gemstones. Then she screams her lungs out.

*

"I am **not** coming out as long as he is in the house, do you hear me?"

"You really have to excuse her. She is rather easily excited."

"That's OK. I know I will see her again, often. When I first saw her, I had the same feeling as when I met you. She was familiar, not just because she resembled you. No, she too is somehow part of my future. Isn't that fantastic?"

"It is downright incredible."

"That means it was not just because we were going to sit in the same row in class."

"So it would seem. I have a hard time imagining that she will join our class."

"I can hardly believe my luck, to meet friends like you two the first time I move away from home."

"Unbelievable things happen around you with amazing regularity."

"That's how the Heritage works."

"I believe I promised to show you the farm. You are going to love the hayloft. It is possible to climb along the ceiling to the middle and jump right down."

"Your sister is not coming with us, it seems."

"I can say for sure that Trine is not going to jump in the hay with you today. Take my word for it. She may be interested in doing so at a future time, though."

"It sounds like great fun."

"So I've been told."

Chapter 11: A tale of two invitations

It's only five minutes till class begins, and Tom is frantically doing his homework. Somehow he never got around to doing it before, even though he's had a couple days. It is not the first time either. And probably won't be the last.

At the desk beside him sits Ben, his clear blue eyes peacefully resting on some far distant point only he can see. This does not mean he is unaware of what goes on around him. When Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore Von den Hoyenburgh comes gracefully gliding up to his desk in her latest ballerina dress – which she has never worn to school before – and her new hairstyle – which she has never worn before, either – Ben turns in her direction with a friendly smile. He does not comment on her appearance, but then again she is wearing something new every day so in a manner of speaking there is nothing new.

"Ah, Benjamin. Good morning!"

Ben has still not repeated his initial wish to be addressed as Ben, and no one has seen fit to inform the newcomers of the fact, for some reason. Perhaps for the reason that the newcomers never asked, and generally act somewhat superior. Especially Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore; Aiko has become a lot more normal lately. Yes, she is wearing expensive clothes, but they don't look flashy. If anything, it looks like she is trying to dress normally but just doesn't know where to get normal clothes.

"Greetings, Miss Von den Hoyenburgh."

"Please, call me Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore."

"As you wish, Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore Von den Hoyenburgh."

"That wasn't what I intended. I just don't want things to be so formal between us, after all this time."

"This was your sole request?"

"Eh, no. Actually I have something to ask."

"I listen."

"On Saturday evening, I will be hosting a small party at my place for my friends from Vienna, Paris and Rome. I would be delighted if you would also attend. It must be lonely for you to not meet young people of your own standing."

"Oh, far from it. I have met the most delightful young people already. Even yesterday I went home with Tom here and we jumped in the hay together. Very enjoyable."

Tom, already distracted from his homework, turns to see the young lady's face. He does not need to look twice to realize that she is unfamiliar with this agrarian sport and assuming a totally different meaning. He jumps to his feet: "This is not what it sounds like!"

Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore etc is looking from Ben to him and back, her face white. Tom tries again. "Look, we only..."

"Quiet, kids." The teacher raps his desk. "Class is about to begin!"

Tom learns absolutely nothing during that class. The moment the bell rings, he races over to that girl's place. "Miss Von den Hoyenburgh! It is very important that you understand this. My home is a farm, and we harvest hay as fodder for our sheep. It is stored in a large barn. A popular sport is to jump from as high as possible into the hayloft. It is essentially risk-free, unless you land on your neck perhaps, but a very thrilling experience. It is in no way related to the ancient practice of using hay for mattresses."

Her face shows a strange mixture of relief and disgust.

"Of course not" she says dismissively. "I knew it would be far from him to sleep with a

boy, much less a farmboy."

"I hope we can do that this weekend" informs Ben from the sideline.

"WHAT?" Tom stares at his friend in utter disbelief, while Elizabeth Katharina Eleanore seems unable to even breathe.

"Oh, I haven't asked you yet. Of course you don't need to if you don't want to."

"Please tell us more clearly what you are planning. I know this isn't what it sounds like."

"I talked with my mother on the telephone last night, and asked if it was OK that you come to visit us, since I had been allowed to visit you. She agreed that you could sleep with me and my sister from Friday to Saturday, if you want. On Sunday we will have to join her at the peace conference. It is a very important one, and will also prove highly instructional to us, she said."

"Wow. That's ... an incredible honor."

"It is because you are a precious person to me."

The choice of words automatically makes Tom glance in the direction of Aiko. He is not surprised to see that she is following the conversation with keen interest. She quickly looks away from his gaze, but he knows she has heard every word.

"I will ask Dad, but I'm pretty sure he'll let me stay over the night in one of your guest rooms. Of course I won't literally be sleeping in the same bed as you and your sister."

"Of course not!" Ben actually chuckles. "Rita and I are not sleeping in the same bed anymore."

*

Wonderful. Tom hauls his bike the last steep rise to the farm. He has ticked off the rich girl by having Ben decline her party to be with him instead. Not that he thinks Ben would have gone there anyway. He just may have convinced the class that he is not kissing the angel and mushy stuff like that, as if that was even possible. But the girls are still jealous at him for being Ben's best friend instead of them. What more could go wrong?

"I hate you!" Trine shouts before he has even closed the door behind him. "What kind of insane idiot would bring home a Starborn without any warning?"

"He just followed me home, OK. And none of us have a pocket telegraph. How was I supposed to warn you?"

"You could have waited till the next day!"

"You think I can just order a Starborn around like some kind of servant? Besides, you were the one who wanted to meet him!"

"Not like that!"

"Can I help that you strut around in pajamas that are worse than nothing? Can I help that you decide to tackle Benjamin B Starborn in a bath towel?"

"I hate you! Now I can never meet him again!"

"If not for me, you would not have met him in the first place."

"That would have been better!"

"No it wouldn't. I told you, he likes you. Don't ask me why. I don't even know why he likes *me*. And he never told *me* that my eyes were pretty. Thank Goodness, and knock wood. Today he told the girls he wanted me to sleep with him and his sister."

OK, that shut her up. But also, very clearly, proved his insanity once and for all. Not that Trine has ever truly doubted that, as far as he has heard. Quickly he relates the whole sorry incidence. It does not cheer her up. Even the option to enjoy his public humiliation passes her by, strangely enough.

"If only we had met in a decent way! Then he might have invited me too!"

"He probably would have, if you hadn't locked the door to your room and shouted for him to go away."

"This is so horrible! What should I do??"

"Look, I know he likes you, even though you are just a kid. Why don't you telephone him? He has telephone in the house where he lives with that Johnson guy. He told me so. If you call him and ask him nicely, I am sure he'll let you come too. Really."

"I can't do that! I am going to **die!**"

"We are all going to die someday, but not all of us are going to visit Starborn Manor. Come on, let's find his telephone number!"

"No! I can't! I would die from shame! He must be laughing himself to death just thinking of how stupid I am!"

"If he was a normal boy, I agree. You were the most pathetic sight I have seen since the lamb that almost drowned in the bog. But Ben just worried about you."

"That makes no sense!"

"There is something you must know about Ben: He doesn't know shame or guilt. To him, things just happen. There are no wrong things as far as he is concerned. There are hurtful things, and he will sympathize with you. But he will never accuse you, and he will never mock you. Because guilt and shame don't exist in his world."

"Well, they exist in my world! I am dying from shame here!"

"That's why you should learn to see his world. But to be honest, I'm glad you're not coming with me. You're simply too immature."

"You cruel stupid brother! It's all your fault! Your fault, you hear?"

Yeah, he hears. And she may be right. Or perhaps not. Perhaps Ben is right, and things just happen because they are supposed to happen. All you need to do is be there. It is hard to hold on to it when he is alone. When Ben is beside him, it all seems so easy. As if everything is always going to be alright.

Chapter 12: In marble halls

"Just wait till we're past the valley, then you'll see something neat."

Johnson is driving them further up the valley than Tom has been anytime. The houses are getting fewer. And then they drive up a short road and stop outside a red hut. On the other side of the hut is a railroad track. On the track is a strange car.

"Automotive" explains Johnson. "Like a cross between automobile and locomotive."

Johnson and the two boys wander over to the automotive, and soon they are off. Yes, it is neat. Freed from the concern of keeping the car on the road and meeting other traffic, they speed up. A lot. The terrain is flashing by the sides. The speed is much more noticeable in this thing than in a common passenger train. Tom has taken those from time to time. But that was nothing like this, sitting so close to the action, seeing the landscape hurtling toward them at breakneck speed, just to zip past them and lose itself behind.

"To the left we'll soon see the rail branch off toward the city airport. From here, Antares travels all over the world. The original Visitors supposedly would just disappear one place and appear somewhere else, but she can't do that yet."

"So it is something that comes with age?"

"Or experience. That's what we think, anyway. The original Visitors never explained it, so all we can do is guess."

"Ben, wouldn't it be neat to be able to just pop up anywhere?"

"Yes, but traveling is fun too. And Mom says that if you always are where you ought to be, it is never too far to where you ought to be next. As long as we follow the guidance of the invisible force of goodness, we never come too late or too early."

"But if you could jump around the globe, the Goodness would know that too and could change your plans."

"That's true. I guess we shall just have to wait and see. I am much younger than my mother after all!"

"But the Visitors were all men. What if it is a male thing?"

"I don't think it is a thing of the body. It sounds like a work of the Heritage, or the Miracle Energy as it was called back then. Mom sure has that. Much more than I."

"Right. It was just a weird idea."

The trip would surely have taken a couple hours in an ordinary car on ordinary roads, but in the automotive it only takes a fraction of the time. Soon they pass through a narrow gulch and the landscape opens up into a broad valley surrounded by majestic mountains. The small river that escaped through the ravine is just a large stream where it comes down from the other side, then flows around a low grassy hill in the middle of the valley to meet a smaller stream just beneath the hill. The two continue as one and run out of sight. But on the top of the rounded hill is the bright marble building that was their destination: Starborn Manor.

There is no need to announce their arrival. The quiet of the valley would make it very noticeable when anything mechanical comes here, even the electric automotive. As they walk up the last steps, Tom notices that Johnson is not coming with them to the main gate. Instead he quietly moves toward another door to the left. The door is already ajar, and there is someone just inside, obviously waiting for him. Somehow he had never considered that this man also sacrificed something in order to be with Ben. But it must surely be worth it. There hasn't been any trace of resentment or impatience on the whole trip. Then again, it is hard to maintain such thoughts when a Starborn is around. Or at least that is his experience with Ben.

He will soon find out how the rest of the family is, because the gate opens and Anita

Starborn steps out. Having known Ben for so long, Tom is as prepared as any man can be. But he is still struck with awe at the sheer radiance of power, beauty and empathy from this woman. In a more primitive age, people would have knelt in worship of her as a goddess. As it is, he bows as deeply as he can without falling over.

Anita Starborn and her son embrace each other, hug and kiss for quite a while. When they separate, the mother turns to their guest. "Tom Lithus, be welcome! My son has spoken highly of you. It is a great blessing to find such friends as soon as he leaves the nest."

"Thank you, Ma'am. It is a honor even to know your son. And I still can't believe I really am here."

She smiles. "You will believe. We are not nearly as scary as we seem at first glance."

The first time Tom looks away from the regal hostess, he sees that Ben is already holding a girl who seems to have jumped into his arms. For a 13 year old, Rita Starborn is not all that big or developed. She is mostly a child still. But the world's prettiest child, of course. Her hair is a richer, deeper golden than the other two, as if gold just slightly alloyed with copper rather than platinum. Loose and moving freely almost as if alive, it surrounds her head like fire. She is going "Wheeeee!" as Ben is spinning her around. Then she jumps down and looks over at Tom. "That's your boyfriend?"

Tom just gapes, but Ben laughs. "They are just called friends when they are the same gender. Boyfriends and girlfriends are of the opposite gender, and those are the ones you kiss and stuff."

She looks at Tom with big-eyed curiosity. "So if I kiss him, he'll become my boyfriend?" "Yup."

"Rita" says her mother mildly, "you should not be quick to get a boyfriend. First you have to be sure that you love him more than anyone else."

"Won't I love him because he is my boyfriend? People always love their boyfriends."

"Getting a boyfriend is very serious. It is like adding a new person to the family."

"Like having a baby?"

"In a manner of speaking. You promise to love them and take care of them always."

"But you don't need to change their diapers!"

"Not until they grow very old."

Thank the Goodness that the mother is here. For a moment Tom had been afraid the girl would just walk up to him and kiss him to see if he really transformed into a boyfriend. Evidently being ignorant of human behavior is the way of the family rather than something special for Ben. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Tom can't decide. Also, he can't decide whether he would or wouldn't have become her boyfriend if she had kissed him. Probably. Although he would have to wait some years for her to grow up. She is definitely not in the age for mushy stuff. Trine is right on the target there, however wrong she is otherwise. And she is. He is so not telling her about this conversation.

The family is just about to eat dinner. Given the marble halls and stuff, he has certain expectations: A large table with white linen, silverware at the very least, and servants waiting on them with a sumptuous feast. Despite wearing his Sunday clothes, he feels just inadequate in a manor like this. And then the Lady of the manor leads them through the large halls, to a much smaller room off near a corner of the main building. Half the room is a very everyday kitchen, the other half is a simple dining room with furniture such as could be found in any random Norwegian home. "I hope you like this, Tom" says Anita Starborn, the world's one and only superheroine. "Ben is crazy for the stuff, so I try to make it when he comes home."

"The stuff" turns out to be a mix of finely cut, fried vegetables including potatoes and

a small part of hard fruits like apple or pear. There is also something that at first sight could be mistaken for meat, but when he tastes it, he decides it must be some kind of mushroom, probably chanterelles. Ben has never mentioned his family being vegetarians, but come to think of it, Tom has never seen him eat meat either. Perhaps he just doesn't like it; he certainly hasn't asked Tom to stop keeping sheep. Not that Tom has much choice in the matter anyway. Be that as it may, the food is quite tasty. He still has a hard time believing that he is eating a dinner made by Anita Starborn. This is something to tell your grandchildren. No, this is something to tell your grandchildren to tell their grandchildren! "The world's most powerful person made my dinner."

"Hehe, we have it every Friday" says Rita, and Tom realizes he has spoken out loud. OK, not very loud, but still. He can feel his face cooking immediately.

"Actually I enjoy cooking when I have the time" says The World's Most Powerful Person. "With all the traveling there is all too little time for such simple pleasures. And now Rita is getting into it too. Ben can memorize recipes, but he simply doesn't have the inclination. He sure can eat it though!"

"Your food is simply the best, Mommy" replies Ben. And he is probably right. Tom would not have chosen the most expensive restaurant instead. Although that could be just as much for the atmosphere. There is a quiet, a feeling of absolute safety and ... love. Not the wild storm of romantic love, but the mirror-like quiet of an old, settled family love. That reminds him ...

"Your father isn't here?"

"No, Dad went to the conference already. He is sixty already, you know, so he appreciates a good night's sleep before the roundtable starts. Mom is going to fly straight down."

"In fact I am going in half an hour. But don't worry, they do fine on their own, and both Johnsons and Lees are in the house. Besides, I would not have left my children behind if there was any darkness over it."

Tom does not understand that expression, and he is too awed to ask. But evidently she has some gift of fortunetelling or something. As could be expected, he thinks.

After thanking for the food, Tom notices that there is no dishwasher machine, and still no sign of servants. He is not sure what role these Johnsons and Lees play, but clearly they are not dishwashers. So he volunteers his help. He is almost surprised to find that it is accepted without hesitation. "Rita is doing the dishes this meal, but you can help her." Anita and Ben almost immediately leaves the room. Rita flashes him a smile.

Tom carries the plates to the sink while Rita fills up with hot water. "It's best that you wash and I dry" she tells him, "because I know where to put the stuff." He is amazed that they do it this old-fashioned way, but it is OK with him. He has done the dishes often enough on the farm. She sure uses hot water, though. It almost burns his fingers, but he will not let it show and make himself a coward before a little girl. So he steels himself and washes the dishes.

"Do you love Ben?"

His fingers are suddenly numb, and the glass falls from them, turning oh so slowly in the air as it starts to spin toward the floor. He is frozen into a statue, unable to move, unable to even think, able only to observe the glass on its resigned tumble toward oblivion. His ears adjust to the sound of the coming crash. The glass spins one more time, and lands bottom down on the floor, quietly like a settling feather. Rita bows, picks it up and puts it back into the water. "So, do you?"

Chapter 13: Loves and fishes

What do you say when your friend's 13 year-old sister asks you whether you love him? Apart from growing red, stammering and dropping glasses to the floor. Well, one option is to tell the truth. "I haven't really thought about that" admits Tom. "But I guess you could say I love him as a friend. Not in the same way I would love a girlfriend, of course, or a brother if I had one. But each day I look forward to seeing him again, and when we're together – I mean, when we are in the same place – I feel more happy, more alive, more complete. As if a part of me has always missed him. So I guess you can say I love him. But we boys don't say things like that."

"Why not? If you love someone, you must tell them. Even if they know. They still should get to hear it."

"I think that is only girls. Boys don't like to think about it that way. As long as we are happy together, we don't mind what it is called."

"Then boys are really weird."

"Yeah. That we are, at least when it comes to love."

"Ben says 'love you' to Mom and me."

"I guess it just sounds weird when boys say it to boys."

"And do you kiss?"

"What?? No way!"

"Not at all?"

"Never!"

"Not even goodnight?"

"Never."

"Then perhaps you don't love him after all."

"We're just friends! Friends don't kiss, no matter how much they love."

"I don't think you can love without kissing. But I'll ask Mom. After we're finished here."

"That sounds like a good idea."

They finish the dishes in silence. The atmosphere is not exactly tense, but the silence still makes Tom uncomfortable. He cannot think of anything to say, though. Luckily there wasn't a lot of dishes so they are soon finished. Rita leads on to another room. This place is so big, it reminds Tom more of a mall than a home. But the actual rooms where the Starborn live seem to be of more normal size and standard. He is not sure what the rest of the manor is used for, and is afraid to ask.

Rita is not afraid to ask her mother at least. "Mommy, can people love without kissing?"

"Oh yes!" The question is so immediate, she might as well have waited for it. "To love simply means that you want good things to happen to another. To hate means to want bad things for another. If someone doesn't like kissing, then kissing them would not be love. Also often there are other things people need more than kisses. For instance if someone is hungry, love would be to give them food. If they are cold, love would be to give them warm clothes or a warm place to stay. And sometime people kiss because they want to, without thinking of whether it is good for the other. Then it is not really love. But kissing is a good way to show love. People who love each other like to be close together, but people who hate each other feel bad about being close. So by hugging or kissing, you show that you don't hate someone."

"So that's how it is!" Rita turns around and bows deeply to Tom. "I was wrong. You know more about love than I do after all."

"Hehe, well at least about boy love."

That did not sound right. Not at all. "I mean, since I am a boy, of course I know more

about how boys feel and how boys experience things. That's only natural, of course. That's all there is to it, really." He looks quickly at Ben, but Ben is busy reading something on a fish reader. He may not have heard after all.

Anita Starborn smiles, and her smile has the power of a blessing. Whatever he may have said, she has understood what he meant, and he can feel the tension drain from his body. "My daughter is the literate of the family. She has almost certainly read more than her brother already, and perhaps when she is grown up she will overtake me as well! She just loves reading, and lately she has pulled a lot of love fishes off InterText. But books and fishes don't tell the whole story. That's why, one day, she will have to go out and see for herself, like her brother."

"I want to go to school too!"

"But not for a few years yet."

Tom silently agrees with that.

Rita isn't one to stand around pouting. She brightens almost immediately. "Wait here, I'll show you something neat!" she says to Tom (as if he knew anywhere to go) and then she is off. She sure can run. He has notice that Ben never gets winded when running at normal human speed, and evidently this is another Visitor thing. Even though they can't teleport, they sure can move fast when they want to. Half a minute later the long-legged girl is back, holding up a small, lightweight device that fits in a hand, and with one side being pretty much entirely a screen. He has seen them, although they are pretty new.

"A palm reader!" declares the proud owner. "I got it only last month! See, you feed the fish here, and use these two wheels to get quickly to the right chapter and page." Tom smiles: "You know, I can remember the time when feeding the fishes meant something totally different."

"Tee hee. You mean fishes that swim."

"Yes, in the ocean. When people were seasick and threw up from a ship, we said they were feeding the fishes."

"And some people have fishes as pets! In aquarium! They feed the fish too!"

"Yes. Microfish hasn't really caught on until the last ten years or so.¹ I can still remember when we got our first fish reader, but then again we are farmers. We are supposed to be a bit primitive."

"Why?"

"Because we work with plants and animals, like almost all people did a few hundred years ago. So city folks think that perhaps we are like people were then."

"But someone has to work with plants for us to have something to eat!"

"Yeah. You know that, but then again you are smart. I know it because I do it, otherwise I might not have thought about it. After all, I could say, why do we need cows when we can buy milk in the supermarket?"

"That would be really unenlightened."

"I think that is exactly the right description." Tom grins.

"I shall have to leave you now" announces mother Starborn. "I am sure you will get along fine though." The teens jump to their feet and after they all follow her down to the rail, where there is protracted hugging and kissing that Tom does not take part in. These people are certainly not shy about showing their feelings. Then again, their feelings are pure and genuine. Could he dare to be so spontaneous? No. He couldn't. Because sooner or later, if he were, he would do something he shouldn't.

¹ This technology is in our world spelled "microfiche", and had a boom around 1970-1980. It never caught on, as paper has remained cheap and digital technologies eclipsed microfiche and microfilm for quick retrieval.

Chapter 14: Night vision

The rest of the evening passes pleasantly enough. They play triple scoopball, which is not too taxing so they can talk while playing. Afterwards, they play Q-bus, a game Tom is not familiar with. It is kinda like a 3D domino with pieces that only match certain other pieces. The way they play it, it is cooperative rather than competitive, but that was probably not the way it was designed to be. Of course, if Tom were to play competitive games with a Starborn, even a severely underage one, he would lose spectacularly every time, no doubt. So he is wisely not complaining.

By the time Tom is getting tired, Rita disappears to the bathroom (well, at least one of the bathrooms) and returns a bit later in fetching pajamas. Ben goes next, and finally Tom. He is pretty tired by this time, so upon emerging in nightclothes and with brushed teeth he immediately suggest that he would like to sleep if he only knew where.

Ben nods. "That's fine, we'll sleep now as well." The fleet-footed teens lead the way upstairs. There is a room, at first sight fairly large for a bedroom, with wallpapers in typical kid-friendly colors. A second look, however, reveals that the room is actually quite full. It holds three beds: One of them is a double, and the two others are adult single size, but standing side by side. A dresser and some kind of cabinet eats into the space as well, so the place is actually rather crowded.

Rita jumps onto one of the two single beds. "This one is mine!" she announces happily.

From subconscious suspicion to alarming clarity in six seconds. Not bad. "This is your bedroom?"

"Yup. Ours!"

"She used to sleep in the double with me, but she's got her own bed now."

"Yup. I'm so grown up, I have my very own bed!"

"And since you said that you did not want to sleep with me OR my sister, we put in an extra bed for you!"

"Ah, uhm, thank you."

"You are welcome."

"This way we can all sleep together and still have our own beds!" adds Rita.

That is technically true, admits Tom in his mind as he gingerly climbs into the remaining bed. But did they have to put them quite that close together? Once the light is out, it will be hard to say where his bed ends and Rita's begins. He almost asks Ben if he can sleep in the double bed instead. But in the last moment, he considers that Ben is likely to inadvertently inform the world about it, quite possibly in a worldwide Viewcast. That's just the kind of guy he is. So Ben lies very, very still and silently instructs his body to not flail about in sleep as it usually does. And, not least, to absolutely not under any circumstances do the thing it sometimes does in the morning.

*

Something is very wrong with the world. There is no life anywhere. There are ruins of what may have been homes, but the ruins are so old and weathered that you can barely see that they have been made by humans at some time. Now, there is not even a blade of grass. The ground is reddish clay, dried by a stark sun in a hazy, orange sky. Like an evil eye the scorching star glares balefully down on a ruined world.

Then Ben appears. That's the only word that fits: Appears. He seems to just tunnel into reality from some other place. He wasn't there, but now he is. It is Ben alright, but he

is changed. Much older. His hair and beard are white as snow, although his face is still unlined and his body is that of a man in his prime, muscular in a sinewy way. This is rather easy to see since he does not wear any clothes. But it is his face that draws attention, for despite its smoothness it somehow radiates age, as if those eyes have seen millennia come and go, whole eons pass before them.

Those eyes are now sweeping over the land around him, taking in the desolation and devastation of the dead world. Shock and horror are reflected in that face: This was clearly not what he had expected. And then, when his eyes have had their fill, he speaks. Or rather screams. "No! Noo!" He claws at his face, as if to gouge his own eyes out. "I did not mean to be gone this long! I only... I only..." His whole body contorts in unbearable agony and he falls to his knees on the dusty ground, his face still hidden in his hands. And then he falls silent. Then he changes.

When he rises, he is calm. But it is a horrible calmness. Lifting his hands, this Ben starts to speak in a different voice, powerful, formal. He intones: "Eternal Light, Invisible Force of Goodness that permeates all worlds! Hear my wish this one time, and let it be done! To this world I offer up my lifeforce, to make whole what my absence has broken. Bind us thus, spirit to dust, light to darkness, to be forever one. This is my pledge, eternal, irrevocable. Let it be done! Let the illusion of ego cease!"

The older Ben spreads his arms, like a human cross. And as he stands there, he begins to glow. His body begins to shine with an incandescent brightness, and then dissolves completely into the light. Tom begins to scream, but he has no voice, and it is too late. With a soundless explosion, the light spreads outward, like waves on a pond. And where it spreads, everything changes. The red barren clay becomes fertile soil and is covered with grass and trees. The angry orange skies become blue and clear. The broken and weathered ruins become beautiful homes. The oppressive silence is broken by the song of birds and the laughter of small children. But the space where Ben stood is empty, just empty air and a patch of soft green grass. And that price was too high, too high even for a world.

Suddenly, now that it is too late, Tom's voice is back. He is not sure of all that he is screaming, but "Ben! No!" is in there, and "don't go away" at least. "Please don't be gone." Tears blur the beauty and wash away the paradise, and he closes his eyes. When he does, the world disappears. A familiar voice comes from somewhere outside that world. "I am here. It is OK, Tom. It is all alright."

When he opens his eyes again, he is sitting in bed. Ben is sitting beside him, holding him, speaking softly. Rita is watching with big eyes. A small lamp over her bed is the only light in the room.

"You have been dreaming, Tom. I am not going away. Nothing bad is happening."

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to wake you..."

"It is OK, Tom." Ben is holding him close. "I don't mind."

"I had a horrible dream... you went away. Forever."

"I won't, Tom. I will always be there when you need me." And then his voice changes, becomes one Tom has not heard ever before this night, solemn, filled with authority. "I will be by your side whenever you need me, whenever you miss me, whenever you ask for me, from this breath and till you draw your last. Before the Invisible Force of Goodness, this is my pledge, eternal, irrevocable."

Rita gasps.

Tom whimpers in horror.

*

The black wings of nameless fear swoop by overhead and gradually fade. Tom grabs his friend's shoulders and swallows until he gets his voice back. "Ben, don't do that!"

"Don't do what?"

"Don't keep saying things like that!"

Ben blinks. "I have never said any such thing before, and may not do so again in a human lifetime."

"But in the dream you said something like that too, and then you died!"

"Tom, I am not even sure that is possible. The Heritage protects me."

"Not from yourself! You made another such awesome oath, and then you just... this really makes no sense, does it?"

"Perhaps if you tell it from the beginning."

So Tom describes his dream as much as he can remember it. The only thing he skips is the part about no clothes. It really didn't seem important in the dream either, as if Ben had come from a place or a time where clothes were not considered important. And anyway, it is not like he would say such a thing in a bedroom no matter what. That would be just wrong. But the rest he describes, word for word as he remembers it. Ben and Rita listen intently, seriously, as if it wasn't just a stupid dream. As if it was important after all.

"And that was the last thing I saw. But you were gone, Ben. Really gone. I could feel it."

"How strange. And I was very old, you say?"

"I think you must have been thousands of years old. I don't know how long quarter angels live, but that was the impression I got."

"Was I a man or a woman?"

"What? A man. More so than now. There was no doubt about it." His ears grow warm with the secret of his knowing, but it is not really important.

"Well, there goes Lee's theory" says Ben unconcerned.

"Huh?"

"Dr Lee believes that the key to mother's longevity is the repair mechanism of her gene spirals. She has inherited one set from her human mother and one from her Visitor father. Lee believes that as a half-Visitor grows older, the superior repair mechanism of the Visitor gene spiral will not only repair itself, but rebuild the human gene spiral in its image. Eventually she will be completely Visitor. That means that I may already have more than 25% visitor genes. But my only X gene spiral comes from mother. If it rebuilds the dot spiral in its image, then I will become a Visitor female when my human lifetime is over."

"That's just too weird!"

"Well, if your vision is correct, that is not going to happen."

"I never said that it was a vision! It was just a dream, but horribly lifelike."

"If you did not believe it to be true, it would not have the power to scare you even after you woke up."

Rita speaks up. "It was sad that Ben had to stop living, but it was kinda nice that he died for the world. Kinda like Jesus."

"Yes" agrees Ben. "I might have done that if I could, but I cannot imagine ever having that much of the Goodness inside me that I could do that."

"The story about Jesus is one of my favorites too! He was a real American hero. And it was so romantic."

"Uhm, I think he was actually Jewish."

"I don't see why that should be a problem."

"Because America wasn't discovered until 1500 years later?"

"Oh. I didn't get that part. I am pretty sure it was an American movie though."

"That would explain the romantic part. But it's based on a Jewish book."

Rita jumps up and strikes a dramatic pose in her pajamas. "How deeply I have longed in my heart to eat this last supper with you!" She sits down. "And the part where his mother and his not-quite-boyfriend watch him on the cross."

"I don't think it is common to use the words 'Jesus' and 'boyfriend' in the same sentence."

"But he was really close, like you and Ben."

"I don't think we are not-quite-boyfriends either."

"Well, of course you are more than that now. Ben gave you a marriage vow and you accepted it, but you did not give one back. How much is that? Betrothed perhaps?"

"That's not like it at all!"

"It wasn't a full marriage vow, sister mine, it was only the part that applies to us. Married people also have some other things to do."

"Exactly! But Ben, why did you have to say that... vow?"

"Because I could not bear the pain in your voice when you said that I had left you. I want you to never feel that pain again."

"That's what Mommy said, when you love someone you want only good things to happen to them."

"But you don't have to marry them all!"

"Don't worry, Tom. I am not going to marry you. Even if Lee should be right, it won't happen in your lifetime."

"Now that's a mental image I can live without."

Chapter 15: For gifted youngsters

"Mmm... Ben?"

"Don't drool when you say that!"

"Rita?"

"Last I checked in the mirror I was still Trine. Your sister, you know? If you haven't forgotten me completely."

"Sorry. I dreamed I was back in the manor."

"Go on, rub it in. Who gets to walk in shining marble halls with the world's mightiest mortals? Who is invited to the Starborn's sleepover? The one, the only, the fantastic Tom Lithus, chaser of pretty boys and severely underage girls!"

"You could have gone too, you know, if you hadn't been hiding from Ben since the first time you met."

"You mean since the first time I fell on my face in front of him with my worn-out slept-in pajamas bottom in the air, and then later ran him down and lay on top of him in a slippery bath towel."

"Actually it was you who was slippery. The towels are quite fine."

"How could I possibly see him again ever?"

"By sending a telegram. That's why there's a keyboard on the phone, you know. I also happen to know that he has a pocket telegraph."

"I happen to know that we're both going to be late for school."

"Oh no! It's Monday! Crumbs!"

"Oh no indeed."

Stranden, the homeroom teacher, is looking serious today again. Well, more formal at least. In the past, this has heralded the introduction of a new student. Tom fully expects there to be more of them. With Ben being not just a Very Important Person, but also very attractive ... not that Tom would know anything about that, of course, but it is obvious, right? You don't need to be a girl or a sissy or anything unusual to notice that a boy is going to be liked by the girls. And besides, it's not like he could avoid noticing, with his own sister collecting pictures of Ben as if they were banknotes ... Stranden is talking already?

"...several new students, and there will be several more coming before Christmas, it seems. Now, I enjoy being a teacher and I have felt fine with teaching this class. But with a class consisting of more and more international students, who have had access to more resources than most during their earlier education, it might be a good idea to bring in someone with special expertise in this area. This concern coincides with a sudden offer from a large university. As some of you know, I have always had an interest in history, especially ancient history. It so happens that I am offered a research grant for a project analyzing data about the pre-Sumer coastal civilization in the Euphrates-Tigris delta. This is simply too good an offer to ignore, especially when someone else may be better qualified for the job I hold today."

Euphrates-Tigris delta? Since when has he even mentioned that before?

"So an agreement has been reached. I will still teach this class for a few more days, but your new homeroom teacher will be sitting in and assisting me, starting today. Please, welcome your new homeroom teacher, Mrs Loliko Watababe!"

The door opens, and a shapely woman in her late 30es enters. She is a bit smaller than the average Norwegian woman, but not extremely so, and at least the normal size for an East Asian woman, which she clearly is. The eyes would give it away if nothing else. She has a nice face, nothing special apart from the ethnic traits, but the rest of her body clearly is a combination of the best from nature and nurture, and she

does not dress to hide it either. Her movements are confident but not quite exaggerated, as is her smile. She walks to the blackboard and writes, first in some Japanese or Chinese script and then in plain letters: Watanabe Roriko.

"Thank you, Mr. *Standen*. Now, as I am sure *some* here know, it is customary in Japanese to first mention the family name, in this case Watanabe, which is incidentally a *very common* family name in Japan. My given name can indeed be pronounced Loliko rather than Roriko. In Japanese, the sounds for the letters L and R are the same, and varying by dialect and gender it may be closer to one or the other. However, I would much appreciate that those of you whose native languages differentiate between the two sounds, follow the official, written version of my name."

It is probably a good idea, reflects Tom, that the two of them won't be teaching together for any length of time. This is hardly love at first sight. Although, looking quickly at some of the boys in class, the same may not be true for them. In a way, he can understand that. She looks much like a teenage boy's fantasy of the ideal mature woman. But for himself, he realizes that looks don't mean as much as they used to. Perhaps it is Ben who is starting to rub off ... not in any literal sense, of course.

"I have been undergone special training to work with gifted youngsters, who are often misunderstood by the world. Because these young boys and girls function on a higher level than others of their age, they naturally need to connect with intellectuals that are more advanced in age. Since the human intellect is not a function purely of genes, but also of training and experience, a trained mature person will be able to connect with the gifted youngsters in a way that others of their own age can not. That is to say, due to their superior genes, the gifted youngsters are already advanced to the same age as a mature adult, mentally. Of course, although intellect is the primary component, we are also incarnate creatures with a body. If the difference between bodies exceeds certain limits, interaction still becomes awkward and unnatural. Therefore simple life experience is not enough. A wide range of experience must be contained within a still youthful body and mind. This comes naturally to the extremely gifted, but is a rare thing to attain for anyone else, even for the higher range of natural talent. You should think of such a person as a bridge between the lonely world of the unusually gifted and the larger but blander world of the natural humans. There are many ways in which such a bridge can be useful, including ... emotionally. An important part of growing up is to release one's bonds to the birth family in order to take the first steps toward forming a new family. This is a trait that all humans share, and also those we might call superhuman, those born with abilities beyond the reach of most men and women. I trust that this will be clear to whom it most applies."

That was a pretty abstract speech, but the expression in her eyes as she looks to Ben is familiar. Too familiar. So, she is not after all an accomplice to Aiko. It is all too clear from those eyes that a new contestant has entered the arena. And one more skilled and experienced than the young girls. She is out to get her hands on Ben, and she won't let 20 years age difference stand between them.

Chapter 16: The telegraph game

He put his arm around her shoulder, and she thought the beating of her heart must be easy for him to hear. It sounded so much louder than the distant cries of the seagulls, the soft roar of the surf and the wind sighing in the branches overhead. "I could never leave you, Roxanne" he whispered.

She knew she shouldn't do this, it was way too early, but her body seemed to have a will of her own. She turned toward him and

"Trine!"

Her father's bellow almost makes her jump out of her skin. Of course, he's downstairs and cannot possibly have any idea what she is reading. Anyway she had locked the door to make sure her annoying big brother wouldn't come barging in while she was in the depth of a book. She knows what he thinks about those books. She would bet that he has his own stuff to read that is much worse than this, some of the girls in class have reported in great detail on books and magazines they have found under boys' beds and places like that. She checked both under the bed and under the pillow, but found nothing. He has a locked drawer though, it is probably there. But he always carries the key with him, the...

"Trine!"

Oh scraps, she forgot her father. "Yes?" Why does her voice sound so tiny compared to theirs?

"Telegram for you!"

"For me?" She unlocks the door and peeks out.

"I left it on the phone." He doesn't need to say more, she better pick it up before Tom comes in. Who would send a gram these days anyway? Everyone uses the phone, unless you're not at home, and even then they usually call later instead of leaving a telegram. She scampers downstairs and races to the phone.

From: Starborn Manor

To: Lithus Place Farm

Attention: Trine Lithus

Greetings! It is I, Ben's little sister. I have been thinking a lot about you after your brother was here. Your brother was very nice and we all like him a lot. Ben says that you are much the same, so I think we would all like you a lot too. But Ben says you seem to be afraid of him and was hiding most of the time when he was there.

I want to tell you not to be afraid of Ben. Ben is the most kind and gentle boy in the world. He would never do anything to hurt you. Also, I thought that perhaps you were worried about sleeping with him, like your brother. That is not a problem. I used to sleep with Ben until I was 11, and even though I was smaller than him he never crushed me or stole all of the bedclothes in the winter. So don't worry.

Ben likes you, and since he is very nice, you will like him also.

Therefore the sum of happiness in the world will increase if you get together.

Best regards,

Rita Starborn (a.k.a. "Rigel" although I am born on Earth!)

OK. Breathe deeply. The first two lines are made by the system, and there is not likely to be anyone at the Starborn Manor who would pull a prank on her. So, yeah, this is almost certainly a letter from the world's third most important person. That in itself is reason for worry. Of course, it does not help that it is about her and the second most important person in the world, who is actually probably the most important of them all

to her. Or is he? Does she really feel that strongly about him, or is it just a crush that was fun as long as she knew it could never happen?

That's why she is terrified, she realizes. It is not about pictures and a scrapbook anymore. It is not at a safe distance, daydreams about a boy who is mostly a myth. Now it is about a living, breathing boy... no, young man. He may be looking young even for a 17year old, but he is more mature in other ways, more knowledgeable, seeing deeper. And if he sees deeper into her, what will he see? Shallowness, daydreams that are more like night dreams in that they don't stand the touch of light. Lies, sweet little lies, fantasies that were never meant to be real. And now, suddenly, scaringly, he is real. And not just him, others are getting involved as well. She did not ask for this!

She looks at the print again, and her eyes fall on a strange string of words. "sleeping with him, like your brother." What is **that** supposed to mean? Of course, she also claims to have been sleeping with her brother, so she must mean it literally, snoring and all. But why would her brother even consider sleeping with a boy, literally or otherwise? Is there something about him she doesn't know? That would certainly explain the lack of magazines with severely undressed girls, which other brothers supposedly have. She was only joking, but what if...? But in that case, why would they want to bring her into it? She shakes her head. No, she does not want to think like that!

But she should write back, at the very least to make sure this Rita character does not take the matter further, for instance by involving their parents. That would be the end of the world for sure. What to say? What to say? She retires to her room, poring over the letter until she comes up with a suitable reply.

From: Lithus Place Farm

To: Starborn Manor

Attention: Rita Starborn

Thank you for your telegram! Please don't show any of this to your brother. The reason I was hiding from him was not that I was afraid of him, but because I was ashamed. I had not expected him to see me sick and dirty and helpless and without proper clothes. Therefore I felt totally crushed with shame and could not face him again. It is not his fault. If only I had known that he was coming, this would not have happened. But even then I would not be like you and your brother. I am just a common girl.

I hope my brother was behaving well when he visited you. He is also just a farmboy and does not what to do all the time. I hope we are not a bother to you.

Sincerely,

Trine Lithus.

Over the next half hour, Trine passes by the phone repeatedly, worried that her brother might run in and grab whatever printout may be lying there. This does not happen, though, and eventually there is a reply.

From: Starborn Manor

To: Lithus Place Farm

Attention: Trine Lithus

If Ben likes you when you are dirty and sick, he will surely like you when you are clean and healthy. So there is no reason to worry. I don't know exactly how shame works, but if you are not guilty you do not need to hide. And even if you have done something you shouldn't, you can just ask for forgiveness. This is much better than hiding.

Also don't worry about Ben seeing you without clothes. Both of us have had human anatomy in our home schooling, and we have seen many pictures of ordinary humans. They look just like us, only more varied. Although I was surprised to see your brother had hair that was not shown on any of the illustrations. But it was really not scary at all, more funny, and I am sure Ben will like you even if you are hairy too.

I am glad you wanted to write to me, and I hope our families will continue to have good relationships together in the future. Please feel free to write or call me about anything.

Best regards,
Rita Starborn.

What in the name of all that is whole and goodly? "Hair that was not shown on any of the illustrations"?? This is **not** good. What has that idiot been doing at the manor? Sleeping with the boy and showing things to the little girl? No, this makes no sense. He may be a bit slow sometimes when it comes to common sense, but he is not out and out insane.

"Dad! Where's Tom?"

"Probably cutting some wood, he promised to do it today. He should be finished soon."

Trine does not answer. She pulls on her boots and storms out.

"TOM!"

"Hi. If you're coming to help, you're a bit late."

"I am not coming to help!"

"If you're coming to watch, you won't have more than five minutes tops, so enjoy it."

"What were you doing with that girl?"

"Huh?" Tom stops and pulls his arm across his forehead.

"Rita Starborn! What were you doing with her?"

"You're still on that trip? Look, she is 13 and not big for her age. Lay it off before I start to think you are serious."

"I am serious! What did you do?"

"Well, first we greeted each other when we met. There was a small misunderstanding where she thought Ben and I were boyfriends, but that seems to be mainly because she doesn't yet know quite what a boyfriend is."

"I hope you didn't try to demonstrate!"

"Have you cracked completely? Of course not. Her mother is taking care of that matter."

"So what happened next?"

"We ate dinner, which was quite good. I told you that already. Then her mother went to some peace conference. We played scoopball. Then we played Q-bus, a kind of domino in three dimensions. It was actually quite fun. Then we changed into pajamas and went to bed."

"Where did you change?"

"In a bathroom. And of course we changed separately."

"Did she ever see you without clothes on?"

"Are you insane? Why would I walk around in other people's home without clothes? It is bad enough to do it at home..."

"Not at all? You slept in your pajamas?"

"Yes of course. Are you having nightmares? Relax, there is at least one of us who doesn't bowl over Starborn in a bath towel. Not that he seems to hate you for it. Not that I think any boy would, even such a plain girl as you. You may be underage, but you still have some, you know, stuff."

"I don't want to hear that from my own brother! It's bad enough that you sleep with boys and streak small girls, if you're not looking at your sister as well!"

"You need sleep. Possibly sedatives and a cell without any sharp objects."

"I'll find out the truth. I will find out for sure, and then you will have to come up with a

really good explanation."

"I look forward to it, little sister. And I honestly think you should take a day off tomorrow."

From: Lithus Place Farm
To: Starborn Manor
Attention: Rita Starborn

I am very worried about my brother. Please tell me how you came to see his body hair. I will try to get this thing fixed without involving other people unless it is necessary. I apologize if my brother has not been doing the right thing while visiting you.

Yours faithfully,
Trine Lithus.

From: Starborn Manor
To: Lithus Place Farm
Attention: Trine Lithus

Tom was very nice when he was here. After dinner he offered to help wash the dishes. Normally I would do it that day, but our mother said it was OK. When he pulled up his shirt sleeves so they would not be wet, I saw that he had a thin layer of dark fur on his arms. Nobody in my family has that, and it was not visible on the pictures of humans. They only had hair on their heads, under their arms, around their genitals and in one picture a man had some hair on his chest. I guess the pictures were just not very close, or it could be because he is a farmer and works with animals. Anyway, don't worry about it. I am sure Ben won't mind if you have hairy arms too.

Your friend,
Rita Starborn.

Chapter 17: An unexpected offer

The phone is ringing. Actually, it is bleating, because **someone** has a weird sense of humor and has chosen a ring tone that reminds everyone of a lamb. Trine can hear it, but she is in the middle of a good story, and Tom is closer anyway. "Tom! The phone!"

"Yeah. I have ears." She can hear him pick it up in the middle of a bleat. "Lithus. Oh, hi Ben. What's happened? You don't usually call. Hmm? Trine? Well, sure. She's not far off. TRINE! It's for you!"

But Trine is not present. In the sofa is a statue that for all purposes looks like Trine, except it does not move and does not think.

Tom shows up. "Who has no ears? It's for you!"

"It's Ben!"

"Yeah. And he's asking for you."

"I can't take it!"

"You take it or I'll spank your behind till my hands hurt!"

"You...!"

"Look" her brother hisses, "I don't mind you wallowing in self-pity every day. It is your prerogative..."

"Prerogative."

"... but if you play mind games with Ben, I'm not going to go easy on you! You don't need to agree with anything he says, if you don't want to, but don't hide under your bed like he's some monster. If you don't want anything to do with him, tell him. I won't, because I don't believe you."

"I can't talk! I can't even think!"

"Tell that to him."

"Noo!"

"Threats of physical violence."

"OK, OK! But we'll both regret this!"

"On my deathbed? I'll see that when I believe it."

"Uhm, hello? I mean, it is Trine."

"Hello Trine! My sister tells me that the two of you have become quite good friends over the last couple weeks."

"We have? I mean ... yes ... we usually speak a bitte litt a little bit ... after school."

"She is very excited to have a real friend her own age, and someone who is not hired by her parents."

A real friend ... That is what she calls me? Yes, I like her ... she is as funny as a child yet as smart as a bright adult, and she is so incredibly honest and yet she never wants to hurt anyone ... she is a wonderful friend really. But every time I speak with her, every time I think of her, I think about you. But I can't say that. It is just the way it is, no matter how much she wants to be my friend, she is always in your shadow. And I can't do anything about it, no more than I can stop the sun from rising and setting. Listen to me, I have read way too many cheap romance novels. But I can't say that either, can never tell you what I really think. Oh no, I should have said something, but what? What? He is waiting for me to say something!

"Sorry, I had not expected you to call."

He laughs, and it is more beautiful than music, or the song of birds in spring. "I know I cannot replace her, but..."

"No, no! That's not it! It is just fine! I just was surprised, that's all!"

"You see, it turns out that we won't be available for the next few weekends, for you to visit the Manor or the other way around...."

"Don't think about it! I am fine. I know you are, you know, important to the world. I

would never think about intruding."

"I am sure there will be a chance later. But as it is, Rita will come see my place in town tomorrow, stay over and then go back to the Manor with me on Friday. We would love for you to stop by my place too, if you have the time. And your brother of course."

"But why did you call me? Why not just ask Tom?"

"Because if you don't come, neither does Rita. She'll wait for another time when she can see you as well."

"Really??"

"Yes, really. You are important to her as well as to me, now. Of course Tom is too, but it seems easier for him to make time."

Ouch. That hurt. And she knows he did not even mean to accuse her. He really believes she has had valid reasons to hide from him all these weeks. He doesn't know anything about ... mind games.

"I will come. I promise. I really look forward to meeting Rita."

And you. I really want to meet you again, but I am terrified because I just know I am going to humiliate myself again. I wish I knew what real girls do when they are in love, but all I know is what they do in cheap romance novels. How I wish this was a novel and I was a main character, then it would all work out somehow!

*

"I just knew you would know the way." *Is that jealousy I'm feeling? That would be ridiculous!*

"Actually I've never been inside either. Kinda strange once you think about it, I've been to the Manor but not this house."

"It isn't big, compared to what all those new girls have. Each of them live in a small palace, while Ben lives in an old little townhouse."

"Well, he doesn't have as many servants as them. Actually I'm not sure if Johnson is a servant at all. There are a few people like that at the Manor, but I never saw them when I was there and the Starborn lived entirely like a normal family, making their own food and all."

"Well, he drove you. Perhaps he's just a chauffeur."

"Then why would he stay here all week rather than just drive down to fetch him on Friday?"

"Goodness knows. At least we're here now."

As Tom steps up to ring the bell, the door explodes outward just in time to not hit him, and a shape surrounded by golden flame sails through the air toward him. No, make that golden, flame-like hair, lots of it. The shape resolves into a pubescent girl as it lands with its arms around his neck. "Tom! So good to see you again!" Before he can move, she disentangles herself and, in another feat of athleticism, jumps straight to Trine to embrace her likewise. "Triiine! You are just like I expected!" The girl looks deeply into her eyes. "I knew it. Ben was right, you have very pretty eyes. Like a cow."
"..."

"Well, not as big of course. Come on in, come on in! You have to see how Ben lives. And Johnson, of course."

"Ah, right." As Trine is still stunned by the somewhat Hinduistic compliment, Tom speaks instead. "Rita, do you know Johnson?"

"Of course! He use to live at the Manor, and his wife is with me every day. They are really nice people, of course. Mommy says that only special people get close to us. People who are loved by fate."

"Right. It sure is an honor. So, do you know what he does? For work, I mean."

"Of course! He studies thaumaturgy. Both of them do."

"Trauma what?"

"Thaw-muh-tuhr-jee. Or perhaps it is called thaumaturgology when they study it as a

science?"

"And that means...?"

"Miracle-working. You know, all the weird things that happen around us. The Johnsons try to find out what happens. Everyone knows that stuff happens, but nobody knows when and where and why and how and to whom. It seems to just happen, you know? So by studying Mommy and Ben and me, they hope to find out more about it. Imagine if everyone could do miracles! Or even if miracles could happen to everyone. It is very important."

"Right. I had no idea what he was doing."

"Tee hee. He should wear a small name plate saying 'thaumaturgologist' or something. He probably thinks he is so famous that he doesn't need to."

"Perhaps he is. I am just a farmboy, so I probably know less about tautomology than most people."

They are inside now. The house has recently been renovated, it seems. It is also organized in such a way as to make the best use of the limited space. Well, limited ... it is smaller than the farm house, but then again only two people live here. It may not be so bad. The bedrooms and bathroom are downstairs, while the living room is upstairs. It seems to double as a study, there is some office equipment on one side of the room.

"Oh, and Johnson also helps with the mail and the phones."

"Tom! Trine! Welcome to my home away from home!"

Trine's heart skips a beat, then starts dancing to a strange rhythm. How can any teen, even a quarter angel, look so regal and yet so kind? Like a king and a trusted servant at the same time. Those bright blue eyes show no sign of remembering the things they saw last she met him. She does, of course, and looks away.

"Did I warn you not to eat before coming here?"

"I told her."

"My little sister came in time to make a feast worthy of kings and queens. With the kings and queens conspicuously absent, you two will simply have to take their place."

"I have done my best because you all are my best friends!" She strikes a pose: "How deeply I have longed in my heart to eat this supper with you!" For some reason, Tom seems greatly amused.

Indeed, from the smell that is coming out of the small kitchen, some practical miracle-working has taken place there. The work-like table has been dressed up for the occasion. Although everything is plain and practical and the knives are stainless steel, the precision with which it is laid out still makes it look like they were indeed waiting on royalty. Johnson emerges from the kitchen, bows politely but not overly formally, and helps Rita carry in the food while Ben seats the guests. Needless to say, Rita moves at twice the speed of the grown man and still somehow manages to brake in time to not cover them all in sauce. Miracles indeed.

They savor the food in quiet, only interspersed with softly spoken praise for the food and general declarations of sympathy, the first mostly from the guests and the latter mostly from the hosts. No one wants to really take their mind off the meal. There will be time enough for talk, surely. Even Trine gradually relaxes as the meal progresses without her belching, farting or overturning bowls of food as she had expected. She manages to look at him – that would be Ben, of course – a few times without anyone becoming suspicious. All is well with the world, for once. Then, as the meal winds down, a contented hush falls around the table. And then Rita says, very clearly: "Trine, would you like to be Ben's girlfriend?"

